With four words, Anne Boleyn changes History. Very slight crossover with 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'.

For anybody who isn't familiar with the character from 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer', Anyanka (born Aud, later known as Anya Jenkins) is a vengeance demon.

Vengeance demons have the power to seek out people who have been wronged in some way, or who believe that they have been wronged, and can grant them a wish. This wish need not be one to specifically wish harm on the person who wronged them, and it's not certain what limits there are to the power of a vengeance demon, although they are capable of creating alternate universes based on a wish. Anyanka chooses to specialise in scorned women, and will seek them out to try to get them to make a wish. However, the catch is that, one a wish is made, the wisher has no control over how the vengeance demon will interpret their wish, or the means by which it will be granted.
They were building the scaffold outside.

Three of the four women employed by Master Kingston, the Constable of the Tower, to tend to the needs of this special prisoner were visibly unnerved by the sounds of sawing and hammering below them, sounds that even the glazed windows could not muffle. They performed their duties in a distracted manner, nervous fingers turning to thumbs every time they heard a particularly loud clatter of a falling plank of wood or an oath from one of the men working diligently below, glancing anxiously back at their temporary mistress, as though they hoped that she would not be able to hear the din below. In contrast, the fourth woman went about her work calmly and efficiently, observing the other maidservants with a keen eye and occasionally glancing back at the woman sitting in the chair by the fireside.

Even if they had not known that they were tending a woman who, just a couple of weeks ago, had been the highest lady in England, even if the dark grey gown she wore had not been made of silk, carefully tailored and beautifully embroidered, while her few pieces of jewellery were of the finest quality, it would have been apparent at a glance that she was a lady.

Under the circumstances, nobody could blame her if she chose to spend her last days weeping and wailing, spewing venom against those who had brought her to this place and calling on God to strike them down for all they had done to her, but instead she was calm, almost disconcertingly so, reading silently from her book of devotions and occasionally fingering the jewelled cross she wore around her neck. If she ever flinched at any of the noises coming from outside her window, she did it so imperceptibly that none of them ever saw it.

The guise of a maid was one that the fourth woman had adopted more than once as part of her work, and one that she was bound to adopt often in the future, when ladies of rank and wealth required her services, but while many of them often treated their servants with careless contempt, this lady had been unfailingly courteous and considerate towards her attendants, quietly apologizing for the fact that they too were to be confined in this place with her when they were first presented to her but otherwise behaving as though nothing was amiss, treating them as she would have treated the ladies-in-waiting who had once attended her, in happier days.

Considering some of the things that they had heard of the lady, the first three women were pleasantly surprised by how easy she was to work for but the fourth had suspected that this would prove to be the case – and even if she hadn't, she would still have seized this opportunity to take this position, to be able to make this lady one of her clients.

Witch.
Reformer.
Jezebel.
Usurper.
Martyr.

Despite her relative youth, the Queen of England, once simply Lady Anne Boleyn, had been
labelled with many contradictory names and once she was dead, the list would only grow longer.

People would argue over whether she had truly loved the King or if she was simply a calculating opportunist who aimed too high and paid the price, whether she was forced by her family to entice the King or whether she herself decided her actions independently, whether she should have yielded and become the King's mistress when the opportunity was first presented to her or if she was right to refuse to yield until she was promised marriage and the Queen's crown, whether she was a victim or a villain, a sinner or a saint for centuries to come, when there was nothing left of the lady but bones beneath the floor of the chapel within the precincts of the Tower of London.

Perhaps they would never reach a conclusion about her. Once she was dead, her name would not be spoken at court except in whispers, as it was the last thing that her husband was likely to want to hear. The more time that passed, the more facts that would be lost and the more myths and legends would be born, the more labels that would obscure the truth of her story.

For the fourth woman, however, only one label truly mattered.

Betrayed.

Anyanka, patron saint of scorned women, had sought out women who had been betrayed by the men they loved for over six and a half centuries, offering them an opportunity to avenge themselves against the men who had hurt them, however they wished. She offered her services to any woman who stood in need of them, rich and poor alike, and had granted countless wishes since she was called, but this was the first time that she had had a Queen as one of her clients.

When King Henry had set aside his first wife, Katherine of Aragon, she had cherished a hope that she would be able to seek her out and give her the chance to make him pay for everything he was doing to her and their daughter but Katherine had never called out to her, would never have wished to avail of the opportunity for vengeance against those who had harmed her. With Anne, the call was faint but it was loud enough for Anyanka to be able to hear her, which meant that there was a chance that she might be ready to accept the opportunity when it was offered to her.

If she did, then Anyanka would be the envy of other vengeance demons, able to pin another face on their wall of fame, for clients of repute, a thought she found far from displeasing.

As a rule, the women attending Queen Anne in her captivity were kept locked up with her, unable to come and go as they pleased since the door was to be kept bolted.

It was an unnecessary precaution, in Anyanka's opinion.

Even if Anne was able to escape the room in which she had been held for the past two weeks, aside from during her trial, she would have been apprehended and returned to captivity before she reached the end of the corridor and, despite the popularity and effectiveness of such guises in stories for children, she would have been recognized instantly even if she donned the drab gown, white apron and cap of one of her maids and sought to escape in disguise.

The other three women chafed at their confinement and, as a result, duties like fetching hot water and clean linen, and taking away Anne's clothes to be laundered were especially popular, as it meant that they were allowed a brief respite from the close confinement of the chamber.

Etiquette, together with the demand that the prisoner be constantly monitored, meant that at least one attendant had to remain with Anne at all times but there were no arguments when Anyanka volunteered to remain with her, allowing the other three the chance to seize upon other duties that would bring them outside the chamber, at least for a short while. They had also been very eager to
go along with her suggestion that, after their errands, they should eat their dinner in the refectory supplied for the use of the guards and other employees of the Tower.

For her purposes, it was best that she and Anne be alone together for as long as possible.

"Is there anything I can bring you, Your Majesty?" She asked with a deferential curtsey, trying to appear humble and awed in the Queen's presence, as the other women did, so as not to arouse suspicion that there might be something different about her but, at the same time, she wanted to appear friendly and sympathetic enough so that the other woman would be prepared to be open with her.

"No, thank you." Anne shook her head. The sunlight caught something shining around Anyanka's neck and making it gleam brightly, catching the eye. "That's a beautiful necklace." She remarked absently.

"It belonged to my grandmother, madam – a simple thing, of course." Anyanka said hastily, stuffing the necklace into the bodice of her gown before Anne could catch sight of the emerald that gleamed at its centre, knowing that there was no way that she would not notice that the jewel was too fine to belong to a simple serving woman; even if it had been bequeathed to her by a former mistress of hers, or if she had stolen it, one would expect that she would sell it rather than retaining it, as it would bring her a handsome sum. "Are you certain that I cannot get you something, some food perhaps?" She coaxed.

Anne barely touched any of the meals that were served to her, despite Master Kingston's assurances that if she had any complaints about the quality of the food, he would see to it that she was brought whatever she fancied, and his offers to send her the finest cuts from his own table if she wished. It was a wonder that she had not passed out from lack of food.

"No, thank you." Anne repeated her refusal and then, catching the disappointed look on Anyanka's face, she softened slightly, sensing her need to be able to do something, if not the reason for it. She put it down to pity, a serving woman's need to be able to find a way to make her more comfortable, knowing how short a time she had left. All of her maids walked on eggshells around her, behaving as though they were attending somebody's deathbed rather than waiting on a prisoner in the Tower. For somebody young and healthy, like Anne, it was particularly unsettling to be treated the way somebody dying of old age or a chronic illness would be treated but at least they were kind and considerate. Not many others were. "But perhaps some wine."

"Of course, madam." Anyanka said at once, hiding her victorious smile.

What could be better? She often found that a cup of wine could be of enormous benefit when it came to loosening the tongue and making her clients more... creative when it came to their wishes. She bustled about her task before Anne could change her mind and she missed this opportunity, filling the silver carafe from one of the earthenware containers in the cupboard and then, feeling the chill in the air, she held a poker in the heart of the fire for a few minutes, until the tip was red hot, before plunging it into the flagon to heat the wine. Once the wine was warm enough but not too hot, she filled one of the glass goblets and passed it to Anne.

"Thank you." Anne accepted the wine with a small smile, indicating for Anyanka to take a seat opposite her. "Please pour one for yourself," she invited. "It's cold in here, even with the fire."

As Queen, it was unthinkable for her to invite a servant to sit with her while they shared a carafe of wine but even though the title of Queen was still technically hers, she was also a condemned prisoner, worse off than the woman sitting in front of her. Tomorrow, once her maids had packed away her things and cleaned her chamber, they would be recompensed for their services and free to
leave the confines of the Tower a few shillings wealthier for their stay. By that time, Anne would be dead, her ashes scattered to the four winds if she was burned to death or her remains hastily interred in an unmarked grave in the chapel if she was to be beheaded.

"Thank you, madam." Filling a second goblet, Anyanka sat down in the chair in front of her, sipping at her own wine and waiting for Anne to take some of hers, instinctively knowing that if she hoped to get this woman to speak to her, her best bet would be to say as little as possible and to wait for Anne to speak when she was ready to.

"You know, when I was a girl I served at the court of Margaret of Austria." Anne said after a few minutes of silence, looking into the burning embers glowing at the heart of the fire rather than meeting Anyanka's eyes, smiling absently at the memory of a happier, simpler time. "Oh, it was a wonderful time, pageants and dances... so many dances." She tore her gaze away from the fire to look at Anyanka, looking more animated than any of her attendants had seen her since she was first brought to the Tower. "I once appeared as the Queen of the Amazons, with a naked sword in my hand and a crimson headdress with a great plume!"

Her sister Mary had been green with envy, as had all of the other girls, when the plum part of the Queen was given to Anne. With hindsight, Anne could see that the pageant in question, one staged especially to showcase the talent of the children of the Archduchess' court, was the secondary entertainment of the night and that she, the youngest and smallest of the girls given into the charge of the formidable Archduchess for her education, had been chosen for the part of Queen as much for comic effect as for the fact that she was the best dancer but at the time, it had been the greatest thrill of her short life. It was only a couple of months later that her father contacted the Archduchess, asking that his daughters be released from her service to go to France.

Anne cried when she learned that she would have to leave.

Anyanka smiled at the reminiscing, almost ready to make a remark of her own but seeing from Anne's face that she had more to say, she held her tongue.

"But Margaret was wise too. She said to us: 'Trust in those who offer you service and in the end, my maidens, you will find yourselves in the ranks of those who have been deceived.'"

"Wise words." Anyanka said quietly, injecting just the right note of sympathy in her voice to let the other woman know that she saw the meaning behind her words.

"Very wise." Anne agreed, returning her gaze to the fire, contemplating it and wondering if she might be forced to face the flames tomorrow, if she was to be the Queen of England who fulfilled the prophecy that one of their number would be burned or if Henry, out of whatever shred of compassion or mercy he possessed, out of whatever lingering affection he had for her or even out of fear that he would be badly thought of if he allowed his wife and the mother of his child to be burned at the stake, would grant her the final kindness of a quick death by decapitation.

"It's so cruel!" Anyanka burst forth, her indignant outburst – only half feigned – getting Anne's attention and pulling her from her reverie. "After everything, for him to treat you like this!"

"The King is only doing what he thinks he must." Anne said, the steadiness of her voice belying the turmoil of her emotions. She honestly did not know which would be preferable; that Henry was convinced that she had truly betrayed him and that her conviction resulted from her enemies' lies poisoning his mind against her rather than from his own wish to destroy her, but that he would always think such evil of her or if it would be better if he knew that she was innocent, knew that she had never betrayed him and never even wanted to but that he was still willing to allow her to be condemned to death, for a crime he knew she had not committed, in order to free himself to marry
that wretched Seymour wench! "He thinks that he must have a son in order to keep this country safe, and he believes that he will not get one from me." She added quietly, thinking that if she had not lost her son earlier in the year, it could all have been so different.

Their son would have made Henry see that she was his heart's true love, and Mistress Seymour would have been banished back to Wolf Hall in short order, never to set foot at court again.

"He has nobody but himself to blame for that – everybody knows why you lost your son," Anyanka assured the other woman. "And we know that it was not your fault. It was all the King and that Seymour woman." Anne did not answer and, for a moment, Anyanka feared that she had pushed her too far, too fast and that she would withdraw from the conversation, unwilling to say another word but there was an angry glint in Anne's eyes that told her that there was still a chance. "I just hate to think that, after what he's doing to you, he's probably going to get exactly what he wants. Don't you just wish..." She trailed off, hoping that Anne would pick up on the train of thought and finish her sentence by expressing a wish for a suitable punishment for her faithless, ruthless husband but she did not. "If the King was my husband, I'd wish that he was never able to lie with another woman again, not without his member erupting in boils and him being struck by every foul pox known to man." She prompted hopefully.

She thought that that sounded like a very fitting punishment for Henry of England, and she was ready and willing to inflict it on him if Anne gave her the word.

Anne merely shrugged. "It doesn't matter now."

She had less than a day left to live.

If Henry wanted to marry Jane once she was dead, she couldn't stop him and after tomorrow, it would not affect her in any way.

Much as she would have preferred it if Elizabeth remained her father's heir, she knew her husband well enough to know that he would get his male heir somehow. If Jane Seymour failed – and she doubted that Henry would give her more than a year, perhaps two to try before he grew bored of her pallid face and insipid sweetness and wanted a more intelligent, passionate companion – then he would quickly find some pretext for ridding himself of her so that he could try with a fourth wife, if he did not decide that it would be simpler to concoct some charge or another to send Jane to the scaffold in her turn, casting himself as her victim and telling himself that he had been betrayed once more, and that he had every right to rid himself of she who betrayed him.

Now that he had learned his power, learned that he could send his wife, an anointed Queen, to the scaffold when she no longer pleased him, why would he ever again choose to put himself through the difficulty of seeking an annulment when there was a much quicker way for him to free himself?

If no wife could give him a son, she wouldn't be surprised if, the next time Henry got a bastard son on one of his mistresses – or the next time one of his mistresses bore a son, and was able to convince Henry that he was the one who fathered the boy – he would do whatever it took to make that boy his heir, even if he had to write a new law to achieve his aim.

How would Mary feel if, instead of losing the place of heir presumptive to Elizabeth, she had to stand by and watch her father's bastard son by a common slut feted as England’s next ruler?

"Of course it matters!" Anyanka snapped at her before covering her impatience with a hasty show of deference before Anne could get really angry with her and demand that she leave her alone, unwilling to converse with her any further. "Forgive me, Your Majesty."
"There's nothing to forgive." After everything that had happened over the past weeks, weeks during which nobody had dared to speak for her, it was comforting to know that somebody sympathized with her and was indignant on her behalf. It was likely that this maidservant, who had been in her service for a mere fortnight, would be more willing to speak for her than any of the courtiers, including those who owed much of their advancement to her.

Anyanka was silent for a few more minutes before she tentatively broached the subject again. "After everything, don't you wish that you could make him pay for what he's doing to you?"

Anne shrugged again, looking into the fire.

Anyanka suppressed a sigh, thinking, and not for the first time, that her job would be so much easier if she could just lay all her cards out on the tables for her clients from the beginning, explaining to them that she had the power to grant their wishes, allowing them to take their revenge on those who had wronged them and helping them to come up with the best possible punishment but that would never be allowed. Some of them were so uncreative when it came to their wishes that she would have loved to be able to give them some tips.

D'Hoffryn was of the belief that the most effective wishes came from those who had no idea what the effect of their words would be, believing that if people knew that their wishes were going to come true, they would temper their anger and that, in all probability, at least some of them would feel guilty later, when their wishes came true. The last thing they wanted was to have repentant women coming to them with blubbing pleas for their wishes to be reversed and the man they ill-wished spared the agony he was enduring, as they could not bear the sight of his suffering.

The cost of reversing a wish was far too high for them to take that chance.

Anyanka had not been a vengeance demon for six and a half centuries for nothing, however.

She had learned to read potential clients and to gauge the likelihood of them availing of the opportunity she presented them with and she suspected that even if she had told Anne exactly why she was here and exactly what she was offering, explaining her power in detail and making it clear to her that she could avenge herself on her faithless husband however she pleased, no matter how vindictive she wanted to be, no matter how harsh a punishment she chose to inflict on him for the way he wronged her, the other woman would have declined to wish on Henry the punishment he richly deserved. Despite everything that had happened, despite everything that he had done to her, she still loved him and she would not want to see him hurt.

However, that did not mean that there was nothing that Anyanka could do for her...

"That Mistress Seymour!" She spat the woman's name as though it left a foul taste in her mouth, aware that, in cases like these, her clients were often angrier with the woman who had attracted their man's attention than they were with the man himself. It made no difference to her which of them Anne wished to avenge herself on. "She truly is the wickedest of hussies to try to sink her claws into the King, putting on such a mask of virtue – and worse still, she kept up the pretence, even when she saw what the cost would be. I suppose the price is an easy one to pay if you are not the one paying it." She remarked, smiling inwardly when she saw Anne's involuntary nod and the way her lips and brow twisted in a scowl at the mention of the woman's name.

She was about to prompt her with the magic words again when Anne took them out of her mouth. "I wish..."

Outside, there was a clatter and an exclaimed oath as one of the workmen dropped one of the
planks he was carrying. Anne shuddered at the sound, wondering if it had been a deliberate cruelty on the parts of her captors to arrange for the erection of the scaffold on which the blood of four innocent men, and perhaps her own blood, was to spilled just below her lodgings, to rob her of any peace she might have been able to find in her prison. Her voice was whisper-soft when she uttered her next words, unaware of how eagerly Anyanka was waiting to hear them.

"...to live."
Chapter One

17th May 1536

Four men were to die this morning because of her.

Anne was the only person in all of England who could know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that all four men were innocent of the crimes of which they had been accused, that instead of being her paramours they were just four men doomed to die so that her husband could free himself of her and replace her with the worthless wench, Jane Seymour, but that did not change the fact that those who were to die this morning would lose their lives because of her.

If she had succeeded in giving Henry the son he craved, they would have lived.

If she had accepted his offer years ago, and become his maitresse en titre, they would have lived.

If she had stayed in France and never returned to her native country, they would have lived.

If she had never been born, they would have lived.

Master Kingston who, late last night, had brought her the welcome news that she was to be spared the terrible fate of burning and would instead suffer death by decapitation at the hands of the swordsman of Calais, sent for specially to ensure the quickest, most painless death, had not wanted her to watch the executions, making no secret of the fact that he considered it no fit sight for a woman, let alone a lady of gentle birth. The irony of his words, given that she would be following them to the scaffold at noon, seemed to escape him but he stood firm against her pleas to be allowed to honour her brother and the other men the only way she could, by witnessing their sacrifice, refusing to consent to allow her to leave her chamber to watch.

She had no way of knowing that his refusal was made as much out of fear that if she appeared in public, even under heavy guard, that there might be a riot, with those who sympathized with her – and there were no shortage of them, despite her previous unpopularity – attempting to abduct her and carry her away to safety before her own execution as from Master Kingston's fear of the affect that witnessing their deaths would have on her. The public reaction to her arrest and conviction was an angry one and Kingston was not prepared to take the chance that his prisoner might be snatched up by her supporters and spirited away from his keeping before she could be harmed.

He knew that if that happened, he was likely to be forced to pay for it with his life.

The King would be far from amused if the execution of the Queen, and therefore his freedom to take Mistress Seymour as his new wife, was delayed or, worse still, prevented entirely, and somebody would have to pay the price for his displeasure.

The three women attending her – the fourth, the woman with whom Anne had spoken yesterday, seemed to have disappeared shortly after their conversation, perhaps not wanting to have to witness the execution of her temporary mistress – were given strict orders from Master Kingston not to aid the Queen in her attempts to watch the executions but, while they would not assist her, they also did not dare to stop her and they stood helplessly as she dragged a heavy chest towards the window, and then a stool, using the latter to climb onto the former.

The added height allowed her to look out the window, down at the scaffold below and at the crowd milling around it, eager for the spectacle of the executions to begin.
Executions were far from infrequent but it was unusual for four to be beheaded at once, as beheading was generally reserved for people of high status, whose rank meant that, more often than not, they were spared the harsher penalties meted out to commoners, allowing them to keep their dignity, even in death, instead of being butchered. There was an air of excitement and expectation today as the people gathered. Some of them had even brought their children with them, tugging wide-eyed little boys and girls towards the front, where they would have a good view, in the hopes of imparting a grim lesson about the importance of being obedient sons or daughters and, more importantly still, good, loyal and obedient subjects to the King.

Anne wondered if any of them had travelled far from their homes to get to London today so that they might be present for today's executions, if any of them planned to stick around after the four men were killed in the hopes that they might witness the even greater novelty of the execution of a Queen, if they believed that the men – and, by extension, Anne herself – were guilty and deserved their fate or if their guilt or innocence mattered to them as long as they could see their beheading, giving them a suitably gruesome story to tell their children, friends and neighbours.

They brought George out first.

To Anne's dismay, the crowd assembled to watch her beloved brother die greeted him with jeers and cat calls, calling out 'Adulterer' and 'Traitor', savagely eager to watch him die, to see one who had once been so high brought so low. She could see George turn to Master Kingston, an imploring expression on his face, as though to ask whether something could be done to quiet the crowd, to give him an opportunity for his last words to be heard but there was nothing that Kingston or anybody else could do to silence them. There were too many of them.

She couldn't hear his last words through the glass window or over the shouting of the crowd.

The executioner guided him to the block, half-helping and half-pushing him to kneel in front of it and lay his head down before he tucked back the collar of George's plain white shirt so that there would be nothing to impede the axe blow.

A moment later, his head was struck off and his sister sobbed in despair, grief for her brother warring with guilt over the part she had played in bringing him to his end.

Her attendants clucked consolingly, trying to persuade her to come down from her perch, not to watch, to sit down and have a hot posset to steady her. It was an offer that they had already made several times since she awoke in the predawn hours and one that Anne had no intention of availing of, knowing that they hoped to drug her with something to settle her nerves and to render her drowsy and dull-minded when the time came for her own execution, blunting the edge of her terror and pain in the hope that she would suffer as little distress as possible in her final moments.

Anne didn't listen to them, digging her fingers into the ledge to keep herself from falling or from fainting as she watched while Norris and then Brereton were brought before the jeering crowd, to face their taunts before they laid their heads on the block, ready for the axe to fall.

Mark was the last to die.

Even from a distance, Anne could see that his body was bruised, bloody and so mangled by the torture he had endured before he yielded and made his confession that he could not walk to the scaffold as the other three men had and had to be dragged there by his guards. He lacked the strength to speak a few final words. His whole body seemed to relax as they positioned him before the block, as though death was a welcome relief, a respite from his pain. He did not attempt to struggle or to plead for mercy. He simply lay there, waiting for his death.
Looking at him, Anne felt only pity.

Despite the fact that she knew that his confession had been used as evidence against her, she couldn't feel angry with him or condemn him for making it, not when she could see for herself what he had endured before he could be induced to speak against her. She suspected that if their positions had been reversed, she would have broken too, and probably far sooner than Mark had, willing to say whatever her tormentors wanted to hear from her if it meant an end to her pain, even if it meant that she, and others, would lose their lives because of her false confession.

Once Mark's head had been severed from his body, she consented to climb down, only half-aware of her attendants as they fusssed over her, anxious to see to it that they did anything they possibly could for her.

She was very conscious of the fact that with her alleged lovers beheaded, any hope of a reprieve she had had become far, far slimmer.

Now that the four men had lost their lives, it was highly unlikely that Henry would be prepared to spare her life and send her away to a nunnery instead, even one abroad. He would be afraid that if he was seen to show mercy to her, it would be taken as an admission that he doubted the truth of the charges laid against her and was unwilling to see her die for them, and if that was the case, it would mean that he had allowed four innocent men to be executed unjustly.

That was something that he would never allow to be said.

When it was her turn to go to the scaffold, she wouldn't see Henry riding up at the last minute to command that her execution was to be cancelled. There would be no belated salvation for her.

Henry had set his heart on marrying Jane Seymour and, after what had happened with Katherine, he would not be willing to allow Anne to live and to cast a shadow over the validity of their union and the legitimacy of any brats Jane bore him, not if he could help it. He would want to make sure that the path to the throne was clear for his son by Jane – though Anne couldn't imagine any child born of that wench being a prince to be proud of, let alone the equal of her beautiful, clever Elizabeth – and there was only one remaining obstacle to be removed.

Brereton, Norris, Mark and George were dead.

Anne was the only one left to go.

"Master Kingston, tell me, how is the Queen?" Archbishop Cranmer asked anxiously as he was led through the Tower to the lodgings used for Anne during her captivity.

Despite Cromwell's words about Anne no longer being an asset to their cause and instead proving to be a liability, one who could undo their good work if she was out of favour with the King, with the unspoken implication that it would be far better for them to distance themselves from her in order to ensure that the reforms of the Church continued, as God willed, Cranmer was torn by guilt that he had not done more for her, not spoken on her behalf to the King in the hopes that his good opinion of her might make him less inclined to believe the false charges – and there was no doubt in his mind that they were false – that had been laid against her. He needed to hear that Anne was faring well, or at least as well as she could be expected to, if he hoped to be able to reconcile his conscience to the idea of remaining silent when his former patroness stood in need of him.

"Truthfully, in the early days of her captivity, she often spoke rather wildly; for example, that it would not rain until she was released." Master Kingston reported. Although some of the ignorant
people who had heard such utterances had taken them as evidence of the fact that the Queen was a witch, some of them feeling terrified to she would use her powers to lash out at them for their part in holding her prisoner and arranging her execution, even if they were only obeying orders, he knew better, as he had much experience in dealing with frightened prisoners and was able to distinguish terrified, hysterical ramblings from true threats. The Queen was not the first to make such wild predictions, nor would she be the last but it had still been a relief to him when she had stopped making her claims, as he hated the thought that her name and her memory would be further blackened by rumours of witchcraft. "But now, according to her almoner, preparations for death have increasingly occupied her thoughts, and so I believe she is reconciled to it."

"I am glad." Cranmer murmured faintly.

They had reached the door of Anne's lodgings and he waited while the heavy bolt was drawn back to allow him to enter. Within the chamber, two of the maids were preparing for his arrival, lighting candles and setting out a chair on which he would sit to hear the Queen's final confession. Cranmer set out the items he had brought with him, pacing back and forth as the final preparations were made, feeling unable to look Anne in the eye.

He said a silent prayer of thanks that the King had not yet begun proceedings to annul his marriage, choosing instead to wait until Anne was dead and he could dissolve their marriage without hindrance. When the time came, Cranmer would be the one called upon to investigate the validity of the King's marriage to the Queen, an investigation from which only one verdict would be expected but if the marriage was annulled before the Queen's death, he would be duty-bound to inform her of it and he hated the thought of causing her further pain in her final hours of life.

It was far kinder to allow her to go to her death still bearing the title of Queen, still believing that her child was the King's legitimate daughter, a princess and, in the absence of a son from the King's next marriage, the heir to the throne, sparing her the thought that little Elizabeth's future was in doubt and that she would soon be exiled from court and from her father's presence, her position as insecure as that of the King's illegitimate daughter, the Lady Mary, if not worse.

Cranmer inwardly vowed that after the little princess, his goddaughter, was declared a bastard, he would do everything in his power to protect her and support her and to keep her always in the King's good and kind graces. Although the King was insisting that Elizabeth was to be removed from court with all haste, unable to bear the sight of his daughter because of his anger towards her mother, Cranmer was confident that this would not always be the case. Elizabeth was still such a young child, not yet three, so innocent that no man could blame her for anything her mother had done or not done and she was so pretty, charming and intelligent that he was sure that the King would not be proof against her charms, once he was persuaded to welcome the child back to court.

Cranmer was aware of the rumours that the Seymour family were secret supporters of the Lady Mary and that Mistress Seymour was hoping to return her to favour as soon as she became Queen, a thought that filled him with fear, knowing what it could mean for the reformation.

Like her mother, the Lady Mary was devoted to the Church of Rome and, should she become Queen, she would immediately seek to restore the Catholic superstitions to England, especially as she would wish to have the people think her legitimate, as the Bishop of Rome insisted she was, and she would undo all the good work of their reformation. The King was no longer as young as he once was and, although nobody would dare to mention the awful possibility aloud, there was a chance that his marriage with Mistress Seymour would prove to be childless, which would mean that the question of which of his daughters should be his heir would be one of vital importance, one that could determine the future of England's faith.
If it came to that, Cranmer would do all he could to persuade the King that he should name Princess Elizabeth as his heir rather than the Lady Mary... and perhaps he might even be able to succeed, as little Elizabeth would not have stood against her father and would be too young to remember her mother and to seek to defend her memory. She was young enough to adapt to her changed circumstances rather than feeling resentment over them, as the Lady Mary did, and there would be no bitter struggle to force her to accept her new lot in life.

Anne greeted him calmly when he entered, quietly saying that as her time now approached, she begged Cranmer to hear her last confession. Master Kingston turned to leave, to allow them a measure of privacy, even though the women attending on Anne were to be present and within earshot, but Anne halted him with her next words.

"Also, I should like the Constable present when I receive the good Lord." Her words were softly spoken, couched as a request rather than as an order, which she was no longer entitled to give, but her dignity and the indefinable air of command about her as she made her request would have made it impossible for any man to refuse her wish.

"Madam." Master Kingston inclined his head in acquiescence, as aware as all those present of the magnitude of this request.

No condemned prisoner would ever dare to die with a lie on their lips, knowing that by omitting anything from their confession or, worse still, by perjuring themselves before God by claiming innocence of sins they had committed, they would condemn themselves to an eternity in purgatory, forever denied salvation and a place in Heaven. Whatever the Queen was about to say would be the truth, and while Archbishop Cranmer would be bound to preserve the seal of the confessional, even after her death, the same was not true of Kingston.

As a witness to the Queen's last confession, he would be duty-bound to report it if that was her wish, regardless of what she said, regardless of the risk that her words might cause offence.

Cranmer took Anne's hand in his as he led her towards the chair that had been set up for him. One of the maids placed a cushion in front of it and he helped Anne kneel down before he sat himself.

"My child, do you have a confession?" He asked gently.

"Yes." Anne looked up to meet Cranmer's sympathetic gaze, sincerity shining from her blue eyes. "I confess my innocence before God. I solemnly swear, on the damnation of my soul, that I have never been unfaithful to my lord and husband, nor ever offended with my body against him. I do not say that I have always borne towards him the humility which I owed him," she acknowledged, "considering his kindness and the great honour he showed me and the great respect he always paid me." Anne did not deny that, as their marriage progressed, Henry's respect for her had diminished considerably, to a point where he only treated her with what little courtesy he could muster for her when others were there to witness it, but she also could not forget the way he had treated her before that. That was what she wanted to remember now; the good rather than the bad. "I admit, too, that I have often taken it into my head to be jealous of him." Her voice trembled slightly at this, as she wondered if it could have been different if she had been able to emulate Katherine, as George once urged her to, and pretend that she did not notice Henry's affairs, if she would still have been brought to this end or if she might have been allowed to quietly retire to a nunnery and live out her days in peace, seclusion and contemplation. "But God knows, and is my witness, I have not sinned against him in any other way.

"Think not I say this in the hope to prolong my life," she added, in case Master Kingston feared that he was being used as a messenger, delivering word of her final confession to Henry so that he might feel remorse for ordering her death and commute her sentence to imprisonment or
banishment rather than having her blood on his hands. "God has taught me how to die and He will strengthen my faith. As for my brother and those others who were unjustly condemned," she swallowed, trying to keep from breaking down at the memory of the morning's executions, of her brother and the three other, innocent men who had been casualties in Henry's quest to rid himself of her. She felt guilt for their deaths, knowing that if she had died when she lost her baby boy, the loss that had sealed her doom, they would still be alive. "I would willingly have suffered many deaths to deliver them, but since I see it pleases the King, I will willingly accompany them in death, with this assurance: that I shall lead an endless life with them in peace."

Having said her piece, she shut her eyes and bowed her head, awaiting Cranmer's final blessing.

Cranmer sighed deeply, near tears himself. "In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." He said as he gently made the sign of the cross on Anne's forehead, granting her her final absolution before addressing Kingston, managing to keep his voice steady and commanding, "Master Kingston," the other man rose at the sound of his name. "Please go and make sure to report Her Majesty's true and last confession, so the world will know it." He commanded. There was so little that could be done for her now but she would have that much at least.

Kingston clearly understood the importance of his charge. He bowed as he answered. "I will." He promised before leaving the room.

Cranmer rose from his chair but was halted when Anne reached out to catch his hand, a pleading expression on her face, her courage momentarily deserting her.

"Mr. Cranmer, I do not suppose that, even at this last hour, the evangelical bishops that we put in place might intervene for me?" She pleaded, grasping desperately at the shred of hope, faint as it was, that her life might be spared, unwilling to give that up just yet.

"Your Majesty, I..." Cranmer tried to pull away from her, unable to look her in the eyes.

Like him, the evangelical bishops owed their careers, together with the opportunity they were given to spread the true religion, to the lady kneeling in front of him but, just like him, they would never dare to risk the King's anger by speaking on her behalf, even though they might have had a chance of winning her a reprieve if they all stood together in their attempt to save her.

They were cowards!

Anne seemed to hear his thoughts, her calm and her dignity returning to her as she released his hand. "No, I understand." She managed to say, pitying Cranmer and offering him a reprieve from his guilt. "How could they? Forgive me." She sighed quietly, looking straight ahead as she reined her emotions under control, knowing that the hour of her death was drawing closer and not wanting to appear distressed or hysterical when the time came.

Had she looked at Cranmer, she would have seen the tears flowing freely from his eyes, tears of grief for her impending death and tears of guilt for his cowardice in failing to do more to prevent it.

She was to die at noon but she was ready a full half-hour before that, clad in a grey damask gown with a crimson petticoat and a fur-lined cloak over it, her hair pinned in a neat twist. When the time came, one of her attendants would help her don a plain white linen coif, to ensure that there would be nothing to impede the sword stroke that would end her life, and her pendant and earrings would also have to be removed for the same reason, but until then she would wear her jewellery and keep her hair uncovered.
Her face was pale, betraying the sleepless nights she had suffered during her captivity and the strain she had endured throughout the trial, and even in the weeks of uncertainly and fear before her arrest, when she could sense the threat looming about her but was unable to predict the form that threat would take or to defend herself from it effectively. However, she was pleased to see that there was no trace of the tears she had shed for her brother and his fellow victims, no telltale redness or puffiness around her eyes to betray her distress. One of her attendants held a small pot of rouge and Anne dabbed her cheeks with it, carefully rubbing it in to give her some colour.

To some, vanity might seem pointless, even absurd, at a time like this but for Anne, it was a relief of sorts to be able to prepare herself for death, as she had prepared herself for countless other public appearances throughout her life. She might be dying the shameful death of a criminal, branded an adulteress and a traitor but she was still the Queen of England, despite everything, and she had no intention of making her final appearance looking anything less than immaculate or behaving with anything less than the utmost dignity and serenity.

As he once threatened, Henry had dragged her down, far further and far faster than he had raised her but this was something that she wouldn't allow him to take from her.

Whatever else he took from her, her pride and her dignity would remain hers until the end.

For a moment, she wondered what Jane Seymour was doing now, imagining that she, like many others, would be waiting to hear the signal that announced that Anne, Queen of England, was now a head shorter, that with both of the women who had called themselves his wives dead, Henry was a free man and that Jane would soon be able to plant her backside on Anne's vacated throne but she determinedly banished thoughts of Jane Seymour from her mind. The woman was not what she wanted to waste her precious final minutes of life thinking of.

She wasn't worth it.

There was no sound from the courtyard below and the scaffold was deserted.

Were the crowds to be admitted only at the last minute?

Despite the fact that she was a prisoner under his charge, Master Kingston did not forget that she was also a Queen and he knocked on her door before he entered, bowing deeply.

"Madam, the hour approaches. You must make ready." He told her formally.

Anne nodded comprehension, standing still while her attendants straightened her cloak and her train. "Acquit yourself of your charge," she told Kingston calmly, "for I have been long prepared."

Kingston nodded, stepping forward and handing her a small leather pouch. "The King asks you to take this purse. It has twenty pounds in it, to pay the headsman for his services."

Anne raised her eyebrow in surprise, both at the sum that the headsman was to be paid and at the fact that Kingston had omitted mention of the alms that she should be distributing to the poor before her death. Had Henry decided to be miserly about it, neglecting to provide money for alms? She didn't ask this question aloud, of course, accepting the pouch with a quiet "Thank you."

"Will you and your ladies follow me?" Kingston asked courteously, as though he believed that she had a choice over whether or not she complied.

With Kingston and two guards preceding her and her almoner walking by her side, Anne followed, her attendants walking behind her, the three of them sniffing a little, distressed by the thought of their mistress' impending death. Anne herself was calm, at least outwardly, but she couldn't help
but betray her surprise when, instead of leading her to the courtyard, where the scaffold was set up and, she assumed, the executioner awaiting them, Kingston led the way down a dark corridor, then a flight of stone steps leading down to a lower level.

"Master Kingston, what is this?" She asked, her curiosity winning out over her need to preserve a calm, dignified exterior. "I thought that…"

"His Majesty has directed that your execution should take place within the Tower, madam, and in private. It will be witnessed by the Lord Chancellor, the Archbishop of Canterbury and several lords of the King's choosing. His Majesty believes that this would be best." Kingston explained, clearly uncomfortable with this sudden change to the plans for her execution.

Prisoners condemned to death had very few rights, particularly those condemned to death for treason, the worst of all crimes, but one inalienable right was theirs according to ancient law and tradition; the right to die before the people and to be allowed to address them beforehand. Not even the King himself could deny them that, even if he wanted to. Like Anne, Kingston was aware that if she chose to exercise that right, if she demanded that she be brought to the scaffold outside and the people admitted so that they could witness her execution and hear her final speech, they would have no choice but to comply with her wishes.

It was plain that the Constable feared that she might make that demand, that he was dreading the thought of hearing her speak those words, knowing that he would be duty-bound to arrange for her wishes to be carried out, even when those wishes were in direct conflict with the orders of his sovereign, something that was bound to cause trouble later but, fortunately for him, Anne – perhaps sensing his dilemma and taking pity on him – did not demand that right.

"If those are the King's instructions, then I will obey." She said softly, allowing Kingston to conduct her down another corridor to a plain wooden door, which one of the guards opened for them before stepping back to allow them to enter a wide cavernous chamber.

A low platform had been hastily erected at one end of the room, with two shallow steps leading up to it. It was liberally strewn with straw, to soak up the blood that would soon be spilled, and the executioner awaited her there, most of his face concealed by a black hood.

She couldn't see the sword.

There were only a handful of others in the room. A young boy clad in a homespun tunic, who looked to be no more that fourteen or fifteen years old and whom she assumed to be the executioner's assistant, perhaps an apprentice, stood to one side and half a dozen men stood lined up directly in front of the throne, the men Henry had handpicked to watch his wife die.

Only Archbishop Cranmer looked openly distressed by what he was about to witness.

Cromwell looked impassive, as always, his expression betraying nothing of his feelings on the subject, neither remorseful at the thought of sending an innocent woman to her death – and he must surely know that she was innocent, given that he was the one who had fabricated the charges against her – or pleased by it. She wondered how he would feel when Jane Seymour was crowned Queen, especially if she managed to influence Henry on matters of religious policy, though Anne considered that unlikely. Would Cromwell come to regret that he had pushed a Queen who supported his reformation aside in favour of a papist? It would be too late if he did.

The Duke of Suffolk would not meet her eyes as she passed him by, determinedly staring straight ahead of him, his jaw set and his body tense. He had never liked her and had worked against her since before her marriage, eager to see her toppled from her position of power.
He had his wish now.

Even the Duke of Norfolk, her own uncle, was present, likely chosen both because he was joint President of the Privy Council, one of the most powerful peers and the head of one of the oldest and noblest families in England, and because, as her relative, he was under suspicion and Henry would want to ensure that he was completely loyal to him, loyal enough to watch her die without speaking a word in her defence and loyal enough to watch Elizabeth passed over in favour of Jane Seymour's brat. In the aftermath of Anne's disgrace, Norfolk and all her relatives would have to be exceedingly careful, ensuring that they didn't give Henry any reason to believe them to be disloyal.

Norfolk wouldn't look at her as she passed him, his face pale and his expression unreadable.

Of the remaining two witnesses, Sir Thomas Audley looked calm, almost bored, neither relishing the task nor displaying any hint of unhappiness at being chosen for it, and Sir Nicholas Carew who, despite being a distant cousin of Anne's, had once supported Katherine and the Lady Mary and had transferred his loyalty to the Seymours in recent months, as soon as it became apparent that they might manage to tear Anne down and perhaps even work for the restoration of the Lady Mary ahead of little Elizabeth, looked grimly satisfied by the thought of watching her die.

Anne ignored them all, walking sedately to the platform and climbing up the shallow steps. The straw rustled underneath her silk slippers and the train of her gown. She stood there for what felt like a long time, not saying a word as she looked out at the chosen witnesses, moved by Cranmer's distress but chilled by the expressions on the faces of the other men watching her.

"Is there nothing that you would like to say, Your Majesty?" Kingston prompted after a silence stretching for a minute or so. Anne shook her head in response to his question. "Are you certain?" He pressed her. It was very rare for someone condemned to death to decline the opportunity to speak before they made their end and he wanted to give her every chance to do so.

Anne nodded, glancing down at the unfriendly faces before her.

She had nothing to say that they would want to hear and if she did speak, she could be certain that men like Brandon and Carew would be all too willing to distort her words, implying that she had died with an insult for Henry on her lips in the hopes that his anger with her would lead him to take it out on their little daughter once she was gone, so that Elizabeth's loss of favour would be her half-sister's gain. If she was to be executed before the people, she might have spoken, knowing that they could not distort her last words if they were heard by hundreds of people, who would circulate them throughout London, but under the circumstances, she would hold her tongue and keep her child safe. She couldn't take any chances with Elizabeth's future welfare.

Master Kingston nodded, seeing that her mind was made up, indicating to her attendants that they might begin to prepare her. With tears in their eyes, two of them removed her heavy cloak while the third tied a linen coif over her hair and then removed her necklace.

Anne removed her earrings herself, pressing them into the hand of one of the women. "Thank you." She said quietly, smiling bravely for their sake, touched by the genuine grief in their faces as they curtsied to her. It was strange; these women, who had shared her life for little over two weeks, were weeping openly at the thought that she was to die while Henry, her husband of three years, the father of her child and the man who had pursued her ardently for years before they could finally be together, once pledging that he would sacrifice his kingdom for an hour in her arms, was able to sign the warrant for her execution and send her to her death without a qualm. He had not even given her a chance to answer the charges laid against her in person before ordering her arrest. "Thank you." She said again.
As was the custom, the executioner knelt before her. "Madame, forgive me for what I must do."

"Gladly." The executioner might be the one who would extinguish her life but he had not played any part in bringing her to the scaffold. How could she condemn him for doing his duty, or for earning his livelihood? Anne pressed the purse into his hand. "And here is your purse."

The executioner nodded his thanks, hefting the purse in one hand, as though to estimate the weight and determine whether or not she had given him enough money to ensure that he would make her death as quick and as painless as possible or if his first blow would be deliberately clumsy, prolonging her suffering and turning her last moments into a gruesome farce. Thankfully, he seemed to be satisfied with it and he stowed it in one of his pockets.

There was no block so she knelt upright.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." Her almoner read aloud and, despite everything, Anne was pleased to hear him reading in English. If the people had been present, they would have understood his words, for he spoke in their tongue, not in Latin, which only a tiny minority, the most educated people in England, could understand, and she had helped to make it so. It was part of her legacy. "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters..."

Despite her determination to be brave, to be calm and not to allow anybody to see that she was distressed or fearful, now that the time had come, Anne was afraid, joining her hands together in prayer. "Oh, Jesus, receive my soul. Oh, Lord God, have pity on my soul. To Christ I commend my soul. Jesus Christ, receive my soul. Oh, Lord God, have pity on my soul..."

Her eyes were closed, and she could not see that Cranmer also knelt, an example followed by her attendants and her almoner. Her uncle sank to his knees, tears glistening in his usually stony eyes and Audley, moved, knelt as well, an example grudgingly followed by Carew.

Cromwell too knelt, praying for Anne and for absolution for himself and the part he had played in this, an absolution he couldn't believe would ever come. Last night, he had spent hours in the chapel, kneeling before the altar, but try as he might, his prayers would not come, not even the simplest prayers he had learned as a child. Had God turned His back on him?

Brandon was the last to kneel, crossing himself as he felt the chill of the cold stone floor even through his breeches. He would be the last man to deny that Anne had caused more than her fair share of trouble to England during the past years, and that many people, many good, honest people had suffered because of her but now she was about to pay the ultimate price, atoning with her death for any wrong she had done in life, and he could not continue to hate her.

Because of his position as Constable of the Tower, Kingston was obliged to remain standing but he felt tears prick at his eyes, more moved than he cared to admit. He had witnessed many executions in the course of his duty but he knew that this was one that he would never forget, not now or ever. The memory of Queen Anne would stay with him for the rest of his life.

When Anne opened her eyes, she registered that the men before her were kneeling but it didn't seem important, not now. Behind her, she could hear the executioner moving and she instinctively looked back, not wanting to see the sword but at the same time needing to, continuing to pray as she glanced back.

The executioner's hands were empty.

"Boy! Fetch my sword!"
She turned to look at the youth in front of the platform, registering his astonishment at the order and seeing that the sword was not in his possession.

It happened so quickly that she did not have time to process what this might mean before she felt a gust of air generated by rapid movement and then a sharp slice at the back of her neck. The next thing she knew, the sword was passing in front of her eyes, stained red with her blood, and the thought crossed her mind that this would be the last thing she saw before the darkness of Death enveloped her.

It didn't.

She could still see the bloodied sword before her, could still feel her lungs sucking in air, could still feel the rhythmic beating of her heart as it pumped the blood through her body.

The sword had passed through her neck, as quickly and as easily as it might have sliced through the stem of a flower, but her head was still firmly attached.

Anne could hear the gasps of astonishment behind her and see the half-horrified, half-amazed expressions on the faces of the men kneeling in front of the platform at this unexpected development.

They were just as surprised as she was.

What was happening?
Chapter Two

17th May 1536

Brandon's grip on Anne's arm was firm as he stalked through the corridors, hauling her along behind him, his jaw set and angry. While the other witnesses were kneeling there, paralysed with astonishment, mouths agape and wide eyes starting up at her in wonder, horror, astonishment or a combination of the three, none of them knowing what to make of the sight they had witnessed, Brandon was the only one able to think clearly enough to act, springing to his feet and grabbing Anne by the arm, dragging her away from the executioner, away from the chamber and from all of the people who stood there gawking, hustling her back to her lodgings.

The guard outside the door of the room looked astonished when he saw Anne returning but, after seeing the expression on Brandon's face, he didn't dare to ask any questions, unbolting the door and stepping aside to allow them to enter, bolting the door behind them at Brandon's signal.

Once they were inside the room, Brandon thrust Anne into one of the chairs by the fireplace. The fire was not lit but the room was warmed by braziers.

"Sit there and don't move!" He snapped at her, pacing the room for a few moments, staring at her periodically, unable to process what he had just witnessed.

He badly wanted to believe that it was a trick of some kind, that Anne might have met with the executioner beforehand and that they had contrived this scene between them, with Anne bribing him generously to go along with her plan, in the hopes that she would be able to win herself a reprieve from execution, but he knew that this was not the case. He had been only a few yards away from her, close enough to see the sword slicing cleanly through her neck, to see the blood on the sword but that Anne was unharmed. There was not even a scar to show where the sword cut her, and only a few drops of blood sprinkled on the gown.

He had no explanation for it.

Anne looked paler than he had ever seen her, apart from a faint colour on her cheeks where she had applied rouge earlier in the day. She was silent, her grip on the arms on her chair so tight that her knuckles were white. After a few minutes, she finally spoke.

"Has Henry been told?" She asked quietly.

He frowned reprovingly at her, displeased that she was using his friend's name so openly. She might have been his wife – might still technically be his wife – but Henry was the King and, after the way Anne had betrayed him, she had no right to refer to him like that.

"His Majesty the King will be told, my lady." He told her curtly, feeling grateful that he was not the one who would have to tell Henry the news that Anne's execution had gone awry. He could only imagine how he would react when he was told. Master Cromwell was the one who was left with that unpleasant task. "I hope that this isn't some trick," he muttered darkly, "for your sake."

This was only partly true.

If it turned out that there was some deception at play, Henry would be furious, yes, but Anne was already condemned to death and couldn't be killed twice. She would be no worse off than she was before, unless Henry decided that she should be forced to face a death by burning rather than by
beheading, forfeiting the more merciful method of execution as a punishment for her attempt at
decception, though Brandon doubted that this would be the case. Feelings were already running
high, with gossip circulating about Mistress Seymour and the true reason why Anne was being
tried and executed. Henry was clever enough not to want to inflame those feelings any further by
condemning her to a more terrible death and risking being branded as a monster.

It would be Brandon himself, along with Kingston and the other witnesses who would wind up on
the receiving end of the King's wrath for being fooled by the charade.

Outside the door, they could hear the sound of approaching footsteps, and a voice urgently asking
to be admitted to the room. The heavy bolt slid back and the door opened to admit Cranmer, who
hurried straight to Anne's side, kneeling down by her chair and taking her hand in his, kissing it
gently, almost reverently.

"Your Majesty, I..." His voice was choked with tears of relief and joy and his eyes shone as he
looked up at her, unable to believe what had happened, that she was now sitting in front of him,
safe and whole and alive. "It's a miracle." He said, awed. "A true miracle." Anne didn't say a word
but Cranmer could feel her hand trembling slightly in his and he looked up at Brandon. "I think
that Her Majesty would feel better if she could have something to drink, Your Grace." He said
firmly, nodding in the direction of a small table, where a jug of water and several goblets had been
set out, before looking back at Anne, feeling a surge of compassion towards her when he saw that
she was clearly just as shocked as any of them were, perhaps more.

He would have liked to be able to promise her that everything was going to be alright now but that
was not a promise that he or anybody else could make to her. Cranmer had known the King long
enough to know that, while he was a devout man and capable of great kindness to those he loved,
he was a man whose wrath could be terrible when his wishes were thwarted.

He could not believe that Anne was guilty of the foul charges laid against her – if he had had any
doubt of her innocence, even after she swore it during her confession, her miraculous survival was
all the proof he would have needed that she had been unjustly accused – but, in a way, her
innocence mattered less than the fact that the King believed her to guilty.

Cranmer was determined to be a loyal servant to his royal master and it pained him to think that the
King he served so diligently, the King who was the best hope for completely severing England's
ties to the corruption of the papacy and the formation of a true Church of England, would be
capable of seeing an innocent person - his own wife and Queen, and the mother of his innocent
little daughter - executed for a crime he knew her to be guiltless of in order to free himself to take
another woman as his wife but he was not blind.

The royal marriage had been troubled for some time and, when the King met Mistress Seymour
and fancied himself in love with her, believing her to be a pure maiden who could not be insulted
with an offer of the role of mistress and one he could only have if he could offer her honourable
marriage and the reassurance that any children born of their union would be his legitimate heirs,
the Queen's fate was sealed.

The King may not have ordered that false charges be laid against the Queen to provide him with a
pretext to rid himself of her without having to endure the embarrassment of being obliged to claim
that he had married a second woman who could not be his lawful wife – Cranmer couldn't bear to
think such evil of him; if he did, his conscience would demand that he leave his service, regardless
of the cost to himself or to the cause he served, and he was too afraid to do that – but it was likely
that he was willing to believe them when the first accusations were made, so willing that he had not
been as diligent about uncovering the truth as he would have been in happier circumstances.
If the Queen was executed, then the King would be free to marry Mistress Seymour.

With the Princess Dowager of Wales also dead, no man would be able to challenge the validity of the marriage or the legitimacy of its issue and, although it was not necessary to annul his marriage to the Queen, he planned to do so anyway, despite the fact that if she had never truly been his wife, she could not be guilty of adultery. He wished to declare the Princess Elizabeth a bastard in order to ensure that even if Mistress Seymour bore him a daughter and no sons, that daughter would still be the first rightful heir to the throne, ahead of her half-sisters. He was determined to banish Queen Anne from his life and to make a fresh start with Mistress Seymour, and his determination extended to wishing to deprive Anne's child of her rights as a princess.

When the investigation and the trials began, the King claimed that he hoped that the Queen would be cleared of all of the charges laid against her, promising that if that was the case, those who had dared to slander her would be severely punished for it but no man who heard him make those claims had believed for a moment that he wished to be told that the Queen was falsely accused, that there was no evidence that she had betrayed him or that she had even contemplated doing so and that he could keep her as his wife with an easy heart, with the unspoken implication that if he wanted Mistress Seymour, he would have to take her as his mistress.

The Queen's survival was a miracle but it was a miracle that the King would find very unwelcome.

Anne's thoughts were running along similar lines.

When Brandon handed her a goblet of water, the scowl on his face making it plain that it galled him to have to serve her, she sipped it slowly, trying to relax but finding it impossible to do so. Like Cranmer, she was shrewd enough to know that Henry would not receive the news of her survival with either relief or joy. He wanted to be rid of her, he wanted to marry Jane Seymour and he wanted the brats he hoped to sire on her to sit on the throne. If she had died, she did not doubt that he would have run to the Seymour home as soon as he knew that he was a free man, marrying the wench before her body was cold and claiming that her alleged treachery was the reason why he would not wait even a day out of respect but, for whatever reason, she was still alive and because of that, she had made things considerably more complicated for him.

She did not have to spend long imagining his reaction.

Outside the room, she could hear a bellow of "Make way for the King's Grace!" and a few moments later, the door opened and Henry stormed into the room with Cromwell, Norfolk, Kingston, Audley and Carew hurrying in his wake, his face twisted in a scowl when he saw Anne sitting in her chair.

"She's still alive!" He all but spat out the words, glaring at each of the men in the room in turn, as though they were somehow responsible for it, pointedly ignoring Anne, refusing to meet her eyes. "What happened?"

"Her head wouldn't come off." Even as he spoke, Brandon could have bitten off his own tongue for his poor choice of words, which had the unpleasant effect of immediately drawing Henry's anger on his own head.

"What do you mean?" Henry demanded angrily, wondering how things could possibly have gone so wrong in so short a space of time.

He was eating an early lunch in his private quarters, giving orders to his attendants that his horse should be made ready as he would want to go riding later and eagerly awaiting to sound of cannon fire from the Tower, the pre-arranged signal that would let him know that Anne's head had been
struck from her body. The signal would tell him that the whore had paid for her betrayal with her life and that he was a free man, free to marry his dear, sweet, pure Jane and free to make a new beginning with her, with a Queen that his country would be overjoyed to accept, one who would make him the father of many fine princes and with whom he would be happy.

An eternity seemed to pass while he waited for a signal that had not come.

Instead, Cromwell burst in on him, unannounced – unusual in itself, as his Lord Chancellor always observed the formalities due to his master's status – asking that he come to the Tower of London immediately, as they had immediate need of his presence there. Cromwell hadn't explained what was going on, a prudent precaution as there were always many prying ears at court, now more so than ever, but the urgency in his tone was enough to convince Henry to accompany him.

Once he arrived, he was conducted to the room designated as Anne's lodgings during her captivity – a more comfortable chamber than he felt she deserved, after what she had done. He had thought that it would serve her right if she was forced to stay in the darkest, dampest, most rodent-infested dungeon in the Tower and was very tempted to order that this should be the case, except that Cromwell had tactfully pointed out that although she was arrested and was being investigated for foul crimes against her husband and sovereign, Anne had not yet been convicted of anything and that it would look ill if she was treated poorly, advising that she should be comfortably housed and well attended for the sake of appearances.

After her conviction, it seemed like a pointless cruelty to make her last days more unpleasant than they had to be, something that would have reflected ill on him in any case, so he left her be.

Seeing Anne sitting in the chair by the fireplace, a silver goblet in one hand while her other hand rested on the arm of the chair, as proud as any Queen, despite her sober gown and the white coif that was still covering her hair, enraged him even before he heard Brandon's excuse for why she was sitting here instead of lying dead at the feet of her executioner.

"He's supposed to be the best, isn't he?" He demanded, referring to the executioner, the swordsman of Calais summoned to grant Anne the quickest, most painless death possible, a mercy that she did not deserve. He had been assured that Anne's head would be swiftly struck off, with one blow and, even if that had not been the case, even if the man had botched the job and managed to miss her neck entirely, he should have swung again. What kind of idiot had they hired? "How could he miss?"

"You don't understand," Brandon said bravely, drumming up his courage and knowing what the likely reaction to this news would be. "The executioner didn't miss, he struck a clean blow – we could even see the blood on his sword as it passed through the Lady Anne's neck," although he could not see her, he could sense Anne stiffening at the way he chose to refer to her and the significant omission of her title as Queen and knew that her clever mind would not dismiss it, but that was the least of their problems. "But she survived it, completely unharmed."

"Why?" Henry asked, unable to believe his ears.

"We don't know, Your Majesty." Brandon responded respectfully, indicating the other witnesses with a wave of his hand. "But we all saw it."

And they were all men who were loyal to him, men he could trust, Henry reflected. Had Anne's execution been witnessed by others, men who might sympathize with her, he would believe that they might have been persuaded to lie for her, to concoct this story in the hopes that he would be fooled by it and spare her life, but these men would never defy him to help Anne. Even the Duke of Norfolk, her own uncle, would not side with his niece ahead of his sovereign. He knew where
his loyalty lay, as did the others. That was why he had chosen them.

"You!" For the first time since he entered the chamber, he looked directly at Anne, stalking towards her and seizing her by the shoulders, hauling her out of her chair and dragging her into a standing position, looking straight into her eyes, desperately searching for evidence of cunning and duplicity. Her blue eyes were wide with confusion, as though she was as astonished as any of them by what was happening but he didn't trust that.

Anne was a mistress of manipulation, a skill that had allowed her to hold him in her thrall for so many years, bewitching him to the point where he was willing to sever his ties with the pope, put the whole country in jeopardy by going against the Emperor, kill honest men and mistreat Katherine. Even if she was not his wife, she was a good woman and one he was certain he would have treated with far more kindness if not for Anne. Anne might never have asked or even hinted that Katherine should be subjected to increasingly harsh and humiliating treatment for her refusal to call Anne her Queen, for her insistence on claiming that title for herself and for her refusal to say that Elizabeth was the true Princess of England while Mary was nothing more than a bastard, but Henry was sure that the only reason he would ever have treated Katherine like that was because he believed that it would please Anne to see her rival brought low.

She even made him banish his own daughter, his Mary, the pearl of his world from his life. Perhaps he had been the one to give orders that Mary should serve Elizabeth at Hatfield, even though he knew how hurt and humiliated his elder daughter would be by this indignity, but now he was sure that it had been Anne's witchcraft that had put the idea in his head and that the thought had not truly come from his heart. He would have treated Mary kindly, as a daughter of his should be treated, even if that daughter was a bastard. She had wanted to see Mary humiliated and brought low and she used him to achieve this, making him think that he wanted to be harsh, making him believe that it was the only way that he would be able to bring Mary in line.

Now she was even trying to cheat death.

He wouldn't let her!

"What did you do? Tell me!" He demanded, shaking her roughly enough to knock the coif she wore askew, an act of violence that prompted gasps of astonishment and dismay from several of the men present, as they had never expected him to physically lash out at a woman.

"Nothing!" Anne insisted, trying to pull away from his grasp. "I don't know what happened, I swear!"

"You're lying to me! You've always lied, from the very beginning!"

Henry knew that Brandon had not wanted to hurt him by confessing to him that he had conspired with Thomas Boleyn, and that he knew that the man was instructing his daughter to capture Henry's affections in the hopes of securing advancement for himself and for his family. He knew that his friend had only spoke because his conscience prompted him to do so, needing to apologize for not warning him of Anne's capacity for treachery, and because he wanted to make sure that he knew the full extent of Anne's ability to deceive, in case he was tempted to ignore the evidence of her guilt because of the love they once shared. However, it still hurt to think that it had never been real, that while he was pouring his heart out in love letters, showering her with tokens of his affection and turning his life and his country upside down, all for her, Anne was laughing at him behind his back, pretending to love him but concerned only with the benefits that she and her family could derive from his love – and they had certainly benefited from his love a great deal.

Now that Anne's hold over him was broken at last, it made him burn with embarrassment to think
about the titles, estates and offices that he had lavished on the Boleyns, just to see Anne smile.

His whole court must have thought him a fool to be so besotted with her!

Anne was so young when she first set out to catch his eye, no more than eighteen or thereabouts, but if she was capable of such deception in those days, when Wolsey characterized her as a silly girl, what would she be capable of as a woman?

Would there be any length that she would not be prepared to go to, if it served her purpose?

"I'm not lying." Anne insisted, doing her best to remain calm, though it was no easy task when faced with Henry's fury. His grip on her was so tight that it felt as though his fingertips would leave bruises on her upper arms – though, strangely, it did not actually hurt – and he looked as though he might be prepared to strangle her with his own hands if he lost what little control he maintained over his temper. "I swear to you, on my soul – on our daughter's life – that I don't know what's happening." She vowed, willing him to believe her, wondering how he could possibly think that she would be able to feign such a spectacle, even if she wanted to.

How could she possibly keep a sword blow from removing her head?

Henry wasn't listening. He moved one of his hands from her shoulder to her waist, and the other hand down to her right wrist, dragging her over to one of the braziers, ranting furiously.

"You think you can trick me, don't you? You think that if you can keep me from having you beheaded, you can make me spare your life and let you keep your place as my Queen and keep me from marrying my Jane and having a family with her but you're wrong. Witch! You can escape the sword but there's one thing that even a witch has no power to save herself from." His eyes were dark with rage as he held her hand poised over the brazier, close enough for them both to feel the heat of the red hot coals smouldering within it. "If you won't die by the sword, you'll die by fire." He threatened, waiting for her to break down, to tearfully confess her deception and to promise her cooperation, in exchange for being spared a worse death by far.

Anne refused to show fear as she met his eyes, although she felt plenty of it. "I didn't do anything." Although she was expecting it, she still let out a cry of surprise when he forced her hand into the brazier.

It didn't hurt.

She could feel the texture of the coals beneath her fingers, could smell the tip of her own sleeve smoking and see that even Henry's sleeve was being singed but there was no pain. The coals were warm to her touch but not uncomfortably so, something that frightened her even more than feeling the flesh burning from her bones would have.

The other men in the room were horror-struck, unable to believe that their King could take such a step, inflicting a torture on Anne that would not be meted out to the lowest prisoner in the Tower, and their shock was enough to keep them paralyzed for several long moments.

Brandon was the first to recover, braving Henry's anger by hurrying over to him, laying a firm hand on his shoulder and trying to draw him away, to force him to release Anne.

"Your Majesty, please, stop this?" He pleaded, more frightened than he cared to admit by the fury in Henry's eyes, a fury bordering on madness. "Let her go!" He begged him, unable to believe that his friend would ever do something like this to any woman, let alone one he had loved for so long but that wasn't what frightened him most. It took him a moment to realize what it was that was
most frightening about what was happening and when he did, his face turned pale. "Henry," Brandon addressed his friend by the given name that he rarely used, his tone firm but without the urgency he had used previously. "Henry, she's not screaming."

Aside from Anne's initial cry of surprise, there hadn't been a sound out of her.

Nobody, man or woman, no matter how stubborn they were, no matter how determined they were to hide their pain from their tormentors, could remain silent for so long. Anne should have been screaming loudly enough to wake the dead, wailing in agony and pleading for mercy, at least until she passed out from the pain, but she was silent, her expression betraying no pain, merely impatience, as though she was simply waiting for Henry to tire of this display and let her go.

Brandon didn't think that he had ever been so disconcerted in his life.

The words slowly penetrated Henry's brain and, although he did not release Anne, he pulled her hand out of the brazier, turning it over and studying it with mingled horror and awe. He didn't know how long he had held it there but he knew that it had been long enough to ensure that her hand should have been ruined, charred and useless, past healing but she wasn't even blistered, the skin as pale and whole as ever, barely warmed by the heat of the brazier.

The fact that the edge of her sleeve was singed only made it more disturbing.

He hastily released her hand, as though it burned him, stepping away from her and instinctively crossing himself.

"What is happening here?"

"What am I supposed to do with her now?" Henry paced back and forth in the narrow confines of an empty room that Master Kingston had unlocked to give him some privacy as he consulted with Cromwell, Cranmer and, the other three men having been dismissed with strict instructions not to breathe a word of what they had seen to a living soul, on pain of death. "I can't kill her." He might have wanted to believe that Anne surviving the sword blow was a trick at first but he couldn't, not now, not when he had seen with his own eyes that the fire left her unscathed.

If fire and steel could not harm her, he didn't know what could and, worst of all, he couldn't believe that he should be seeking to find another way to kill her.

Should he dare to court the wrath of whoever was protecting Anne?

He didn't know if Anne was protected by a divine force or a diabolical one, but he could be certain that whoever or whatever protected her was powerful.

What might it do to him if he persisted in his attempts to harm its charge?

"It's a miracle!" Cranmer declared, awed. "Surely this is God's way of showing us that the Queen is innocent of the charges laid against her; He will not allow her to be executed..." Seeing the furious glare Henry gave him and knowing that he would be outraged by the mere suggestion that Anne might be innocent, especially after the men with whom she was accused had been executed on his orders, he swallowed nervously, trying to come up with a way of making his words more palatable to his sovereign's ear. "I mean, it is likely that this is how the people would interpret it, should they ever learn of what happened today." He amended hastily.

"I believe that the Archbishop is right." Cromwell spoke up, keeping his tone calm and measured, believing that the last thing they needed at the moment was to allow their passions to rule their
good sense. He was not a superstitious man and he was reluctant to apply the name of 'miracle' to Anne's survival... although he couldn't think what else it might be... but he knew that he would be in the minority, should this extraordinary event become public knowledge. "There are a great many superstitious people in England, despite our attempts to curb popish excesses and to make them aware of the fact that things aren't always what they appear to be and that a wise man will look at things more closely before declaring a miracle – as in the case of duck's blood at Hale."

Even as he said it, he knew that the comparison was not a true one.

The monks at Hale had pretended that the duck's blood belonged to Christ, wilfully deceiving the pilgrims who flocked there in search of miracle cures, paying handsomely for the privilege of gazing upon the vial of blood and praying before it, while Anne's survival was something he had witnessed with his own eyes and something for which there was no rational explanation, nothing that could reassure him that they were not witnessing the hand of God reaching down to intercede on Anne's behalf and protect her from those who would harm her.

He did his best to suppress the disquieting thought and continued. "It is likely that they would believe that this was God's way of providing evidence of the Queen's innocence... and that they would expect Your Majesty to interpret it in the same way." He didn't say any more, knowing that Henry would be able to follow the logic through to its conclusion without any prompting from him.

"I won't keep her as my wife." Henry insisted, knowing that this was what he would have been expected to do if Anne had been found innocent at her trial and that this would be what the people would anticipate if they were to be presented with proof of her innocence, even after she was convicted. Even if Cranmer found a pretext for annulling their marriage, as he had been charged to, the people would not accept the verdict, not when it meant a Queen whose life was saved by a miracle being set aside. He didn't want her as his wife, not any more, miracle or no miracle. He wanted Jane and he meant to have Jane. "The four lovers have already been executed." He pointed out. "If I take her back, if I make it look as though I believe that the charges were false all along, then the people will believe that I had four innocent men executed – and that I did it knowingly, because I wanted to take another wife. They can't think that of me."

The people would blame Jane, he knew that.

They were already whispering about her, despite the fact that he had taken the precaution of sending her back to Wolf Hall while the trials were in progress, so that she would not be tainted by everything that was happening, but even that had not been able to keep her name from being bandied about, with people deriding her for tempting the King to destroy Queen Anne so that Jane might sit on the throne in her place. There was already one particularly insulting ballad being sung in the streets of London, decrying Jane and himself, and there would undoubtedly be others before long. The people may never have liked Anne, accepting her as Queen only under duress, but once the trials began, her plight excited the sympathy of an increasing number of the people.

Instead of rejoicing to see her brought low, as Henry had expected and hoped would be the case, they balked at the idea of Anne being led to the block, completely convinced of her innocence. It seemed that very few of them were tempted by the prospect of replacing the Queen they had cried out against for years with a sweet, fair new Queen who would heal their King's heart.

If word of Anne's survival became public knowledge, the people would make a heroine of her. They would call her survival a miracle and tell themselves that she was favoured by God, who must have great plans for her if He was unwilling to allow her to be killed. They would take it as a sign that it was God's will that Anne should continue to be Queen of England, and that the children of a woman who was so favoured should be the heirs to the throne. They might have rejected Anne
in the past but they would tell themselves that God knew His business best, and that if He had saved Anne, He must have good reasons to wish to see her continue to live as Queen.

If he refused to take her back as his wife, if he annulled their marriage and sent her into exile as he had Katherine when he learned that their union was a false one, then the same people who had cried out against Anne as a whore and a concubine when he married her would quickly change their tune and leap to her defence. They would insist that she was his true, lawful wife and the only woman they would ever consent to call their Queen. They would never accept Jane in her stead, and if she bore him a son, he would be seen as a bastard rather than as a lawful heir.

Jane could bear him half-a-dozen sons and the people would still cleave to Anne and Elizabeth.

How could an ordinary woman like Jane, even a sweet one, hope to compete with a miracle?

If Cromwell, or either of the other men, believed that Anne's arrest had truly been motivated by his desire to rid himself of her and move on with Jane Seymour, they were sensible enough not to allow any sign of this to show in their facial expressions.

"I believe that Your Majesty is correct in that respect," Cromwell said thoughtfully, knowing how much damage it could do to Henry if his subjects were presented with what they would see as undeniable proof of Anne's innocence.

If he took her back, it would be tantamount to an admission that he was prepared to accuse four innocent men of adultery and see them brought to the scaffold in order to free himself to marry Mistress Seymour, an admission that he could not afford to make, especially in the wake of some of the other executions that had taken place in recent memory, executions that had turned the tide of public opinion further and further against the King, but if he refused to do so, the people would be angry and they would refuse to accept Anne's successor, whoever she might be. Instead of having a child whose legitimacy and whose claim to the throne could be denied by nobody and who would be able to ensure the country's future security, the King would have another child of dubious status and uncertain claim, and when he died, civil war was all but inevitable.

Between them, Lady Mary, Princess Elizabeth and Mistress Seymour's child could tear England apart and there would be a long, bloody struggle before one of them managed to seize the throne.

That could not be allowed to happen.

"What about a convent?" Henry suggested hopefully, remembering that after the verdict first came in, Cranmer had made the tentative suggestion that Anne's life should be spared and that she might be sent away to Antwerp, where there was a pleasant convent that would be happy to welcome her, one in which she could live out her days in peace, prayer and contemplation. Although he had refused to consider the suggestion at the time and railed at the unfortunate archbishop for daring to make it, for daring to suggest that after everything Anne had done, she should still be treated so leniently, it now seemed like a very appealing plan. "We could put out a message that I have decided to show her mercy and spare her life after all."

He certainly had no objection to showing himself to be merciful, even to a woman who had betrayed him as cruelly as Anne had, and he would not have to worry about being condemned for sending the mother of his child to her death.

Cromwell shook his head at once. "I'm afraid that that will not be possible, Your Majesty." He said quietly, knowing that he did not need to remind the other man of the reasons why they had initially dismissed this plan. Allowing Anne to live, whether in comfortable retirement in the countryside, in a convent or in exile abroad, would send a clear message to the people, one that they could not
afford to send under the circumstances. "Now that Lord Rochford and the others have been executed, if the Queen's life was spared..."

It would be taken as evidence that he had reason to doubt her guilt and, by extension, the guilt of the men who had been executed, Henry thought glumly, wishing that Anne's execution had been the first scheduled, rather than the last, wishing that he had not agreed to let her die by the sword rather than the axe. Even being forced to take her back as his wife would be preferable to the situation in which he now found himself, as he would have at least been able to save face by 'discovering' new evidence at the last minute, evidence that proved that the allegations were false, something that would allow him to play the loving, repentant husband, relieved to know that his wife was honest after all, deeply regretting that he had ever suspected that she might be capable of betraying him and promising to punish those who had lied to him and made him doubt her.

He might attract some disapproval from the people for allowing it to go as far as it did, but with Anne by his side, a fellow victim of the deception of others, he would have been able to weather the storm and, in time, things would settle down and return to normal.

Brandon, who had been silent until now, finally spoke. "The Queen cannot be left alive." He said quietly. "If she is, people will learn of this eventually and Your Majesty can't afford for them to make a saint of her. We can't let that happen. The only way out of this is for her to be executed." Seeing that Henry was ready to bellow at him, to remind him that the only reason that they were having this discussion was because Anne evidently could not be killed, he hurried to elaborate. "There aren't many people in London, outside the court, who know what she looks like, not up close." He pointed out. The streets were all but deserted when Anne rode to her coronation, and she did not often go out amongst the people, except to distribute alms to the needy and, given the surprising surge in support for her after her arrest, her trial was not open to the public. If they made sure that only people who looked to be of respectable means were permitted to be present for her execution, and kept them back from the scaffold, none of them would be able to swear an oath that it wasn't Anne they saw die. "There are so many people in the Tower who have been condemned to death, all we need is a woman of the same age and colouring. Allow a few dozen people to witness her execution and nobody will doubt that she is the Queen."

"Executions are usually witnessed by hundreds of people, sometimes thousands." Henry objected. "Half of London will claim that they witnessed it, whether they're there to see it or not." Brandon maintained. "I think that it might be our only way out of this dilemma. There is one problem, however..." He admitted reluctantly. They might be able to find a suitable substitute, they might be able to ensure that the people believed that Anne was beheaded but there was one remaining problem that was not as easy to solve, one person who would be able to demolish their fragile house of cards in a heartbeat if she so chose, simply by showing her face.

If Brandon's plan was to work, it would work only with Anne's cooperation.
Chapter Three

17th May 1536

"You want to execute another woman and pretend that she's me? No!" Anne was appalled by what they were suggesting, astounded that they would be willing to take such a drastic step.

Although she knew in her heart that it was unlikely to happen, that Henry would never allow it to happen, no matter what, she had clung to a hope that when they returned from the room where they had gone to discuss her fate, they would return with the news that she was to be restored to her rightful place as Queen, with her innocence proclaimed throughout England and, although the men who had died this morning could not be restored to life, that they would be posthumously cleared of the charges laid against them and restitutions made to their families. They did not deserve to be remembered as traitors, and in George's case, as a man who committed the sin of incest, and she would have liked to know that their names would be cleared.

However, she had never expected this.

She would never stand by while an innocent woman was killed in her place... But how far might Henry be willing to go if she refused to cooperate?

He was clearly determined to marry his slut, despite her miraculous survival. She evidently couldn't be killed or harmed but the same was not true of her loved ones and, even if she couldn't be harmed, that didn't mean that she couldn't be imprisoned indefinitely. So far, it had not occurred to Henry that he still had options at his disposal and she didn't want him to realise it. If he was willing to see her dead, along with four innocent men, in order to persuade Mistress Seymour to spread her legs for him, he was still a threat to her, and those she held dear.

If it occurred to Henry that he could confine her to a cell in the Tower, or in some remote place, bricking the doors and windows and leaving her walled up in there, until she starved to death or was driven to madness by her isolation...

If he realised that he could threaten her sister or, worse still, their beautiful daughter, thereby ensuring that she would do whatever he wanted her to do...

It was unbearable to think that the man she loved could be capable of doing such a thing but the past weeks had proven just how far Henry was willing to go in order to be free of her, and what he might decide to do if she didn't go along with his proposal, before he had a chance to think on their situation, and realise the power he still held over her, realise that the deck was not as stacked in her favour as he initially believed it to be.

Cranmer's eyes were soft with sympathy as he spoke, trying to reason with her. "We would never consent to allowing an innocent person to be beheaded in your stead, Your Majesty, just as you would not," he reassured her, unable to fully suppress the suspicion that he was not speaking for the other men in the room, that if it came to it, they would be prepared to see an innocent woman murdered if it suited their purposes. "But we are not speaking of the death of an innocent person. There are other women in the Tower who have been sentenced to death – and to much more terrible deaths than decapitation at the hands of the swordsman of Calais, Your Majesty." He reminded her gently. "If we can find somebody suitable, somebody willing to help us, to help you, then she will benefit from a quicker, more painless death. Surely that would be an act of mercy." He suggested coaxingly, appealing to her compassionate side.
"Madam, the King has already decided that if this can be arranged, it is the course of action that he will undertake." Cromwell told her firmly, speaking of Henry as though he was not in the room, despite the fact that he was sitting at the table opposite Anne. "It would be in your best interests to cooperate with this, and if you do, His Majesty will see to it that you are well provided for."

Anne said nothing, merely raising an eyebrow by way of a question, not trusting so vague a statement. Henry had originally intended to see to it that Katherine was well provided for, after all, and the woman had been housed in misery and penury for her final years, her few remaining attendants staying out of loyalty and love when she could no longer afford to pay their wages.

She certainly had no intention of accepting so bleak a life, just to let Henry marry his slut!

He would have to do much better than that if he wanted her to hide away, though she knew that there was nothing he could give her that would be compensation for never seeing Elizabeth again.

"Should you agree to cooperate, a suitable residence will be placed at your disposal for as long as you have need of it, together with an appropriate household – though it is imperative that you will not reveal your identity to any of your servants who are not made privy to it in advance. The women who attended you in the Tower have consented to accompany you and to attend you." He added; the three women had needed no coaxing to agree to this, although they had gladly accepted his offer of far more generous wages than their position would warrant. They viewed Anne's survival as a miracle and Anne herself as almost a living saint, insisting that they would be honoured to continue to serve her, even if that meant sharing her exile. "His Majesty will also allow you to retain all gifts and property that were given to you before your marriage." Cromwell's lower lip twitched slightly at this, the only visible sign of displeasure he allowed himself to show.

When Anne was created Marquess of Pembroke, Henry had granted her lands worth a hundred thousand pounds a year, a colossal sum and one that would have been more than ample to provide for her royally, as had been his intention when he gifted her with the property, intending it to fund her household and to serve as her jointure if she outlived him. Although once she became Queen, this income covered the expenses of her household and her charities, expenses that would otherwise have been met by the Privy Purse, it now represented a substantial loss to the exchequer, which would soon have another Queen and her household to support, along with the King's two daughters and any subsequent royal children, but that could not be helped.

He knew Anne well enough to know that she would not be bought off cheaply, not when she knew how vital her cooperation was for this affair to be settled to the King's satisfaction, so it was in everybody's best interests to err on the side of generosity.

It was better to placate her, whatever it cost, than to risk that she would refuse to adhere to her side of the bargain.

"I see." Anne said quietly, meeting Henry's eyes and wondering if he realized that the official jewels of the Queens of England were among those presented to her before their marriage, or if he even remembered the day he had given them to her, sending a message to Katherine without breathing a word of it beforehand so that he would be able to surprise her when he showed her what she would be able to wear on their trip to France. Whatever she was being promised now, she knew that the jewels would have to be left behind, so that Jane Seymour might wear them, as it would arouse suspicion if they disappeared but she was going to make sure that her favourite pieces accompanied her into exile, unable to bear the thought that they would adorn Jane.

When the time came, they should be Elizabeth's and she would find a way to arrange it, somehow.

"It's a generous offer, Anne, and you know it." Henry snapped at her, breaking his resolve to
remain silent and to allow Cromwell to do the talking. "I promise that you will be well taken care of if you agree to this."

It was a generous offer, more generous by far than what she would have expected when she began to fear for her position before her arrest, fearing that she would follow in Katherine's footsteps, left to rot in penury. If she was to be exiled, at least she was to be amply provided for and, even if Henry wanted to cut her household or stop her income, he would not dare to do so, not when he would be constantly faced with the threat that she might show her face at court and turn his life upside down if he dared to try to cheat her.

At that thought, at the realization of how much power she might wield over him, simply by virtue of her continuing life, she made her decision.

"I agree – but on one condition." She added, before Henry could celebrate too prematurely. She looked him straight in the eye as she spoke, wanting to make sure that he knew that there was no possible way that she would back down, not where this matter was concerned. It was too important. "Our marriage is not to be annulled."

"What?" Henry gaped at her in disbelief, glancing in Cranmer's direction and wondering if he had said something to her, warning her that this was what he had intended to do as soon as she was dead and could not fight it. She couldn't seriously be asking this of him... could she?

"You heard me." Anne said calmly. "Our marriage will not be annulled and Elizabeth will not be named a bastard. Our daughter will continue to be known as a legitimate princess and as heiress presumptive to the throne, at least until you have a son. If the people don't know that I am alive, then they will have no reason to question the validity of your marriage to that worthless bitch, or the legitimacy of any brats she whelps." She pointed out coolly, amused both by the way that Henry took umbrage at her words and by the visible effort he made to control his temper, not daring to cross her, even in defence of Jane and the thriving family of sons that he hoped she would give him. "If she gives you a son, he will be accepted as your heir. If she has no children, or if she only bears you daughters, then Elizabeth is your heir. This isn't a negotiation, Henry." She stated firmly, not allowing him to deceive himself into thinking that she was trying to secure herself a better deal, that there might be something he could offer her in exchange for renouncing Elizabeth's rights. Elizabeth's future welfare was not going to be the subject of bargaining. "If you refuse, there is no deal and I promise you that the people will learn about what happened today."

She would have given anything to be able to ensure that her daughter would be the next Queen of England, confident that she would be a better ruler by far than either the Lady Mary or any child Henry managed to get on Jane, but she was realistic enough to know that she could not hold out for the throne. If Elizabeth continued to be recognized as a legitimate princess, with a guaranteed position in the line of succession ahead of any daughters Jane bore, even if it had to be after the sons, then she would be safe and honourably provided for. She would never endure the bitter humiliation that the Lady Mary had, humiliation that Anne deeply regretted helping to inflict on the girl now that her own child was threatened with the same fate.

If it was God's will that Elizabeth should be Queen of England, He would find a way to see it done, and Henry, Jane and their bastards wouldn't be able to prevent it.

"Besides," she added, hammering her point home, "if the marriage is annulled, then people will say that there can have been no adultery." She settled back in her chair, feigning a confidence she didn't feel, needing Henry to believe what she was saying and to go along with it, for the sake of her child. "It's your choice; you can leave our marriage as it is and then you and Jane can have a son that everybody will accept as your heir, or you can try to annul our marriage, I'll come to court to
fight it and your marriage to Jane will never be secure."

She was right and Henry knew it.

His choice was an unenviable one, to say the least.

If he did not annul their marriage, then he would continue to be Anne's husband.

People might believe that Jane was his wife and Queen and that their son was his legitimate heir but he would know the truth, as would a handful of others who would be sworn to secrecy.

On the other hand, as long as it remained a secret that only they were privy to, his son by Jane – and he had to believe that there would be a son – would be accepted as his heir, without question. If he tried to annul their marriage, if Anne came forward to fight it, then it would be the situation with Katherine all over again. It might be years before he could finally be free of her, able to take another wife and by then, he might be too old to father a son, and he would certainly be too old to see his son grow to manhood. He might die without any legitimate heir, not even a daughter.

He couldn't allow that to happen, no matter what.

"Alright," he said after a few minutes of silence stretched between them. "I promise before God, on my Crown, my honour and my soul, that I will not annul our marriage and I will not allow Elizabeth to be declared a bastard." He vowed, thinking that the occasion called for a solemn oath. Anne probably would not be satisfied with anything less.

Anne nodded, trying to appear confident, as though she had never had any doubt in her mind that he would agree to her condition but she couldn't help but exhale in relief, glad to know that at least Elizabeth's future would be secure. "If you try to annul it later, if you try to make our daughter a bastard, then the deal is void." She warned him firmly, just in case he got it into his head to wait until she was safely out of the way to annul it.

"If you let anybody know that you're still alive, then I'll annul our marriage and Elizabeth will be a bastard." He threatened.

Anne nodded again, biting her lip to hide a smile.

Outwardly, it might seem as though they had an ultimatum, one that would keep balance between them and ensure that they both kept to their side of the bargain, but Henry had more to lose from it than she did if he breached their agreement. Once he entered into a charade of marriage with Jane, once their first son was born, he would not be able to afford for her to step forward. Even if he annulled their marriage, he would still have married Jane knowing that Anne was alive, and still his wife. It would be a blow from which he would not be able to recover easily, if at all.

"So we have an agreement?" Henry pressed, anxious to have this over with.

Anne's smile was faint but her eyes betrayed her sorrow at the thought that once she was sent away into exile, it was unlikely that she would see her child again. She had secured Elizabeth's future but she would not be able to see her, not even to say goodbye, and her daughter would grow up believing herself to be motherless and, worse still, she would be told that her mother was an adulteress and a traitor who betrayed her father and deserved death for her crimes. She could only pray that, when Elizabeth was older, one of her attendants would be able to tell her that her mother was innocent, and that there was no reason for her to feel shame over being the daughter of Anne Boleyn. Even if they didn't, she still had the comfort of knowing her child was safe.

As long as Elizabeth was safe, she could accept this arrangement.
We do.

18th May 1536

The statue before her seemed almost alive, the pained expression on his painted face so human, so alive with suffering that Mary could barely tear her eyes away from it.

During his time on this earth, Jesus had suffered greatly, giving His life for the sins of mankind, a sacrifice made in love, for the salvation of the world and, while Mary would never presume to compare the hardships she had endured to those suffered by Christ, as next to His, her pain was trivial, she wondered if there was a purpose to her suffering, as there was to His.

Was she being tested, in order to ensure that when the time came for her to become Queen – and she had to believe that this was what God had planned for her – she would be shaped by her suffering in her youth, into the kind of ruler that England deserved, a ruler strong enough to bring the country back from the brink of chaos and to reverse the damage of the past years?

Was it to be her destiny to restore the true Church to England, returning the country to obedience to Rome and to save the people from damnation?

She prayed that she would prove to be worthy.

At the beginning of this month, she was part of the household of her little half-sister. Her removal from Hatfield when she fell ill proved to be a temporary one and she returned there, on her father's orders – orders she was sure he had issued only to pacify the then-pregnant Anne, who was said to have been disgusted and furious about the fact that the King had shown kindness to his eldest daughter and that he was so concerned for her health, begrudging even this slight gesture of affection on his part. When she was informed that she was ordered to return to Hatfield, the only consolation Mary could take was her knowledge that, if Anne was so threatened by such a minor concession, it could only be because she knew how much Mary's father loved her, and knew that it was only a matter of time before that love won out over Anne's witchcraft and he realised that Mary, the pearl of his world, was his most beloved daughter, not Anne's child.

But even that consolation couldn't make life at Hatfield bearable.

She was obliged to wait on Anne Boleyn's little bastard like a servant and to watch while the child was accorded the dues of a princess, honoured as the heir to the throne while Mary, the person who should have been accorded those honours by rights, was referred to by the title of Lady, with the offensive implication that she should be grateful to have even that, as though the blood that flowed through her veins was not purely royal, as though she was not entitled to a far grander title than the title used by almost every lady of the court.

She was insultingly spoken of as the King's bastard, with everybody at Hatfield pretending that she was illegitimate, the daughter of a union that should never have been, pointedly referring to Anne as the Queen whenever they spoke of her, which they seemed to do more and more often when Mary was within earshot. They appeared to delight in the discomfort and dismay that she could never quite conceal when she heard her mother's title applied to the harlot who had usurped her place. It was especially painful to hear them whispering of the celebrations that the King had staged when Mary's mother died, gleefully relating that all of the members of the royal family had worn bright yellow and that there had been dancing and banquets.

While she could easily believe that Anne would be callous enough to rejoice at the death of a woman she had caused such heartbreak to and to expect that the court would follow her lead, and while she had seen the yellow silk dress ordered for Elizabeth in preparation for her journey to
court for herself, Mary had to believe that her father had taken no part in the celebrations, that he still had enough fond feelings left in his heart for the woman who had been his true and loving wife for so many years, the mother of his only legitimate child, to ensure that he would mourn her, and that he would regret all of the pain he had caused her... and their daughter.

She had to believe that her father had come to understand how much pain he had unjustly caused his true wife and their daughter.

She had to believe that he would set things right, and that what he was doing for her now was just his first step towards restoring her to her rightful place.

Now, although she was to continue to reside in Hatfield for the present, at least until arrangements could be made for her to be moved to a residence of her own, one where she was to have a suitable household as befitted the King's eldest daughter, she had been released from her hated duties in Elizabeth's household. She was to have her own spacious, comfortable apartment, furnished almost as richly as little Elizabeth's nursery – a far cry from the bleak, bare room that had been her home for the past two and a half years, since she was first condemned to a servant's existence – and she was assigned two maids of her own to attend her, a clear sign that she now stood higher in her father's good graces than she had for years.

She had not yet been restored to her proper place as a princess and, in the absence of a son of her father by a true marriage, as the heir to the throne but it was a beginning and she was sure that the rest would come eventually.

Now that her father had finally broken free of Anne's spell, now that the harlot would no longer be able to pour poison into his ears, turning him against his daughter and leaving him unable to show her the love and affection he truly felt for her, for fear of offending her, he would be a loving father to Mary once more, as he was when she was a child and when he had doted on her as the pearl of his world. Now that Anne could no longer blind him to the fact that his marriage to Mary's mother – who had been the true Queen of England until the day she died – was a valid one, he would be able to see how he had wronged her mother, his loving wife, by doubting their marriage and by subjecting her to the humiliation of the trial.

He would realize that Mary was his legitimate daughter, repent for the way he had treated her and she would forgive him, knowing that it was only Anne's black influence that had made him act as he had. She could not blame him for falling victim to the spells that witch had cast over him. She could only rejoice that he was finally free, free to be the loving father she remembered.

It would not be long now before he called her to court, welcoming her back into his life and restoring her to her rightful place.

She said a short prayer in Latin and, hearing the sound of somebody clearing their throat behind her, she made the sign of the cross and rose, turning to see Ambassador Chapuys, a diligent supporter of herself and of her mother, standing behind her.

He bowed low, kissing her hand, as was his custom. Even when others would not or dared not do so, Chapuys had always given her her due as a Princess of England, defying her father by according her the honours of her rank, a gesture she deeply appreciated, just as she appreciated the fact that he had always referred to her mother by her rightful title as Queen.

As soon as she saw him, she blurted the question that had been preying on her mind.

"Is it done? Is the harlot dead?"
Despite everything, she did not think that she would be able to feel fully at ease as long as Anne continued to draw breath, afraid that, despite everything, her enemy might still be able to rally and claw her way back to power, bewitching the King again and wreaking her vengeance on Mary and on anybody else who had tried to stand against her. An Anne who had come so close to losing everything she had schemed for, who had come within a hairsbreadth of paying for her sins with her life, would be more dangerous than ever, like a cornered viper.

"I don't know." Chapuys answered honestly. "But certainly, she will be dead before very long."

Mary made the sign of the cross again. "The Lord is good." Chapuys murmured assent. "Tell me," she began, beginning to walk away from the altar with Chapuys by her side and her ladies following at a discreet distance, "why is she really to die?"

While she had never given up hope, there had been times when doubted whether she would be able to hold out long enough to defeat Anne, who seemed so strong, so able to manipulate others, using them as her puppets and forcing them to dance to her tune that her capacity to do harm should never be underestimated, and now that Anne was finally finished, it seemed like a miracle.

Had the Devil finally deserted Anne, seeing that he and his disciple could not hope to prevail against God and His goodness, against whom they had set themselves, determined to wrench England away from the true Church, determined to lead its people down the path of heresy and damnation? Had he abandoned Anne, stripping her of the unnatural powers for which she must have sold her soul, the powers that had enabled her to keep Mary's father in her thrall for so many years, allowing her to corrupt a man who had once been a loving husband and father and a good King who only wanted to do right by his people in order to secure Mary's mother's rightful place as Queen for her own selfish ends? Had he left her defenceless against the punishment she had richly deserved and which was long overdue, deciding that she could do no more for him?

Was her father finally free, able to see the harlot for what she was and to be disgusted by her?

It was said that Anne had gambled all on her ability to give Mary's father a son, believing that if she did this, her power would be assured because he would not be able to repudiate the mother of the male heir he so longed for, and that but for her miscarriage, she might still be sitting on the throne. However, if that was the case, Mary considered her father's former mistress a fool if she had gambled on the hope of a son. A son was the one thing that the Devil, for all his dark power, could never give her, it was a blessing that could only come from God and He would never have blessed that woman with a son, not when He knew of the damage that a son of Anne Boleyn's, brought up to follow his mother's teachings, could do to England.

"They say that she was intriguing with countless lovers." Chapuys said in a low voice.

"How many lovers was she supposed to have?" Mary asked, both revolted by Anne's corrupt nature and amazed by her daring and by the extent of the power she must have possessed, until recently, that would allow her to carry on her liaisons undetected. She could only be thankful that Anne's powers deserted her before she could do more damage than she already had.

"According to Mr Cromwell, over a hundred men – including her brother, Rochford." Mary crossed herself again, repulsed by what she was hearing. Her own brother! How wicked could one woman possibly be? "But I am told she also blames me for what has befallen her and holds me accountable for her doom." He remarked with wry humour, giving Mary a slight smile. "Naturally, I am flattered by the compliment, since she would have thrown me to the dogs, if she could."

Mary smiled in response to that, knowing that this was true.
It must have infuriated Anne to know that Chapuys was an ardent supporter of herself and of her mother, unwilling to desert them in their time of need, and to know that, despite the fact that he was forced to treat her with outward courtesy, he viewed her as the harlot she was, and that he was one of the few men immune to her witchcraft and to know that there was nothing that she could do about it, as even she could not dare to harm the Imperial ambassador.

"What of this other lady? This Jane Seymour?" Mary knew very little about the woman but the fact that Jane Seymour had been able to act as an antidote to Anne's poison, helping to free her father from her thrall after so many years and after Anne had pushed him into committing so many grave sins in order to give her what she demanded, was a very hopeful sign, and she prayed that her future stepmother would be a friend to her, somebody who would recognize her rights as Princess and do everything in her power to persuade the King to recognize and honour those rights.

Although Lady Jane had not yet written to her – Mary did not resent this, understanding that, given the delicacy of Jane's position, she could neither allude to her future role as Queen or openly commit herself to the cause of her future stepdaughter when the King had not yet made his intentions regarding her position clear – other courtiers had hastened to write to Mary after Anne's arrest, expressing their respect and good will, and a couple of them had discreetly hinted that, once Jane Seymour became Queen of England, Mary could expect to find a true friend in her.

After her past suffering, she hardly dared to believe that she could be so fortunate in her new stepmother but Chapuys was smiling slightly, showing that he was optimistic.

"I have been told, in confidence, that she is of our faith and that the King loves her and means to marry her and that she means to restore Your Grace to the succession."

It was welcome news!

If her future stepmother was prepared to act as her advocate, championing her interests to her father and urging him to restore her to her rightful place, he would surely yield, out of love for them both, especially since he would need an heir, at least until Lady Jane bore him a son – and if she did not, Mary would become Queen when her father died, as she was meant to be. Her sainted mother, watching over her from Heaven, would rejoice to know that, within a matter of days, weeks at the most, she would see Mary welcomed to court as a beloved daughter and Princess.

It all seemed so perfect; there was only one thing more that she needed to hear...

"And Elizabeth will become a bastard now, as I have been a bastard?" Mary asked hopefully, feeling that justice demanded nothing less.

She did not dislike Elizabeth, trying not to hate the child for being her mother's daughter, knowing that she could not help this and that, regardless of what Anne had done, the woman's child should not be held accountable for it. Her own mother would have urged her to love her sister and to be kind to her, especially now that she was to lose her mother, and at such a young age. For all her faults, Anne was a loving and devoted mother, spending as much time as she could with her child, and Elizabeth was certain to miss her. She had even become quite fond of her sister, singing to her and playing with her whenever Lady Bryan was prepared to allow it, which was not often as the governess seemed to be convinced that Mary could not be trusted alone with little Elizabeth.

However, after the years she had spent in misery because of Anne Boleyn, stripped of her rightful titles so that they might be bestowed on Anne's child, she longed to see the situation set to rights; herself restored as Princess and as heir, the position she should never have been deprived of, while Elizabeth was downgraded in name to the bastard she was in truth.
She was determined to be kind to her little sister but that could not keep her from wishing to see their respective positions made clear to the world.

Chapuys hesitated a moment before he responded, reluctant to answer her question. When he spoke, his tone was gentle and regretful. "No, Princess. The King has ordered that the brat will continue to bear the title of Princess and that she will be known to all as his legitimate daughter... and, for the present, as the heir to the throne, until such time as a legitimate prince is born."

"No..." Mary felt her knees crumple and, had it not been for Chapuy's supporting arm guiding her to sit on one of the benches, she would have fallen to the floor in a heap. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. How could her father do this to her? How could he continue to deny her rights, even without Anne? He must know that he was wrong to ever doubt that she was his legitimate daughter! How could he be so determined to downgrade her and yet be prepared to allow Elizabeth to continue to enjoy the privileges of a princess, privileges that she had no true right to and that her mother had usurped on her behalf, especially after the way that Anne had betrayed him? "How can my father even be certain that she is his child at all?" She demanded.

If Anne had had so many lovers, then her father would be a fool to discount the possibility that Elizabeth could have been fathered by one of them—perhaps she was even a child born of the incestuous coupling of Anne and her brother, a child born from the blackest of sins instead of just an ordinary bastard!—and he was no fool. Why was he unquestioningly accepting the harlot's word that he had fathered her child? Why was he so willing to have Elizabeth continue to be known as a princess when he was prepared to deprive Mary, the pearl of his world, of that right?

"The King has decreed that Elizabeth is his own child and that, regardless of the crimes her mother committed, he will not punish their daughter for them." Chapuys told her gently, knowing how much of a blow this news was for her and wishing that he could console her.

The news had come as a shock to him as well, and as a very unwelcome one, as it must to all people who hoped to see Mary restored to her rights. Had the King's concubine died when she miscarried the son that would have been her saviour, he would have understood it if the King, in his grief—and perhaps only his relief over the fact that the harlot had died, sparing him the need to end their marriage when he wished to be free of her to take a new wife—chose to allow their child to retain her royal title and honours, but when he was so angry with her over her betrayal, it was astounding to see that he was still willing to be so generous to little Elizabeth.

He did not know if the brat's tender years had inclined the King to show more kindness to her than he had to Mary, his trueborn daughter, when he sought to set Queen Katherine aside or if he was motivated by a desire to calm some of the public anger over the harlot's fate by showing the people that their child was not being punished for her mother's crimes, the result was the same.

He would never have believed it if he had not had the news directly from Master Cromwell, who made it plain that the King was unwilling to consider diminishing the status of his younger child.

Even his thinly veiled warning that the Emperor would view it as a grave insult if the child of Anne Boleyn continued to enjoy the royal status that Queen Katherine's daughter was denied, and the hint that the very least the Emperor expected was that the brat should be declared a bastard so that she would not be set above Princess Mary, was unable to sway Cromwell, who merely repeated that the King had made his decision, and considered the matter closed.

"Since the harlot is to die, the King need not also annul their farce of a union in order to free himself to marry Lady Jane. It could be that he does not wish to open the issue of his union with her unnecessarily, for fear that he would be mocked if he said that a second marriage was unlawful, and perhaps he has taken pity on the brat, as she is so young and as she is to lose her mother—
Mary nodded mutely, knowing that he said it to protect her, afraid that if she tried to suggest that Elizabeth's paternity was doubtful, she would anger her father and undo any good work that Jane Seymour did on her behalf. If he chose to acknowledge Elizabeth, he would take umbrage at any suggestion that he might be honouring a cuckoo instead of a child of his own blood.

She pictured Elizabeth's face, trying to recall if her sister – if she was even her sister – shared any features with her father, wishing that she could have seen the faces of the men who had been Anne's lovers, so that she could see for herself whether or not the toddler's face bore the stamp of their fathering but when she visualized Elizabeth, all she could see was Anne.

Anne, who had caused her and her sainted mother so much misery in life, all for the sake of her sinful ambition, and who, even when the hour of her death drew so near, was still able to strike one final blow, summoning what little remained of her unnatural powers and choosing not to try to extend her own life or to try to win the King's affections again, knowing that she lacked the power to do either, but to achieve a final victory over Mary and over her mother through her child, manipulating the King into continuing to accept little Elizabeth as a legitimate princess, knowing what that would mean for Mary if she could manage to achieve this aim.

If Elizabeth was recognized as legitimate, then Mary could not be.

If her father accepted that his marriage to Anne was a true and valid one – and he could scarcely condemn her for adultery if it was not – then his marriage to Mary's mother was invalid, as he had claimed years ago, when Anne first ensnared him and refused to yield to his advances until he could offer her marriage and a crown, and Mary was a bastard, not entitled to the title of princess or to a place in the line of succession. The rights and privileges that were hers in justice would belong to her little half-sister, the harlot's child, a child that Mary would be expected to yield precedence to as though Elizabeth was truly a princess, a thought that galled her.

Jane Seymour sounded like a good, kind woman and Mary believed Chapuys when he said that her future stepmother wanted to encourage her father to restore her to her former, rightful position, as she knew that there were many people in the country who still knew that she was the rightful Princess of England and her father's true heir and who longed to see her recognized as such once more, but no matter how sincere her good will and her desire to help, Lady Jane would not succeed, she could not succeed, not as long as Elizabeth was considered legitimate.

And Anne knew this.

Anne knew that if she could only ensure that her daughter continued to be recognized as a legitimate princess, she would place a barrier between Mary and the restoration of her rights, one that might prove to be insurmountable, even when Mary enjoyed the good will of the next Queen of England, as well as the support of her powerful cousin, who would surely speak for her.

Had Anne also turned her venom on Jane Seymour, cursing her with barrenness or ensuring that the sons she bore would be too sickly to reach manhood, so that she might secure the throne for her child ahead of the rightful heir?

Anne might die soon – might even be dead already – but if she had secured Elizabeth's position as a princess, if she had paved the way for her bastard child to inherit the throne, then she had ensured that the damage she had begun would continue in the next generation and that the harm she had done to England could not be reversed.
If Elizabeth succeeded as Queen, she would never return England to the true religion, returning the country to the arms of Rome so that the English people could have the blessing of the pope.

She couldn't, not when she was a bastard in the eyes of the Holy Church and unfit to rule, regardless of the King's insistence on calling her the Princess of England. If Elizabeth wished to hold her throne, then she would have to continue to promote the heretical teachings of the reformers, knowing that only they would be misguided enough to view her as the lawful heir to the throne. Even if, in her heart, she believed in the true religion, she would have little alternative but to continue to lead the people of England down the path that Anne had laid for them.

She was Anne's child, so she would not willingly yield possession of the throne. She would do whatever she had to in order to stay Queen, even cheat her own sister out of her rights.

Anne was to die but her vile work would continue through her daughter.

She had won.

Despite everything, Anne had won.

Tears were a luxury that Mary very seldom allowed herself, particularly in front of others.

Her father had once boasted that she was a girl who never cried and she strove to live up to that description, both to please him and because her mother taught her that a princess should never be a slave to her emotions. She was determined to always present a strong facade, not to let anybody see how much the humiliations she was forced to endure hurt her, never letting them see such weakness, knowing that it would give her enemies pleasure and cause her supporters to think her weak, to believe that she had given up hope and yielded to despair.

Now, however, she could not staunch their flow and they trickled, unchecked down her cheeks as her chest heaved with silent sobs.

The sword was still stained with the lady's blood.

It might seem absurd to some but to the executioner of Calais, this was, in some ways, the most disturbing thing he had seen thus far. The generous purse of money the Queen had presented him with before he beheaded her... before he attempted to behead her... was heavy in his pocket and he had already been promised another, far larger sum in exchange for his cooperation over the coming days and, more importantly, for his silence. They were so desperate to keep the story from spreading that he was offered enough money to ensure that he need never work again.

Even if he was inclined to speak of what he saw, he knew that nobody would believe him.

He certainly would never believe the story if somebody else told it to him.

It was explained to him that he would be called upon to execute another woman, as soon as a suitable one could be found, that this execution was to take place outside, before a small number of people who would be admitted to the precincts of the Tower, instead of in private as the Queen's was to have been and that until then he was to remain within the Tower, speaking to nobody save Master Kingston and selected representatives of the King. It would be put out that he had been delayed on his journey to England to explain why the execution was to be delayed.

Knowing that he would soon be called upon to use the sword again, he took out a rough cloth to clean the blood from it, intending to polish it to a shine, ready for use, but despite his best efforts, the blood did not shift, even after several minutes of hard scrubbing. More astonishingly still, when
he examined the cloth he was using, there was no trace of a stain on it, despite the fact that the blood was still wet.

He examined it more closely, noting that while it might be expected that the blood would be dry by now, it had not even begun to congeal. It was still wet and ruby red, as it was the instant the sword passed through the Queen's slender neck.

Fascinated, he reached out with a tentative finger to touch it, feeling amazed and horrified when he found that it was still warm, as it must have been when it was flowing through the Queen's veins. When he withdrew his finger, none of the blood clung to his skin and the stain on the sword remained as it had been, undisturbed by his touch.

He was not superstitious man. He believed in God, as a good Christian should, but he prided himself on being rational but for this, there was no explanation… apart from one.

This was a miracle!
Chapter Four

18th May 1536

"Your ladies – your former ladies – are packing away your gowns and your personal belongings; they believe they are doing this so that your rooms may be cleared for Lady Jane, and so that the King may decide what he will choose to do with your things." Brandon related to Anne, feeling ill at ease in her presence, unable to believe what was happening. The lady sitting in front of him was the true Queen of England, according to both English law and to the Church of England, even if the Catholic Church had decreed that she had no right to the title, and she would remain so until the day she died. However, within a month at most, Jane Seymour would be 'married' to Henry, who had no intention of waiting any longer than he absolutely had to before fathering a son and heir, and then she would be feted as Queen, with only a tiny handful knowing that she was truly the King's mistress and nothing more. It would take him much more than a day to accustom himself to that thought... if he was ever able to accustom himself to it at all. "They will be conveyed to Pembroke Hall, in Wales, which the King has placed at your disposal."

Anne nodded comprehension, feeling relieved when he named the place that was to be her future home. Henry could not take the risk of allowing her to leave the bounds of his kingdom, or even to allow her to travel to Ireland, in case she took advantage of the opportunity to slip away to France, where King Francis was sure to recognize her and to be very interested in the story she had to tell him but Pembroke Hall, newly built by his great-uncle, Jasper Tudor, the Earl of Pembroke and Duke of Bedford after Henry's father came to the throne, and bequeathed to the Crown when he died without legitimate issue, was near the Welsh coast, in an area that was quiet and remote enough to ensure that she would be safely out of the way.

She had never visited the manor which, ironically, was one of the properties that Henry originally intended gifting to her in honour of her elevation of Marquess of Pembroke, to ensure that she would have access to an income that would be large enough to support her as Queen or if, as a result of some unforeseen complication, he was unable to marry her, in which case any child born of their union would still inherit her title and property, and could look forward to a comfortable future as a wealthy noble if they could not be born royal. Later, he changed his mind and chose other properties, but she had seen the plans and knew that it was large, more of a palace than a manor, with no expense spared when it came to decorating and furnishing it.

"As you know, the women who attended you in the Tower are to accompany you as your personal attendants, and a Sir Anthony Russell has been informed of your identity and will live at Pembroke Hall as your steward. Your almoner, Father Parker, has also consented to join you. The King orders that these five are to be the only ones allowed to be aware of your identity. Your other servants must never be told; Master Cromwell recommended that you should distance yourself from them as much as possible, at least in the immediate future. A suitable household will also be engaged," Brandon continued, grimacing slightly at the memory of the figures Cromwell had shown him, detailing the number of people that would have to be engaged to see to the upkeep of Pembroke Hall and the cost of their wages to the Privy Purse.

Anne might not be supplied with a household on a royal scale but her establishment was one that no great lord would have been ashamed to preside over, and Henry would be paying for everything, from the wages of her servants to the hay for the horses in the stable, even though Anne's income was more than sufficient to meet these costs herself.

It was especially galling when he thought of how Katherine was situated during her final days,
when she could have counted the number of people who remained to tend to her on the fingers of one hand and when she had not the resources to be able to afford to pay for even that tiny household, one Henry refused to finance as long as she held to her conviction that she was still his wife, refusing to yield the title of Queen, which she saw as her right, or to acknowledge Anne in her place, not for the promise of being welcomed to court as Dowager Princess of Wales and certainly not for the sake of comfort. Anybody who stayed with Katherine stayed out of love and loyalty, with little hope that they would ever be recompensed for their years of devoted service.

He wondered if Henry had ever paid Katherine's servants the wages owing to them, as she beseeched him to, or if they were still waiting in vain for their payment.

"The King will pay the wages of your servants, and provide an allowance for the upkeep of your household but your personal expenses must be met from your own income." He told her.

"And how is that to be forwarded to me?" Anne asked, untroubled by that condition. Even as Queen, with a full royal household to pay for and many charitable works on which to spend her money, she had never once managed to spend the full income from the lands she controlled as Marquess of Pembroke, let alone exceed it. A hundred thousand pounds a year was far more than anybody, even somebody with her admittedly extravagant tastes, could possibly manage to spend on their personal needs, even if she tried.

The only thing she regretted was that she wouldn't be able to use the excess to provide for the needs of England's poor; if word got out about a lady living in seclusion dispensing large sums of money, it would attract unwanted attention, which would risk her identity being discovered, invalidating the agreement she made with Henry to ensure Elizabeth's legitimacy.

Elizabeth was her priority and she would be as discreet as possible for her sake.

"Master Cromwell is to select a steward and managers to discreetly see to the running of your estates and the collection of rents and other money owed to you." Brandon explained. "The funds will be forwarded to you quarterly. Should you have any queries – or any complaints – you may contact Master Cromwell, but you must do so discreetly, and under an assumed name. Sir Anthony will forward any letters, and you are to send them through him, never by other means. The King does not wish to hear from you," he added, before she could ask, knowing how Henry was likely to react if Anne decided to correspond with him and that it would be far from pretty, "but he has agreed that you will be sent reports of Princess Elizabeth's health and progress through Archbishop Cranmer – and, as you have requested, York Place will be deeded to the Princess," he added, naming a palace that was once Wolsey's pride and joy, one that Henry had given to Anne as a gift when her father was elevated as Earl of Wiltshire and Ormonde.

Per Henry and Anne's agreement that she was to retain everything given to her prior to their marriage, the palace was still her property but, as there could be no question of her making use of it under the circumstances, Anne had suggested that it should become Elizabeth's.

This was a compromise that Henry agreed to with great reluctance.

He had planned to make a gift of the palace to Mistress Seymour when she returned to court, thinking that it might one day become the nursery palace where the children he was sure she would give him would reside in their own princely establishment, enjoying every luxury he could lavish on them, and had not wanted to give up that plan. However, he knew that Anne spoke truthfully when she said that he could circulate the story that, for the sake of their daughter, he had not confiscated Anne's property as was his right, permitting her to leave it to Elizabeth, her only surviving child and her natural heir, and that he would be seen as merciful for it.
When the little girl was older, it was likely to become her London residence.

"Thank you." Anne said, smiling for the first time.

She knew that she had done all she could to safeguard her precious child's future, knew that she had seen to it that Elizabeth could never be robbed of her rightful status as a Princess of England, never left to suffer the neglect and humiliation that Lady Mary endured, but it was still a comfort to know that she would still be able to have news of her child, even if that news was delivered second- or third-hand and infrequently, at that. She could trust Cranmer to do all in his power to ensure that she was sent updates as often as he could and if Elizabeth was to own York Place, she would be able to live there part of the time, especially once she was a little older, staying close to the court and to her father, and in the state that her rank as a Princess of England demanded.

Brandon glanced at the small silver, ivory-inlaid chest on the table in front of him, the one in which the pieces of jewellery that Anne had selected from the official jewel collection of the Queens of England, the ones she staunchly refused to leave behind for Jane Seymour to wear, were stored, a grim smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

It was not until after they agreed their deal that Anne laid claim to the Queen's jewels, calmly asking that they be packed along with her other belongings, and that Henry realized that he had unwittingly included them in their agreement. He had forgotten that he had wrested them from Katherine's possession, despite that lady's protests at the idea of parting with her property to adorn a woman she referred to as the scandal of Christendom, and her refusal to do do until she was forced, and presented them to Anne before their wedding, as they were preparing for their trip to France, instead of waiting until she was actually Queen before giving them to her.

The expression of shock and disbelief on Henry's face when Anne calmly requested that the jewels should be brought to her was almost comical and Brandon was hard-pressed not to laugh at the sight of his disbelief at the thought of what he had unknowingly granted Anne, knowing that if he allowed himself to show any sign of amusement, he would become the target of his friend's anger.

Henry was in no mood to laugh at any aspect of this situation, or to hear others do so.

Anne readily agreed to compromise and to take only some of the pieces with her, which Brandon suspected was her intention all along. She must surely have known that she would never be allowed to take the entire collection into exile with her, promise or not. The jewels of the Queens of England, a collection preserved over centuries and added to as each holder of the title was presented with more fabulous pieces, could not be removed from the royal treasury for her. There was no way that their absence would fail to be noticed, and questioned.

However, by making Henry believe that she intended to claim the entire collection, she was able to secure permission to take some of the jewels with her.

According to Master Cromwell, if Anne had consulted the finest goldsmiths and jewellers in Europe and sought their advice on which pieces to choose before she listed which ones she wanted to retain, she could not have done a better job of selecting the most valuable items in the collection. It was almost uncanny. She might have been allowed to take only a dozen pieces or so, for fear that it would be noticed and remarked upon if more were to disappear without an explanation, but the pieces she had selected were worth a fortune.

If they were robbed on their travels, the thief would be the happiest man in England.

"Why did you insist on bringing them?" He asked, flipping open the lid of the chest and fingerling the sapphire and diamond necklace on top, wondering why Anne, despite the fact that her
insistence on forbidding the annulment would mean that Jane Seymour would not truly be either a wife or Queen, was not content with that and had to deprive the other woman of these jewels too, unwilling to leave her with even that much. He winced slightly as he imagined how Jane would undoubtedly feel if she ever learned that Anne still lived and that she herself was Henry's mistress in everything but name, mother of his bastards rather than his trueborn heirs. No woman, particularly a virtuous one, could hear such news without being devastated by it and he prayed that Jane would never learn the truth. She seemed like a good, kind woman and she didn't deserve such distress. "It's not as though you're going to have anywhere that you can go to wear them. You won't be leaving Pembroke Hall any time soon and you know that you are not going to be allowed to receive any visitors there. What possible use are they to you?"

He did not truly expect an answer but Anne surprised him by speaking.

"They're mine." She told him in a calm, matter of fact tone. "Mine by rights, as Queen of England, and mine because they were given to me by the King as a gift of his love. I don't want that slut wearing them, not if I can possibly prevent it. She's already taking too much. If Henry needs an excuse to explain their absence, he can tell the wench that he had them destroyed because I once favoured them above the others and because he doesn't want anything around that will remind him of me – that's what he'll be saying about my gowns, my own jewels and my other belongings, isn't it?" She observed shrewdly, knowing that this was very likely to be the excuse Henry would use to explain why so many items would have disappeared from the Queen's rooms by the time Jane Seymour took up residence there instead of being left to be inherited by her successor.

Even if the wench had no interest in retaining gowns made for a lady with much darker colouring, or books that she probably wouldn't be able to read, she might want the ornate tapestries, silk hangings, rich furnishings, fine carpets and ornaments with which Anne had decorated her quarters since they first became hers, either for herself or as gifts to her relatives and for the Lady Mary, spoils of their victory, but she was going to be disappointed if this was what she hoped for.

Anne had every intention of seeing to it that there would be nothing of hers left for Jane to claim.

It hurt to think that even if she wasn't forcing his hand on the issue, it was very likely that Henry would still want to banish all reminders of her from his sight – even their own child was likely to be banished from the court, bundled back to Hatfield so that the sight of the little girl he had deprived of her mother's love would not be there to dampen Henry's joy in his new "marriage" – but she couldn't dwell on that, not now. All the thought could do was cause her pain.

"I'd like to know that they would be Elizabeth's one day, when the time is right. They should be hers." She remarked, glancing up at Brandon, searching his gaze with her keen blue eyes.

For a brief instant, he felt as though she could read his thoughts and see into his very soul and he shuddered slightly, wondering if she could sense that it was he who made the first allegations about her conduct, allegations that had prompted the investigation that led to her arrest and trial and to the executions of four men, Anne's beloved brother included. Anne was clearly protected by a powerful force, whether divine or diabolical, and Brandon shuddered at the thought of the vengeance that force might exact against him for his part in this.

"If I were to send a message to you one day, years from now, sending you these jewels and asking you to see to it that they were given to my daughter, would you see to it that they were given to Elizabeth and to nobody else, Your Grace, or would you bring them to Mistress Seymour, or maybe to the Lady Mary?" She asked quietly, holding his gaze.

Brandon stared at her for a few moments, unsure how he should answer.
He liked to think that if he gave his word of honour to a mother that her belongings would be given into her child's hands, he would keep that promise and see to it that the child received them, regardless of his feelings towards the woman in question, or that he would decline the task altogether if he felt that he could not carry it out as requested but he was very conscious of how Henry, his friend and his sovereign, would expect him to act if he was faced with such a choice, and of how he himself would wish to act if given the choice.

Henry would expect the jewels to be given over to him, if it was at all possible, so that they might adorn his new Queen, and to Brandon's mind, he thought that they should be given to Mary, whom he knew would cherish them, more for the fact that they were once worn by her mother than for their material value, though he knew that she loved jewels, and that it grieved her deeply when Henry sent orders that her own collection of jewels, given to her as Princess of Wales, were to be taken from her so that they could be kept safe until Elizabeth was old enough to wear them.

He certainly felt that Mary had far more right to the Queen's jewels than little Elizabeth did but she was far less likely to ever have the opportunity to wear them. As a direct result of Anne's demand that Elizabeth should continue to be acknowledged as Henry's legitimate daughter, Mary was unlikely to ever be restored to the position that was her birthright. If Henry did not father a son by Mistress Seymour, then it was likely that little Elizabeth would be Queen one day, especially if Henry lived long enough for his younger daughter to grow into a young woman of an age to bear children and for his older daughter's childbearing years to pass her by. At best, Mary might be allowed an honourable position at Elizabeth's court, if she accepted her sister's right to rule.

Seeing the torn expression on his face, Anne laughed lightly, putting him out of his misery. "Don't worry, Your Grace, I won't ask it of you. I can see that it would be cruel to force you to make such a choice. Will you be escorting me to Wales?" She asked, changing the subject and knowing better than to think that she would be trusted to travel there by herself. Henry would be too afraid that she would try to escape and to reveal their plot to allow her out of the sight of somebody he trusted, not until she was safely ensconced at Pembroke Hall.

"Yes, madam." Brandon told her. "We are to leave while the execution takes place, so that we can take advantage of the distraction."

"Who is to die in my place?" Anne had been assured by Cranmer and by Master Kingston that the woman selected to be her substitute for her execution, the woman who would help to convince the world that Anne Boleyn was no more, would be a prisoner condemned to death already, that she would be asked to cooperate rather than forced to and that it was likely that she would consider herself fortunate to be spared a worse death but the thought of somebody dying under her name was still a disturbing one. Brandon didn't answer and wouldn't meet her eyes. "May I meet her?"

That got his attention.

He gaped at her, unable to believe his ears, unable to believe that she would truly wish to be introduced to the woman who was to take her place at her execution.

It was so morbid!

In Anne's place, he was certain that he would want to know as little about his substitute as possible, for fear that her memory would haunt him. However, Henry had given orders that Anne was to be placated where possible, for fear that she would decide that she did not wish to cooperate after all and take her chances by revealing the truth of her survival to the people, putting their carefully laid plans in jeopardy, and that any reasonable requests she made of him while she was in his charge were to be granted so he nodded, albeit reluctantly.
"It can be arranged, if you wish." He told her. "Anything else?" Despite his sarcastic tone, Anne nodded. Brandon sighed, inwardly berating himself for giving her the opening to make a further demand and wondering what she would ask of him now. "What is it?"

"My father." Anne said quietly. "I want to see him before I go; I know that he's still in the Tower and I want to say goodbye and to let him know that I'm safe."

Her father would never dare to tell anybody, she knew that, and even though their relationship had not always been a close one, even though it had sometimes seemed as though he cared more for his personal ambition than he did for Anne or her siblings, he was still the man who had played with them in the gardens of Hever when they were young children, never so busy that he could not spend time chasing them or seeking them out when they hid. He was still the man who had seen to it that his clever little daughter was given the best education he could obtain for her, together with the opportunity to live in foreign courts and learn from the people there. She wanted him to know that she was alive and that she would be alright.

She also knew him well enough to know that it would amuse him to know that she had ensured that Jane Seymour would be Henry's mistress in everything but name and that little Elizabeth would be Henry's only legitimate child, the rightful heir to the throne in the eyes of God and the law while Jane's child would be nothing but a bastard and a pretender, albeit an unwitting one. It might be a cold comfort compared to what he must surely have lost now that he was sharing in her disgrace but at least it would be something. She had not needed to be told that it was all but guaranteed that he would be prevailed upon to relinquish the court honours and offices that had come to him since the day she first caught Henry's eye, so that they might be bestowed on the Seymours and their allies, or that he was likely to be ordered from the court, leaving him worse off than he was before he summoned her home from the French court.

At least then he was in favour with the King, a trusted ambassador with a bright future.

At least then he still had his son.

They had played a game with high stakes and they had lost but, even so, she couldn't leave without saying goodbye to him.

"I am sure that that can be arranged as well." Brandon promised her. "As long as you are certain that he won't say anything, to anybody, about you being alive or about the King's union with Lady Jane being bigamous, and as long as he won't try to contact you afterwards, when you're living in Pembroke Hall." He warned, wondering if Thomas Boleyn would truly dare to take such a step, perhaps in the hope of denouncing the future prince as a bastard who had no more right to the throne than the lowliest scullion working in the kitchens of Whitehall in order to further secure his granddaughter's place, or if he would keep quiet rather than risk losing more than he had already.

Maybe the worst he would do would be to try to use his knowledge to manipulate Henry into allowing him to return to court, if he was foolish enough not to see how risky that would be.

"He won't." Anne exhaled quietly, still shaken by everything that had happened, despite her best efforts to maintain a calm demeanour.

By tomorrow morning, she would have left the Tower, neither as a free woman nor as a headless corpse. Pembroke Hall would be a more pleasant prison than her chamber in the Tower by far but it would still be a prison, one from which she would not be able to stir a step for years, not while people might remember what she looked like and recognize her.

She had done all she could to secure Elizabeth's place, which was far more than Katherine had
been able to do for Mary when she fell from grace, but her little daughter was so young that she was unlikely to have any memory of her as she grew older. For Elizabeth, her mother would be nothing more than a name, and the name of a traitor at that. She would be taught to feel ashamed of the fact that she was the daughter of Anne Boleyn, a lesson that people like Mistress Seymour and the Lady Mary would be all too willing to teach her.

Anne bit her lower lip, determined not to shed a tear, especially in front of Brandon, or allow herself to wallow in self-pity, knowing that things could easily be much worse.

She was alive.

She had seen to it that Elizabeth was safe.

For now, she had to be content with that.

The gardens were beautiful, the flowers of May blooming all around them and the gentle warmth of the sunshine caressing their faces as they walked, hand in hand. The contrast between the sunshine of the gardens and the darkness of Anne's prison was unmistakable but it was a contrast that nobody would ever have dared to comment on.

By common consent, Anne's name was not mentioned by those at court and her impending execution was not alluded to, as though ignoring the facts could make them go away.

Henry was distracted as he walked but he made a determined effort to hide it, smiling warmly for Jane's sake, as though he did not have a care in the world.

When she had asked if they might go for a walk and speak together, he had wanted to refuse, as there was still so much to arrange with regard to Anne, and as he didn't feel particularly amiable after what happened, but he knew that he could not do so, not without provoking comment and hurting her feelings so he accepted her invitation with every show of pleasure and enthusiasm, leaving it to Brandon, Cranmer and Cromwell to continue making arrangements for Anne while he strolled in the gardens with the woman who expected to be his bride in the very near future.

"What would you like to talk about, sweetheart?" He asked genially as they walked, guessing from the expression on her face that there was some issue that Jane wished to raise with him.

"If Your Majesty would allow, I should like to talk about your daughter, Mary," Jane began, knowing that this might be the best possible time she could choose to speak up on her future stepdaughter's behalf and to make the first moves towards bringing about the young girl's restoration to her father's favour and to her rightful place at court, something she had been longing to do since the King first asked her to permit him to serve her.

Although the King had ordered the removal of his younger daughter from the court, with the toddler due to begin her journey back to Hatfield before the day was out, Jane had seen his affection for little Elizabeth with her own eyes when the court visited Wolf Hall after Queen Katherine's death and she instinctively knew that she would have a much better chance to persuade the King to welcome his elder daughter back if she did so while his younger daughter was in disgrace following her mother's imprisonment and execution.

Elizabeth was still a little girl and she possessed all the charm of a young child, together with the charm that she had inherited from her mother, charm that would make it difficult for anybody, least of all her father, to remain angry with her for long. Elizabeth was so like Henry that it was impossible for anybody who looked at her with an unprejudiced eye to deny that she was his
daughter, regardless of what was proven against Lady Anne. She might have been fair where he was dark, inheriting the colouring of her grandmother and namesake, Elizabeth of York, but she shared some of his features and many of his qualities, combining the best of both of her parents. She was intelligent, courageous, witty and spirited, a child for any father to be proud of.

The King adored Elizabeth and she had also never irritated him by defying him, as Mary did when she refused to take the Oath of Succession, nor was she old enough to remember much of her mother or to resent her loss, as Princess Mary resented the way that poor Queen Katherine was humiliated and mistreated. Elizabeth was too young to understand yet but when she was older, she would know that her mother paid the price for her crimes against the King, and understand that Lady Anne had had to die for her betrayal. It would not affect her love for her father.

Once the King's fury towards the Lady Anne had faded a little, it would be natural that he would be more inclined to favour Elizabeth over her older sister.

Jane was afraid that if she waited too long, the King's pity for his soon to be motherless younger daughter would win out over his anger with her mother and, instead of Princess Mary being restored to her former position and to her father's good graces, as she ought to be in all justice, the King might decide that he would rather continue to acknowledge Elizabeth as his legitimate child and to allow her to retain her current position as heiress presumptive, something that would act as a barrier to Princess Mary's restoration, which was the last thing Jane wanted.

Jane did not have any ill will towards Elizabeth and was determined that, even when she was named a bastard, she would still be made welcome at court, honoured as the King's own daughter and Jane would be a mother to her, just as she intended to be a mother and a friend to Princess Mary. However, given the choice between both of her future stepdaughters, she considered that Mary was the trueborn daughter of the King and, as such, she had far more right to the title of Princess of England and to be heiress to the throne than her young half-sister did, so it was Mary's interests that Jane would champion, to the best of her ability, even if it meant that little Elizabeth would have to lose her position as Princess in order for Mary to regain that title.

At least she was too young to have any memories of having held it, so she would not resent its loss and Jane was sure that, when she was older and when she was taught the truth, the Lady Elizabeth would understand that it would have been unjust for her to continue to be known by the title her mother had usurped on her behalf, and know that it was right for Mary to be the Princess. Thomas Boleyn was to be banished from court, and the Howards were also in disgrace, so there would be nobody around to tell the child that she ought to be considered legitimate, or to fill her head with the idea that she had been cheated of her place as Princess for Mary's sake and that she should resent Mary and those who supported her for her loss.

Jane would see to it that Lady Elizabeth's governess and tutors taught her the truth.

In time, the child would surely be relieved to know that matters had been set right, and that she was no longer the cause of poor Princess Mary's distress.

The King did not say anything in response to her mention of his eldest daughter's name and Jane took that as her invitation to continue.

"When I am Queen, I would hope to see her reinstated as heir apparent." She told him earnestly, hoping that he would know that she was sincere in this, and not just speaking for Mary because she believed that it would please him if she did, without truly caring what became of the poor girl. Nobody could deny the fact that Princess Mary had led a difficult life over the past few years, and she had had scant help or sympathy from Anne, who must have hated her for being Queen Katherine's child and the rightful princess, but it was Jane's earnest wish to put things right.
Henry frowned reprovingly at her for this.

"The Lady Mary is illegitimate," he reminded her, keeping his tone even but making sure that there could be no doubt in her mind that he meant what he was saying and that he would not allow himself to be swayed from that stance, either by arguments from any members of his Privy Council who might sympathize with Mary or by Jane's coaxing and her appeals to the love he felt for Mary. "My legitimate daughter, the Princess Elizabeth is heir to the throne, at least for the present, until you and I have our boy. You should know that, Jane – your family all took the Oath!"

He knew that some families were reluctant to take the Oath, even if they did so out of obedience, but he had had not thought that the Seymours were among those who doubted his justice.

He wondered how many times he would have to stand firm against such arguments, without being able to tell anybody of the reason why there could be no question of bastardising Elizabeth or depriving her of any of her rights as princess, including the right to be first in line to the throne until she had a brother, and to have her father work to contract a royal marriage on her behalf, even if such a match was not possible for Mary because of her bastard status. He was sure that even those who understood that Mary was illegitimate and that there could be no question of him pretending otherwise would expect that Elizabeth would also be declared a bastard, and would be surprised to learn that the child's status would not be diminished in any way.

Even if he was in a position to tell them his reasons, they would never believe him.

He could scarcely believe what was happening, and he saw with his own eyes how Anne was protected from those who sought to harm her.

The Emperor was bound to push for the restoration of his cousin, hoping to see her sitting on the throne as he would be assured of a loyal ally with Mary as Queen of England and, even if he might have been willing to accept her exclusion from the line of succession as long as her half-sister was also named a bastard, admitting defeat in that respect for the sake of peace between England and Spain, it would be a different story while Elizabeth remained a princess. The Emperor would not be pleased to see his aunt's daughter regarded as a bastard while Anne's daughter was honoured as a princess. Even if Jane bore half a dozen sons to stand between Elizabeth and the throne, and neither daughter could hope to be Queen, he would not be satisfied.

He was certain to take that as an offence against his family's honour that this should be the case, and to continue to hound Henry in the hope that he would give in and restore Mary.

It would take all of Cromwell's cunning to weather this issue and the last thing he needed was to have his future wife disputing his decisions with regard to the positions of his own daughters.

He needed Jane to love him and support him in all things, not to argue with him.

"But..." Jane had been well schooled by her father and her brother, instructed to take great care about what she said to the King, warned never to argue with him – he had had more than enough arguments from the Lady Anne throughout their marriage and courtship and was unlikely to want to continue the same pattern with her successor, so he would not want to tolerate disputes from her – but she still could not hide her dismay at his words, unable to believe that the King would rather see the daughter of the Lady Anne, the woman who betrayed him in such a vile manner, as a princess and as his lawful heiress instead of the daughter of Queen Katherine, who had been as true and loving a wife to him as any man could ever have hoped for. Surely now that Lady Anne's hold over him had slipped, he could see that Mary should be restored to her rights.

She couldn't understand why a loving father – and she was certain that the King loved Mary and
that their estrangement must be as painful to him as it was to her – would not seize this opportunity to set things right for his daughter and to welcome her back as his first trueborn child.

Henry frowned at her, then forced himself to smile and to feign good humour; after all, it was not Jane's fault that Anne was somehow able to cheat death – and he would have given a great deal to learn how she had managed that feat – or that she had insisted on the terms she had in exchange for her cooperation in freeing him to make a fresh start with a new marriage, giving him a chance to father the son and heir he owed his country, the prince who would ensure the survival of the Tudor dynasty. Anne had known how vital her cooperation was if their plan was to succeed and she had taken full advantage of that fact in order to ensure Elizabeth's position as much as she possibly could, not caring about the difficulties that he would face as a result of her demand.

Knowing Anne, she probably knew that it would cause him trouble to have to recognize Elizabeth as legitimate, but it had not kept her from making her demand. Maybe she was even pleased to think of the problems she was still able to cause him, despite everything he had done to remove himself from her power, despite his effort to move on, pleased to think she had power over him.

But he would move on, he told himself, no matter what Anne tried to do.

He refused to allow Anne to take his future from him.

"Jane, you're a fool." He said affectionately, fondly thinking about what a pleasant change it would be to have Jane, who might be foolish but who would always know her place, instead of Anne who, for all her cleverness, had never been able to learn hers, as his wife and as the mother of his sons. "You ought to solicit the advancement of the children we are going to have, not the Lady Mary."

He rebuked her tenderly, smiling at the thought of the strong, handsome sons Jane would give him, and perhaps a couple of sweet, lovely daughters with whom he could cement alliances with other countries. Any monarch would be blessed to have a daughter of Jane's as his wife.

Anne might be able to ensure that Elizabeth stayed a princess but the sons Jane gave him would be accepted as England's princes, whether Anne liked it or not.

He wasn't going to allow her to take that from him.

"But Your Majesty, I thought I was asking not so much for the good of the Lady Mary as for the good of the repose and the tranquillity of yourself, as well as the children that we may have ourselves."

If Jane was honest with herself, she had to admit that she would rather see her own child sitting on England's throne, even ahead of Princess Mary, and she prayed that she would soon fall pregnant with a strong son, but she still believed that the young girl was entitled to be restored as Princess of England, even if she could no longer be called Princess of Wales. She was also far more likely to be warmly disposed to any children Jane bore if she was given her due as a princess, instead of being humiliated as a bastard as she was when Elizabeth was born. It was natural that Mary would resent any half-brothers or half-sisters who were honoured while she was disgraced.

If little Elizabeth was to be named a bastard, she was so young that she was unlikely to remember that she had ever been considered legitimate or to miss being honoured as a princess, just as she was unlikely to remember her mother, and young enough to be taught that she never had any true claim to legitimacy, but Mary was old enough to know what she had lost and to feel angry about it, recognising that her father had wronged her by denying her all she was due as a princess.

Jane wanted to be able to enjoy a happy, peaceful family life and she did not think that this was likely to happen without Mary's restoration.
"And for the tranquillity of Your Majesty's kingdom." She added.

It took nine months to breed a child, even if the King fathered one straight away once they were married – and Jane could not forget what she overheard the Lady Anne saying to her sister-in-law about the King's lack of vigour and potency, or keep herself from worrying about what would happen if she too failed to bear him a son, wondering if she would end up following in the path of her predecessors, discarded or worse, while the King sought to take a fourth wife who would succeed where she failed – and a great deal could happen in nine months.

Surely the King could see that, despite the fact that Master Cromwell had been able to impose the Oath of Succession on the people, forcing them to swear that they would acknowledge his younger daughter as the rightful heiress to the throne unless she had a brother born in wedlock, and that they would fight to defend her rights if it was necessary, they would much rather see Princess Mary as their next ruler ahead of Princess Elizabeth. Surely he could understand that Mary's supporters were likely to outnumber Elizabeth's by a wide margin, especially when she was first cousin to the Emperor, who could easily commit his vast armies to the defence of his kinswoman's rightful inheritance if an attempt was made to crown Elizabeth Queen of England in Mary's place.

She shuddered to think about what it might mean if something were to happen to the King before she bore him a child, when the kingdom would be left divided between his two daughters and their respective supporters, saying a silent prayer that she would be the mother of a healthy prince within a year, at the most, a child whose claim to the throne would trump that of both his sisters and who would keep the country safe from a civil war, which would be the ruin of England.

"Forgive me," Henry took her arm. "It's just that I so much want a new beginning. A renaissance." He explained. "Sometimes it's hard to be reminded of things. Do you understand?" He asked, wondering if, even after she was gone and all physical reminders of her presence had been removed from the palace, he would ever be able to forget that Anne still lived, that she was still his wife and that, although only a tiny handful of others would ever be aware of the fact, his union with Jane could never be a true one, not in the eyes of God. She would be accepted as his wife by the English people – he imagined that they would be so pleased to see Anne gone that they would have welcomed her successor, regardless of who she was – and the sons they had would be accepted as princes and as heirs to the throne, supplanting Elizabeth by virtue of their sex, but he would know the truth. The 'marriage' he had planned with Jane would make an unwitting harlot of her, and bastards of their sons and, much as he wished to, he could not completely blind himself to that fact. "You are so pure," he said wonderingly, praying that God would forgive him for what he was going to do to her, that He would see that he only did it for the good of England and see that Jane was an innocent in all of this. "I just don't want you to be affected by the things that have gone before."

Jane smiled, touched by his words and Henry inwardly breathed a sigh of relief when she did not continue to press the issue of the Lady Mary, satisfied with his response.

She must never be allowed to learn the truth.

He would never allow her to discover that Anne still lived, never allow her to learn that although they had gone through the ceremony of marriage, it was even more meaningless than the ceremony with Katherine was, as he could not claim ignorance this time, that the title of Queen was one that she would bear in name but that would belong to Anne by rights and that their children would be illegitimate in the eyes of God, bastards born of an bigamous union.

The burden of this secret was one that he would shoulder alone.
It wasn't until she was escorted down to the dungeons that Anne truly appreciated how fortunate she had been that her rank as Queen protected her from being housed there. The chamber in which she had spent the past couple of weeks might have been bleak and bare compared to what she was accustomed to but it was palatial next to this place.

It was dark, lit only by torches without any sign of sunlight and so cold and so damp that even her fur-lined cloak could not fully protect her from the chill. The air was stale and the stench of human waste assaulted her senses before she had even set foot on the narrow corridor leading down to the dungeons. Part of her wanted to turn back when she realized how truly Hellish a place this was but she persevered, determined to see this through, no matter what.

She was ushered into one of the cells, a windowless room with bare stone walls and without any furnishings. The floor was strewn with fresh straw and there were iron rings hammered into the walls, so that people could be chained to them to prevent their escaping. By the looks of the cell, it had been some time since it was last occupied and Anne briefly wondered whether it was the only area down here that was even moderately clean.

Beside her, Brandon's nose wrinkled in disgust and Cranmer held a handkerchief in front of his nose, murmuring a prayer for the poor souls who had found themselves in this place.

"Wait here, madam." Kingston instructed her, clearly unhappy to have to show her this place, unhappy that she had firmly declined his offer to have the woman brought to her own chamber instead, wanting to see with her own eyes how she was being treated and unwilling to allow them the opportunity to make the woman presentable before she was brought to her.

Motioning for the guard to precede him, he moved down the corridor to one of the small cells, set apart for prisoners who were violent and needed to be isolated from the others. Once this woman had been selected for her task, she was moved to the privacy of a cell, so that they might prepare her for the role that she was to play without the other prisoners seeing what was happening and becoming curious about it. Not all of the prisoners were sentenced to death, and the last thing they needed was for somebody who would be freed in a matter of months or years to learn things that they should not know, and share the story once they were set at liberty.

When he entered the cell, he surveyed the woman for a moment before nodding his satisfaction. "She wants to speak to you." He said shortly.

The woman nodded shortly. "If Her Majesty wishes it, I will obey."

"Good." He motioned for the guard to unlock the manacles around her legs, frowning when he saw that the skin on her ankles was red, puffy and chaffed.

They would have to take special care to ensure that nobody could possibly catch a glimpse of those injuries. Nobody who saw them would believe for a moment that anybody would dare to inflict such an injury on the Queen of England. Thankfully, although taking the clothes of the people they dispatched was the traditional prerogative of an executioner, a bonus on top of their fee and one that was especially valuable when the victim was a member of the nobility, the Frenchman had been paid a considerable gratuity in addition to his fee to ensure that he would not claim the Queen's garments, so that she would be allowed to keep her dignity, even in death. They were also fortunate that the woman's wrists had not been bound and were therefore unmarked.

He held her by the elbow, trying to touch the grimy cloth of her gown as little as possible, guiding her towards the cell in which Anne was waiting with the other two men.

When they entered the cell, the woman bobbed a curtsey, holding her head high and meeting
Anne's gaze squarely. "Your Majesty." She greeted politely.

"This is Marion Perry, madam." Master Kingston explained.

"Mistress Perry." Anne greeted her automatically, feeling at a loss for words, an unusual and uncomfortable state of affairs for her. What was she to say to the woman whose death would win her her freedom? She studied the woman in front of her for a few minutes, easily seeing why she had been selected. They were about the same age, and of a similar height and build – Anne estimated that her gowns would fit Marion easily, without any need for alteration. Marion's eyes were blue and her hair was jet black, like Anne's.

Seeing that Anne's attention had been drawn to her hair, Marion held out a lock of it, inspecting it. "They dyed it." She remarked, surveying the effect. "And don't worry, Your Majesty – they've promised that I'll have a chance to have a bath tonight and that I'm to wear one of your gowns tomorrow, so you don't need to be afraid that they'll have me appearing as you looking like this." She extended her other hand, which was admittedly grubby. "I won't disgrace you, I promise."

"Thank you." As soon as she said it, Anne could have bitten her tongue. Under the circumstances, it was perhaps the most ridiculous thing that she could possibly have said.

Marion laughed shortly, as though sensing her discomfort. "There's no need to thank me, Your Majesty; I'd rather go out by beheading than the alternative."

"The alternative?" She hadn't intended to ask the question, hadn't wanted to press the other woman about the reason for her being in the Tower in the first place, half-afraid that she would hear her protest her innocence of the crime that she had originally been sentenced to death for, in which case she could not allow their arrangement to continue and would have to insist upon an alternative plan, but it slipped out without her wanting it to, her curiosity about the woman who was taking her place winning out over her resolve not to interrogate her.

"I'm a poisoner." The response was blunt, and there was no trace of remorse in Marion's face as she continued, ignoring the shudders at the thought of the terrible deaths meted out to those convicted of poisoning. "My husband, and I'm not sorry I did it. He was a bastard of a man, and that's the truth of it – though I'd say that you know all about what that's like, don't you, Your Majesty?" She added, grinning when she saw that both Brandon and Kingston visibly stiffened at her words, indignant at the barefaced insult against Henry, while Anne smiled despite herself. "What they had planned for you is a sight better than what they had planned for me, and they've promised that they'll see to it that my two girls will be well provided for." She continued in a gentler tone. "I was glad to take them up on their offer, I can promise you that."

"Is there anything that I can do?" Anne asked quietly. "Your daughters…"

Marion might have been promised that her daughters would be provided for but Anne still intended to find out exactly what was arranged for them, making sure that whatever could be done for the two girls would be done. She had been so worried about what would have happened to Elizabeth if she wasn't able to keep Henry from declaring their daughter a bastard, so afraid that she might lose her title and succession rights but, compared to Marion's two daughters, who could well have faced complete penury and ruin if their mother wasn't offered money for them, Elizabeth would have been much better off; even if she had lost her rightful place as a princess, she would still have been the King's daughter and, no matter how angry he was, Henry would still see to it that she was provided with an allowance for her maintenance and with servants to tend to her needs.

"There's nothing." Marion told her, glancing at the three men for a moment before being struck by an idea, one that made her grin at her own daring, easily able to imagine how the King and some of
the most powerful men in England would react if they knew what she was proposing. "But perhaps there is something that I can do for you..."
Chapter Five

18th May 1536

"No! I won't wear it! You can't make me!" Elizabeth struggled as her attendant tried to dress her in her cloak and hat, ignoring the woman's attempts to coax her into complying, knowing what the outfit they were trying to get her into signified. This was what she had to wear when she was travelling and she did not want to leave court and go back to Hatfield, not yet.

Normally, visits to the court were fun.

Her Papa would lift her in his arms and swing her around and around until she was dizzy, telling her that she was the prettiest princess in the world and the most perfect daughter any man was ever blessed with, his precious, special girl and the jewel of all England, and he would play games with her and sometimes let her sit in front of him when he rode on his horse. He held her securely, so she wouldn't fall, but Elizabeth was never frightened, even when Papa made his horse ride so fast that her hair flew in the breeze. She knew that she was always safe with her Papa. When he showed her off to the lords and ladies of the court, they would all tell him that he had a lovely, clever daughter and that she was a true Tudor rose. Her Mama would cuddle her and play with her and give her beautiful gifts, wonderful toys and lovely new clothes, fit for a princess, and she always told Elizabeth that she loved her more than she loved anybody else in the whole world.

Normally, visits to court meant feeling safe, happy and loved.

This time, however, it was very different.

When she arrived, she was brought straight to her Mama, who was behaving very strangely, as though she was frightened by something, although Elizabeth did not know what.

Her Mama cuddled her close when she arrived, as she always did, kissing her many times and telling her, over and over, that she loved her very much and wouldn't ever want to change her in any way, not even to make her a boy. Mama begged her not to forget that, no matter what happened, no matter what anybody told her when she was older, but while she was usually very happy to see Elizabeth, looking as excited and pleased about the visit as Elizabeth was, she was different this time. She tried to smile but she still looked unhappy and Elizabeth could see that she had been crying and that it looked as though she might cry again.

She wanted to be able to comfort her Mama and make her happy again but she didn't know how. She didn't know what it was that had upset her Mama, and if she didn't know what was wrong, she couldn't help her put it right.

Instead of staying to play with her in the nursery, so Elizabeth could show her her doll's new gown and let her see how well she rode the new hobby horse that Papa sent her last month - a gift that came with the promise of a real pony when she was a little older - her Mama picked her up in her arms, carrying her outside into the gardens, where her Papa was walking. He tried to leave when he saw them coming but Mama hurried after him, still carrying Elizabeth, calling for him to stop and to listen to her and to give her one last chance, for Elizabeth.

He didn't listen.

He shouted at her Mama, saying horrible things and making her even more frightened and
unhappy, and Elizabeth was angry with him for it.

She wanted to tell him to stop shouting, to stop being so unkind to her Mama and to make him say that he was sorry and promise that he would be nice to her from now on so she wouldn't be sad and afraid anymore but even though he was her Papa, he was the King too and the King could not be scolded, not by anybody in the country, even the Princess. As well as that, he was so angry that Elizabeth was afraid to say anything, afraid of what he might do if she did. He walked away after that, leaving them behind.

Her Mama put her down, kneeling in front of her and hugging her tightly for a long time before she brought her back to her nursery and to Lady Bryan.

There were tears running down her Mama's face when she asked Lady Bryan to always take care of Elizabeth, no matter what happened. Even though she kept wiping her tears away, because a Queen should not cry in front of other people, especially servants, new tears streamed down her cheeks as soon as she wiped the old ones away and Elizabeth could hear her quiet sobs.

It made her feel very scared when she saw how sad her Mama was.

Lady Bryan promised that she would do as Mama asked and Elizabeth was surprised and a little frightened to see that her governess, who never wept, who was always so composed and who told Elizabeth that a lady should always be in control of her emotions, especially around other people, looked as though she would like to cry too.

Elizabeth hadn't seen either of her parents since then, even though she had been here for days. Lady Bryan hadn't brought her out among the lords and ladies of the court since Mama brought her back to the nursery either, even though she usually did that, saying that they should see their Princess and pay their respects to her. They stayed in Elizabeth's own apartment, not going down to the Great Hall for dinner even once, although Elizabeth had hoped for that treat and asked Lady Bryan if she might dine with her Mama and Papa, and nobody had come to visit them.

It was as though the lords and ladies didn't even know that their Princess was at court!

Now it was time to leave but she wasn't going to go back to Hatfield until she got to see her parents, not until she could see for herself that her Mama was alright.

Lady Bryan heard her shouting and hurried over to her, kneeling down in front of her and straightening her cloak. "Princess Elizabeth, you must do as you are told." She said firmly, indicating the other ladies, who were busy packing away her belongings, getting ready to return to Hatfield. "We are all very busy and we need you to help us by behaving yourself."

"I want to see my Mama!" Elizabeth insisted.

She would do as she was told and let them get her ready to travel, and even though she wanted to stay at court, she would even go back to Hatfield without complaining if they would bring her to her Mama first so that she could see her and say goodbye, so she could know that Mama was safe and that she and Papa had mended their quarrel and were happy together again.

She didn't want to leave until she knew that her Mama was no longer frightened or sad.

Lady Bryan looked a little bit sad for a moment, touching Elizabeth's cheek but then she looked serious again, like she always did. "That's not possible, child." She said, standing and getting back to work supervising the packing before Elizabeth could ask why and demand to know when she would be able to see her Mama again.
When she was very little, Elizabeth had learned that if she stayed very still and very quiet, her attendants would speak freely in front of her, as though they thought that she was too much of a baby to be able to pay any attention to them, much less to understand what they were saying. She was sure that she overheard a lot of things that Lady Bryan wouldn't want her to hear. She stood silently and motionlessly now, listening while Lady Bryan and Mistress Catherine Champernowne—whom Elizabeth was allowed to call Mistress Kat because her real name was so long and very difficult to say properly—her favourite of all her ladies because she was the sweetest and played the best games and told the most exciting stories, spoke.

Lady Bryan looked harried and worried as she made sure that they had packed everything, afraid that they had forgotten something important, something they would need back at Hatfield.

"If we have forgotten something, it may be a long time before we are able to retrieve it." She said grimly, checking through the trunks where Elizabeth's gowns and petticoats and shifts were held one more time before moving to help Mistress Kat pack up the gold plate. "We are ordered to remove the child from court immediately and get her out of the King's sight. Who knows when she will be allowed to return—or if she will be welcome here again? Mistress Seymour may not wish to have her predecessor's child at court, after what happened to Queen Anne for her sake, especially when she seems so fond of the Lady Mary. She'll want to encourage His Majesty to welcome her back, you mark my words, and Her Highness could stand in the way of that."

"Poor little princess." Mistress Kat's voice was soft with sympathy.

"She is very fortunate that she is still a princess." Lady Bryan said, lowering her voice a little but not so much that Elizabeth couldn't still hear what she was saying. "When I heard about the Queen, I was sure that Her Highness would be named a bastard, as the Lady Mary was. At least Princess Elizabeth is safe from that, and we should all thank God for it." She said fervently, finding it all too easy to imagine how bleak their lot would be if their small charge was bastardised and they were left to care for her as best they could, with a modest allowance and few servants.

The Lady Mary's household at Ludlow Castle was dissolved when her parents' marriage was declared invalid, as was only fitting, as a bastard had no need of a grand royal establishment, and no right to expect that one should be provided for her, no matter how much she complained about its loss, but it was still a hardship for those who had served her loyally for many years, devoting their lives to the girl they thought was a princess and trusting that they would have a position in her household as long as they needed and wanted one, to lose their positions and be turned out.

Elizabeth knew better than to alert them to the fact that she was listening by asking a question but she was very confused.

Why would Lady Bryan have been afraid that Elizabeth would not be a princess anymore?

She was a princess because her Papa was the King of England and her Mama was the Queen, which meant that she was a very, very important lady, the Princess of England, and that, if she didn't have a baby brother, she would be Queen of England one day and in charge of everything.

How could she lose that place?

What was a bastard and what did it have to do with the Lady Mary?

The Lady Mary was the King's daughter but not the Queen's, and Lady Bryan explained that this was why she was sent to be one of Elizabeth's ladies instead of having ladies of her own. Even if that was what being a bastard meant, she couldn't understand why her governess would fear that she would share that fate. Elizabeth was the Princess and princesses didn't have to wait on others.
She was even more concerned about the mention of her Mama, and judging by Lady Bryan's tone, if something had happened to her, it was something nasty. Remembering how angry her Papa was and how horrible he had been to her Mama when she last saw her parents together, Elizabeth felt afraid for her, worried that she might be in trouble or hurt. What was happening?

"What of the Queen?" Mistress Kat asked softly. "Will the King really agree to let her... is there no chance that she might be allowed to go to a nunnery?"

Lady Bryan shook her head. "None, not now that the others have gone to the block. The King has ordered that she be beheaded, as soon as the French executioner arrives, poor lady."

Despite her resolve to remain silent and to listen, Elizabeth let out a cry of protest at that, devastated.

She was very young but she was old enough to know what being beheaded meant, she had heard her attendants speak of it once or twice. Beheaded meant that the person's head would be cut off and they would die and be gone forever. She couldn't bear the thought of her Mama dying, especially in such a horrible way. Elizabeth had cut her hand once and it bled a lot and hurt her very much. She was sure that it would hurt much, much more to have her head cut off and that was what was to happen to her Mama and it was her Papa who had ordered it.

"Princess Elizabeth!" Mistress Kat looked horrified when she realized that Elizabeth was listening and she hurried to pick her up, rocking her in her arms and trying to comfort her but Elizabeth refused to be pacified by her assurances that everything was going to be alright.

If her Mama was to be killed then nothing would be alright, not ever again.

"I want my Mama!" She wailed, struggling against Mistress Kat's comforting embrace. She didn't want Mistress Kat to hold her; she wanted to be in her Mama's arms and have her hugs and kisses and hear her soft words of comfort, she wanted her Mama to tell her that this was all a silly mistake and that she was fine and that nobody was ever going to hurt her, not ever, because they knew that, if they tried, Papa would give them a very, very horrible punishment. "Where is she? Bring her to me! Where's my Papa?" If she could go to her Papa, she could tell him that he had to leave her Mama alone and not let anybody hurt her or kill her. "He has to stop them!"

"Your mother was convicted of treason, Your Highness," Lady Bryan tried to calm her down. "All traitors must be made to pay the price for their crimes, my child, even the Queen. She betrayed the King, your father, and she must be punished for that..."

"No!" Elizabeth swatted away the hand that Lady Bryan reached out towards her, not wanting to be consoled and not believing that her Mama could ever have done anything wicked and betrayed her father. Her Mama was the sweetest, kindest, most beautiful woman in the world and she would never have done something so bad. Her Mama loved her Papa too much to ever even think about doing something that would hurt him. "My Mama wouldn't do that! She didn't! She didn't! She didn't!" She screamed the last words at the top of her lungs. "Papa's wicked to say she did!"

"Your Highness!" Lady Bryan was appalled and tried to hush her. Regardless of her personal feelings on the matter, she knew that she could not so much as hint at the possibility that Queen Anne might be innocent, not even in front of the little princess. Especially in front of the little princess. She had to tell Elizabeth that her mother was guilty, and to ensure that the child never said otherwise. "You must never, ever say something like that again, do you understand me? His Majesty is a good man, and he would not have allowed the Queen to be condemned unjustly. I know that this is difficult for you, child," she added, in a more gentle tone, "but you must accept it and be thankful for your blessings; you are still a princess, after all, and His Majesty will see to it
that you are provided for, as a princess should be… and perhaps one day soon you will have a new mother." She added in a coaxing tone, knowing that the King was likely to remarry in the near future, to father a son and to secure the succession, and wanting to prepare her charge for that eventuality, which was certain to come as a shock to her when the time came.

Elizabeth was in no position to be able to afford to offend her father and his new wife by being sullen and resentful towards them, should be ever be invited to court to be presented to them. She would be fortunate if an invitation was made within the next few years and, if she showed herself to be in any way hostile towards her father or stepmother, the invitation would not be repeated.

"I don't want a new mother!" Elizabeth shrieked the words as loudly as she could, dismayed by the very thought that somebody might try to fill her adored Mama's place. Nobody could ever do that! No other lady could be as beautiful or as loving as her mother. No other lady could ever take her place and she would hate any lady who tried. "I want my Mama!"

"You can't have her." Lady Bryan said bluntly. "She's gone and no amount of crying or shouting is going to bring her back. You must understand that and you must never speak of her again, especially in front of the King." She sighed deeply, surveying the miserable child for a few moments before speaking again, more gently this time. "When you are older, child, you will understand. The world is a slippery place." She met Mistress Kat's eyes. "The Lady Anne would have been better off if she had never been Queen at all; she should have married a rich man who was too stupid to know anything about politics, then she might have been happy. It is dangerous to love a King, something that Mistress Seymour may learn before she is much older."

Elizabeth sniffed, biting her lower lip to keep the tears from flowing as she listened, thinking that Lady Bryan was right. It would be safer not to love a man when she was grown up. Her Mama had loved her Papa very much, she knew that, but he had still been nasty to her and killed her.

She would never love a man and let him do that to her.

19th May 1536

Henry didn't come to say goodbye.

Anne hadn't expected him to, not really, not when he was determined to excise her from his life, but it still hurt that, after all of their years together, all they had shared, he couldn't even go to the minor effort of sending her a message of farewell, a promise that he would ensure that their child was well cared for and that she need have no fears for Elizabeth's future… anything.

She gently twisted the wedding ring on her finger, surveying it contemplatively. Compared to the other jewels in her possession, it was simple and plain, a slender, unadorned band of gold but it was the one that she would never have consented to part with, under any circumstances.

If Henry wanted to take this from her, he would have to cut off her finger to do so… and, given what happened when he tried to have her head cut off, that might be easier said than done!

At one point, she had been tempted to take it off, to throw it away or to toss it into the fire like a piece of rubbish but she couldn't bring herself to be rid of it.

She eased it off her finger, reading the inscription written in letters so tiny that she could barely make them out, remembering the gleeful expression on Henry's face when he first obtained them, just before they went to the deserted room at Whitehall, where a cleric was waiting to perform the ceremony that would unite them as man and wife, whether Katherine and the Emperor and the Bishop of Rome and everybody else who sought to prevent their union liked it or not.
It had been a very necessary ceremony, given that she already carried his child in her belly, one that could not be delayed any longer, even though they had hoped that Cranmer would have been installed as Archbishop of Canterbury in time to solemnize their union, and to declare that Henry's union with Katherine was null and void before he did so, instead of having a humble priest perform the wedding ceremony in exchange for a generous bribe, with all those present sworn to secrecy until the time came to reveal their marriage to the country as an accomplished fact.

Henry was utterly convinced that his son awaited birth and he would never have dreamed of taking the chance that his long hoped-for heir would be born a bastard. He had already suffered a similar fate with little Henry Fitzroy, knowing that he was the father of a fine son, a boy any father could be proud of, but that he was very unlikely to be able to make that son his heir.

The last thing he wanted was to have a repeat of that situation.

Their son's position as Prince of Wales was to be protected, no matter what it took.

He would do everything in his power to ensure that their child was born in lawful matrimony, and although they had both hoped that they would be able to have a splendid public wedding in Westminster Abbey, with wine flowing freely in the streets and the people sharing in their delight to be married at last, her pregnancy did not allow them the luxury of waiting and they were obliged to make do with what they could manage in secret and on short notice.

He had refused her repeated requests to be shown the rings before the ceremony, thwarting her playful attempts to snatch them from him, albeit gently as she was carrying his child, and insisting that she had to wait and see. It wasn't until after the ceremony, when they were alone, that he finally showed her the twin inscriptions, explaining the significance of the admittedly unusual choices; 'diamond' on her ring and 'ship' on his, recalling one of the first gifts she ever sent him.

She was still the diamond, still loved him steadfastly, despite everything, but even though Henry had failed to fulfil the ship's promise of protection, she wasn't going to discard the ring.

It was a reminder of the fact that she was still Henry's wife.

Against the odds, against Henry's own intentions, she had managed to keep this title and, by doing so, she had ensured that Elizabeth would continue to keep hers.

It was a reminder that Henry was not the only one walking away from their marriage with a victory.

There was no doubt in her mind that Henry would get rid of his own ring, ordering that a new one should be made for his pretended marriage to Jane. She was reasonably certain that the ring he commissioned for Jane would be particularly finely wrought and bejewelled, as though a splendid wing could allow him to forget that no matter how much it cost, it held no true value as, unlike the ring on Anne's finger, Jane's ring would never be anything more than an empty symbol.

Henry wouldn't want to remember that they had been married, much less acknowledge, even to himself, that they were still married, even if he pretended to the rest of the world that he was Mistress Seymour's husband, pretended that he had the wife he loved and wanted at long last and that theirs was a lawful marriage blessed by God, but he would have no choice in the matter.

If he thought that getting rid of the physical reminders of her presence would enable him to forget her, Anne knew that he was mistaken.

He couldn't forget her any more than she could forget him.
Their lives were entwined, forever.

Marion's execution was to take place at nine o'clock.

By then, they were to have set off on their journey.

The three maids who were to accompany her into exile had woken Anne before dawn, helping her to wash and dress before arranging her hair in a simple twist. Her gown was of white damask, almost hidden by a black velvet cloak with the hood up to cover her face, in case anybody should glance in her direction. All of the personal belongings she had been allowed to have with her during her time in the Tower had been packed and the trunk brought down, so that it could be stored on top of one of the carriages, ready for them to set off. Her other belongings, everything that was still in her apartment at Whitehall or in her rooms in another palace, would follow, as soon as they could be sent on to her without attracting undue attention.

The maids were to attend Marion on the scaffold, for the sake of appearances before making their way to the far courtyard, where the carriages awaited them. They had already returned to their homes to pack up their belongings, telling any relatives or friends that they had been engaged to work in a country house – which was true enough – and to sort out any details that needed sorting before they said their goodbyes. For now, Anne was alone with Brandon and Archbishop Cranmer, waiting, the former pacing back and forth and the latter praying silently.

Brandon glanced at the clock on the wall, estimating the time that they would need to make their way down so that they could get away unnoticed.

"If you want to say goodbye to your father, we should leave now." He told her curtly, not meeting her eyes. He offered her his arm but there was nothing friendly, or even courteous about the gesture, and the determined look in his eyes made it clear that he would not accept it if she declined to take his arm, preferring to walk alone than to have him touch her. He wanted to make certain that he had a firm grip on her, just in case she decided to try to run outside and declare her identity to the people who were being admitted to witness the execution.

Anne put her arm through his, allowing him to lead her out of her chamber and down the corridors towards the place where her father was imprisoned.

Although Anne had been housed in relative comfort, waited on by several attendants, a privilege allowed to her by virtue of her status as Queen, those who were arrested with her had not enjoyed such luxuries. With the exception of Mark Smeaton, the only accused man of low birth, they were spared the indignity of the dungeons and the horrific torture that a common prisoner could be subjected to at the whim of a jailer, but they were housed in damp, cramped, bare cells, even Anne's father who, as an earl twice over, was the highest-ranking of them. None of them were permitted to have a servant with them to tend to their needs and they were allowed to send for only the minimum by way of clothes, bedding, books and writing materials.

Not even Henry had professed to believe that Boleyn had ever been his daughter's lover, that he had encouraged her in her alleged infidelities or that he might even have been aware of them and committed treason by holding his tongue on the subject instead of warning the King but he had still wanted the man to be safely locked away, for fear that he would speak out for Anne if he was given the opportunity to do so, and rally people to her cause, encouraging them to rise up in defence of their innocent Queen and to reject the woman the King had chosen as her replacement.

Brandon had not disputed Henry's reasoning – his friend's temper was so volatile when the investigation into Anne's conduct began that even the slightest suggestion that he should reconsider
any of the arrests he had ordered could have brought the speaker to the Tower as a suspected accomplice or sympathiser – but he believed it to be an utterly unnecessary precaution.

Now that his daughter had fallen from grace, Boleyn was going to do everything in his power to see to it that he did not fall with her. Instead, he would focus his energies on salvaging whatever he could from the wreckage of his family's ambition. He would never have spoken for Anne, not even to save her life or her brother's, and Brandon suspected that if he had been a free man while Anne was on trial, his would have been the loudest voice decrying her crimes against the King. He would watch his children lose their heads without flinching if it his own head was safe on his shoulders.

When he reached the door of Boleyn's cell, Brandon released his hold on Anne's arm, motioning to Cranmer, who placed a supportive hand on her shoulder.

"Wait here. I have a message from His Majesty for the earl, you can see him afterwards." He instructed Anne quietly, keeping his voice low so that he would not be overheard by any of the prisoners, before looking at Cranmer. "Do not let her out of your sight." He ordered firmly, waiting for the other man to nod obediently in response before he left them and entered the cell.

Boleyn looked as though he had aged years in the weeks he had spent in captivity.

He had not been a young man before but now he looked truly old, aged by fear and disappointment and resentment over all he had lost over the course of the past few weeks. His finery was gone and he was clad only in a plain linen shirt and simple breeches but he had not lost his arrogance – perhaps there was nothing in the world that could ever knock that out of him – and there was an expression of contempt in his eyes when Brandon entered, as though he considered the other man to be an insect who ought to be crushed beneath his boots by rights.

Although etiquette demanded that he stand in the presence of the Duke of Suffolk, one of the highest-ranking peers in the realm, he remained seated, a calculated gesture of defiance.

Despite his show of bravado, however, he was clearly ill at ease, unsurprisingly so.

Over a matter of weeks, he had gone from being one of the most powerful and influential lords at court, high in favour with the King to a prisoner in the Tower, from father to the Queen of England to the father of a disgraced adulteress. His son and daughter were both convicted of treason, his son was dead and, as far as he knew, his daughter would shortly follow him.

Boleyn was afraid that he would join them.

Any sane man in his position would fear that.

"Am I... am I to be tried?" He asked quietly, dreading the answer, knowing as he did that, if he was brought to trial, he could not hope for acquittal. Once Anne and her alleged lovers were convicted, to be put on trial as their accomplice was tantamount to a sentence of death.

Brandon would have dearly liked to be able to say 'yes', to tell the man who had spent the last decade amassing power, mostly through his younger daughter, with no regard for the price that others would have to pay for his ambition, even if that price was their lives, that he was to follow in the footsteps of More, Fisher and countless others who had paid the price for standing against him and his daughter, that he was to pay for his years of scheming with his life, but that was not the message that Henry had charged him to deliver. He remained silent for a moment, leaving the other man to worry about what he was going to say and to imagine the very worst possible outcome, to dwell on the idea that he might be tried and executed, before he finally answered.
"No. You are to be released." Boleyn grinned widely, covering his mouth with one hand to hide his relief and joy at this unexpected reprieve. Disgusted, Brandon continued, tempering the good news with bad, part of him wishing that he could be delivering worse tidings to a man he had always hated, even when were working for a common cause. "But His Majesty commands that since you no longer enjoy his trust or affection, you are to be stripped forthwith of all your official posts and titles." If the look on Boleyn's face was any indication, this came as no surprise to him but his eyes still betrayed his dismay and his resentment over the news Brandon was giving him, as though he believed that, despite everything, he should be allowed to enjoy the benefit of all he had gained through Anne. "You will no longer serve on the Privy Council, you will relinquish the role of Lord Privy Seal and all its privileges. His Majesty also desires that you leave court, and that you never show yourself in his presence again, on pain of death."

Another man would be broken by what he had heard, coming as it did on top of the loss of his son and daughter but Boleyn looked thoughtful as he rubbed his chin absently, looking up at Brandon with a speculative expression on his face, immediately seizing on a vital omission.

"So I am to keep my earldom?" A smile slowly spread across his face as he looked up at the other man for confirmation, his pleasure at the thought that he would be able to retain some of what he had gained unconcealed, and outweighing the grief over his losses.

Brandon thought that even if he hadn't known that Anne was outside, a silent, unseen witness to her father's callousness and greed, he would still have reacted the same way, disgusted by what he was hearing.

It was known that the family of Sir Henry Norris had offered the King a substantial bribe in exchange for his life, willing to sell all they had and to beggar themselves if it could persuade Henry to pardon him, deeming no price to be too high if they could only secure his safety and freedom, or even persuade the King to commute his sentence to imprisonment but Boleyn had washed his hands of both of his children, caring only for what he himself might salvage from the wreckage of his hopes and ambitions and Brandon was revolted by it.

If it had been Edward who had been convicted of treason and who now faced death for that crime, he would have offered up every treasure, every penny, every acre of land and every stick of furniture he possessed if he could save his son's life and, if that did not suffice, he would have begged Henry to take his own life instead and spare his son's.

Seizing the other man by the front of his shirt, he slammed him against the damp, whitewashed walls of the cell, his face inches away.

"Did you watch your son die?" He demanded furiously. "What about your daughter? Will you watch her suffer? Will you watch her die?" He found himself regretting the fact that Anne had insisted that she should be allowed to see her father one last time before she left the Tower to begin her life in seclusion, in order to show him that she was still alive and that he did not need to have any fears for her safety or her future. Boleyn did not deserve the reassurance, much less the satisfaction of knowing that his daughter was still Queen, and that his granddaughter would be the King's only legitimate child while Jane Seymour would be a mistress and her children would be nothing but bastards. "Tell me, Boleyn; was it all worth it?" The other man did not answer and, disgusted, Brandon released him, shoving him away and stalking out of the cell.

Anne's face was ghost pale when Brandon stepped into the corridor, and he noticed that Cranmer had put his arm around her in a protective gesture, as though he wanted to be able to shield her from the pain that the words she had overheard must have caused her.

"Would you like to go in now?" Brandon asked gently, unable to keep himself from feeling some
pity for her after what she had just heard her father say. He couldn't imagine what it must be like to hear that her father cared so little about her, valuing his earldom above his children's lives, and he no longer felt surprised by Anne's inability to recognise how much Henry loved Mary, despite his decision to declare her illegitimate and her defiance of his command that she should accept his new marriage, and to understand that she was still precious to him.

Anne considered for a few moments, before shaking her head decisively. "No." She said quietly, but firmly enough to let them know that they wouldn't be able to change her mind. "I wouldn't."

Brandon merely nodded in response, accepting her wish and taking her arm again to lead her away, outside. As they walked past open windows letting in fresh air from the courtyard, he could hear snatches of speech and he glanced out to see Marion – a far more convincing 'Anne' than even he had hoped they would be able to find when he suggested a substitution – delivering her 'last words'. He honestly couldn't decide whether he was more amused or appalled by the fact that Anne had coached her substitute so that she could make the last speech she wanted her to.

It was perfect; the words were respectful, and 'Anne' said nothing that could be faulted in any way, submitting herself to death, as the King willed it so, and praising him as one of the best Princes on the face of the Earth but despite the praise for Henry, it was the woman standing in front of them with whom the people who were allowed to watch the execution would sympathise.

He could see some of the women watching dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs while the men removed their caps in a gesture of respect and many of them knelt before her, as those who witnessed her ill-fated execution two days ago had. It was as though they had never hated Anne for supplanting Queen Katherine, or objected to the idea of having her as their Queen.

None of the people who stood in the courtyard now would have a bad word to say about Anne from now on, nor would the people who heard their account of her execution.

Chances were, however, that they would have plenty to say about both Henry and Jane Seymour and that none of it would be pleasant.

In a strange way, Anne had won and Marion had helped to hand her another victory.

Knowing that the moment of the sword blow was drawing near, Brandon hurried away from the windows, down the corridor to a set of stone steps leading into a second, smaller courtyard where the carriages were awaiting them.

"You'd better get in." He told Anne, motioning to the front carriage, deeming it better to have her safely out of sight before anyone could see her and undo the work of their charade in an instant.

The coachman was a member of Brandon's own household, a man who had worked for him for years, a man to whom he had given a job when he was searching desperately for work to support himself and his family, and one whom he trusted implicitly, enough to involve him in the conspiracy and to be confident that he would not breathe a word to anybody about the bizarre situation he was privy to. The men who would drive the second coach were also handpicked for their trustworthiness, their silence guaranteed by a combination of threats and bribes.

Before she climbed in, Anne reached for Cranmer's hand, clutching it tightly.

"You'd better get in." He told Anne, motioning to the front carriage, deeming it better to have her safely out of sight before anyone could see her and undo the work of their charade in an instant.

"You'll take care of Elizabeth, won't you?" She asked urgently, needing to know that there would be somebody who would be willing to speak for her child, who would need friends even with if her legitimacy and her rank as a princess were assured. Now that Anne was out of the way, with even her father banished from court and her relatives in disfavour and unable to speak up for the child,
and with the Seymours in the ascendancy and with Cromwell cultivating the Imperial ambassador, there would be many who would speak for the Lady Mary, urging a reconciliation between her and her father and promoting her interests, but Elizabeth would have very few people who would be brave enough to try to coax Henry into thinking more fondly of her. It was more likely that he would have people urging him to disinherit their child in favour of her older half-sister, and to make Elizabeth's banishment from court a permanent one, so that her presence would not be a barrier to a reconciliation between Henry and Mary, or to Mary's full restoration to the status she had once enjoyed. "If you can get Henry to bring her back to court…"

If Elizabeth was allowed back to court soon, after all of this had died down somewhat, then Anne was confident that his love for their child would win Elizabeth a place in his heart and in his good graces once more, ensuring that he would have a care for their child's interests and see to it that she was cared for and protected but he would not be prepared to take the step of seeing her again, not without encouragement. She knew him well enough to be sure of that.

"Your Majesty, I will do everything I can for her, you have my word." Cranmer promised fervently, impulsively bowing low over her hand and kissing it. He felt a surge of envy towards Matthew Parker, who was to accompany Anne as her chaplain, wishing for a moment that he could take his place in the household of this saintly lady, despite the fact that he was well aware that he needed to stay at court in order that he could continue to God's work in guiding the reformation of the English church, a task that could be neither neglected nor left to another man. "God has preserved your life, Your Majesty," he said quietly, his tone awed at the thought.

"Why?" Anne couldn't understand why, if God chose to spare her from execution, He had not also intervened to spare the men who were accused with her, men who were equally guiltless but who had still paid for the lies of others with their lives. It made no sense to her that He would protect her and yet be willing to allow them to become victims of her enemies' lies.

Why would He keep her alive and not them?

Had her execution been the first one scheduled instead of the last, might they still be alive?

"I don't know." Cranmer answered honestly. "But you must believe that He has His reasons for saving you. He has a plan for you, He must."

"I hope so." Anne said quietly, leaning forward to brush a kiss against his cheek. "Thank you."

"God bless you, Your Majesty." He said fervently, kissing her hand once more before he released her.

"It's time to go." Brandon prompted, extending his hand to help her climb into the carriage.

Anne nodded, laying her hand on his. "I'm ready."

At Henry's express command, they were to journey directly to Pembroke Hall, without stopping overnight, despite the fact that, even in a carriage with fast horses and even with good weather and dry roads, the journey would take almost three days.

Henry was afraid that, if they stopped overnight at an inn, there might be a risk that somebody would recognise Anne and, although that risk was a very slight one, given that it was highly unlikely that anybody living in the countryside would know Anne on sight, much less believe that she was herself when they believed her to be dead and buried within the Tower grounds, he was not prepared to take that chance or to allow Brandon to do so. Now that Marion Perry had been
executed in Anne's place, the stakes were even higher than they were before. His people would be outraged if they ever learned about the deception that was wrought on them regarding Anne's "execution" so it was imperative that he ensured that they never learned that Anne was still alive.

He couldn't be too careful.

Brandon was prepared for a long, difficult journey.

He had known even before Henry set out his conditions for the trip that the task of conducting Anne to her new home would be an unenviable one. He didn't like Anne and the idea of being cooped up in carriage with her for days on end, forced to share such close quarters, with no other company save servants and grooms, was an unpleasant one, to say the least, but the other restrictions would make things much worse, even though they were well-supplied with provisions for the journey, including enough food and drink to feed them for ten days, let alone three.

It was his responsibility to see to it that Anne was conducted safely to Pembroke Hall, to be turned over to the care of her chamberlain, who would be responsible for keeping an eye on her from now on and who would be held accountable if Anne was able to evade his vigilance and do anything that compromised the secrecy of her identity, and he had to ensure that she was given no opportunity to escape or to communicate with anybody outside their travelling party. He didn't feel safe taking his eyes from her for more than a moment, unwilling to trust that she would not seek to escape and, as difficult and unpleasant as that made his task early in the day, when they first set out and he was feeling fresh and rested, it was worse still now, as the day dragged into evening.

Brandon was hungry and thirsty and the motion of the carriage was making him feel rather tired, which made him wonder how he was supposed to sleep tonight if he had to watch Anne.

Anne didn't seem troubled by the same difficulties. She had a book in her hand and was absorbed by it, so much so that she had scarcely glanced up from its pages since they set off. She hadn't spoken a word to him all day and she had made no demands or requests.

Brandon didn't know whether he was merely being courteous to a lady by waiting for her to indicate when she wished to eat or to break off their journey for a few minutes instead of being the one to decide such things for her, or if curiosity had kept him from suggesting that they should have their meal unpacked so that they might dine, so that he could see for himself how long it would take for her to experience discomfort and speak up.

He hadn't expected that it would take her long and was certain that she would break long before his need became pressing.

He was accustomed to spending a day in the saddle, sometimes setting off before dawn, after breaking his fast with nothing more than a bite of bread and a mug of ale, and not returning until suppertime. Anne would never have been brought up to test her endurance the same way and, from what Henry had said, she was not a woman who suffered in silence. If she was unhappy about something, she would let him know, and in no uncertain terms. He had expected her to insist that they stop for dinner by noon at the latest, and that he would be plagued by demands to stop the carriage at frequent intervals so she could take a break, or that she might wish the carriage to maintain a slow pace so she could walk for a time, but she had remained silent.

The carriage behind them, carrying the maids, had already stopped a couple of times, having to catch up with them afterwards and now, with the sky growing dark, Brandon was growing more and more impatient. He felt so hungry that it was as though he had not eaten in a week, and so thirsty that he could have traded his estate in Suffolk for a pitcher of water. He also had a rather pressing need to order that the carriage should be stopped so that he could find a bush to hide
behind while he relieved himself. If Anne noticed his discomfort, she did not remark on it and, despite his resolve to wait for her to be the one to speak, his desire not to be the first one to demonstrate weakness, Brandon soon found that he had to speak up.

"Aren't you hungry?" He asked impatiently, prompting Anne to look up from her book in astonishment, surprised by his interruption. "We've been travelling all day," he reminded her sharply. "Don't you want to stop for a break? Or to get something to eat or drink?" He felt a chill run down his spine when he saw from Anne's expression that she was not hungry. In fact, it didn't seem to have occurred to her that she should be hungry by now.

Had he been a more superstitious man, he might have crossed himself but instead he merely stared at her, unable to believe what he was seeing.

He was already having trouble wrapping his mind around the fact that Anne had been able to survive when the executioner tried to behead her, just about. He did not want to believe, as Cranmer did, that Anne's survival was a miracle but, at the same time, he couldn't come up with a more realistic explanation for why she still lived. However, as astonished and awed as he was to see the sword pass through Anne's neck without harming her, or to see her hand forced into a brazier of hot coals but remain unscathed, it was more unsettling to see that hunger, thirst and tiredness seemed to have no more power over her than fire and steel did.

Was she even human any more or had she become something else, something more, something that was not subject to the same human limitations that he was?

Part of him wanted to quiz her about whether she felt even the slightest twinge of hunger or thirst after their hours of travelling, or if she even could eat or drink now, to find out the extent of her ability to conquer such weaknesses but, instead, another question came from his lips, a question he had not intended to ask, one he did not want to hear answered but that he needed answered.

"What did it feel like?"

"Your Grace?" Brandon couldn't tell whether Anne's innocent surprise and puzzlement at his question was feigned or if she truly did not understand what he wanted to know.

"The execution… the beheading… when the executioner tried… you know what I mean." When Henry had forced her hand into the brazier, Brandon could see that she had not been harmed by it in any way, and he could assume from the way that she did not cry out that she had not felt pain when she first touched it but the beheading was different. He had seen the sword pass through her neck and that there was blood on it and he was curious about how that must have felt for her.

Anne was silent for a few moments, mulling over the question and trying to come up with an honest response to it. "It felt sharp." She said at last, framing her thoughts as best she could.

"Sharp?" Brandon repeated the word dubiously.

Anne shrugged. "Sharp." She confirmed, instinctively touching her neck, ringing it with slender fingers. The sword blow had not left her with even the faintest of scars… at least not physically. "There wasn't any pain," she continued quietly, speaking to herself rather than to Brandon, trying to gather her thoughts and to remember what had happened, every sensation of the bizarre incident. "It was sharp and I could feel the sword going through my neck. It was cold. I thought the sword would be the last thing I would ever see." She remarked wryly. "But I was wrong."

"So you're telling me that it didn't hurt?" Brandon pressed her, feeling more relieved than he would ever have thought possible at the thought that at least she had not endured any pain.
"No," Anne contradicted him at once. "It hurt."

"But you just said…"

"There was no pain from the sword, that's not what hurt." Anne met his gaze squarely, noticing that Brandon shifted uneasily in the carriage when she did so. "You love your wife, don't you, Your Grace?" She was not close to Brandon and never had been, even though he was Henry's closest friend and had allied with her father and uncle before he turned on them, but she had seen him interacting with his Duchess before, and she had heard their relationship spoken of at court, with more than a few people marvelling over the fact that, since marrying Catherine Brooke, Brandon had been transformed from a man who was known to be susceptible to a pretty face and who had never allowed marriage vows to come between him and his pleasures, into a loving, devoted and, by all accounts, faithful husband. His marriage to Catherine was one of the happy ones.

Brandon stiffened at the question and, after a moment's pause, he answered her, although he disliked the idea of speaking of Catherine before Anne. "Yes, I love my wife very much. She's a good woman – and she's been a very loving mother to my young son." He added pointedly, frowning at the thought of how Anne had never been a mother, or even a friend to Princess Mary. Her concern had always been for her own daughter and her interests, even at the expense of her stepchild's welfare and interests. It was one of the things that he disliked most about her.

He thought that if she had been willing to treat Mary kindly, doing what she could to ease the poor girl's situation instead of making matters worse for her, he would not have disliked her as much.

Even if Anne had been unable to bring herself to plead with Henry to find a way to restore Mary as Princess – and he had to acknowledge that there would be few women in her position who would take such a step when they had a daughter of their own, especially when their child's legitimacy was questioned by people who supported their stepchild's place as her father's legitimate child, as both girls could not have been born in wedlock – the least she could have done was encourage him to be kind to Mary at least, instead of allowing Mary to be forced to act as a maid-in-waiting to the infant Elizabeth, turned into a virtual prisoner at Hatfield. Mary deserved far better than the treatment she endured over the past few years, and he hated Anne for refusing to help her.

Anne nodded acknowledgement of his words. "How do you think you'd feel if you found out that she was willing to have you killed?" Her question, though softly spoken, stunned Brandon into silence. He gaped at her, unable to keep himself from imagining how he might feel if he was in her place with Catherine playing Henry's role, and it was plain that the mere thought of such a thing was horrifying for him. She smiled sadly at him, knowing that she had made her point and that he understood her meaning. "It hurt more than I ever imagined anything could hurt me."
Chapter Six

19th May 1536

Her father had promised that she would not be staying at Hatfield much longer.

Aside from the news of Anne's death, it was the most welcome news Mary had had in years.

She eagerly anticipated the moment when she would be able to walk out of the country palace, the place where she had felt more humiliated, miserable and alone than she had at any other time during her life, knowing that her new home would be a more congenial one by far, a home where she could be the mistress, treated with respect, rather than a despised servant. Even if some of her servants were instructed to keep an eye on her activities, that would still be better than living in a place where people were loyal to Elizabeth, and keen to safeguard her interests.

Her father had not yet invited her back to court, although Mary had prayed that she would receive a letter from him letting her know that he wanted to put the past behind them, now that he was free of Anne's poison, and that it was his dearest wish to see her again, that she should be with him, where she belonged, as he prepared to welcome his new bride into his life.

Chapuys suspected, and Mary agreed with him, that her father would not be willing to welcome her back to court until she yielded to his will and took the Oath of Succession, as he would want her to acknowledge him as Supreme Head of the Church and, despite what had happened with Anne, he seemed to be as determined as ever to ensure that Elizabeth was accepted as the legitimate heir to the throne until he had a son with Lady Jane, though it was difficult to understand why he was so adamant about keeping the toddler a princess when it would be so easy for him to annul his union with Anne and proclaim to the world that he now knew that Elizabeth was a bastard, while Mary was a princess, something that all devout Catholics must know.

However, although he was not prepared to invite her to come to court, he had informed her, through Master Cromwell, that it was his wish that she should be removed to the manor of Hundson, where a household was being readied for her.

Master Cromwell had been fairly sparing with the details, not mentioning how many servants she might expect to have, or what kind of income she could anticipate being supplied with to meet her personal expenses and the costs of running her household but that didn't really matter to Mary, especially as she was sure that her father wouldn't go to the trouble of giving her a household of her own if he wasn't going to see to it that she would have everything she needed. If he wanted her to be neglected and humiliated, he could leave her at Hatfield, denying her the funds she needed to live as she ought to and allowing Elizabeth's attendants to snub her. He would only move her from Hatfield if he intended to see to it that she was better-treated.

The thing that truly mattered was that her household would be her own, entirely her own.

She was realistic enough to know that she wouldn't be given a dwelling or a retinue to match what she had enjoyed when she was still given her true title of Princess of Wales, and that since her father was so determined to see to it that Elizabeth was honoured as his legitimate daughter, her own establishment would probably be on a smaller scale. However, she would have servants of her own now, servants who would have to accord her the respect due to a King's daughter. She would no longer have to wait on little Elizabeth and instead, she would be the one being attended and honoured, as was her right, freed from the ignoble position she had endured since the day she was first ordered to Hatfield to wait on her infant half-sister.
She could scarcely wait to shake the dust of Hatfield from her boots, to know that if she ever returned – and part of her thought that it would be kind for her to come to visit her young sister, and to take an interest in the child as an elder sister ought to, even if Elizabeth was the child of Anne Boleyn, who had caused Mary such misery – it would be of her own free will, and she would come as a guest to be honoured, not as a servant who could be bullied and humiliated at the whims of the highest-ranking attendants in Elizabeth's household, as if she was a lowborn drudge.

Mary's world had not yet been set to rights, and perhaps she would never again enjoy the idyllic position she had during her childhood, the position that she was sure she would still enjoy, if not for Anne and her scheming, but she knew that she should be thankful for the improvements to her situation, even if she yearned to have more, to have what she truly deserved.

One had to be grateful for the blessings God chose to send.

The servants at Hatfield were all conscious of her improving status. It was reflected in the way they lowered their eyes respectfully when they spoke to her, instead of brazenly meeting her gaze as though they considered her to be their equal, at best, as they would have before, in the bows and curtsies they made when they saw her, in the respectful tones with which they addressed her and with their willingness to perform any service she required of them, as soon as she asked it of them, sometimes even anticipating her needs before she voiced them, instead of rudely insisting that they did not have the time to follow her commands or, if they performed the task, deliberately performing it so poorly that Mary was obliged to rectify much of the work herself after they left.

They could see that the tide was beginning to turn in Mary's favour and against the little mistress of the household, so they would not dare to offer her even the slightest hint of disrespect from now on, for fear of reprisals if the King should take offence at the idea of his own daughter being mistreated by maids of honour and even menial servants, now that he was showing himself willing to be reconciled with her once more. They knew that they must tread carefully around her.

Chapuys had gently warned her to take care, to ensure that she did not allow herself to become overconfident thanks to the slight kindness being shown to her by her father and make things worse. He was the King and, although he was showing himself willing to treat her fairly generously now, he could take away all he had given her, and all too easily, if it pleased him to do it. He could command that she should have her own household at Hundson today, yet insist that she should return to Hatfield tomorrow if he wished, relegating her to a servant's role once more. They knew that they must tread carefully around her.

Her father was the King, and would allow nobody to tell him what he must or must not do.

He had also hinted that it was likely that the King would expect some repayment for the kindness he had shown to Mary, and that he was anticipating that she would answer his gentler treatment with a promise to take the Oath as he had wanted her to do since he first began to circulate it but, although Mary believed that Chapuys was right, she couldn't bear the thought of doing it.

She was shrewd enough to know that she could expect her treatment to improve even more if she took the Oath and told her father what he wanted to hear.

It was almost certain that her father would welcome her back to court as soon as he received word of her willingness to comply. Jane Seymour would undoubtedly be willing to encourage him to bring Mary to court, and to honour her as his firstborn daughter should be honoured. Her submission might not win her her restoration to her proper place, not if her father was determined to deny it to her, but it would mean that she could return to court and that her father would open his heart to her once more, rediscovering the love he once cherished for her.

She longed to be welcomed back to court once more but how could she turn her back on her
birthright, and dishonour her mother's memory by ignoring her sacrifices.

Her mother had never been her father's concubine, as the court her father had set up had tried to insist. She had not lived as an unwitting harlot for many years, conceiving seven times outside the bonds of holy wedlock, and losing six of her children as a punishment for her sins. She had lived in the holy state of matrimony and she would never have lied before God by claiming that she had gone to their marriage bed a virgin if she had been a wife to his brother in more than name. The deaths of her children were not a punishment for sin but God's will, because He wanted to call the little princes and princesses to Him, and because it was His wish that Mary should be Queen.

Mary was certain that, no matter how much her mother loved her, no matter how much she wished to see her as Queen, and no matter what other sacrifices she would have made on her behalf, without hesitating, where other matters were concerned, she would not have lied about whether or not her first marriage was consummated for her sake, not even if she could spare her the pain and humiliation of being declared baseborn and disinherited as such by doing so.

Much as she loved Mary, she would not imperil her soul for her sake, and Mary would never have asked it of her.

If Mary took the Oath, she might as well announce that her mother had lied, that her marriage to Prince Arthur had been consummated and that she had wilfully deceived the King by claiming that it had not, that she had lied in court, before God, when she claimed to have come to the King's bed as a virgin and that she had knowingly entrapped him in a union that was sinful, against the law of God, in order to satisfy her ambition to be Queen, and that, even when he came to suspect that their marriage was invalid and accursed, she had done her best to prevent him from annulling it, as he ought to, out of pride, unwilling to allow another woman to bear the title that was once hers, even though she knew that she had never truly been Queen of England.

She would be declaring that for all the love her mother professed to bear for England and for its King, she was willing to deny them both the stability and security that a legitimate male heir would give them, and to force the King to remain in a sinful union rather than give up the title she had obtained by deceit, telling the people that the woman they loved as their Good Queen Katherine had played on their sympathies throughout the Great Matter, duping them into believing her lies and turning them against the King, whose cause had been the just one after all.

If Mary took the Oath, she might as well announce that she was a bastard born of an incestuous union, an abomination before God, who would never have been born if her parents had not committed a grave sin, and a pretender, a girl who had committed treason by claiming the title of Princess when she had no more right to it than a beggar's daughter, and by seeking to proclaim herself their heir to the throne ahead of the King's trueborn daughter, Elizabeth.

How could she do it?

How could she dishonour the memory of her mother and deny her own rights?

Chapuys was right when he advised her to be careful, and not to take her father's show of favour for more than it was but, if there was a way to avoid taking the Oath, she would do so.

Her father had killed Anne, despite the fact that he had once loved her passionately.

Mary firmly believed that Anne was guilty of the charges laid against her, and more, but she knew how infatuated her father was with her – how could she not, after everything he did to her and to her mother for Anne's sake? – but, despite that, when he realized that she had wronged him, he didn't hesitate to have her killed. It was as though the long years he had spent infatuated with her,
years during which he willingly turned his kingdom upside down for her sake, so that he could make her his Queen, if that was the price of her surrender, counted for nothing.

Cardinal Wolsey was her father's closest, most trusted advisor for many years, since her father first became King, but when he was unable to give him what he wanted, he was cast aside, stripped of the many treasures in which he once delighted, treasures that had failed to placate his angry master. Had he not died in prison, Mary was certain that he would have been brought to the block, despite his past loyalty and good service and despite the fact that he was a cardinal of the Holy Church, who should be answerable to God and the Holy Father, not an earthly King.

Sir Thomas More was once a dear friend of her father's. He was a rarity at court, an honest man who would never betray his principles for the sake of advancement and favour and Mary's father once valued his counsel above that of any other man save the Cardinal, craving his approval. When More refused to give him the approval he sought, he paid for it with his life.

Mary's mother was a devoted, loving wife to her father for years, the best wife that a man could ever hope to have, but that had not stopped him casting her aside like a worn shoe when she no longer pleased him, nor had it kept him from punishing her for her refusal to help him make his mistress his wife and her children the heirs to the throne by agreeing that their marriage was invalid and helping him to brand their child a bastard. Their years of happy marriage counted for nothing when he set Mary's mother aside, banishing her from the court which had been her home for so long and leaving her to die, neglected and impoverished, in a dilapidated country manor, without even the consolation of her child's presence as she lay dying.

He could kill Mary too, if she displeased him.

Once, she was her father's darling, the pearl of his world, his only living child and a girl he delighted in showing off to the court and to visiting dignitaries, praising her as his perfect princess.

That had not kept him from declaring her a bastard when it suited his purposes to do so, or from ordering her to leave Ludlow Castle and to take up the humiliating role as Elizabeth's servant, so how could she be certain that it would keep him from ordering her execution if he became angry enough about her refusal to take the Oath to be willing to resort to such a measure?

She would not allow it to get that far, Mary decided.

Her future stepmother was warmly disposed towards her and, according to Chapuys, she was eager to welcome her back to court and to see her honoured as she ought to be. Her father, by all accounts she had heard, loved Lady Jane very much and was certain to be anxious to please his new bride... hopefully so anxious that he would be willing to welcome Mary back to court, without first requiring that she take the Oath, in order to please his new bride.

If there was a chance that Lady Jane's kind offices could induce her father to invite her back to court and to honour her without her needing to take the Oath in order to secure her restoration to his good graces, then Mary would not offer to take the Oath, even though she knew that he would expect her to do so, and that she would please him if the suggestion came from her. If there was a chance that she could have her father's love and favour once more without having to brand her beloved mother a harlot and proclaim herself a bastard, she would not take the Oath.

She didn't want to think about what would happen if Lady Jane was unable to do this for her.

When she was first sent to Hatfield as a servant, she had vowed to herself that, no matter how poorly she was treated or how much she was humiliated, she would never allow them to break her, never allow them to bully her into pretending that she was a bastard instead of a princess. When the
Oath was first circulated and when a messenger was sent by her father, commanding her to take it, she refused, and in no uncertain terms, making it clear that she would not be induced into signing away her birthright so that the Concubine's bastard might usurp it.

She knew that, if she yielded, her submission would be announced to all of Christendom, and used as proof of the rightness of her father's cause, and she refused to strengthen her enemies.

She had sworn to herself then that, even if her life was threatened, she would not take the Oath, she would let them drag her to the scaffold instead before she willingly repudiated her mother and herself... but she had not truly believed that her father would be able to bring herself to harm her, no matter how much her refusal to obey angered him, so it was easier to make the promise then than it was now, when she had reason to fear that he might truly be prepared to take such drastic measures against her if she continued to defy him.

She would make it clear to him that she was prepared to obey him in all things, excepting only those matters that touched on her conscience and might imperil her soul, and that she was the most loyal and loving daughter a father could hope for. She would show him how willingly she welcomed Lady Jane as his future wife and her future stepmother and Queen, and of how she would happily welcome the opportunity to show the new Queen her filial duty and affection, and to do her whatever service it might please Lady Jane to ask of her.

If her father retained any vestige of the loving papa who once doted on her, surely that would be enough for him, and he would not demand that she perjure her soul by going any further.

If he was unwilling to meet her halfway, if he demanded that she should take the Oath or die for refusing, she didn't know if she would be able to stand firm, or if she would yield to save her life.

All she could do was pray that Lady Jane would be able to help her and that her resolve would never have to be tested in that way.

When she said as much to Chapuys, she could read the expression on his face as though it was an open book. The ambassador who had served her and her mother loyally, doing all in his power to aid them, even when it meant risking the King's anger, wanted to believe as badly as she did that she might be able to return to the court with honour, without having to stain herself by proclaiming herself illegitimate but, at the same time, he was afraid for her. He was afraid that, should she defy her father, she would die for it and not even the Emperor would be able to save her from the scaffold but, despite his fears, he respected her enough not to push her on the matter, not yet, and he was too kind to try to take away her hope of restoration by speaking of his doubts and fears while there was a chance that that hope might not be a vain one.

"I pray that this will be the case, Your Highness." He said gently, keeping his voice low, for fear that somebody might hear him addressing her as a princess should be addressed, and seek to report his actions to the King, along with the fact that Mary had allowed him to treat her as a princess without correcting him, reminding him that the King had declared her a bastard.

Hatfield had been Elizabeth's home since she was a tiny baby and it was natural that the servants and attendants who made up her household would feel that their loyalties lay with their little mistress and that they would hope to see the child honoured and favoured by the King.

They could not take the chance that one of them would overhear and seek to report his mode of address, in the hopes that the King, in his anger over this minor show of defiance, would turn against Mary, despite Lady Jane's efforts to speak on Mary's behalf and encourage her restoration to his good graces, and that his affections would be directed towards Elizabeth instead.
The brat was already in a far more favourable position than Chapuys wanted to see her in, without her benefiting even more at Mary's expense.

"However," he added, a note of caution in his voice, "you must take care that you do nothing to anger the King, not until Lady Jane has had a chance to plead with him on your behalf." He believed that Mistress Seymour's desire to see Mary restored to her proper place – or at least as close to her proper place as was possible, under the circumstances – was sincere and it was something that he was thankful for. Mary would need to have the support of loyal friends.

"Thank you, Your Excellency." Mary smiled at him, more grateful for his support than she could say, and when he offered her his arm, she took it, allowing him to conduct her into the Great Hall, where dinner was being laid out for the household.

When she first came to Hatfield, she hated meals in the Great Hall.

At Ludlow Castle, she occasionally dined in state in the Hall there, as was expected of a princess, but, more often than not, she preferred to take her meals in her private dining room, with Lady Salisbury and her maids-in-waiting as company for a pleasant, peaceful meal. At Hatfield, orders had been given that she was not only forbidden to dine in an honoured state at the top table, she was also forbidden to have her meals served to her in the privacy of her own chamber. Lady Bryan had made it plain that this rule was not one that she would be prepared to break or bend for Mary's sake; if she was not willing to eat at the common board in the Hall, with the lower servants, they would not make alternative arrangements for her.

Mary was sure that those orders had come from Anne, who was determined to humiliate her by forcing her to choose between dining at the common board and starving and who must also have wanted to ensure that Mary would not have the protection of dining alone. When she dined in the Hall, it would be all too easy for somebody to slip something into her ale or onto her food if Anne decided that Mary was a threat to her and was prepared to resort to poison in order to ensure that the King would never welcome his eldest child back into his heart and his court.

She had spent many anxious meals not daring to take her eyes off the food on her plate or her ale, for fear that somebody might try to poison them, and not daring to accept a cut of meat or a drink from one of the heavy pewter jugs of ale unless she could see that others were eating and drinking the same, with no ill effects.

The memory of that fear, and of the countless humiliations she had endured, was still fresh and it made her triumph feel even sweeter when Chapuys conducted her into the Hall and, instead of leading her to her accustomed place at the common board, he conducted her to the dais and to the table there, where gold plate and cutlery were laid out.

Strictly speaking, Mary should not have been dining there.

According to the rules her father had laid out when he established the household at Hatfield, rules that he had not yet rescinded, despite everything that had happened, only Elizabeth was permitted to sit in the place of honour and, as she was so young, it was very rare that she dined in state in the Hall instead of in the privacy of her nursery, where her governess could ensure that she did not glut herself on the highly spiced foods and sweetmeats that would ruin her teeth and her digestion, so the place was usually vacant, except on important, festive occasions, when it was deemed important to have the child dining before the people in state. Lady Bryan liked to see to it that people were reminded that Elizabeth was to be regarded as the Princess of England.

Usually, her place remained vacant, the empty chair shaded by a canopy of estate and the table set for diners who would never appear, while the King's eldest daughter sat on a bench halfway down
the Hall, with menials seated on either side of her, eating off a simple, earthenware platter, and obliged to content herself with the relatively plain fare prepared for servants.

However, after word of Anne's arrest reached Hatfield, nobody had dared to object when Mary first boldly strode up to the dais and sat in the high, carved chair usually reserved for her little half-sister, feeling absurdly pleased to be sitting on a proper chair, padded with silken cushions, instead of on a plain wooden bench as she had for the past two and a half years, and demanded that a place should be laid for her using the gold plate that was usually kept locked in cabinets when Elizabeth was not in residence at the royal manor, and even more pleased when her command was obeyed, with servants scurrying to prepare a place for her to dine in state.

They knew that, although she might not yet have formal permission to sit there, or even the authority to issue an order like that and expect it to be obeyed, that it was very likely that the situation to which they had grown accustomed would soon be changed.

Gossip was circulating through the country palace about whether or not Mary would once more have the legal right to call herself a princess before the month was out and, as long as that was a possibility, none of them would dare to breathe a word of protest over where she chose to sit. Unless the King sent a message forbidding it, they weren't about to argue with Mary.

Even when Mary heard from Chapuys that her father had decided to continue to recognize little Elizabeth as legitimate, even though she knew that this meant that he did not intend to restore her, she continued to sit in the place of honour and to eat from a gold plate, praying that her father would send a message letting her know that she might do this with his blessing, that it was her right as his daughter, as a girl with royal Tudor blood flowing through her veins, and that she should never again be treated as a servant would be treated.

Surely he could allow her that much, even if he persisted in calling her a bastard – he had granted his illegitimate son, Henry Fitzroy, titles that made him the first among the peers in England when he was little more than a toddler, as well as a large establishment of his own and Mary knew that her young half-brother was accorded the honours due to a prince during his brief life.

Why couldn't her father do the same for her?

Surely he would do the same for her soon, once things were more settled after the harlot's death and his remarriage and he was ready to welcome his daughter into his heart once more and, until then, it was important that the servants at Hatfield should see her behaving as one who was favoured and honoured by her royal father, to remind them that she was a person who should be treated with respect and deference. If she behaved as somebody who was confident that she was favoured by the King, that was how servants would treat her. Appearances were crucial.

Chapuys had graciously accepted her invitation to join her at the table, and Mary was giving directions to a servant that another place should be laid next to her when they heard a clear, carrying voice, audible even over the chatter of the court.

"Make way for Princess Elizabeth! Make way for Her Grace! Make way for Princess Elizabeth!"

Mary kept her eyes glued to the plate in front of her, and at her reflection distorted in the polished metal, but she could imagine the ceremony, all too easily – after all, the same ceremony had once accompanied her movements. Outside the Hall, anybody who was still hastening there for the meal would back out of the way to let the toddler and her retinue pass, making obeisance as they greeted Elizabeth, and once Elizabeth had entered the Hall, those present would leap to their feet, bowing and curtseying deeply as she passed them by on her way to the dais.
Mary badly wanted to be able to sit there, not to move, as she would undoubtedly be expected to.

She wanted to sit there, refusing to give way, to make it clear that, no matter what her father said about their status, she was the true princess and Elizabeth was just a bastard, the daughter of a whore and a traitor. Had it not been for Chapuys' hand on her arm, and the gentle compassion in his eyes as he looked down at her, his expression telling her that, although he sympathized with her and agreed with her stance, it was one that would do her no good if word of it ever reached the King's ears, she would not have been able to move a muscle.

Her position was too precarious for her to be able to afford to anger him, in any way.

The brief satisfaction of refusing to give up her place at the table for Elizabeth could cost her the far greater prize of a restoration to court and to her father's favour.

But for that, nothing could have induced her to stand, to back away from the chair as though she was a maidservant caught trespassing there when her mistress' back was turned. It was the only reason that she was prepared to make a slight, shallow curtsey to her half-sister, something that she had determinedly resisted doing until now, before moving down to one of the lower tables.

Defiance over such relatively minor matters was a luxury that she could not afford, not now.

She could hear Lady Bryan's crisp tones as she introduced Chapuys to Elizabeth, inviting him to sit at the table with 'Princess Elizabeth' and dine with her – not even Lady Bryan would dare to offer an insult to the Imperial ambassador by failing to issue that invitation – and she was pleased to her Chapuys courteously but firmly decline the invitation, electing to sit with her instead, even if it meant sharing a bench with her and some of the servants of the household.

Lady Bryan's lips were thin as she watched the ambassador step down from the dais in order to sit down next to the Lady Mary.

Ordinarily, she would not have felt unduly troubled if Chapuys chose to behave like a fool, and to decline an honour when it was offered to him, but today she felt irritated by it.

He might have feigned politeness when she presented little Elizabeth to him, even making a shallow bow to the child, though it was evident that he did not wish to do so, but his response to her invitation made it plain that he would rather dine in a humble state in Lady Mary's company than in honour next to the Princess, an insult that would be noticed by everybody in the Great Hall and that would undoubtedly fuel the rumours circulating about Elizabeth's status in the wake of her mother's arrest, trial and execution, if an ambassador felt that he could snub the child without needing to worry that doing so would ensure that the King would be angry with him, and disinclined to consider an alliance with his master.

That was why she had brought her charge to the Great Hall today.

Ordinarily, she refrained from allowing Elizabeth to dine in state, except on the most formal of occasions, when people from the nearby villages travelled to the manor to watch their betters dining and would wish to see the Princess. Elizabeth was a very pretty sight in her finery, and those who saw her were charmed by the sight of the King's lovely little daughter.

Her table manners still left a little to be desired and, like all children her age, she was far too fond of unwholesome foods for her governess to be happy to allow her to indulge herself at table very often, knowing that, out of respect for the child's royal dignity, she could not be seen to restrain her before so many eyes but, under the circumstances, she felt as though there was no alternative, even though Elizabeth was already tired from her journey to Hatfield, and upset about her mother's fate.
Hearing that, in her absence, the Lady Mary had taken it upon herself to sit in Princess Elizabeth's customary place and to order that she be royally attended, with none of the servants daring to gainsay her wishes for fear of reprisals, decided the issue for her.

It was inevitable that servants would gossip about the future of the little princess, wondering if she was to be declared a bastard now that her mother was disgraced and executed, especially as it was not that long ago that the Lady Mary was proclaimed a bastard when the King's marriage to her mother deteriorated, proving that the King was prepared to cast mother and daughter aside as one rather than opting to be generous with his newly illegitimate daughter.

Lady Bryan had expected and feared that she would soon have charge of a bastard rather than a princess, so she could not fault others for wondering the same thing... and if they wondered about whether Elizabeth would be named a bastard, it was only natural that they would also wonder if they could expect that the Lady Mary would, once more, be proclaimed Princess and heir to the throne, especially when it was known that Mistress Seymour favoured her and was eager to do all she could to bring about the restoration of the Lady Mary.

It was best for her to put the issue to rest straight away. There was no sense in delaying.

The King himself had sent a message to her to let her know that Princess Elizabeth would continue to be recognized as his legitimate daughter, and he had given express instructions that the child was to continue to enjoy all the honours and privileges that she had always enjoyed and Lady Bryan intended to make it clear to every single person at Hattfield, including the Lady Mary and the Imperial ambassador, that whatever Queen Anne had done or had not done, her child was still the Princess of England and, for the moment, at any rate, the rightful heir to the throne.

Having her dine in state before her household would be a good beginning, and she could tell by the expression on the Lady Mary's face that her message was plain to one person, at least.

Lady Bryan was determined that, unless the King issued orders to the contrary, orders that she would have to obey, tonight would be the last night that the Lady Mary would sit at the high table.

Despite her best efforts to eat her meal and behave as though she was not in the least bit troubled by the fact that she had been obliged to step back for Elizabeth, Mary's food tasted like ashes or sawdust in her mouth, and even Chapuys' efforts to converse pleasantly, as though everything was normal, could not engage her attention, which was drawn to the dais, and to the little girl who was being settled into the high chair that made her seem even tinier than ever, and to whom the choicest, most savoury portions were being offered to tempt her reluctant appetite.

Mary could see that Elizabeth's eyes were red-rimmed, indicating that she had been crying and likely for a long time, probably since the news of Anne's death was first broken to her and, although she firmly believed that Anne's execution was no more than that harlot's just desserts, for a moment she wished that her life could have been spared, so that Elizabeth would not have had to endure the pain of being left motherless at such a young age, and she yearned to take the toddler in her arms and console her, reminding her that she still had a sister to care for her.

She was half-ready to stand, to go to Elizabeth's side and offer the child the comfort she so sorely needed, when she saw something that stopped her in her tracks.

At Lady Bryan's direction, two servants were setting out a canopy of purple silk, trimmed with gold, over Elizabeth's chair, signalling her royal status.

Mary should have been the one dining under a canopy.
Mary should have been the one feted as a princess, ruling over a household befitting her rank, while Elizabeth was raised in far humbler circumstances, as befitted a bastard.

To be the Princess of England was Mary's birthright, a birthright that Elizabeth's mother had usurped on her behalf, and one that Anne must have expended every last ounce of power she possessed to keep for her. Even if Elizabeth could not be blamed for her mother's actions, even if she was too young to realise what Anne had stolen from Mary on her behalf, it did not change the fact that, as long as the title of Princess was applied to her, it would forever be denied to Mary. The canopy over Elizabeth's head was a testament to Anne's victory, a victory that endured even when the harlot was dead and buried, and the same was true of the fact that Mary was sitting on a bench at one of the lower tables, shunned by all save a few loyal friends.

She felt sorry for Elizabeth over the fact that she had lost a mother who adored her and who always lavished her with love, attention and rich gifts, but Mary had lost her mother too, a mother far more worthy of her daughter's love than Anne could ever be, and Elizabeth was to be allowed to retain many compensations for the loss of her mother, compensations that were denied to Mary; despite Anne's disgrace, her child would continue to be lavishly provided for, as befitted a princess, a title and position that Elizabeth had no true right to, though few dared to say so.

Mary would have to rely on her father's fickle favour and his equally fickle generosity for her household and allowance, as though she truly was a bastard and had no right to expect any better from him, as though she should feel humble and grateful for any small attentions or kindness that he deigned to show her when he was entitled to ignore her entirely if he so chose.

When she thought of that, when she remembered the price she would pay for Elizabeth continuing to be a princess, Mary's tenderness towards her sister cooled and she remained seated, forcing her attention away from the miserable little girl seated in the place of honour and turning instead to Chapuys, beginning to talk to him about affairs at court and how her cousin the Emperor fared, as though nothing was wrong, as though she was unaware of the tearful toddler behind her.

Thanks to Anne, Elizabeth was doing very well.

She could manage without Mary's consolation.
Chapter Seven

21st May 1536

It was a long time since Brandon had felt as relieved as he did when his coachman called back to him that Pembroke Hall was in sight and, a short time later, when the carriage drew up outside the lavish manor, he didn't hesitate before climbing out of the carriage, eager to stretch his legs. After three days of travelling, he felt like an old man, his limbs aching and his muscles stiff from such a long period of inactivity, and he needed to be careful to get his bearings at first, so he did not embarrass himself by stumbling as he walked towards the manor.

He decided then and there that, no matter how inclement the weather became on his journey back, he would ride on horseback every step of the way rather than travel in the carriage.

He had had more than enough of that over the past three days.

It was after nightfall and, aside from the gentleman coming out to welcome them, there was no sign of anybody but, even so, Brandon waited until Anne had covered her face with the hood of her cloak before helping her out of the carriage, just in case. He was awed, and more than a little envious to see that she seemed to have endured their long journey far better than he had. Her step was light when he offered her his hand to help her out of the carriage and, aside from the fact that her gown was slightly crumpled, she was as fresh as she was when they set out.

It was a disconcerting sight.

He hurried her inside, as quickly as he could, knowing that Anne's baggage would be unloaded and brought upstairs to the rooms prepared for her.

Once they were conducted into the large, panelled reception hall, the gentleman who had welcomed them made a deep bow in Anne's direction.

"It is an honour to be permitted to serve you, Your Majesty." He greeted her politely, even though all three of them were aware of the fact that, once he was asked to take on the position by Master Cromwell, there could be no possible question of him refusing it. Even if he was not being generously compensated for undertaking this task, he would have accepted it, for fear that, if he did not, they would wish to see him dead rather than courting the risk that he might spread the story. "My name is Anthony Russell, and I will be your chamberlain and steward. If there is anything that you require, Your Majesty, please let me know and I will endeavour to please you."

Anne gave him a slight smile, nodding. "Thank you, Sir Anthony."

"Don't call her 'Your Majesty'." Brandon told the other man sharply. The last thing they needed was for Russell to give the game away over something as simple as a title and, even if he intended to ensure that he addressed Anne in the manner that, technically, was still her right when they were alone, it was inevitable that, sooner or later, somebody would overhear him and wonder. The servants who were to be engaged to maintain Pembroke Hall would already be curious about the fact that they were working for a lady they would never see without adding to it. It would only take one slip to give the game away. "Not even when you are alone, do you understand me – and that goes for the rest of your attendants too." He added to Anne. "Make sure that they know."

It was plain that Anne was not pleased by the thought of instructing her chaplain and her maids not to address her as they would address a Queen – and after how long she had spent waiting for the
title to be hers, and after how hard she and her family had schemed to obtain it for her, wresting it from Katherine, Brandon could understand that she would be reluctant to surrender any of the honours of her role – but she nodded, understanding the reasons for the prohibition and knowing that, if the truth was revealed, her daughter would be the one to lose out.

Keeping the secret would have to take priority over her prerogatives as Queen.

"Yes, Your Grace." Russell nodded obediently, bowing to Anne again and looking at her apologetically. "My lady." His tone was a little wary, sounding out whether or not this style would be acceptable to her, and he was relieved when she nodded, indicating her acceptance, and her understanding that he was not willingly denying her the honours due to her as Queen and that, under other circumstances, he would observe all of the customary courtesies. He extended his arm in a courtly gesture. "May I escort you to your apartments?"

"Of course."

Anne was curious to see how she was to be lodged. She knew that neither Henry nor Cromwell would dare to jeopardise their agreement by providing her with poor accommodation, not when her cooperation was so vital if their subterfuge was to be successful and, judging by what little she had seen of Pembroke Hall so far, it was both spacious and sumptuously decorated and furnished, a palace in miniature, but she also knew that, under the circumstances, it was likely that she would have to restrict herself to her private apartments, at least for the immediate future, for fear of being seen by a servant who might wonder about her identity or even match her to descriptions of the Queen thought dead, so she wanted to know what they were like.

"I thought that it might be most convenient for you if the first floor was placed at your disposal, my lady, but if you would prefer to make other arrangements, please let me know." Russell said as he guided her up the stairs. "The upper floor will be used primarily to accommodate servants, but it can be accessed by a back staircase, so there will be no need for you to be disturbed – though there are rooms for your maids on the first floor." He added, knowing that a lady would need to have her personal attendants close to hand, so that they would be ready to tend to her whenever she had need of their services. "And for your chaplain too. There is plenty of space for each of them to have their own quarters, my lady." He explained before Anne could ask.

Father Parker and the three maids who had tended to her needs in the Tower were leaving their lives behind so that they might accompany her and serve her. Anne felt that the least she could do was to ensure that they would be comfortably accommodated and well treated.

The long gallery stretched along one of the sides of the manor, overlooking the gardens with a view stretching for miles and, when Russell conducted them inside, Anne was surprised to see that, instead of the long chamber being mostly bare, used only as a place to display family portraits, it was well-furnished, with comfortable chairs and couches before the fireplace at one end, and an ornately carved table surrounded by chairs before the fireplace at the opposite end. Two more fireplaces were set along the far wall, so the gallery would be kept warm. An exquisitely crafted virginal was set near the centre of the room, and there were cushioned seats beneath the high, wide windows that filled the room with sunlight. A chair and writing desk was set next to one of the windows, where it would have the benefit of the most sunlight. At least half of the far wall was lined with cabinets, one filled with gold plate but the others containing books.

Anne ran her fingers along the surface of the writing desk, pleasantly surprised.

The gallery was wider than was usual, and far more spacious than the presence chamber of her apartment at Whitehall. The idea of using it as a living area was certainly a clever one, especially under the circumstances, when she would be denied the option of exploring the rest of the house,
but she was astonished that it could be made ready for her so quickly.

Russell seemed to read her mind. "I've been told that the late Duke of Bedford ordered the gallery to be furnished thus, my lady," he explained, "as he grew older, his health failed him and he rarely left this floor. He ensured that he would have all the comforts he would require in his private quarters – and he amassed a large collection of books, from all over Europe." He added, seeing that Anne's gaze was drawn to the volumes lining the cabinets. "If you wish to order any new volumes, I will be happy to make the necessary arrangements."

"Thank you."

Anne wondered if the Duke of Bedford's living arrangements in his later years had played a part in the decision to select Pembroke Hall as her new residence, or if it was merely a coincidence, albeit a very convenient one for her. It was ironic, in a way, that the arrangements made by an old, sickening man in his declining years should suit the needs of a young, healthy woman so perfectly but, if this was to be her new prison, it was a comfortable and spacious one, with every luxury money could buy. She listened with half an ear as Russell assured her that, if there was anything about her quarters that she wished to see changed, she needed only to ask him and the necessary arrangements would be made at once, together with his explanation that they would need to devise a system to allow the household servants to clean the rooms when they were not in use and his assurances that he was certain that satisfactory arrangements could be made.

"Master Cromwell thought it best that, in the immediate aftermath of…" Russell coughed discreetly, not wanting to allude to Anne's execution and knowing that both she and Brandon would take his meaning, "that it would be best if I did not engage a new household immediately. The servants who were engaged to maintain the Hall will continue to work here and, over the course of the next few months, I will engage more people, if that is acceptable to you, my lady." He said, wanting to assure her that she would be well cared-for.

"It is," Anne agreed.

She didn't want to imagine the kind of speculation that must be circulating among the servants who had worked at Pembroke Hall for years, without any owner in residence, now that they had been told that they were to have a new mistress, albeit a reclusive one. It was unlikely that anybody would guess the truth – Anne scarcely believed that this was truly happening, and she was living through it – but it was certain that they would have their theories, especially when they would never be permitted to see her face, and those theories would probably be quite creative.

Russell indicated a door at one end of the gallery but he did not open it.

"The Duke of Bedford had that parlour converted into a chapel, my lady," he told her, "and there is an apartment for your chaplain beyond." The door at the other end of the gallery led into a private sitting room and, from there, she could access a large, opulent bedchamber with a dressing room and a water closet attached to it. The final touch was one that Anne particularly appreciated; from her bedchamber, she could access a wide balcony from which a flight of stone steps led down to a walled garden, with a fountain at the centre and flowers and ornamental trees that had clearly been carefully tended by the hand of a skilled gardener. "Only one of the gardeners ever works here, my lady, and only he will have a key to the garden gate. He will knock on the gate, and he won't enter if you are out in the garden, so you will have privacy here," he explained.

The expression of relief on Anne's face at this confirmation that she would be able to go outside instead of remaining cooped in her rooms spoke of her feelings more plainly than words ever could. It was too dark for her to be able to see much of the garden but she could smell the flowers from the balcony, recognising the faint scent of roses. "It's wonderful, Sir Anthony," she told her
new chamberlain sincerely, happy to see his genuine desire to please her.

It would make her exile much easier if she could count Russell as a friend rather than a jailer.

Brandon's lips were thin as he regarded the luxurious suite of rooms that were to be Anne's new home. The contrast between them and the shabby rooms Katherine was provided with at the More could hardly have been more marked. Anne would enjoy virtually all of the comforts she had as Queen, while Katherine was left ill provided for and ill attended.

He could remember the first time he visited the More, charged with the unpleasant task of informing Katherine that the man whom she still thought of her husband, the man she still loved, had married another woman and that she could therefore no longer style herself as Queen of England and, worst of all, that the King did not intend to allow her to see their daughter, who was to be stripped of her royal titles and branded a bastard for the sake of Henry's children by Anne.

The rooms set aside for her were small, at least by the standards to which a lady of Katherine's standing would have grown accustomed, and dismal, the narrow windows letting in very little light. Even the furniture, which might once have been quite fine, was showing signs of wear from long years of use and, with only Katherine's one remaining lady to see to the upkeep of her mistress' rooms, an increasingly thick coating of dust covered much of the furniture and the moth-eaten tapestries covering the cracks in the wall, making the rooms smell musty and stale.

He hoped that Anne could appreciate how fortunate she was to be in such a comparatively privileged position and, if she could not see that, he had scant sympathy for her.

Anne did not fail to notice the expression on Brandon's face but she did not remark on it, smiling sweetly at Russell instead. "Would it be possible for food and wine to be sent up, Sir Anthony?" She asked. "My Lord of Suffolk and I have had a long journey."

"Of course, my lady." Russell bowed, looking as though he was angry with himself for not thinking of it himself, before she could ask. "I'll see to it immediately." With another bow, he hastened out of the room to send a message to the kitchens that he required refreshments, leaving them alone.

Anne untied her cloak, taking it off and laying it over the back of one of the couches before moving down to the dining table and sitting in the chair at the head of the table, motioning to the place next to her. "Will you sit down, Your Grace?" She asked, her gravely polite tone at odds with the impish smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She knew well that Brandon wouldn't be happy about sitting with her but, at the same time, he was tired after their journey and could not remain on his feet out of stubbornness so he had little choice but to accept her hospitality.

Brandon sat down but he didn't say anything to her, not until after Russell had returned, carrying the tray of food and wine himself and explaining to Anne that her maids and chaplain were dining downstairs before excusing himself so that they could dine in peace. He was hungry and the tempting array of food before him sharpened his appetite.

Once he had blunted his hunger with some bread and cold meat, washing it down with wine, he watched Anne, noting that, unlike him, she was barely picking at her food, taking only a little bread and fruit. It was just like meals on their journey; Anne never took much interest in the food she was offered, and seemed to be content with very small meals.

It was uncanny, as though whatever power had saved Anne from being beheaded, and from the flames, had also sought to ensure that Henry would not try to kill her by starving her to death, or by some similar means. It would probably also be impossible to drown or suffocate her.
Despite himself, he couldn't help but think of what Cranmer had said about Anne's survival being a miracle, proof of her innocence. He did not doubt that this was what the archbishop believed, nor did he doubt that, if the people of England ever learned the truth, the vast majority of them would reach the same conclusion but he didn't believe it… he didn't want to allow himself to believe it.

When he went to Henry to tell him about the rumours circulating about Anne's behaviour, it all seemed to be so easy.

Cromwell confided in him that Henry was now of the belief that he had been seduced into his marriage to Anne by witchcraft and that he therefore considered their union null and void and, although Brandon was certain that the allegations of witchcraft were nonsense – Anne's natural charms had proven more than enough to capture Henry's heart without her having to resort to the supernatural – he was delighted to hear that Henry intended to dissolve his marriage to Anne, especially after he spoke with the Seymours and learned of Jane's sincere and fervent hope to bring about Mary's restoration to the succession and to her father's good graces.

With another lady, he might have suspected that she would feign sympathy for Mary's plight in order to win the Emperor's support, without intending to bestir herself to make any effort on her behalf once she was Queen but, after speaking to Jane, he was not only certain of her sincerity but sure that, even after she had children of her own, she would not neglect Mary.

If Mary had a kind stepmother who was willing to speak for her and to champion her interests, instead of Anne whose chief concern was the welfare and position of her own child, then Henry would surely want to welcome Mary back to court with honours. Brandon could remember how much his friend once doted on his daughter and he was sure that Henry must miss his eldest child. He might have thought that he needed to be harsh with her in order to secure Anne and Elizabeth's positions but Brandon was sure that it must have been difficult for him to treat his beloved child so unkindly, and to distance himself from her. Without Anne, he would surely be delighted to be able to welcome Mary into his life once more, and to restore her to her place as Princess.

It was a blow when, some weeks later, he asked Cromwell how things were proceeding with regard to the annulment and learned that they were encountering difficulties.

Although Anne was not loved by the English people, they would consider the idea that she might be a witch an absurd one, and Henry was likely to draw ridicule on his own head if he tried to cite that as grounds to dissolve their marriage. Henry's past liaison with Mary Boleyn could have been used as a reason to dissolve his union with her sister under ordinary circumstances but Henry was reluctant to air that issue once more, especially as he would not be able to claim innocence, as he could with regard to Katherine. He feared that the people would mock him for the fact that, after the long years he had spent fighting to be able to make Anne his wife and after all the men he had imprisoned and executed for refusing to accept her, he had tired of her in barely three years and was now seeking to rid himself of her so that he could try marriage with a third woman, and see if she was more to his liking than her predecessors were.

One thing Henry would never tolerate was the idea that his subjects would mock him.

Brandon knew his friend well enough to know that the only grounds that were likely to be accepted by the people, the only grounds that few of them would ever dream of disputing, were grounds that Henry would never be willing to use. If he declared that his marriage to Katherine had been valid then his union with Anne would be automatically invalidated on the grounds of bigamy and, as Katherine's widower, he would be free to remarry whichever lady he wished. However, for Henry, the idea of using such grounds to free himself from Anne could not be contemplated, as it would mean that he would have to admit that he was wrong to set Katherine aside, wrong to declare Mary
a bastard and wrong to deny the pope's authority.

His pride would never allow him to do this and Brandon considered it telling that, even when Henry was desperately seeking a way to rid himself of Anne, it never occurred to him to take this option.

Now that Anne had made Elizabeth's continuing legitimacy a condition of her cooperation, Henry would never try to annul their marriage by any means, both out of a determination to keep his word, and because of a superstitious fear of what might happen to him if he broke a vow he had made to a woman who was under such powerful protection, even if he did not know the source of that protection, or why it had interceded on Anne's behalf.

Could she be innocent?

Brandon didn't want to believe that she was but he couldn't help but wonder.

"I want to ask you something." He hadn't intended to say a word to her but it seemed that his tongue disagreed with his mind's intentions. Anne looked up at him, mild curiosity in her blue eyes and she nodded slightly, indicating that he could ask his question. "Before you answer, I want you to know that, whatever you say to me, the King will never hear of it, or anybody else. I'll never breathe a word, as long as I live." Brandon assured her, and he was determined to keep his word, regardless of her answer. "And no matter what you tell me, nobody will hurt you in any way, and it won't make a difference to Princess Elizabeth's position."

"Alright." Anne looked more amused than curious.

She was probably thinking that he couldn't hurt her if he tried.

"Were you guilty?" He asked bluntly, wondering if she would tell him the truth, regardless of the promises he had made to her. Would she want to continue to protest her innocence, even if she trusted him to keep her secret, or would she want to torment him by confessing her guilt, knowing that he would be honour-bound not to tell Henry what she had said, even if his friend began to worry about whether he had condemned innocent people to death and was plagued by guilt at the thought? For all he knew, Anne might pretend that she was guilty in order to torment him. "Were any of the charges true, with any of the men – or was there somebody else, somebody we didn't find out about? You don't have to name the man if there was but…"

"There was nobody." Anne cut him off, quietly but firmly. "I was never unfaithful to my husband, I never plotted Henry's death, and I never poisoned the Princess Dowager or the Lady Mary." She said, ticking off the most frequent allegations laid against her on her fingers. "I was innocent, I swear to you. That wasn't what you wanted to hear, was it?" She observed coolly, seeing Brandon's face fall at her words and knowing, by looking at him, that he did not want to believe that she was telling the truth but that he could not believe that she was lying.

"No." Brandon said, feeling his stomach knot. The food he had just eaten threatened to reappear and it was with difficulty that he managed to keep it down, taking deep breaths to steady himself.

"Why would you be so worried about whether or not I was guilty?" Anne asked, before realisation dawned and she answered her own question. "You were the one who made the allegation."

It wasn't an accusation, or a question. It was simply a statement of fact.

"Yes."

"Why?"
It wasn't a surprise to her to learn that Brandon hated her. Anne had known for years that the Duke of Suffolk's opinion of her was a low one and that, although he had once pledged to help her father and her uncle when they sought to make her Queen, wanting to join them in bringing down Wolsey and ensuring that he would be welcomed back to court as Henry's friend, he lost heart in their schemes not long after Princess Margaret died and had transferred his sympathies and loyalty to Katherine and her daughter instead, though he did not dare to openly defy Henry to help them. However, she had thought him to be a more or less honourable man, and would never have expected that he would lie about her like that, not when he knew that it was a matter of life and death, and not just for her. Even if he hated her, she would not have expected that he would want to see her brought to the scaffold, or for innocent men to die for the sake of his hatred of her.

"You don't understand!" Brandon snapped at her. "I never wanted this to happen!"

It was on the tip of Anne's tongue to point out that she had never imagined that he would want to see her miraculously cheat death but she left the remark unspoken. This wasn't a time for flippancy. "Then what did you want?" She asked instead, keeping her tone even.

"He wanted to set you aside, you must know that," Brandon told her sharply, trying to suppress the guilt he was feeling. "He fell in love with Lady Jane, and he wanted to be free of you so that he could marry her." He noticed that Anne flinched slightly at that but, instead of feeling pleased that he had struck a blow, pleased to see that, even if she could not be harmed physically, she could still be wounded by words, he felt guilty instead, angry with himself for causing her more pain than she must have already endured. "He made up his mind to annul your marriage, but he was hesitating, he couldn't find grounds... at least not grounds that he wanted to use." He amended. "I knew that he was hesitating and I was afraid that..." He trailed off, not wanting to continue.

"You were afraid that he would change his mind." Anne finished for him, wondering if he had had just cause to fear, and if she wanted to believe that this was the case.

While it was true that Henry thought himself infatuated with the worthless Seymour wench and while she could well imagine that her husband fondly believed that the wretched slut was a pure maiden who could never have consented to be his mistress because she had a concern for her virtue and for the good name of the Seymour clan, instead of the product of an ambitious family who had their eyes set on a higher prize than the temporary favour Jane might win them with a few tumbles between the sheets with the King, she also knew that Henry was changeable.

If she had not lost their son, then he would never have dreamed of calling the validity of their marriage into question; when their boy was born, he wouldn't want to allow there to be any question over his legitimacy or his right to be his father's heir. Even if he fancied himself in love with Mistress Seymour, he would never choose her over the prospect of a living, legitimate prince.

If she had not lost their son, Mistress Seymour's choices would have been limited to becoming Henry's mistress, easily taken up and even more easily discarded, or else returning to Wolf Hall in the hope that she might salvage something of her reputation if she distanced herself from Henry as quickly as possible; remaining at court simply wouldn't have been an option for her once she was known to have caught the King's eye, there wouldn't be a man or woman in England who wasn't utterly convinced that she was Henry's mistress, and no gentleman would marry her.

However, even after she lost her baby boy, all hope was not lost.

Anne was sure that it was possible, maybe even likely that, however angry he was with her over her miscarriage, Henry would have come to her bed, sooner or later. Once he was there, she might conceive again, and they might be able to reconcile, for Elizabeth's sake and for their own. Maybe she might have bought herself the time to win her husband's love again.
Perhaps Brandon had been right to fear the possibility that Henry might change his mind.

"He was hesitating." Brandon repeated. At the time, it had seemed like a good reason to tell Henry that there were rumours of impropriety on Anne's part but, face to face with the lady in question, after all the damage his words had set into motion, it seemed like a truly inadequate excuse to attempt to blacken her name in the hopes of destroying her marriage, and his words to Henry, drawing suspicion on Anne, seemed like the act of a coward, a sly attack against an innocent woman and her little daughter, as ruthless as anything he had ever alleged against the Boleyn family. "I thought that if I could make him believe that you weren't worthy to be his Queen, it would stiffen his resolve and he would be able to get rid of you."

"You succeeded." Anne said dryly, her disdain for him and his actions evident.

"I never wanted it to go as far as it did!" Brandon insisted, wishing that she would shout at him or strike him instead of just sitting there calmly. It made him feel even worse.

"But it did." Anne pointed out, still in the same, calmly reasonable tone. "Are you really surprised that Master Cromwell seized the opportunity to make false allegations?" She asked, getting her answer from the expression on his face; she doubted that there was a single courtier who was unaware of the fact that she and Cromwell had fallen out in the months before her arrest, and she credited Brandon with having the intelligence to know that, if Cromwell was trying to find a way to enable Henry to get rid of her, Brandon's allegations must have seemed like a Godsend, one that would allow him to both please his King and rid himself of the Queen with whom he was at odds, sparing Henry the trouble of an annulment. "You lied to Henry about me, and now four innocent men are dead. You have to live with that, Your Grace, whether you meant for it to happen or not."

Brandon couldn't defend himself. It was the truth.

"I'm sorry." He said quietly. "If I could take it back...

"You can't."

"I know." His voice was scarcely louder than a whisper.

For a moment, it felt as though George Boleyn, Smeaton, Brereton and Norris were in the room with them, all four of them looking at him with disfavour, blaming him for the part he had played in their deaths, blaming him for accusing Anne of misconduct without pausing to consider the fact that, if such a charge was to be laid against her, others would have to be accused with her.

At night, he could hear Smeaton screaming and he could visualise the gentle musician being put to the rack so that a damning confession could be forced from him, a confession that would damn him and his patroness to death, could see the four men being led to their deaths, one by one, and forced to lay their heads on the block and hear their pleas of innocence, images and sounds that had jolted him into wakefulness and that kept him from shutting his eyes again.

After what had happened, after what he did, maybe he deserved to be dogged by ghosts.

He looked up at Anne, who was watching him quietly, wondering again how she was spared the grim fate of the men accused with her, men who were just as innocent as she was, and he shivered inwardly.

He needed to be able to make amends, somehow.

"I'm sorry, for everything. Is there anything that you need... anything I can do?" He all but pleaded with her, needing her to ask something – anything – of him and feeling that, if he could only
perform some service for her, it might make the ghosts fade away, might ensure that Anne's protector wouldn't avenge her by punishing him and his loved ones.

Anne made him wait for what felt like an eternity before she nodded slowly and, even before she said a word, Brandon could guess what she would ask of him and he half-wished that he had not offered her his help. Henry and Cromwell had seen to it that Anne would be supplied with all she could need or want at Pembroke Hall but, even if Anne was not already so well taken care of that she had no need of any assistance that he might be able to give her, he should have known what would be uppermost in her mind, and what she would ask of him.

"Elizabeth." Her voice was soft as she spoke her little daughter's name. "She's going to need somebody to speak for her, now that I'm gone, somebody to encourage Henry to see her."

She had already asked Cranmer to do what he could to help Elizabeth, and to encourage Henry to welcome her back at court but she knew that her beloved child would need all the support and good will that she could get and, as Henry's closest friend, Brandon was in a position where he could advocate Elizabeth's interests and be listened to.

Much as he needed to be able to do something to make amends with Anne, Brandon wished that she could have asked something else of him, anything but this.

Little Elizabeth's interests were in direct opposition to those of her elder half-sister and he knew it.

If he spoke to Henry on the toddler's behalf, if he was able to encourage his friend to welcome his younger daughter back to court and to love her and cherish her once more, to make him feel pleased that he could have her at court as his princess instead of resenting Anne for obliging him to continue to accord her royal honours, then Henry would have less motive to reach out to Mary, and he would be less likely to release the young girl from her obligation to take the Oath of Succession before she could return to court and regain his favour and fatherly love.

Brandon had met Elizabeth on several occasions before, when she was brought to court, and he knew that she was a charming child, one who was able to effortlessly enchant her father, as well as being too young to defy him as her elder sister had. He could easily imagine Henry coming to lavish his affections on Elizabeth, forgetting Mary and opting to leave her in the countryside.

He wanted to see Mary restored, and saw it as the best way that he could make amends for the way he had assisted the Boleyns and the Duke of Norfolk when they sought to displace Queen Katherine, depriving Mary of her place in the world, but he owed a debt to Anne too, and to the child who would be left without her mother.

How could he choose between the two?

"Elizabeth is just a child, Your Grace. Whatever you think of me, she's innocent." Anne told him quietly, as though she could read his thoughts and knew why he hesitated, unwilling to commit himself to a promise to champion her daughter's interests. "And now that I'm gone, and my father has been sent away to court, Henry is her family now, he's all that she has left. I can't encourage Henry to welcome her back, or to let himself think fondly of her. You can. Please." She said softly, praying that he would agree, that she could have the assurance that somebody of Brandon's influence and standing would be willing to undertake the task of acting as Elizabeth's champion.

If she could know that her child was safe and that she would soon be restored to her place in Henry's heart, she could accept anything, even the prospect of lifelong imprisonment.

Brandon wanted to say 'no'.
He wanted to refuse her request, to make it plain to her that, although he regretted the part he had played in what had happened to her, her brother and the other three men, he would not commit himself to support Elizabeth when he might find himself in a position where he was doing this at Mary's expense.

He wanted to tell her that she would have to come up with something else.

However, he looked into her eyes, seeing in them a mother's fear for the child she had left behind and, despite the fact that he had not intended to do so, he found himself nodding, wanting to be able to reassure Anne that, if it was in his power, he would protect and help her child however he could, his objections melting away.

Maybe she truly was a witch.

"I will do everything in my power to help her." He vowed. "You have my word."

The guilt weighing him down did not vanish, as he had half-hoped it would, but as soon as the words were spoken, he felt as if his burden was lightened.

Perhaps, if he helped Elizabeth, he would be able to sleep at night without hearing screams.

25th May 1536

Lord Edward Brandon was not in a good mood when his father returned.

He had wanted to be allowed to go to the executions, especially Queen Anne's – how many chances was he going to get to see a Queen beheaded, after all? – but his stepmother had stood firm against his repeated requests that she petition his uncle, the King, on his behalf for permission to attend. Although she was usually very kind and allowed him to do whatever he wanted, within reason, she had turned a deaf ear to his pleas this time, insisting that his father had told her that he did not want either of them attending the execution under any circumstances, and that she would not go against his clearly stated wishes, in this matter or any other.

Edward could understand that she did not want to be disobedient, as his father had to be obeyed by everybody in the family, as well as their servants, and he stopped pressing Catherine when it became clear that she would not give in to his pleas, but he couldn't understand why his father would want to keep him from going to the execution.

He was not a silly little baby who would be upset and have bad dreams if he saw a person, even a woman, die. He was a big boy of eight years, old enough to witness an execution without being frightened and, since he knew that his father did not like Queen Anne, he couldn't be sad about the fact that she was going to die and want to keep him away from the execution because of that.

If anything, he expected that his father would be pleased about the execution.

Everybody knew that traitors deserved to be executed and, as his father was a close friend of Edward's uncle the King, he must be especially angry with Queen Anne for betraying him and he would want to see her punished for it.

When he saw his father, he ran straight to him, not even giving him a chance to greet Catherine first, as he usually did, wanting to air his woes at the earliest possible opportunity. He tugged at his father's doublet to get his attention, scowling up at him.

"I wanted to go to see the Queen's execution but Catherine didn't let me." He complained indignantly, so angry with his stepmother that he used her name rather than calling her Mother, as
he usually did.

"She said that you said that I wasn't allowed to go." He added accusingly.

"That's right." Brandon agreed, his tone indicating that he did not wish to discuss the matter.

Under other circumstances, he might have brought Edward to witness Anne's execution – although his son was young, it was important for him to learn the importance of being a loyal, obedient subject of the King and, even though he was Henry's nephew, that did not mean that he would be exempt from suspicion if he was ever implicated in a plot, especially as he had a claim to a place in the line of succession through his mother, which could make him a prominent figure if Henry had no son – but that had been impossible, given the deception.

Edward might not know Anne well, as his parents had not wanted him associating with her if it could be avoided, even if he was her nephew by marriage, but he had seen her occasionally, when he visited the court, and he would certainly have recognised that Marion Perry was not the Queen he knew, and said something about it, insisting that they had the wrong woman on the scaffold.

The last thing he needed was for his own son to give the game away.

Edward's scowl deepened. "Why not? I'm old enough to see an execution. I should have gone!"

"I don't want to discuss this, Edward." Brandon's sharp tone surprised both his wife and son, who were not used to seeing him out of temper with them. "It's over and I don't want to hear this matter spoken of again, do you understand me?"

"But everybody is talking about it!" Edward was dismayed.

He knew that his father was the one who had gone to arrest Queen Anne, and that he was present for the trials, and for the executions so he had hoped that, even if he could not go, he would be able to coax the details from his father at least. He had waited six days for his father to return from his errand, eager to pepper him with questions and to learn every detail of what had happened, and it was very disappointing to learn that no answers were likely to be forthcoming.

"You won't be doing the same." Brandon said firmly. He knew better than to think that he would ever be able to forget the events of the past days, or the part that he had played in them, and he didn't want to rehash the issue, least of all with his young son. "Now go up to your nursery." He instructed. "Your mother and I need to talk." Seeing the dismayed look on his son's face, he gentled his tone a little, knowing that it was not fair for him to allow his frustration over the situation with Anne to affect his dealing with his child. "I'll come up to see you later."

"Yes, sir." It was plain that Edward was put out but he made no further protest, leaving the room and trudging towards the stairs that would bring him up to the nursery.

Once they were alone, Catherine moved closer, kissing him lightly on the lips.

"How was your journey?" She asked.

Ordinarily, she might have said that it wasn't really fitting for the King to charge her husband, who as a duke was one of the highest-ranking noblemen in the country, with the task of travelling to the late Queen's Welsh estates in order to make an inventory of the goods there, a task that should really be left in the hands of a secretary, but she felt proud of the fact that the King knew that Charles was an honest man, one who could be trusted to return with an honest account of the plate and moveable property there, and who would never dream of taking advantage of his charge so that he could fill his own pockets, as many others would, without hesitation.
The King knew that Charles was a man to be trusted, and that was something to be proud of.

"Long." His tone was grim but he attempted to smile, for her sake. "I'm glad to be in London again. How have things been at court?" He asked, curious about how matters were progressing with regard to the King's union with Jane Seymour – even a sham wedding required a great deal of organization, after all, and he could imagine that Henry was determined to make a grand spectacle of the marriage, to encourage the people to accept Jane as their new Queen.

Hopefully, this strategy would be more successful with Jane than it was with Anne's coronation.

For the sake of the country, and of Lady Jane herself, it was vital that England should welcome their new Queen instead of holding a grudge against her because of Anne's supposed fate.

"Well enough." Catherine responded. "Lady Jane returned to London, with her family, but they are staying at Durham House instead of at the palace, at least until the wedding. The King thought that it would be more fitting that way, and that it might help prevent gossip – though I doubt that anything will prevent that. I've visited her, and she told me that the plans for the wedding are nearly complete. The marriage is to take place next Tuesday, in Westminster Abbey."

"So soon?" Brandon was astonished at this. He had thought that it would take much longer to make proper arrangements for a wedding, especially the wedding of the King.

Catherine chuckled lightly. "I think that Edward Seymour is afraid that another lady may catch the King's eye and steal him away from his sister if they don't seize the opportunity while they have the chance." She remarked, although her tone was light, devoid of spite. She did not truly believe that the Seymours had cause to worry about the King's fancy moving from Lady Jane to another woman, certainly not within the next few weeks, but she was certain that there were others at court who felt differently, viewing Jane as a dull, colourless creature who could not hope to hold the King long, and toying with the idea of encouraging their daughter or sister to do what she could to catch the King's eye, in the hope that she would be the one to take Anne's place as Queen, not Jane. "They've been working on the wedding gown for the past fortnight or more, and the rest of the family have ordered their clothes for the wedding..."

"A fortnight?" Brandon cut her off, frowning slightly. "That was before the Queen's trial began."

Catherine shrugged, unconcerned with this. "Why should they wait?" She asked rhetorically. "They didn't want to waste any time with the preparations, they needed to get those underway as soon as possible. Once the Queen was arrested, any fool could tell that she would be found guilty and sentenced to death, so it would have been pointless to delay."

Brandon stiffened at her words, at the calm assumption that, once Anne was arrested, her verdict was a foregone conclusion, but before he could remark on it, his wife continued.

"Lady Jane told me that she hopes to be able to persuade the King to invite Princess Mary to court for the wedding," she told him, smiling at the thought of Jane's kind intentions towards her future stepdaughter. After everything Mary had been through over the past few years, it was a great relief for Catherine to hear, from Jane's own lips, that she was resolved to help her, however she could. "She said that she wants to be a mother and a friend to her."

"And Princess Elizabeth?" Brandon asked, wondering whether Jane's intentions towards her other future stepchild were as kind or whether she intended to discourage Henry from showing affection to his younger daughter in order to cement Mary's position in his affections, in the hope that if Henry came to cherish his elder daughter as the first child in his heart, he would restore her. He had given Anne his word that he would have a care for Elizabeth's interests and he intended to keep it,
even if Jane and the Seymours were opposed to the toddler's advancement, but he would have preferred to know that he could expect Jane to be kindly disposed to little Elizabeth, so that he would not need to worry that she might try to discourage Henry's interest in her.

"She's been sent back to Hatfield," Catherine told him, mistaking his meaning. "The King ordered her from his sight — though I can't imagine why he is still insisting that she will continue to be known as a princess, especially after what her mother did." She added, frowning at the thought. She had spoken briefly on the matter with Lady Jane, who confirmed that the King was adamant that there would be no question of his younger daughter being declared a bastard, which meant that Mary was unlikely to be restored as a Princess as both daughters could not be viewed as born in wedlock, and she shared the other woman's disappointment over this.

With Anne safely out of the way, it was only right that Mary should be restored.

Brandon knew exactly why Elizabeth was to be allowed to retain her title of Princess but the explanation was not one that he could give his wife. Like virtually everybody else at court, she would only be able to wonder about the reasons for the King's surprising insistence that there could be no question of downgrading the little girl, despite the fact that he had signed her mother's death warrant when she was convicted of adultery, and sent the child from court.

"Lady Jane had hoped that she would be able to persuade the King to restore Princess Mary as his heir, at least until she gave him a son of their own," Catherine continued, "and she's very disappointed that this will not happen. She truly wanted to be able to make things right for her."

"Lady Mary," Brandon corrected her, although it pained him to apply the reduced title to the young girl.

"Charles?" Catherine looked at him in surprise, astonished that he should say such a thing when neither of them made a secret of the fact that they considered Mary's downgrading to be unjust, at least between themselves. It was one thing that they were in total agreement about, and Catherine had frequently encouraged her husband to do all he could to soften the King's attitude towards his eldest daughter and to cement her position, however he could.

When the Admiral of France stayed with them, in order to negotiate Elizabeth's betrothal with the Duke of Angouleme, Henry had given Brandon specific instructions that, if he was asked, it was to be made clear to the Admiral that Elizabeth was the lawful heir to the throne, and accepted as such by the English people, while Mary's bastard status was widely recognised and her false claim to the throne was a matter of ridicule. However, they had seen to it that he heard a very different account of the state of affairs to the one Henry intended, openly hinting that, despite the Act of Succession, the people would fight for Mary if Elizabeth tried to take the throne ahead of her older sister, making sure that he understood that, should King Francis agree to the match, it was far from guaranteed that his son and daughter-in-law would be able to hold the English throne.

Although it was probable that the Admiral was given instructions of his own before he set sail for England and that King Francis was nowhere near as inclined to allow the match as he had pretended to be, Catherine liked to think that they had helped to block the betrothal, one that would have strengthened Anne and Elizabeth's positions considerably while weakening Mary's.

It was the least they could do for Mary.

"If the King has ordered that Princess Elizabeth should continue to be regarded as his legitimate heir, then he will not look kindly on those who call Mary a princess, my dear, even his friends." Brandon reminded his wife patiently, hoping that she would understand that it was important that neither of them referred to Mary as Princess, especially at court. Even if the young girl seemed to
be in her father's favour, and her stepmother's, it would not be safe for them to accord her the title
Henry denied her, not unless he decided that he wanted to see her restored and made his feelings
known to them, something that seemed unlikely to happen. "We will both need to get into the habit
of calling her Lady Mary, especially around Edward."

He was still so young, it wouldn't be right for them to confuse him by insisting that he refer to his
cousin as a princess while he was at home, and to accord her the honours that that status demanded
should he ever meet her privately, but to refer to her as Lady in the company of others and to
refrain from according her the respect that a princess demanded in public.

He was bound to make a mistake, sooner or later, raising the question of how a boy so young
would know that Mary had ever been called a princess unless he was told by his parents or teachers
that she should be entitled to that status, and drawing suspicion on the whole family.

No man could afford to have even a faint shadow of doubt over his loyalty these days, not even one
whom the King called his friend.

Catherine, seeing the sense of what he was saying, nodded. "I suppose that you're right." She said
grudgingly. "But it's a shame that His Majesty won't even consider it, to please Lady Jane if not for
his daughter's sake. It was different when that woman was still alive but he doesn't have her
whispering poison about his daughter in his ear anymore, and he doesn't need to worry about
offending the whoring bitch by being kind to..."

"Don't call her that!" The vehemence of his own tone took Brandon aback and it had the same
impact on his wife, who looked at him as though she thought that he must be losing his wits if he
was defending Anne but he didn't regret saying it. "What's done is done, Catherine. It's over now,
and she's gone. Whatever she did or didn't do, she's paid the price for it... she's paid a very high
price." He said quietly, thinking of Anne in her luxurious but lonely home in exile, cut off from
little Elizabeth, the daughter she adored and about whom she must be very worried.

She might not have died, but she was still going to suffer and he was sorry for that.

"But..." Catherine began to protest, unable to believe that her husband would ever speak a word in
Anne's defence, especially after the way she had betrayed his dear friend.

"I don't want to hear you insulting her." Brandon cut her off. He believed Anne when she said that
she was innocent, although he would have preferred not to, and he disliked the idea of allowing an
innocent woman to be insulted in his presence without him reprimanding the speaker for it, even if
the speaker was his own beloved wife. "If you must speak of her, speak with respect."

He pulled away from her, wanting to be alone for a while and to gather his thoughts, and when he
left the room, he left an astonished wife behind him, one who was half-convinced that she must be
dreaming, unable to believe that, after everything that had happened, he could speak a word in
Anne's favour.

The world they knew was truly turning upside down.
Chapter Eight

30th May 1536

Her wedding dress was the most beautiful gown she had ever owned, far lovelier and far more lavish than even the gowns her father bought for her when she was going to court to be a lady-in-waiting in the service of the Queen... of the Lady Anne.

Although he was not a wealthy man, her father surprised her with his insistence that she should go to court outfitted with only the best, or at least the best that his purse could stretch to provide for her. She might only be the daughter of a simple knight but nobody would have known that from her gowns. She dressed as richly as the daughter of an earl, at least, though her gowns were modestly cut, of delicate shades of blue and green, as befitted a virtuous maiden and, although he also insisted that she should bring a selection of the jewels that had been carefully hoarded in his coffers since the day her mother died, those pieces were simple too.

She had not known at first why her father would believe that such measures were necessary or why he would add to the already considerable expenses of providing for all she would need to live at court, when he was not a rich man by any means, not until she was actually at the court, and she first received a message from the King, who asked to serve her, addressing her with a humility and a near-reverence that she could never have imagined any monarch using towards a subject, least of all one as humble as she was, begging her to be Guinevere to his Lancelot.

She had been presented to the King before, when he visited Wolf Hall, just before he told her father that she might come to court as a lady-in-waiting, but she had never have imagined that he, who might have any woman he wanted, would ever condescend to look at her, but her father and her brother must have seen something in the King's eyes that she did not, and when they brought her to court with them, they made certain that she could equal any lady at court as far as matters like gowns and jewellery were concerned, not wanting her to be handicapped by simple, countrified gowns when other ladies would swan about like peacocks in the latest fashions and might catch the King's eye because of the beauty of their attire, not just the beauty of their faces.

This was Jane's chance, and they intended to see to it that she would have everything she could possibly need in order to make the best of her opportunity.

Initially, she was flattered by the King's attentions, as she was sure any young woman in her position would be, but she did not want to be his mistress and she hated to think that her father and brother might have that fate in mind for her, that they might be thinking of the advantages that they might reap from her shame and that they would hope to press her to give herself to the King, knowing that she would wish to please them and to see her family prosper, and that they would be thinking of the benefits they would derive in the short-term instead of her future security and happiness, knowing that if her virtue was lost, her hope of a good marriage would be slim.

Some might see it as an honour to be the King's mistress but it was well known that the honour was inevitably a fleeting one.

The King was a handsome man, although he was no longer as young as he once was, and there were always many women ready to lie with him, so he could take his pick and was rarely satisfied with the same lady for very long. Sooner or later, his interested waned and he had his eye on his next conquest, thinking little of his last mistress and what might become of her.

If Jane became the King's mistress, then she would enjoy his favour, for a time and her family
would be treated with favour, granted lucrative posts and perhaps awarded with estates or even titles, enriching the Seymour coffers and ensuring that her father and brothers would enjoy prominence at court, reaping the rewards of royal favour. Even Anne would be powerless to do anything to her or to say anything to insult her, even unable to object to the idea of Jane being honoured with a position as one of her ladies when the whole court knew that she was at court for the King's pleasure rather than the Queen's, no matter how much it embarrassed her.

The King's favour would protect Jane from Anne's malice... at least for a while.

Once it was over, once the King lost interest, as he inevitably would, he would forget about her, as though she had never caught his eye in the first place, and, if Anne decided to publicly shame her by banishing her from service in her household and from the court as a strumpet as soon as she saw that Jane had lost the King's interest and that it was safe for her to vent her spite on her if it pleased her to do so, the King would not lift a finger to prevent her dismissal, nor would he take any great interest in her future, unless he sired a child on her, in which case, she might be fortunate and have a husband provided for her so that their child would have a name.

She did not want that.

She wanted to leave Anne's service as she entered it, as a virtuous maiden of impeccable reputation, a maiden that no gentleman would be ashamed to call his wife and the mother of his children. She didn't want to be a toy for the King's pleasure, discarded after a few weeks and left for her father to arrange the best marriage he could for her, to any man willing to take her.

She deserved better than that.

Then they told her that she might be Queen.

Instead of being the King's mistress for a brief period, uncomfortably aware of the fact that although there would be many courtiers who would court her favour as their passport to the King's good graces as long as she held his attention and love, the same people who flattered her to her face when they could derive some benefit from doing so would scorn her as a strumpet when her back was turned, speculating on how long her position in the King's affections would last before Anne won him back or before another lady caught his eye and drew his attention away from her, and snub her once she was set aside, she might become the Queen of England, the highest lady in the land and the beloved wife of the King, mother of his Princes.

Only a saint could fail to be tempted by so glorious a prospect, and the fact that she could be the cause of Anne Boleyn being set aside as Katherine was before her sweetened the prospect for her.

Jane would be the first to admit that she was not highly educated, and that almost all of the legal and theological arguments regarding the King's Great Matter and the Act of Succession were beyond her comprehension, even when her brother Edward tried to explain the matter to her in simple terms, knowing that she needed to know something of such matters if she was to go to court, where she would need to tread carefully and avoid giving the King cause for offence, but even if she did not understand the arguments, she understood what was right.

It wasn't right that Queen Katherine, a good woman, a loving wife and mother, and a devoted Queen who had done so much good for England, and for the poor in particular during the long years of her marriage with the King should be set aside and banished from the court that was her home, so that another woman might take her place. Even if the marriage had been doubtful, even if it was a mistake for them to have wed in the first place, they had married and Jane thought that this was what mattered most of all, far more than any legal impediment.
If they had learned of an impediment to their marriage early on, before they had any children who
would be affected by the proceedings, and decided to annul it then, it would be one thing, but when
they were married for so long, when a child was born of their union and when that child was old
enough to understand what it meant to be a princess and what it would mean to be a bastard, and to
be hurt when she learned that she would have to exchange the former for the latter, Jane couldn't
think that it was right for Katherine to be set aside, regardless of any impediment.

She should have been allowed to retain her place as Queen for as long as she lived, and Princess
Mary should have retained her rights as the King's legitimate daughter. When Katherine died and
the King was a widower, he would be free to remarry if he chose, and he would have sons by his
new wife if God willed it so, but without causing pain and humiliation to such a good, kind
woman, as well as great distress to his innocent daughter. Jane was certain that, if not for the fact
that Anne had caught his eye and held out for marriage, refusing to yield to his advances as long as
she had the chance to obtain a greater prize, the King would have allowed Queen Katherine to
remain his wife as long as she lived, as a kindness to her after all her love and devotion.

It wasn't right that, when Queen Katherine refused to say that she was never truly married to the
King, she was punished for doing so.

She was a good, devout woman who would never have fought the annulment of her marriage if she
did not believe in her heart that it was a true, lawful union and that her daughter was legitimate and
the rightful Princess of Wales.

Even if the marriage was invalid, even if Princess Mary was illegitimate, Queen Katherine
shouldn't have been punished for doing what she thought was right. She would never have defied
the King out of malice, only because she thought that she would be wrong not to. She shouldn't
have been sent to miserable lodgings, deprived of the attendants she needed to tend to her, the
money she needed for her expenses and even fuel and decent food, while hope of greater comfort
was dangled before her as an inducement to get her to renounce her daughter's title and her own.

It wasn't right that Queen Katherine and Princess Mary should have been forced apart for so long,
forbidden to see or to communicate with one another for years, and even denied the comfort of a
last visit together when Queen Katherine was dying and longed to see her daughter, just one more
time, so that she might bid her farewell in person and give her her mother's final blessing.

Jane was shocked when she heard that the King had refused to allow them even that much.

Eustace Chapuys, the Imperial ambassador, had dined with Jane and her family last week, and he
confided in her that it was his fervent belief that the King was not wholly responsible for the
privations and humiliations that Queen Katherine had had to endure during her last years, years
that should have been spent in honour and comfort as a beloved Queen.

The King might have been the one to issue the orders but Ambassador Chapuys firmly believed
that Anne was the one who insisted on the measures against Queen Katherine and Princess Mary,
determined to see the woman she viewed as her rival hounded into acknowledging her as Queen
and little Elizabeth as Princess instead of Mary, or else into an early grave, encouraging the King to
be harsh with her and objecting to any suggestion that Katherine should be treated with greater
honour and respect and viewing those who made suggestions to that effect as her bitter enemies.

He also believed that Anne was the one who refused to allow Mary to see her mother when she lay
dying, and that she had filled the King's ear with poison whenever she got the chance, doing
everything in her power to persuade him that he could not allow the two women any opportunity to
be together, even under the circumstances, for fear that they would plot against him if they were
given the chance to be under the same roof. He said that this was the same reason that, when
Princess Mary was ill and calling for her mother, the King refused to consider the idea of allowing her to go to her so that the Queen might care for her, as she begged to be allowed to do.

The King was not an ill-natured man, but Anne had held great influence over him, and used it to turn him against those she viewed as her enemies.

Jane badly wanted to believe that this was true.

If she was to marry the King, then she needed to believe that he was not a man who would be capable of treating a woman he had loved, a woman who still loved him devotedly, with such callous cruelty, because if he could treat Queen Katherine so harshly, after all she had done for him, what would keep him from doing the same to Queen Jane if she failed to please him?

She had to believe that it was Anne's doing, or she would never have the courage to go to Westminster Abbey today to marry the King.

It wasn't right that Princess Mary should have been stripped of all the royal honours that she had enjoyed since her birth. Even if an impediment was found to her parents' marriage, a way should have been found to ensure that she could remain legitimate and continue to be regarded as a Princess – and if such means did not exist, they should have been devised!

It wasn't right that Mary should be humiliated by being ordered to wait on her little half-sister, not when she was once the Princess, the one who was royally attended and to whom people paid homage instead of her being demanded to pay homage to another, just as it wasn't right that she should be banished from the court and exiled from her father's favour, pressured to take the Oath and threatened when she would not. It was cruel to demand that a young girl should repudiate her mother and own herself a bastard in exchange for a restoration to her father's good graces.

Jane could understand that, while Anne lived, the King did not want to risk angering or upsetting her by softening towards Mary and welcoming her back to court without obliging her to take the Oath, especially when Anne was carrying a child and needed to be kept calm and happy for the sake of her unborn child, so that it would be born strong and healthy.

He must have known that she was likely to view it as a threat to her position and to little Elizabeth's if he showed his affection to Mary too openly – and perhaps his refusal to yield was even motivated by a desire to protect Mary, for fear that if Anne believed that she had cause to worry that there was a possibility that Mary might be restored to her father's good graces and so pose a threat to Elizabeth's place as his heir, she would not shrink from employing poison to remove her daughter's rival! – but she prayed that, now that Anne was dead and the King knew that his new wife would never object to the idea of Mary's restoration, he would be willing to welcome Mary to court and to tell her that there was no need for her to take the Oath.

Mary needed a mother, somebody who would fill the void that Queen Katherine's death had left in her life, somebody who would care for her as a mother should care for her daughter and ensure that she was kindly treated, honoured at court as the King's daughter should be honoured, and that she had somebody who would speak on her behalf. Even though Jane was not many years older than Mary, she was determined that she would be a kind and loving stepmother to her, somebody Mary would know she could count on as a loyal friend.

The King might not have agreed to her request when she told him that, once she was Queen, she hoped to see Mary restored as heir to the throne but, even if he was not prepared to consider the idea now, even if he had made up his mind that he would rather continue to acknowledge Elizabeth as a Princess and as his heiress, Jane was sure that he would change his mind, in time.
Once she persuaded him to allow Mary to return to court, once he was able to get to know the
daughter he used to cherish again, and to remember his love for her, Jane was sure that the King
would want to do right by Mary and to restore her to her former position.

Once she bore him a son, then he would have little reason to worry unduly about which titles were
applied to his daughters, as it would no longer affect the succession; surely he would see that Mary,
who had enjoyed the honours of a Princess for so long before she was deprived of them, should be
legitimised and given the right to call herself Princess Mary once more, while Elizabeth, who was
so young that she was unlikely to be profoundly affected by any change in her status or to resent it,
would soon learn to content herself with Lady Elizabeth.

It would be the right thing to do.

Jane stared into her reflection in the polished mirror before her as her maids applied the final
touches to her gown and coiffure. Behind her, her sisters, Bess and Dorothy, fussed with their
gowns, delighted with the becoming shades of blue silk. Within a short time, they would get into
the carriage that would take them from Durham House to Westminster Abbey, where her father
would be ready to lead her down the aisle, to where her future husband, the King of England,
would be waiting for her, waiting to take the vows that would unite them as man and wife.

Before the day was over, Mistress Jane Seymour would become Queen of England, consort to King
Henry the Eighth.

The thought was both exhilarating and frightening.

His wedding costume was of gold and white silk, a splendid outfit that his tailors had crafted in
honour of this special day, the day they viewed as a day of celebration but one that Henry couldn't
help but feel serious misgivings about.

As far as his tailors knew, this was a day for nothing but rejoicing; their King, after two
unsuccessful unions, the first of which was doomed from the beginning because of an
insurmountable impediment that rendered it invalid and ensured that God would never bless it with
living male issue, while the second was doomed because the bride had proven herself unworthy of
the exalted position to which her marriage had raised her, was finally going to marry a woman he
loved and who was worthy of him and, with both of the women who had laid claim to the title of
Queen dead, nobody would be able to challenge the validity of this third union, or the legitimacy of
the male issue that would surely be born from it.

Henry, however, knew something that they did not.

He knew that, although almost every man, woman and child in England believed Anne to be dead,
her headless corpse hastily interred in the chapel of St Peter ad Vincula, within the precincts of the
Tower, she was alive and well in Wales. Their marriage had not been annulled and would never be
annulled which meant that, although only a handful of people were aware of it, she was and would
remain his lawful wife, the true Queen of England and the mother of his only legitimate child.

Today, he would go to Westminster Abbey and wait for Sir John Seymour to lead Jane down the
aisle to the altar, wait for him to place Jane's hand in his so that they might make their wedding
vows, unaware of the fact that Henry's hand was no longer his to give.

He was a married man and he was deceiving a woman who loved and trusted him.

Jane would believe that, after today's ceremony, she would be his wife and England's Queen.
She would believe that their union was a lawful one, and that they were blessed, little realising that they were living in sin and that she was his mistress, not his wife and, while he hated the idea of putting her in that position, he felt that he had no alternative. He could not go back to Anne, not even if he wanted to, because that would mean uncovering the deception that was wrought on the English people, along with the fact that their King had allowed a woman to be killed in Anne's place so that he might be free to remarry, nor could he decide to remain unmarried.

His Privy Council would allow him no peace if he announced his intention not to remarry.

For the present, Elizabeth was his heiress presumptive, and the Act of Succession confirmed her status, but Henry was under no illusions. He still needed a son.

If he died tomorrow, although Elizabeth was his lawful heir, there would be those who attempted to champion Mary instead, especially as Elizabeth was so young, and could not claim the same powerful kin as her half-sister. Even if Mary could be convinced to take the Oath and to admit that she was a bastard with no right to succeed him, she would still have supporters and it was very likely that there would be civil war between those who upheld Elizabeth's rights as heir and those who sought to deprive her of her succession rights in favour of Mary.

If he and Jane had a son, that son would be recognised as his heir.

Even Anne had accepted that this would be the case when she agreed to cooperate.

Henry might know that his union with Jane would never be a valid one but his people wouldn't. Once Jane bore him a son, they would have no reason to dispute his status as a legitimate prince, or his right to take precedence over both of his half-sisters as the heir to the throne. They would welcome him as their Prince, civil war would be averted and his kingdom's future security would be assured. It was Henry's duty to give his people a male his people could look to as their future King, and if he had to sin, and to make Jane sin in order to do so, that was what he would do.

He would treat Jane with love and affection and honour and respect at all times, he vowed inwardly as he finished dressing and examined his appearance in his mirror. He would act as a good husband to her, even if he was not her husband in truth and never give her any reason to suspect that their union was doubtful, never allow her to learn that the true Queen of England lived in seclusion in Wales. When their son was born, he would accord her all of the honour due to the mother of his heir and, with God's help and mercy, they would be happy together.

After everything, surely God would agree that he deserved to be happy.

Surely He would forgive him his deception.

He felt a slight stirring of pity for Cranmer. The archbishop was his faithful servant, he knew that, but he was also a devout man, who would not be comfortable with the idea of performing a marriage ceremony he knew to be bigamous and invalid, and as he was fond of Anne, he would not like the idea of presiding over the ceremony that would make people think that Jane had the right to bear the title of Queen, the title that was rightfully Anne's, but he would never voice an objection to it. His loyalty to Henry ensured that.

Henry listened with half an ear as Cromwell made his report, explaining that all was readied for the marriage ceremony at Westminster and cheerfully noting that the crowds gathered outside the church seemed to be as welcoming as they might have expected them to be. It was irritating for Henry to see, when Anne was first arrested and word of it leaked out, that his people, who had rejected Anne when she was crowned Queen and insisted on cleaving to Katherine instead, had sided with the woman they used to abhor, viewing her as a victim, an innocent woman who was
being accused of horrific, capital crimes to facilitate her judicial murder, so that Jane could take her place and it was a relief for him to hear that things were settling down a bit.

He wanted Jane to be welcomed by his people.

She was a good woman, and he wanted them to see that. He wanted them to accept her, and to appreciate the lovely qualities in her nature that drew him to her. She didn't deserve to be blamed for what had happened with Anne – what the people believed had happened with Anne – or rejected for it. If his people would give her a chance, they would see that she would be a fine Queen, and a loving wife and stepmother, the perfect consort for their King.

She was already seeking to be kind to Mary, encouraging that the girl should be welcomed back to court. Henry had not liked to deny her request that Mary should be invited to the wedding, but since Mary had not yet taken the Oath, he could not allow her to be permitted to come to court until she did. Although it had irritated him when she pressed him to restore Mary as heir when she knew that Elizabeth was the legitimate princess, he couldn't be too angry over it, and he was even rather touched by it. It might have been foolish of Jane to solicit Mary’s advancement instead of thinking of the children she would bear him, and wanting to safeguard their advancement ahead of those of their half-sisters, but it showed her generous heart.

There wouldn't be many women who would speak for a future stepchild instead of focusing on securing the position and interests of their own children.

Perhaps, in time, when Mary took the Oath, they could be a family.

"...and it is my belief that, when the time comes for Lady Jane's coronation, the people will welcome..."

"No!" Henry surprised himself as well as Cromwell with the vehemence of his refusal. It was bad enough that he was bringing Jane to the church today, to mock the sacrament of marriage by going through the motions of the ceremony when he knew full well that he was not free to marry, but the coronation was a sacred ceremony. How could he allow Jane to be anointed with the holy oil and crowned with St. Edward's crown when he knew that she had no right to be? He drew the line at this sham marriage. He would not profane the sacred rite of coronation by knowingly allowing his mistress to be crowned, as though she was Queen in truth. "No." He repeated more quietly, trying to calm himself. He didn't want to appear agitated when he went to the church, knowing that if he did, it would make people speculate about whether he regretted Anne's supposed death and he didn't want that. "I do not want to discuss that now."

Cromwell inclined his head respectfully. "As Your Majesty wishes." He murmured before subsiding into silence, knowing his master well enough to know when it was dangerous to push him.

Henry sighed, scrutinising his appearance in his mirror.

He could remember the day he married Katherine as if it was only a matter of weeks ago, instead of many years. He was not much more than a boy then, barely on the threshold of manhood, and even though his father had spoken to him on his deathbed, telling him that he ought to send Katherine back to Spain and look elsewhere for a bride, he refused to listen.

He was determined to marry the lovely Spanish princess who had been kept in his father's palace, more a hostage than an honoured guest, her position at court and the level of comfort in her household fluctuating depending on how affairs between his father and hers stood, and he would not listen to any suggestion to the contrary. Because his father was so recently dead, and the court was in mourning for him – though Henry imagined that there were few who were truly sorry to see
him gone! – the ceremony was a simple one, without the usually pageantry that usually accompanied such occasions but he was determined to make up for it later, by staging a splendid coronation for the new King Henry and Queen Katherine.

The people had cheered them on their coronation, delighted to see that their young, golden Prince was replacing his dour, miserly father as their sovereign, and that he had already showed that he was a truly chivalrous knight by keeping his word to the Spanish princess who was his promised bride for so long and making her his Queen, instead of listening to those who would have him jilt her in favour of another princess, a younger girl, with a larger dowry.

Everything seemed golden in those days, and the future seemed bright.

With Anne, the wedding was a hurried, simple one but for a very different reason.

She carried his child and they could no longer afford to delay while the pope procrastinated, refusing to commit to a decision, one way or another, unwilling to grant Henry justice for fear of offending the Emperor but also unwilling to deal honestly with him, and make it clear that he would never do the right thing. They could not afford to take the chance that the son they both confidently expected would be born a bastard, so they had to marry in secret, and leave it to Cranmer and Cromwell to sort out the details and legitimise the union after the fact.

It was nothing like the ceremony Henry had envisioned when he first asked Anne to marry him.

He had pictured them marrying in Westminster Abbey, or else in the Chapel Royal at Whitehall, in a lavish ceremony that would have the people gaping in awe, astounded by the beauty of their new Queen, whom they would welcome into their hearts as soon as they saw her, and instead they wound up hiding away in a deserted attic for a marriage ceremony presided over by a priest who was heavily bribed in order to secure his cooperation, witnessed by only a handful of people, those who could be trusted to keep their mouths shut until the pope finally delivered the bulls that would confirm Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury, making him the highest authority in the English Church, qualified to deliver a verdict on the case once England's ties to the papacy were severed.

However, he didn't mind the simplicity as much as he thought he would have.

He was marrying Anne, and that was all that really mattered. He was marrying the woman he loved, a woman who had already proven herself fertile and he was so happy to be able to do so at last, after waiting for so long to put his ring on her finger and speak the vows that would bind them together, that the location of the ceremony, and its simplicity, did not trouble him unduly.

How could he have known that evening, when he stood next to Anne in the attic, that the child she carried was not the Prince he confidently expected but just another daughter, that little over three years after their wedding, he would sign her death warrant and that, but for the timely intervention of who knew what force, her head would have been struck from her body at his orders? How could he have known that, although Anne pledged to love and to honour him for the rest of her days, she would betray him by shamelessly indulging her carnal lusts, with any man who was willing to satisfy her… or had she betrayed him?

Something was protecting her, that much was undeniable.

He would have liked to believe that it was the Devil interceding on behalf of one of his disciples, but it didn't make sense that the Devil would step in to defend Anne from execution when it would surely have been easier for him to prevent the investigation and the trial in the first place.

The Devil would surely have the power to strike down anybody who might have accused her
before they had a chance to breathe a word against her, or else he could have used his dark powers to shield the child that Anne had lost, ensuring that he would remain rooted in her womb until he was strong enough to be born and knowing that once she was the mother of a Prince, Anne would be protected. Nobody would dare to speak a word against the mother of the Prince of Wales and the future King of England, and Henry would have punished anybody who so much as hinted that Anne was unworthy of her place as Queen or cast the slightest shadow of doubt over his son's rights as his heir. He had waited too long for his son to allow any man to call him a bastard, and live.

If the Devil had wanted to save Anne, there were easier ways.

God could step in to defend the innocent.

He had saved Daniel when he was cast into a den of lions, so could He have saved Anne from the executioner's sword?

Henry didn't want to believe it.

He couldn't allow himself to believe it.

Anne had to be guilty because if she wasn't, he had forced his wife into exile so that he might set up his mistress in her place, knowing that the bastard sons Jane would bear him would unknowingly usurp the throne that belonged to Elizabeth, his only legitimate child, by rights.

Anne had to be guilty because, if she wasn't, justice would demand that he cancel today's wedding ceremony, and leave London to go to Pembroke Hall, to make amends with Anne and to conduct her back to London as his Queen, abandoning Jane and his chance to be happy with her, admitting the truth to his people about Anne being alive and facing their inevitable scorn at his actions.

He couldn't do that.

He was committed to his course of action, and he would see it through.

Now that a substitute was executed in Anne's place, there was no turning back. Anne would stay at Pembroke Hall, in his past, and Jane would preside over Whitehall Palace and the court as a beloved Queen, giving him a new future. After everything that had happened, he refused to give up his future with Jane.

He had earned it.

"Come, Master Cromwell," he said, in the heartiest tone he could manage. "We must hurry. Today is my wedding day, after all – it wouldn't do to keep my bride waiting!"

Anne might have been saved from death, but he would not allow that to keep him from moving on without her.
Chapter Nine

30th May 1536

Mary had hoped that she would be invited to attend her father's wedding to Jane Seymour but, to her dismay, no invitation was forthcoming.

As the Imperial ambassador, Chapuys would attend the wedding ceremony as a representative of the Emperor, as one of the honoured guests, and he could not snub the King or the new Queen by refusing to attend but, although she knew that he had contacted Master Cromwell, hinting heavily that the King's daughter would be grateful if she could attend the nuptial celebrations for her beloved father and pay her respects to her new stepmother, Cromwell had told him – apologetically, according to Chapuys – that this was out of the question for the moment.

The King had made it plain that, until Mary took the Oath, proving to her father that she was his loyal, obedient subject and daughter, there could be no question of receiving her at court.

Not even the inducement of having his daughter present for the ceremony, signifying her approval of the union and her acceptance that it was a valid one and that Lady Jane was her new Queen, was enough to tempt her father to release her from the obligation to take the Oath. He still wanted her to say that he was right and that she and her mother were wrong to ever deny that.

It was a disappointment to her on two fronts.

Not only was she dismayed by the fresh confirmation that her father was not inclined to soften towards her where the issue of her parents' marriage and her own legitimacy was concerned, despite the fact that he was now free from Anne's malign influence and was free to show affection to his daughter and to put an end to the persecution she had endured in recent years, she also wanted to meet her new stepmother in person as soon as possible, to thank Lady Jane for her kind efforts on her behalf and to assure her that she welcomed her as Queen and as a stepmother.

With her mother dead, it was no betrayal of her memory to accept that her father was entitled to remarry if it pleased him to do so or to welcome the lady of his choice as her new Queen.

It was no betrayal of her mother, or of herself to honour her stepmother as her Queen, or to accept that any children born of the marriage would be legitimate and, if a son was born, that he would be entitled to be the Prince of Wales and heir to the throne, even ahead of Mary. If it was God's will that the King's union with Lady Jane would be blessed with the birth of a healthy son, Mary would never presume to question his will, or to deny her brother's right to the throne.

Mary was certain that her mother would approve of the King's marriage to Lady Jane, pleased to see that this good woman had led him away from Anne and from sin and would guide him back to the right path, saving his soul and helping to repair the damage that Anne had wrought on England, just as she would be pleased to know that Lady Jane intended to do everything in her power to bring about the restoration of Mary's rights, the rights that her mother had suffered so much to defend but died before she could see the matter set to rights.

She wanted to go to court and to assure Lady Jane that she could marry the King with her blessing but, even if she was not to go to court, she was still leaving Hatfield today.

Her household at Hundson was ready for her and, in the future, instead of being a member of Elizabeth's household, a princess forced to act as a servant to her father's bastard, she would preside
over her own establishment. The trunks containing her belongings were packed and stowed on top of the carriage that would bring her to Hudson, the two maids in waiting who were assigned to attend her were ready for the journey and waiting to help her into her cloak, a new one of black velvet, lined with the furs her mother had left her.

Mary knew that, when her mother made her will bequeathing the furs to her, she had noted that the furs were old, and somewhat worn but that Mary was unlikely to have any better ones as long as Anne was in power. Her mother had known that while the harlot was allowed to usurp the title of Queen, she would be happy to see her predecessor's daughter shabbily clad while she lavished her own daughter with rich garments, fit for a princess, as though she believed that if she dressed little Elizabeth like a princess and ensured that the toddler's finery would be a sharp contrast with the dark, plain gowns that Mary wore, gowns better suited to a servant than to a noblewoman, she would be able to make those who saw the child believe that she was truly entitled to that title.

Anne was vain enough to think that rich gowns and jewels could make a Queen or a Princess, underestimating the people and their ability to see past such things, to see the truth.

There was little enough that her mother had had to leave when she died, but she bequeathed virtually everything of value she possessed to her, in the hope that she could do something to allow her daughter to maintain her dignity as a princess and dress as her station demanded, knowing that she would receive nothing from her so-called stepmother.

It grieved Mary deeply that her mother was unable to hold on even half a year longer, long enough to see Anne exposed as the traitorous harlot she was and cast aside, as she deserved.

She was certain that Jane Seymour, a good and virtuous woman by all accounts, would never even contemplate the idea of accepting her father's advances as long as her mother lived. Even if the King pressed her to be his wife once Anne was safely dead, Mary felt that not even the prospect of being called Queen of England would tempt Lady Jane into accepting his offer, and that she would instead urge him to reinstate Queen Katherine as his rightful wife and consort, and to restore his lawful daughter to the succession.

However, that could not be.

Her mother was dead, and Mary could only hope that she was watching from Heaven, and was aware of Anne's fall – though it was likely that, if she knew what was happening, she would pray for the repose of Anne's soul and beseech God to show mercy on her, despite the sins that Anne committed against her and her daughter, and that she would wish to see little Elizabeth safe and well cared for, even if she would never wish to see the child of her rival, of the woman who had enslaved her husband and manipulated him, using his lust to secure herself the Queen's crown, permitted to retain the honours of a Princess of England while her daughter, who was entitled to those honours by rights, was denied them, all through Anne's witchcraft.

That was another reason why she would be very glad to leave Hatfield.

Since little Elizabeth was sent back from court – banished from the King's sight, according to Chapuys, because he could not bear to have a miniature reminder of Anne and of her betrayal around him, especially now that he was beginning a new life with Lady Jane and wanted nothing more than to be able to forget his past with Anne – Lady Bryan seemed to be more determined than ever to highlight the fact that, despite everything, the toddler still had the right to call herself a princess, at the King's express command. Elizabeth dined in state at every meal, not just dinner, eating under her canopy and served on gold plate, while Mary was relegated to the common board, and the governess seemed to be going out of her way to dress her small charge in the finest of the gowns that Anne had ordered for her daughter before her death, and even to adorn her with jewels...
from the Princess' collection, even though Elizabeth was too young to wear them.

When Lady Bryan came down to the reception hall, holding Elizabeth by the hand so that her charge could bid her sister farewell, Mary saw that Elizabeth was wearing a diamond and emerald pendant, along with a matching diadem that she recognized as belonging to the collection of jewels that her father had commissioned for her when he granted her the title of Princess of Wales, jewels that he had commanded that she should surrender to the infant daughter he called a princess when Elizabeth was born and Mary was commanded to wait on her.

Despite Chapuys' frequent reminders that the best thing she could do, for the present, was to refrain from openly defying her father by refusing to accord Elizabeth the honours that he still demanded on her behalf, and his assurances that if she could pretend to be the dutiful and cooperative daughter that her father expected her to be, it would ensure that he would not wait long before he summoned her to court, welcoming her as his daughter once more, it was difficult, almost impossible for Mary to force herself to curtsey when Lady Bryan brought Elizabeth down.

"Your Highness." The words were bitter in her mouth but she had to speak them.

"My Lady Mary." Lady Bryan's greeting was more respectful than any words she had spoken to Mary since the day she arrived at Hatfield, condemned to a servant's life because her father had set her mother aside in favour of another woman and wished to use Mary's position as an attendant in the child's household to show that he regarded Elizabeth as a princess, while Mary was a bastard.

"Princess Elizabeth wanted to say goodbye and, if I may, I would like to wish you a safe and pleasant journey, and I hope that you will be very happy in your new home."

Mary inclined her head coldly, hiding a smile.

Although she was not fooled in the least by Lady Bryan's respectful farewell or by her good wishes, much less warmed by them, she was pleased that the governess saw fit to speak to her thus, viewing Lady Bryan's deferential manner as a further sign of her improving position.

Lady Bryan must be aware of the fact that, far from showing kindness and respect to the King's daughter while Mary lived under Hatfield's roof, as a member of a household presided over by Lady Bryan on Elizabeth's behalf, she had treated her with coldness and indifference at best, and cruelty at worst. Now that it seemed likely that Mary might be restored to her father's favour, the governess was worried that if word of her conduct towards the King's acknowledged daughter was carried to his ears, she would face his anger for it, even though he was the one who had commanded Mary to serve at Hatfield and who had insisted that she was to be treated with no more honour than the other maids, and that defiance and disobedience were not to be tolerated. Mary had even overheard servants whispering that the King had reproached Lady Bryan for showing her too much lenience, although she did not want to believe that this was true.

If he decided to take umbrage at the way Mary was treated, the King was unlikely to pay any heed to protests that his daughter was treated thus at his orders and nobody else's.

If anything, those who tried to remind him of this were likely to make him even angrier with them, as he would hate to be reminded of how harshly he was bewitched into treating his pearl.

"Thank you, Lady Bryan." Her tone was cool, and she took a malicious satisfaction in seeing the woman wince at her next words, even though she knew that it was her duty as a Christian to forgive those who wronged her rather than bearing grudges against them or seeking to avenge herself. "I will not forget your considerate treatment of me, during a difficult time."

The governess looked uncomfortable but she nodded, bobbing a curtsey, according Mary a degree
of respect that she had never accorded her in all the time that Mary had dwelled at Hatfield.

"I obeyed His Majesty's commands, Lady Mary, as we all must," she said with quiet dignity.

"Yes." Mary said quietly, looking down at little Elizabeth. Her father had commanded that this child should be considered the Princess of England and the rightful heir to the throne, until such a time as Lady Jane... Queen Jane... supplied him with the son he longed for. He commanded that Elizabeth should be honoured as a princess by all, including Mary, and that each of his subjects should take an oath, vowing that they recognized the child as heir to the throne and that they would defend her claim with their lives, should they be called upon to do so.

Her path to her father's favour would be a stony one to tread, and he would demand obedience from her before he was willing to even contemplate the idea of welcoming her back into his life, but if he commanded her to swear that she recognized Elizabeth as a princess, essentially admitting that she was a bastard, that her mother had been her father's concubine rather than his wife, and that they both wronged him by claiming otherwise, how could she possibly obey him?

She prayed nightly that this would not be asked of her, that even if he was not prepared to disinherit Elizabeth and restore her, her father would send a message letting her know that it was not necessary for her to take the Oath, that she could return to court regardless as he and his new Queen both longed for her presence and did not want to be parted from her over this matter, or any other, but so far, those prayers were not answered.

"Are you really going away, Lady Mary?" Elizabeth's voice was quiet, and her lower lip trembled as she asked the question, as though she was ready to cry.

Despite her indignation over the fact that, simply by being accorded the title of Princess, the child in front of her was ensuring that she was unlikely to be granted the right to call herself by it, Mary couldn't remain cold when faced with the sight of a distressed child and her tone was kind and gentle when she answered her. "Yes, Your Highness."

"Not for always?" Two fat tears trickled down Elizabeth's cheeks at the thought.

"I am sure that Lady Mary will come back to visit you, Your Highness – won't you, Lady Mary?" Lady Bryan tried to soothe her charge, casting an imploring look at Mary, silently beseeching her to agree in order to calm the distressed child, even if she had no intention of visiting.

Mary nodded, forcing herself to smile. "Of course, sister." She said. Privately, she had her doubts about whether or not Elizabeth was her sister, wondering if there was truth to the allegations that she had been fathered by one of Anne's lovers but, regardless of the identity of her father, it was undeniable that the little girl would need a loving family. She had no mother now and, although Lady Jane was a kind woman, she would not be able to invite Elizabeth to court without the King's leave, even if she wanted to, and so would be unable to be a mother to her, as she had pledged to be to Mary. Anne's father had been allowed to leave the Tower a free man, and was even permitted to retain the earldom and property he had gained through the King's infatuation with his daughter, but he was unlikely to be allowed to see his granddaughter, even if he wanted to take an interest in her for the sake of the daughter he had reportedly repudiated at the end. With nobody else to do it, perhaps it was Mary's duty to show kindness to Elizabeth. It was what her mother would have wanted her to do, even if Elizabeth was Anne's child. "I will come to visit you, and perhaps you might like to come to visit me at Hundson, if the King allows it."

Mary couldn't imagine that her father would wish to hear any suggestions relating to the child of the harlot who had betrayed him and made a fool of him, certainly not in the immediate aftermath of Anne's execution, or that he would give his permission for Elizabeth to be a guest at Mary's new
establishment even if Mary asked it of him but she hoped that the idea of future visits would calm Elizabeth, even if they were unlikely to be allowed for a long time, if ever.

Elizabeth sniffled quietly, her blue eyes shining with unshed tears. "My Mama went away for always," she said mournfully. "But I want her to come back to me."

Lady Bryan knelt down to her level, rubbing her back lightly, wishing that she was better able to comfort and distract the little princess.

It was a hard fact of life that many children lost their mothers at a young age and were forced to learn how to cope without them, but Elizabeth’s situation was especially difficult.

How many children had to deal with the knowledge that the mother they adored, the mother who loved them fiercely, was dead because their father wished it?

"We have spoken of this, Princess Elizabeth." She reminded the child quietly, uncomfortably conscious of Mary's presence and wondering if the girl was taking note of everything she said, ready to report it if she thought that Lady Bryan was expressing sympathy towards Anne, or that she believed her death to be unjustified and might be saying that to Anne's child, turning her against the King and making her believe that her father was a murderer, a monster willing to see his innocent wife put to death so that he might raise his new love to the throne in her place. "The Queen, your mother, had to go to live in Paradise, with God and his angels."

Mary's lips thinned at this, but she didn't say anything, even though she disapproved of Lady Bryan's choice of words.

After everything Anne had done, she could not possibly be in Paradise and it was wrong to deceive her child by saying that she was. It would be far better for Elizabeth, young as she was, if she could hear the truth about her mother, and know that Anne's wickedness had damned her to Hell and to an eternity of suffering there. At least then, Anne could serve as an example to her little daughter, who would be better off knowing the truth so she could guard against following in her mother's footsteps and ensure that she would grow to be a good and virtuous woman, who would never behave as Anne had. Elizabeth's guardians would need to take great care with her, to ensure that her childish innocence and purity was not contaminated by her mother's sins.

"They cut off my Mama's head." Elizabeth said softly, tears flowing freely as she spoke, confiding the awful truth in Mary. "They shouldn't have done that! Mama didn't do anything naughty!"

Lady Bryan swept her small charge in her arms before she could say any more, cradling Elizabeth and turning to Mary with an apologetic smile, hoping that she would understand that it was only because Elizabeth was so young that they did not tell her the grim details of her mother's conviction – not that Lady Bryan believed a word of the charges; whatever else could be said of her, Queen Anne was a devoted mother and she couldn't believe that she would ever do anything that would risk the position and rights of the child she adored, least of all to indulge in carnal lusts – and that they could not be expected to disillusion a child not yet three by denying that her mother was in Paradise.

"The Princess is tired, Lady Mary," she said, forcing herself to sound calm and confident. "I should bring her back to the nursery, so that she can have a nap. I hope you have a pleasant journey."

"Thank you, Lady Bryan. Goodbye, sister." Mary smiled at Elizabeth, feeling sorry for her. She said no more and watched as Lady Bryan bore the toddler upstairs to the nursery.

It was only a couple of minutes later that a liveried servant approached her, bowing deeply before
delivering his message, letting her know that her belongings and her maids were ready to leave, whenever she wished to depart. This time, she was not to be ordered into a carriage, much less carried there by force when she refused to obey. This time, it was for her to decide when to leave.

She didn't hesitate even a moment before going out to the drive, climbing into her carriage so that she could leave Hatfield, and all the indignities she had endured under its roof, behind.

Lady Bryan carried Elizabeth to the lavishly appointed nursery suite, removing her jewellery and setting it aside, so that it would not be damaged, before she unlaced the green satin gown, so that Elizabeth could take her nap without being restricted by the tight stomacher or entangled in the yards of rich cloth. Once Elizabeth was clad in her shift and petticoats, she lifted her into the great carved bed, which was so large that the toddler looked as tiny as a doll lying on it, and tucked her under the quilted satin coverlet.

"Sleep well, Princess." She said kindly, stroking the soft golden hair until Elizabeth's eyes began to drift shut. Once Elizabeth looked ready to doze off, she slipped away, not noticing that her small charge's eyes opened as soon as she left her side, or that Elizabeth was listening avidly when she began to speak to Mistress Kat, who was hanging Elizabeth's gown up so that it would not be creased when she woke up and donned it again.

"Has the Lady Mary left?" Mistress Kat asked in a soft voice.

"Yes," Lady Bryan confirmed. "She'll be at Hundson before nightfall. She's pleased about it, though she'd never say so, not to any of us, and very glad to have a household of her own again – though Sir John tells me that the Lady Mary's new establishment is much smaller than Princess Elizabeth's household, not even a third as large, thank God!" In her way, Lady Bryan was very fond of Elizabeth and she wanted to see her restored to her father's favour so it was a relief to see that, even if the King had opted to supply his elder daughter with an establishment of her own, the sizes of the respective households of his two daughters made it plain that, despite everything, Princess Elizabeth was more highly valued than Lady Mary. God willing, it boded well for the King's intentions, and they did not need to fear that their young charge would find herself downgraded in favour of her elder half-sister. "I dare say that the Lady Mary can thank Lady Jane – Queen Jane, I suppose I ought to say; she'll have married the King by now – for her new establishment. She's determined to reconcile Lady Mary with His Majesty, and bring her to court."

"And Princess Elizabeth?" Mistress Kat asked, more concerned for the little child in her charge than for Elizabeth's half-sister. "Do you think that Queen Jane will speak for her too?"

"I don't know, but I've heard nothing to say that she might," Lady Bryan said bluntly. She had heard plenty about how kind the new Queen supposedly was, and plenty about her intentions to see to it that the Lady Mary was welcomed back to court and honoured as the King's daughter, but she hadn't heard so much as a whisper to indicate that Queen Jane was also speaking to the King on behalf of her younger stepchild, reminding him that the crimes of a mother could not be held to the child's account and urging him to welcome the little princess back into his life. To Lady Bryan's mind, while it was commendable that the new Queen was willing to be kind to the Lady Mary, she had more of a duty to be a mother to an innocent little child, deprived of her true mother for her sake, but the new Queen didn't seem to agree. "I doubt that she'd care to have Queen Anne's child at court, before her eyes."

If there was so much as a whisper of truth to the rumours of Seymour involvement in Queen Anne's downfall, then in Jane's shoes, Lady Bryan doubted that she would want to have the child rendered motherless by her family's scheming around her, and if bringing about the Lady Mary's restoration to the King's good graces was her goal, then she would not want to see Elizabeth back at
court, for fear that her presence would remind the King of his love for her, and for Queen Anne, and ensure that he would never contemplate the idea of Mary's restoration.

"Perhaps Queen Jane is afraid to speak for the little princess just yet, after what happened." Mistress Kat suggested optimistically. "She might think that it would make the King angry if she spoke up for Princess Elizabeth too soon, and that it would do more harm than good if she did. Perhaps she believes that she will be better able to serve the princess if she waits until the King's anger has softened and he is willing to welcome her back once more before she speaks to him."

She badly wanted to believe that this was true.

Little Elizabeth was just an innocent child, and an innocent child should not be held accountable for the deeds of her parents but, more than that, Mistress Kat enjoyed her service in Hatfield, she adored the little girl she tended to and didn't want to have to leave her. Her parents were delighted when they were able to secure her a place as a maid of honour to the infant princess when her establishment was first set up but she was afraid that, if they believed that Elizabeth was permanently out of her father's good graces and that service in her household would not be beneficial for her attendants, they might write to her commanding her to leave Elizabeth's service rather than remaining tied to the child when the association could do her no good.

If she could tell them that Elizabeth was likely to be received at court soon, honoured as the Princess of England and welcomed as the King's cherished daughter once more, then perhaps she could hope that she would be allowed to stay to serve her little mistress, who had already lost too much without losing one of her favourite ladies as well.

"Perhaps," Lady Bryan allowed, although her tone indicated that she was doubtful about this. "I hope so – Her Highness will need to be restored to His Majesty's good graces, by whatever means. She is certainly not in a position to scorn help, wherever it may come from."

Her attention turned to the sorting out of the chests full of tiny garments next, and she said no more, focusing her energy on going through the gowns, petticoats and kirtles, most of which Queen Anne had personally chosen for her little daughter. Elizabeth was growing so quickly now that quite a few of the dainty garments in the chest were too small for her but, while this time last year, Lady Bryan would have thrown or given her charge's outgrown gowns away, even though they were of expensive material and fine tailoring, she was reluctant to throw anything away now.

They might no longer be in a position where they could afford to be so extravagant or so careless of what they had and she didn't want to take any chances.

Master Cromwell had indicated that he would make arrangements with her for an allowance to see to the maintenance of Princess Elizabeth's household, but he had not named a figure, and perhaps the King had not yet settled on one, for all that he intended for his younger daughter to continue to enjoy all of the privileges and comforts of her status.

Until she knew that the allowance that was to be provided for Elizabeth's household was sufficiently generous to ensure that it could be smoothly run, while its little mistress enjoyed every luxury that her rank as princess demanded, and could be sure that it would be paid regularly, instead of them being obliged to remind Master Cromwell, Lady Bryan felt that it would be wiser if she kept the outgrown gowns safe. If the need arose, the tiny gowns could be unpicked and the silks, satins, damasks and velvets could be crafted into new gowns, fit for a princess.

She and Mistress Kat became absorbed in their task, little realizing that Elizabeth was wide awake, mulling over the conversation she had overheard.
She couldn't understand why Lady Bryan would think that her Papa would not want to see her, even if he had done a horrible thing to her Mama – Elizabeth thought that *she* was the one who should be angry with *him* for what he had done; she and her Mama had not done anything bad to her Papa, after all – and it made her angry to hear them talking about Queen Jane.

Her Mama was the Queen, the loveliest Queen in the whole world.

She didn't like to hear Lady Bryan and Mistress Kat talking about this other lady, this Jane, as though she was the Queen now.

That was her Mama's title, just like Princess was Elizabeth's.

Lady Bryan told her that when the Lady Mary said that she was the real Princess, she was telling wicked fibs and being very, very naughty to claim a title that wasn't really hers so Elizabeth couldn't understand why Lady Bryan wouldn't say that Jane, whoever she was, was being wicked by pretending to be the Queen and why she wasn't being punished for it.

Surely it was even naughtier to pretend to be the Queen than it was to pretend to be the Princess!

Lady Bryan scolded the Lady Mary when she said that she was a princess, so why would her Papa allow this Jane to call herself Queen without scolding her for it, and sending her away?

She couldn't understand any of this, and it frightened her.

Lady Bryan told her that her Mama was in Paradise now, living with God and all of his angels so Elizabeth shut her eyes tightly and silently prayed to her Mama, imagining how pretty she must look in her beautiful white gown and her wings and halo – somebody as beautiful and as good and as kind as her Mama had to be an angel now – and asking her to talk to God for Elizabeth, so that God could make sure that her Papa would bring her back to court and say that he was sorry for cutting Mama's head off and taking her away from Elizabeth.

When she finally dozed off, her lips were curved in a small smile.

Even if her Mama was in Paradise instead of here with her, Elizabeth was sure that she was still watching over her and loving her, and that made her feel safe and happy.

If Mama was watching over her, she didn't need to be frightened any more.

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*7th June 1536*

Her new stepmother had sent her a letter.

Mary had hoped that she would be a sent a message from her father, that even if he could not yet bring himself to welcome her back to court as his daughter, he would still send her a letter asking how she was faring, and how she was settling into her new home, perhaps asking her if there was anything that she needed to make Hundson a more comfortable home for her and pledging that, if there was anything she needed from him, anything at all, she needed only to ask and it would be his great pleasure to see to it that she had all she could possibly need or want.

She would have liked to see further proof that restoration to her father's favour was not just an impossible dream for her, that it could easily become a reality.

However, although she was initially disappointed to realize that the letter the royal messenger handed her was not marked with the King's seal but with that of the Queen, she recovered from her disappointment very quickly, reminding herself that she should be pleased by the fact that her new
stepmother was writing to her, to know that, unlike the harlot, who had done everything in her power to ensure that Mary would be exiled from her father's life and from his love, so that she might encourage him to lavish all of his love and attention on her child, Lady Jane was sincere in her desire to bring about a reconciliation between Mary and her father, to welcome Mary back to court, and to see to it that she would be treated with all honour.

The letter was written in the neat hand of a clerk, though Jane had signed it in her own hand, with large, slightly awkward capitals spelling out her new title: *Jane the Quene*.

Mary was not surprised that Jane should have to rely on the assistance of a clerk, as few women were fortunate enough to be afforded more than the most basic education, able to do more than read and write their own names unless they were the daughters of royalty or of high-ranking nobles, but she felt a pang of concern at the thought that her new stepmother might know so little of the machinations of court life that she would be able to trust her private correspondence to a mere clerk, little realizing that he could be in the employ of somebody who might seek to work against her, and who would be willing to pay handsomely to learn the secrets of the new Queen's correspondence. If she couldn't write her own letters, she needed a secretary she could trust.

The letter in Mary's hands was one that might anger her father if he saw it.

In it, Queen Jane greeted her stepdaughter affectionately and respectfully, promising that she would act as a mother and a friend to her, and that it was her dearest hope to see Mary reconciled with the King but, although there would be nothing to cause any real offence in that, she continued, apologizing for the fact that she was unable to persuade the King to restore her as Princess of Wales and promising that, if it ever lay in her power to convince the King to change his mind, she would do so, as it was her fondest wish to see Mary restored.

As fond as her father might be of his new wife, Mary couldn't imagine that he would be happy if he learned of this letter, if he knew that his new bride disputed his decision to declare his daughter a bastard. It also grieved her to see that, even though her new stepmother was speaking for her, her good will was not enough to persuade her father to change his mind about her status.

She continued reading, a frown creasing her brow as she read her stepmother's plea that she should obey her father and take the Oath as he commanded, a plea softened by her assurance that she knew how difficult that it must be for Mary to contemplate taking this step, and that it would be painful for her to repudiate her late mother, and her promise that she would not ask it of her if she did not think that it would be for the best, both for the King and for Mary herself, adding that she also hoped that she would agree for the sake of peace in the kingdom.

She also vowed that, if Mary came to court, she would see to it that she was honoured by all, and that she would be second among the ladies of the court after Jane herself.

Though the King had not said anything to her, Jane wrote that she was sure that he missed Mary badly, and that he was longing to have her by his side once more, even if he could not bring himself to tell her that or to be the one to make the first move. She did not add that it was likely to be His Majesty's stubborn pride that kept him from going back on his determination not to allow Mary to return to court until she took the Oath but it was the first thing that came to Mary's mind when she read that sentence, and she wondered if Jane had thought that too, even if she would never say such a thing about her new husband, especially when that husband was also her King.

She closed her letter by expressing her belief that, for the good of the whole country, it was not good for there to be divisions within the royal house, to whom the country should be able to look as an example. They should be a family, together at court instead of separated. Mary could imagine that, although Jane was sincere about wishing her well, she must also be thinking about what
would happen when she bore children of her own and would not want divisions within the royal family to threaten the future of her sons, or to see civil war in England after the King’s death.

Mary's father would want to see his son by Jane as his first rightful heir and, unless he opted to disinherit little Elizabeth, she would be nominated as his heir in the absence of a son from Jane – and, much as she would have liked to think that her father knew what was right and just and that he would want to see her restored as his first rightful heir if he and Jane had no sons, Mary had to admit that he was more likely to disinherit Elizabeth in favour of a daughter of Jane's, not for her.

She had hoped that Jane would be able to persuade her father to welcome her back without taking the Oath but the fact that Jane was writing to her now, beseeching her to give in, suggested that this was not going to happen, certainly not any time soon. She believed Chapuys when he told her that the new Queen hoped to see her restored to the succession, which meant that Jane would not make the suggestion that she should declare herself a bastard, essentially admitting that she had no right to a place in the line of succession, lightly.

She would only do it if she truly believed that there was no other way.

Mary felt an icy chill run down her back and neck as she thought of Anne, the woman her father had loved but whom he had sent to the block without a second thought when she betrayed him.

From her father's perspective, by refusing to take the Oath, Mary was committing treason, as surely as Anne did when she took lovers to her bed, cramming a cuckold's horns on his head. In law, it was an act of treason punishable by death to refuse to accept Elizabeth as the rightful heiress to the throne or to deny the validity of his marriage to Anne, and any subsequent remarriage. He demanded to be acknowledged as Supreme Head of the English Church by all of his subjects, including his daughter, just as he demanded that all of his subjects agree that he was entirely justified when he sought to set his devoted, loving wife aside in favour of another woman.

Nobody could be allowed to allege that he was wrong to do so, even with Anne gone.

As far as her father was concerned, Anne proving unworthy of being England's Queen would not mean that his union with Mary's mother was not invalid and accursed, as he alleged. Even when anybody with eyes could see that, no matter what he said to the contrary, his desire for Anne was his true motive for dissolving his marriage to his wife of many years, he continued to insist that he had only sought to set Mary's mother aside because his conscience would not allow him to continue to regard her as his wife because she was once married to his brother.

He would not take kindly to being called a liar.

He might understand that it would pain Mary to say that her mother was never her father's lawful wife and that it was wrong of her to claim that she was once Archbishop Cranmer's verdict was made known to her, and might understand how humiliating it would be for a girl brought up a princess to declare that she was a bastard born of an incestuous union but he would not accept her pain or humiliation as an excuse for her continued refusal to do as he commanded.

If she did not take the Oath, he might kill her for it and, even if he did not, he would refuse to receive her at court, even if his new Queen beseeched him to welcome her back, for her sake and for the sake of family unity... and if Mary was unable to come to court, there was a very real risk that, in time, when his anger towards the harlot died down, he might summon Elizabeth to court instead, and Elizabeth was just a little girl, a sweet, charming child who was bound to forget her mother very quickly and who would bear no grudge towards her father for Anne's fate.

If Elizabeth went back to court before she did, if Elizabeth was allowed the opportunity to enchant
their father and to make him want to honour her as his princess and favourite daughter once more, or even to enchant the new Queen, who was kind and unlikely to be able to resist the charm of a small child, then what hope did Mary have of regaining the King's favour or her rightful place?

She could not allow Elizabeth to rob her of her chance of restoration to the King's good graces, even unwittingly. If Elizabeth captured his heart, she would hold it tightly in her tiny hands, never letting go, enslaving him with her innocence and childish charms as easily as her mother had enslaved him with her beauty and promise but without losing him, as Anne had.

If Mary wished to be restored to her father's favour, then she needed to be near him.

The only way that she would ever be allowed near him was if she took the Oath.

An oath taken under duress was not binding, Chapuys had assured her of that, promising that His Holiness the pope would understand why she had had to take the Oath, and that he would absolve her of responsibility for swearing, understanding that she would not do it if she did not fear for her life and if she did not know that it was vital, for all their sakes, that she was restored to her father's favour and welcomed back to court, where she might hope to have a positive influence on him, guiding him back to the true path and reminding him, with her presence, that she was a worthier heir than little Elizabeth by far, an heir more likely to be welcomed by his people.

Her life could well depend on her taking the Oath, and England's future as well.

If she could return to court and win her father's love again, then she might be the only person who would be able to persuade him of the error of his ways, convincing him that it was not too late for him to rebuild England's ties to Rome, restoring the true faith to the country. If he would only acknowledge papal authority, the same authority that he had once written a pamphlet in defence of, and acknowledge that it was wrong for him to claim the title of Supreme Head of the Church of England, the pope would forgive him and welcome him back into the fold, as the prodigal son was welcomed when he swallowed his pride and returned to his home and to his father.

It was not too late to save her father's soul, or to save England from the heresy Anne had imposed on the country in order to serve her ambition.

If she took the Oath, Mary had a chance to make things right.

The pope would forgive her if she did it.

She prayed that her mother would as well.
Chapter Ten

12th August 1537

The first time he travelled to Hatfield to pay a call on its little mistress, he went there only because his conscience would not allow him to renege on his promise to Anne that he would watch over her child’s interests, now that she was no longer in a position to do so.

Once Anne was safely conducted to Pembroke Hall, and once he married Jane, Henry wanted nothing more than to be able to forget his wife’s existence, and the fact that as long as Anne lived, he could never truly call Jane his Queen or their children his legitimate heirs. He was so determined to have the new beginning he craved that there were times that Brandon wondered if his determination might allow him to delude himself into thinking that Anne had died after all, if he was able to protect himself from everything and everybody that might remind him of her.

Even little Elizabeth continued to be banished from her father’s sight, left to the care of her household at Hatfield with no indication of when she might next see her father, though he knew that Lady Bryan wrote to Master Cromwell, hinting that an invitation to court would be welcome, and that she thought that it would be fitting for Princess Elizabeth to appear there.

Archbishop Cranmer managed to drum up his courage once or twice, enough for him to dare to hint to the King that it was not right for a father to be estranged from his innocent little child, but his timid suggestions were met with angry declarations that the Princess would be received at court when the King saw fit to invite her, not a moment before.

As long as Elizabeth was exiled from the court, Brandon felt honour bound to visit the child and to see for himself that she was doing well.

Thanks to him, at least in part, Elizabeth lost her mother and he felt obligated to watch out for her and to ensure that she was cared for and happy.

He did not write to Anne about his visits with Elizabeth. He did not want to correspond with her, and he also knew that there was a risk that his correspondence might fall into the wrong hands, or that Henry might object to it if he found out, angry to think that Brandon might feel some sympathy towards Anne. He could only imagine how Catherine would react!

However, as Cranmer wrote to Anne from time to time, he could give the Archbishop news of Elizabeth’s welfare and trust that he would pass it on to the child’s mother, who was certain to be glad of any news she could get of her child, regardless of the identity of her source.

Maybe it made the loneliness of Pembroke Hall easier for her to bear when she could feel that she still had a connection with her child, even if the connection was a distant one and the chances that she might be permitted to see Elizabeth again were so slim that she could hold out no reasonable hope of it. Brandon knew that if he was forced to be parted from Edward, he would want somebody to show him enough kindness to be willing to give him news of his son.

No parent should have to be left without a word of news about their child, only able to worry about how that child might be faring.

He had not agreed with Henry’s decision to force Katherine and Mary apart as punishment for defying him, a punishment that was especially cruel when Katherine’s health began to fail and her pleas that she might see her only living child went unanswered because she refused to say that she was not Henry's wife, and he did not like the idea of Anne and Elizabeth suffering the same fate.
No matter what Anne had done or not done, she did not deserve that and little Elizabeth was innocent of all wrongdoing and should not be punished for the sins of her elders.

Brandon was known to be loyal to Henry, and to have had no love for Anne so nobody could possibly harbour any suspicions about the reason why he would want to visit the exiled little princess, as he could have no motive to do so other than simple kindness towards a child who had lost her mother and whose father and new stepmother never visited her or wrote to enquire about her welfare. He and Catherine were friendly with Mary, and not even Mary begrudged his visits to Elizabeth, able to understand that his attention towards her young half-sister did not mean that he was unkindly disposed towards her, or that it pleased him to know that Mary was to be denied the title of Princess and a place in the succession while Elizabeth was allowed to enjoy her status as Henry’s legitimate child and, until Jane bore a son, as the heir to the throne.

Although there were some who believed that, had Henry not decided to continue to recognize Elizabeth as legitimate, Mary would have been restored as Princess by now, Brandon had his doubts about that, and had said as much to Catherine when she grumbled about it.

Henry cared for Mary and he was showing himself to be willing to see to it that his elder daughter was well-provided for and treated with honour, now that she had yielded to his will and was, once more, welcomed back to court but, if he had truly wanted to legitimise Mary, it lay within his power to do so, both as King and as Supreme Head of the Church, and it was a possibility even if he could not bring himself to say that he had been married to Katherine and even if he was afraid to annul his marriage to Anne, for fear of the consequences of doing so.

Parliament would pass an Act legally legitimising Mary and granting her the right to a place in the line of succession as soon as Henry asked it of them. The people would be delighted to see the girl restored, and would not grumble if she displaced Elizabeth as first heir after the King's sons.

However, Brandon suspected that for Henry, the idea of legitimising Mary was intolerable because he could not bear the idea of admitting that he was wrong, either openly or by implication.

If he allowed Mary to call herself legitimate once more, it would be tantamount to an admission that those who had died because they could not bring themselves to agree to the idea of Katherine being set aside and Mary being disinherited had died in vain, that those who defended Mary's right to the title of Princess, calling for her restoration were right to do so, and he would never allow that to be said. Even if Anne’s execution had proceeded as planned and he had been able to annul his marriage to her and to make a bastard of Elizabeth, Brandon now suspected that he would have left Mary illegitimate too, and left himself without an heir rather than go back on his previous decisions, even if that left the succession insecure until such a time as Jane bore a child.

Little Elizabeth’s good fortune in having a mother who was able to secure her place as a princess was not the reason for Mary's continuing illegitimacy and he hoped that, in time, Mary would realize that and that she would not resent Elizabeth for something the child had no power over.

Both of Henry’s daughters had suffered at their father’s hands and he hoped that he would never have to see one sister setting herself against the other, continuing their mothers’ rivalry.

Brandon had never made any attempt to conceal his visits from Henry.

He knew better than to travel to Hatfield behind his friend’s back, as he was bound to learn of the visits eventually, through a courtier who would be happy to try to stir up trouble for Brandon by implying that he was cultivating the little princess in secret, seeking to win her affections and to ensure that she was more loyal to him that she was to her father, or even that he might plan to see to it that Elizabeth would be the next ruler of England, even ahead of Henry and Jane’s sons. These
days, Henry was especially suspicious, ready to punish anything he perceived as disloyalty and a wise courtier knew that he had to tread carefully and give no cause for suspicion.

He had asked permission from his friend to visit Hatfield from time to time, so that he could call on Elizabeth, and Henry had granted him leave to do so whenever he wished, sending a message to Lady Bryan to let her know that she should allow the visits of the Duke of Suffolk whenever he came to Hatfield, even if he arrived without sending a message ahead, and that he could see Princess Elizabeth each time.

He was to be trusted absolutely.

He had not asked why Brandon would want to visit Anne’s child and Brandon suspected that his friend didn’t want to know.

He would have liked it if Henry asked about Elizabeth when he returned from his visits, even if the other man could not yet bring himself to travel to Hatfield and look at the face of Anne’s child – which was almost understandable, under the circumstances, especially given Henry’s discomfort over the invalidity of his union with Jane while Anne lived – but Henry never showed any inclination to do so and, as long as Elizabeth’s material needs were being met, Brandon did not have an excuse to press him to take more of an interest in the little girl’s welfare.

Even if he had dared to remind Henry that, regardless of the identity of her mother, Elizabeth was his child and he should never allow himself to forget that or to neglect her in any way, Henry was too stubborn to be swayed by either arguments or persuasion, no matter who they came from, and Brandon’s attempts at convincing him were more likely to turn him against the idea and make him more determined to ignore Elizabeth than they were to make him open his heart to his child.

If he decided to see Elizabeth, he would do so in his own time, when he saw fit, not before.

Jane Seymour, though not unkindly disposed to the child of her predecessor, focused her energies on Mary instead of Elizabeth, determined to do everything she could for the young girl.

It had been a disappointment to her that she was unable to persuade Henry to legitimise Mary and restore her to her former position, or even to convince him not to proceed against her should she refuse to take the Oath, as he demanded of her, but once Mary took the Oath and friendly relations were restored between herself and her father, Jane set out to befriend her, doing everything in her power to see to it that Mary’s lot at court would be as happy as it could possibly be, under the circumstances. Now that Mary was settled at court, enjoying her father’s affection and a position of high status as the King’s daughter, Brandon hoped that, if he approached Jane about the possibility of little Elizabeth being welcomed to court, she would be eager to welcome the child.

She was carrying a child of her own, after all, and so was certain to be sympathetic towards her little stepchild – and if Jane bore the son that Henry had craved since the day he married Katherine, he would not deny any request she made of him, even if her request was that he should bring Elizabeth to court. Perhaps he might even be glad to be given an excuse to summon the little girl to Whitehall, able to tell himself that he was welcoming Elizabeth back into his life for Jane’s sake rather than his own, even though he was the one who would derive the most pleasure from the presence of his enchanting little daughter, on whom he had doted before he sent Anne away.

As long as it meant that Elizabeth would be welcomed back to court, it didn’t matter what Henry told himself about the reason for her restoration to favour. The result would be the same.

Until then, Brandon would continue with the visits that, while they had begun as a duty undertaken out of guilt and pity, had soon become a pleasure.
Elizabeth was a beautiful, intelligent and charming child, and one who delighted in visitors, especially visitors from court – though the poor child saw few of them; as the King refused to see his younger daughter, there were few courtiers who would be willing to risk courting his displeasure for the sake of seeing the child, even if she was still the Princess of England and heiress presumptive to the throne and officially honoured as such – and Brandon found that he enjoyed spending time with her, and he was touched by her delight whenever he arrived.

The inhabitants of Hatfield must have seen his horse approaching, and recognized the livery of his attendants. As soon as he rode into the courtyard, two grooms hurried forward to take his horse, while Sir John Shelton, the steward of Elizabeth’s household, was waiting to receive him, bowing deeply as Brandon approached and giving him a broad smile of welcome.

“Welcome to Hatfield, Your Grace.” Shelton greeted him, genuine pleasure in his voice.

Although several of the people who had once counted themselves fortunate to be allowed a place in Elizabeth’s household, when the King was still married to her mother and determined to see to it that their infant daughter was honoured, had sought to resign their posts in the aftermath of Anne’s disgrace, hoping that they might be lucky enough to obtain places at court instead, where they were more likely to prosper than they were if they were left to share their little charge’s exile, Shelton was not one of those who sought to leave Hatfield. Through his wife he was kin to the Boleyn family and therefore to little Elizabeth, and he wanted to ensure that everything possible was done to advance the child’s cause, not caring if he was compromising his chances for personal advancement by opting to remain in Elizabeth’s service rather than seeking a post at court.

While it was undoubtedly an issue of grave concern to him that the King continued to refuse to visit his younger daughter, and while he dearly hoped that Elizabeth would soon be invited to court – which he firmly believed to be no more than her due as Princess, especially when the King’s illegitimate daughter, the Lady Mary, was welcomed there and was treated with great honour by the court and with affection by the King and Queen, by all accounts – until then, it was good to see that the Duke of Suffolk, one of the highest-ranking nobles in England and a close friend of the King’s, had taken an interest in Elizabeth and her welfare.

The child needed as many powerful friends as she could possibly have.

The King might see to it, through Master Cromwell, that his little daughter’s household was supplied with an allowance that was sufficient to keep it running, to ensure that Elizabeth could dress as her station demanded and even host an Open Hall for dinner, dining in state under a canopy so that the people in the surrounding areas could come to see their little princess in her royal splendour but a life of quiet exile would not always be appropriate for Elizabeth.

While it was true that life in the country would be healthier for a royal child, and that it would allow her to pursue her studies in peace, when she was older, she would need to appear at court frequently, to ensure that she was not cheated of the place that was rightfully hers, especially as she would need to be in a position where ambassadors could see her and report back to their masters on the beauty, grace and charm of the Princess of England, and in order to get back to court, she would need to have people who would be brave enough to speak to the King on her behalf, encouraging him to welcome her back and to honour her as princess should be honoured.

Even those members of Princess Elizabeth's household who did not harbour any ill will towards the Lady Mary had no desire to see her favoured by the King at Elizabeth's expense.

“Thank you, Sir John,” Brandon inclined his head in response to the greeting, returning the other man’s smile. Shelton was a good man, and from what he had seen on his visits, he treated his young charge with all honour and kindness, even though she was out of favour, instead of
neglecting her or being sharp with her as somebody else might, if they resented the fact that Elizabeth’s mother’s shame meant that their charge no longer drew royal notice or favour to them, as she once had and as they would have expected would be the case when they were first appointed to the then-coveted places at Hatfield. “I hope that Princess Elizabeth is well?”

“Entirely well, Your Grace,” Shelton assured him, wanting to make sure that the other man knew that he was attending diligently to his duties, and running the household at Hatfield as it ought to be run. Should the King make enquiries of Brandon, Shelton wanted to make certain that he would be able to give him a favourable account of affairs at Hatfield… though he suspected that it might be a long time before the King asked about his little daughter, much less paid a visit to her establishment or invited her to court. Shelton prayed that the King would forgive Elizabeth for being her mother’s daughter but he had not yet done so. “I have sent a message to Lady Bryan, to let her know that you were on your way, and she is preparing Her Highness to receive you.”

Brandon nodded, allowing a servant to take his cloak from him.

As always, he was expected to formally pay his respects to little Elizabeth as the Princess of England when he arrived – this was one reason that Catherine did not approve of his visits to Hatfield, unable to understand why he would choose to regularly put himself in a position where he was obliged to pay his respects to the child whose continuing legitimate status, she felt, had unjustly condemned Mary to bastardy, bowing to her as he would to a princess – so he carefully brushed his garments, to ensure that none of the dust from his journey clung to them.

When a servant appeared to let Shelton know that Elizabeth was ready to receive her guest, Brandon allowed Shelton to lead him down the corridor to Elizabeth’s presence chamber, a room that Henry had insisted should be readied for his daughter when he first granted Hatfield to Elizabeth as her residence, despite the fact that she had not yet been able to sit up unaided. Under normal circumstances, it would not have been necessary for a princess to have her own presence chamber as she was unlikely to be in a position to be receiving many important guests in her own right but, in the absence of the prince he had confidently expected and with many of his people still believing that Mary was the first rightful heir, despite the public announcements that the young girl was a bastard with no right to a place in the line of succession, Henry was especially determined to see to it that his infant daughter would be accorded all of the privileges of the heir to the throne, at least until she had a brother, so Elizabeth was equipped to receive her guests in state, and Hatfield was prepared as a residence befitting a royal heir.

The chamber Brandon was conducted to was almost identical to Henry’s presence chamber, except on a smaller scale. Little Elizabeth was sitting at the far end of the room when he entered, prettily clad in a green silk gown, her short legs swinging as she sat bolt upright on her velvet-covered throne, sheltered by a richly embroidered cloth of estate signifying her royal status. Lady Bryan stood to one side, regarding her little charge with pride, and Elizabeth’s ladies stood in a row behind her, all of them looking pleased to see a visitor, especially one of such high status.

Seeing Brandon and Shelton standing in the doorway, Elizabeth motioned for them to approach, with a graceful, regal gesture that was surprising in a child of her tender years.

Brandon approached, dropping to one knee in front of Elizabeth and bowing his head, as protocol demanded of him in the child’s presence. “Good morning, Your Highness,” he greeted her, smiling when Elizabeth solemnly extended her hand for him to kiss, comporting herself with the gravity of a young woman at least a decade her senior and all the poise and dignity of a princess.

Despite the child’s exile, despite the fact that it could well be a long time before she was allowed to return to the court, Elizabeth’s governess had made certain that her charge was well-versed in
the necessary etiquette for life at court, with a particular emphasis on the honours that Elizabeth was due as Princess, from each of her father’s courtiers and subjects. Young as she was, it was essential that she was treated with all the deference that her royal rank commanded by everybody with whom she came into contact, be they high or low.

None of them could be allowed to forget who she was.

Like all the members of Elizabeth’s household, Lady Bryan wished to do everything in her power to highlight the child’s royal status, determined to demolish the rumours that, even now, the King might seek to downgrade his daughter, especially now that the new Queen was expecting a child, and the country prayed for a Prince from her. When Queen Anne was arrested, she had had cause to fear that her little charge would be branded a bastard and that she, rather than having the honour of being Lady Governess to the Princess of England, would instead be left to care for the bastard child of a convicted traitor, a child that the King might even choose not to acknowledge as his own daughter, given the charges that were alleged against the child’s mother.

Now that that fear had not come to pass, she was going to make sure that nobody could mistake Elizabeth’s status.

“You may rise, Your Grace,” Elizabeth told him solemnly but, as soon as Brandon was on his feet, her adult aura melted away and she was a beaming child as she ran towards him, giggling gleefully as, ignoring Lady Bryan’s gasp of dismay, he swept her into his arms and swung her around twice before settling her in his arms, so that their faces were level. “I’ve missed you!”

“I’ve missed you too, my Lady Princess,” Brandon responded truthfully. He had not expected to grow as fond of Elizabeth as he had, especially when she was so like her mother, but the little girl had charmed him from his first visit to Hatfield, and he found her delight in his visits infectious, his initial pity for her deepening into genuine affection for the child. Even if Elizabeth was restored to Henry’s good graces and welcomed back to court, at least for visits for special occasions – a child of her tender years would fare better if she spent most of her time in the country, which was quieter and healthier for her – he would continue to visit her at Hatfield, and he would spend time with her at court, whenever he could. “I came to see you as soon as I could.”

“Is my Papa well?” Elizabeth asked.

“His Majesty the King is very well, my Lady Princess – and he has asked me to give you his love, and a kiss.” Brandon planted a kiss on Elizabeth’s cheek before he set her down, taking her hand and allowing her to tow him outside towards the gardens, as she did each time he came to pay her a visit, weather permitting. Lady Bryan followed them. He felt no remorse for lying; Henry might never have enquired about his daughter, much less charged him with any message for her, let alone a kiss, but Elizabeth did not need to know that. If he could give her the comfort of thinking that her father missed her, he would. “He is very busy at court, with many important things to do but I’m sure that he will be pleased when I tell him that you are well, and that you are growing into a very pretty girl,” he added, knowing that Elizabeth would be pleased by the compliment.

Her governess might be dismayed by her vanity but, for Brandon, it was charming.

She was a beautiful child, and he saw no reason for anybody to pretend otherwise.

Elizabeth nodded, satisfied by this, and then began to lead him on a tour of the gardens at Hatfield, pointing out the flowers that had bloomed since his last visit, occasionally scampering ahead of Brandon and Lady Bryan so that she could pluck some of her favourite flowers, grasping the stems in one plump hand as she strode through her little kingdom.
At almost four, she was taller than most children of her age, and remarkably precocious, already progressing quickly with her lessons in reading and writing, according to Lady Bryan, and beginning to learn Latin. Her blue eyes sparkled with excitement and her fair hair was beginning to show reddish-gold lights, which suggested to Brandon that, when she was older, her colouring was likely to be similar to that of her grandmother and namesake, Elizabeth of York.

Given the charges against Anne, it was no harm that her daughter should closely resemble her paternal grandmother. It was also more likely to endear her to Henry if she reminded him of his mother rather than her own. He would never feel at ease around a miniature of Anne Boleyn.

Even if Brandon had been able to force himself to believe that Anne was guilty of adultery, he would never be able to persuade himself that Elizabeth was not Henry’s child and he was certain that, once Henry saw his little daughter, he would be unable to resist her charms. He would be enchanted by her, as Brandon was, and ready to welcome her into his heart once more.

“How does the Lady Mary, Your Grace?” Lady Bryan asked, as she walked at Brandon’s side. “I hear that she is much at court these days, and that Queen Jane is fond of her.” Despite her best efforts to keep her tone carefully neutral, so as not to betray her true feelings about the issue, there was a slightly disapproving edge to her tone, one that Brandon could detect.

Although she took great care not to say anything to her young charge that would prejudice her against Queen Jane, aware of the fact that it would do none of them any good if, when Elizabeth was finally received at court, she behaved rudely towards her new stepmother, Lady Bryan could not bring herself to approve of the new Queen. Even if she had been able to absolve Queen Jane of responsibility for her involvement in the death of Queen Anne and the banishment of Elizabeth from her father’s sight, Lady Bryan felt indignant to think that the woman who had replaced Princess Elizabeth’s mother should focus so much of her energy on securing an honourable position at court for the King’s bastard daughter while ignoring the true princess.

She had never even received a letter from Queen Jane asking how Princess Elizabeth fared!

Some might think it kind of Queen Jane to wish to reconcile the Lady Mary with her father and restore her to his good graces, and to ensure that the unhappy girl would be well received at court and given a life of comfort and honour but, to Lady Bryan’s mind, Lady Mary had caused most of her own problems through her own obstinacy and refusal to accept her royal father’s will, despite the fact that she had been given ample opportunity to behave sensibly and accept the Oath, even during Queen Anne’s lifetime, and had made the choice to be obstinate and disobedient, while Princess Elizabeth was a young and innocent child, whose only fault, if one could even call it that, was that she was the daughter of the Queen that the King wished to rid himself of.

Queen Jane would have done better to have a care for Elizabeth’s interests than for Mary’s.

“She is well, Lady Bryan. Their Majesties are very fond of her and Lady Mary is a true ornament of the court, something I rejoice to see,” he said firmly, wanting to make it plain to her that, while he sympathized with her desire to see Elizabeth brought to court and recognized by her father, he was also delighted that Mary was restored to favour and had no desire to see her ignored in favour of little Elizabeth, should the latter be invited back to court. Mary had suffered enough without adding to her troubles, and he hated to think that Mary might be given further cause to feel resentment towards her younger sister. Because of Anne, there could be no question of downgrading Elizabeth from Princess to Lady but that did not mean that Brandon thought it was right that the little girl should be set above her older sister, as she was, or that he would not like to see the situation rectified, if it was possible and Henry was agreeable to the idea. “She has asked after Princess Elizabeth many times, and I know that she has spoken of her to the King.”
Although he knew that Mary was a kind-hearted person, Brandon also knew that she felt resentful of the fact that little Elizabeth was allowed to call herself a princess, a right that was denied to Mary, so he was pleasantly surprised when Catherine confided in him that she had heard Mary speaking to Henry of her young sister, remarking that she was a sweet child who would make him proud. Although she could not openly urge her father to welcome Elizabeth back when he was showing himself to be unwilling to do so, she had still dropped very broad hints on the subject, even though she must surely have known that, if she pushed him too far in her attempts to reconcile him with her sister, she might lose his good will, which had come at a high cost.

After everything that had happened to Mary, Brandon was glad to know that she was still capable of showing tenderness towards little Elizabeth, despite her belief that the child was a bastard, one who was unjustly permitted to hold the title that Mary saw as hers by rights. He was relieved to see that the hardships she had endured had not warped her character into a cold, bitter one.

Despite everything, he was confident that her innate goodness and kindness would survive.

“That was good of her,” Lady Bryan conceded, though her tone indicated that she did not fully believe Brandon’s words, doubting that Mary, who had much to gain if Elizabeth remain barred from their father’s sight, would champion the little girl’s interests. “Perhaps the King’s Majesty will send for the Princess Elizabeth’s Grace soon, or else visit Her Highness at Hatfield when he is next on progress through the country. I am certain that he would be pleased with her progress. She is a credit to him, in every way, a truly delightful child,” she suggested hopefully, watching Brandon’s reaction to her words and praying that his expression would reveal that Elizabeth had cause to hope for an invitation to court, even if he did not say the words aloud.

“Perhaps.” Brandon’s response was non-committal.

Much as he would have liked to be able to tell Lady Bryan that she and her young charge could expect to be summoned to court soon to attend on the King and Queen – and, in his opinion, it was only right that Elizabeth should be at Whitehall when Jane bore her child in the autumn - her youth might excuse her continued absence from court but if she was excluded from such an important family occasion, it would be noted by every ambassador at court – he could not give her the answer she wanted, as he had no idea when Henry would decide that he wanted to see Elizabeth again. He also needed to be careful that he said nothing that could be used against him, if he implied that he disagreed with Henry’s decision not to allow his daughter to come to court.

It would certainly do Elizabeth no good if Henry decided to forbid Brandon’s visits, thinking that the time he spent with her was making him too fond of her, and too inclined to champion her interests.

Elizabeth skipped back to them, handing her messy bouquet of blooms to Lady Bryan to hold until they could be brought inside and put in water and slipping her hand into Brandon’s.

Brandon slowed his stride, so that she would be able to keep up with him, smiling down at her. “Your sister will be very pleased when I tell her that you are such a good girl, my Lady Princess,” he told her kindly, using his free hand to fish in his pocket for the gift that Mary had given him for her little sister, when he mentioned that he planned to travel to Hatfield to see the child. Mary had also asked him to tell Elizabeth that she hoped to visit her soon but he had no intention of passing on that message, in case Mary was unable to visit. He let go of Elizabeth’s hand for a moment, so that he could unwrap the silk handkerchief and reveal the silver and pearl rosary. “Lady Mary told me to tell you that she hopes that you will say your prayers faithfully, my Lady Princess, every morning and every evening,” he said, smiling at Elizabeth’s solemn nod in response.
He would have thought that a doll, or some other such toy, would be a far more appropriate gift for a little girl not yet four, who was unlikely to want to spend more time at her prayers than she was obliged to, but he knew from Catherine that Mary’s faith was especially important to her of late. The poor girl spent many hours at her devotions, as though she was trying to atone for giving in and taking the Oath, rather than standing firm and risking execution, as others had before her, and for her, a rosary was an ideal gift for Elizabeth, especially as she lacked a mother to guide her – though if Anne had lived, he doubted that Mary would think her fit to guide a child.

“It’s very pretty,” Elizabeth said gravely, more impressed by the beauty of the rosary than by the spiritual significance of the gift – hardly surprising, for such a young child. “Will you tell the Lady Mary ‘thank you’ for me, Your Grace?”

“Of course, my Lady Princess,” he promised.

“You will be able to use them to pray for the Queen’s safe delivery, my Lady Princess.” Lady Bryan suggested brightly, looking up to meet Brandon’s eyes. “We say prayers for Queen Jane’s safe delivery every day in our chapel, Your Grace,” she assured him, as though she was afraid that he might think that she, along with the rest of the members of Elizabeth’s household, might be hoping that Jane’s hopes of bearing a healthy child would come to nothing and that she would only be the mother of stillborn babes, leaving their little charge as the King’s only legitimate child and heir.

The King would want to know that all of his subjects joined with him in praying for the birth of a healthy prince, and the inhabitants of Hatfield could not afford to be the exception.

Now that the Lady Mary had acknowledged her illegitimacy and accepted that she had no claim to the throne, whether her father and stepmother were blessed with a dozen strong sons or if they were childless, Princess Elizabeth was the one who stood to benefit if there was no Prince, and it would be dangerous for her household if it was suspected that they were ambitious for her.

These were dangerous times, and people might lose their heads for less.

Brandon nodded absently, inwardly wondering what Lady Bryan hoped for in terms of the expected royal child.

Did she hope that Jane would bear a daughter, so that Elizabeth would still be first in line for the throne and outrank her new baby half-sister in terms of precedence, or was she afraid that the birth of a daughter to Jane would lead Henry – perhaps with the encouragement of the Seymour family, who would want to see one of their own as their next ruler – to declare Elizabeth a bastard and strip her of her royal titles rather than seeing Anne’s daughter outrank Jane’s child, and hoping that the child would be a boy so that the King would be satisfied at last and the risk of Elizabeth being downgraded for the new baby’s sake would be minimized?

There was also the risk from Mary’s supporters to consider.

Regardless of which of the King’s daughters an Englishman believed to be legitimate and which the bastard, a son of Henry and Jane’s would be accepted as the heir ahead of both of his sisters. Those who supported Mary and who were longing to see her restored as heir to the throne would have less reason to want to encourage the downgrading of little Elizabeth, as Mary would not be made heir ahead of her half-brother, even if she was restored as Princess.

If Jane was able to present Henry with the son he longed for, that son would become England’s next King, and there would be few men in England who would dispute his right to the throne.
“I am sure that Queen Jane will be pleased to hear of your prayers for her,” he told Lady Bryan.

Elizabeth’s frown at the mention of the Queen did not go unnoticed by Brandon.

The sunny smile had vanished from her small face and a dark scowl, reminiscent of the expression on Henry’s face when something or someone displeased him, creased her brow.

Lady Bryan might tell her, over and over again, that it was very important that she should pray that Queen Jane would be safely delivered of her child and that she would bear a strong prince who would be the King when Elizabeth’s papa was dead, and many more princes after that, so that nobody in England would have to worry that they wouldn’t have a King years and years from now but Elizabeth didn’t want to pray for anything nice to happen to Queen Jane, not ever.

She wanted a baby brother when her mother was alive, mostly because she knew that Mama badly wanted to be able to give her one, but she didn't want one who was Queen Jane's son.

Queen Jane's son wouldn't be her brother the way her Mama's child would have been. He would only share half her blood, like the Lady Mary. Worst of all, his Mama would be to blame for Elizabeth's Mama being killed, and she didn’t think that she would ever be able to like him.

When Lady Bryan brought her to the chapel, or to her prayer desk, and told her to pray that Queen Jane would bear the King a Prince, Elizabeth prayed silently but, instead of praying for a baby brother, she prayed for her mother's soul, and asked her to watch over her from Heaven and to make sure that she was safe and that her Papa would love her again, instead of wanting Queen Jane to give him a son who would become his favourite child, and let him forget his daughter.

She didn't care if people might think that it was naughty of her to pretend to pray for one thing when she was really praying of somebody else, or if it was like lying to Lady Bryan.

It was Lady Bryan's own fault for trying to make her pray for a Prince.

She should know better than to think that Elizabeth would want that.

Brandon smiled at Elizabeth, hoping that she would return it, but the scowl remained on her face.

“Perhaps when the Prince is born, Their Majesties the King and Queen will ask that you should come to court to visit them, and to see the Prince, my Lady Princess,” he suggested brightly, breaking his unwritten rule about saying nothing to get the child’s hopes up about the prospect of a visit to court before Henry indicated that he was willing to allow it. He wanted to see how she truly felt about Jane. If she came to court, Elizabeth would need to know how to behave or her first invitation to visit the King and Queen could prove to be the last, especially if the coming child was a son. The King would not tolerate disrespect towards the mother of his son, least of all from Anne Boleyn’s daughter. There were limits to what Elizabeth’s youth would excuse. “Would you like to meet Queen Jane, your new stepmother? I am sure that she wishes to see you.”

“I don’t want to see her.” Elizabeth stuck out her lower lip in a stubborn pout, folding her arms across her chest and stamping her slippered foot, looking as though she would sooner visit an ogre than the new Queen of England. “I don’t like her, I don’t want her to be the Queen!” She insisted, ignoring her governess’ gasp of dismay at her words and her display of temper. She didn’t care if Lady Bryan scolded her for it and told her that it was naughty for a princess to behave like that. She didn’t like Queen Jane and she wasn’t going to pretend that she did.

“Princess Elizabeth!” Lady Bryan scolded her little charge, casting an imploring look at Brandon, hoping that he would believe that neither she nor any other member of Elizabeth’s household had
ever encouraged this attitude. If word reached the King’s ears, hinting that she was teaching Elizabeth to revile the Queen, it would mean serious trouble for her. In times like this, she couldn’t be certain that she would not be sent to the Tower if the King believed that she was influencing his daughter against her stepmother and against the half-brother he hoped that the Princess would soon have or, worse still, if he thought that she was teaching her that her mother was killed to make way for her replacement. Such a suggestion could bring her to the scaffold! “You must never, ever say such things about Queen Jane!”

Ignoring Lady Bryan, Brandon knelt down in front of Elizabeth, so that his face was level with hers, taking both of her hands in his.

“Queen Jane is a very kind woman, my Lady Princess,” he told her gently, hoping that she would be willing to listen to what he had to say and to believe him when he said it. “She makes your papa, the King, very happy. He loves her very much.” He saw Elizabeth’s eyes fill with tears at this, distressed at the idea of her mother being replaced in her father’s heart, and he quickly moved away from the issue of Henry. “She has been very kind to the Lady Mary; she invited her to come to stay at court with her, and she and Lady Mary have become very good friends. I’m sure that Queen Jane would like to be your friend as well, if you will let her,” he suggested coaxingly, although he knew that it was very likely that Jane would always favour Mary over her younger sister, and that she would not welcome Elizabeth as wholeheartedly, or be as eager to see her loved and honoured by her father. “Wouldn’t you like that?”

“No!” Elizabeth’s response was blunt and to the point. “I don’t want a stepmother, I want my Mama. Papa shouldn’t have let my Mama’s head be cut off with a sword so that this lady could be Queen instead of her. That was a bad thing for him to do. My Mama is the Queen!”

Brandon suppressed a wry smile, thinking that Elizabeth was right, though she did not know it and was unlikely ever to be told. Technically, Anne was still the Queen and Jane was not Elizabeth’s stepmother because she could not be Henry’s wife as long as Anne lived to claim that title... and it seemed that she was likely to live a very long time. He sobered quickly, however, knowing that the truth of the situation was far less important than Henry’s wishes in this matter.

He wished the world to believe that he was married to Jane Seymour, and he wished that a son would be born of their union and that this son would be accepted as his rightful heir.

Young as she was, Elizabeth would have to learn to adapt to her father’s wishes.

“Queen Jane is not to blame for what happened to your mother, my Lady Princess.” Although there were many who would dispute this statement, including some of the courtiers, Elizabeth could not be one of them. “The King asked her to marry him and to be his new Queen so that he could hope to have an heir, after Queen Anne was gone. He chose Queen Jane because she was a good, kind lady and he hoped that she would be kind to you and to the Lady Mary,” he assured her, uncomfortably aware of the fact that he was stretching the truth more than a little.

Henry had been so besotted with Jane that Brandon couldn’t imagine that he ever gave a thought to what kind of stepmother she would be to Henry’s two motherless daughters, not caring if she would be a loving second mother to the two girls, or if she would treat them with disdain, ignoring them in favour of the children she would bear herself or even encouraging Henry to distance himself from Mary and Elizabeth so that his love could be directed at the children of their union.

It was Mary’s good fortune that she had so kind and loving a stepmother, not any design of Henry’s to ensure her happiness.

Elizabeth was not impressed by his words, he could see that much. Her lower lip trembled and her
eyes shone with unshed tears.

“Why did my Papa want to have my Mama’s head cut off?” She asked in a soft voice, looking up at Brandon with trusting blue eyes, hoping that her friend would tell her the truth, something that none of her attendants were willing to do. Whenever she mentioned her Mama around them, they hushed her and told her not to speak of her, warning her that it would make her Papa the King angry if he learned of it. She didn’t know why anybody would have to tell him. “Lady Bryan said that Mama had to be punished because she did wicked things and betrayed Papa but I know that’s not true. My Mama wouldn’t do anything wicked, especially to my Papa. She loved him too much to do that and she wouldn’t do wicked things if she would have to leave me because of it.”

Lady Bryan took a step forward, ready to carry Elizabeth away, but Brandon held up a hand to halt her. Part of him would have been relieved to have the governess whisk the child away, relieved not to have to be faced with the task of explaining the issue to her, but another part of him knew that he deserved this. He had set into motion a chain of events that had cost four men their lives and that had led to Elizabeth being parted from her mother and it seemed fitting, in a way, that part of his punishment for that should be faced with the task of having to comfort Anne’s child.

He held out his arms to Elizabeth, hugging her gently and stroking her soft hair.

“I’m sorry, Bessie,” he said gently, dispensing with formality for the moment and cuddling the little princess in his arms as he would have held his son, had Edward been upset or frightened. Because of her rank, he doubted that Elizabeth’s attendants held her like this very often, even in the relative privacy of her nursery. As the carers of a princess, they would have to keep their distance, even when she had lost her mother, never saw her father and depended on them for affection. “I know that you miss your Mama very much, and I wish that you didn’t have to lose her.”

Not for the first time, he thought that it would have been so much better for all concerned if he had never opened his mouth about the allegations against Anne.

If he had held his peace, if he had trusted that Henry’s resolve to be rid of Anne and to replace her with Jane Seymour would not falter if he delayed, that he would not weaken and seek Anne’s bed before then, giving her a chance to conceive the prince that would make her position secure and ensure that nobody would be able to supplant her as Queen, then Henry’s marriage to Anne would have been quietly annulled, and Jane would have become Queen in her place with minimal fuss.

Anne would have cooperated, knowing that she was beaten, and would be comfortably provided for as a reward for not fighting. Henry would not have to worry about the fact that his union with Jane was bigamous and therefore invalid, and little Elizabeth would be able to know her mother.

Unlike Katherine and Mary, who might have proved to be a formidable pair of opponents if they had set themselves against him, Anne would never be able to raise an army against Henry – Brandon doubted that she would find more than a hundred men in England to defend her claim to the title of Queen if she sought to claim it after Henry married Jane, or who would champion Elizabeth as heir ahead of a son of Henry’s new marriage – so she was no threat, and could have been permitted to be a mother to her little girl, without any interference.

Henry could be gracious in victory once he had his own way.

Brandon imagined that Anne would even be able to convince Henry to allow their child to retain her legitimacy and her position as a Princess of England and as first heiress to the throne after his legitimate sons, if she was offering her cooperation. The little girl's position might be no different than it was now, except that she would have her mother's love and her father would not consider the sight of her an unwelcome reminder of something that he dearly longed to be able to forget.
“Why did Papa want to kill her?” Elizabeth asked, sniffing quietly and snuggling into his embrace, trusting that he would tell her the truth about her parents, all the things that Lady Bryan would never speak of. Her governess might think that she was a baby, who couldn’t understand anything, but she was a big girl and she knew more than Lady Bryan thought she did. “He wanted to marry the Lady Jane, didn’t he? And he knew that he couldn’t marry her if my Mama was alive because he could only have one wife.” Behind her, she heard Lady Bryan protest that she had never told her anything of the sort and didn’t know where she had got such an idea, which was true – Lady Bryan didn’t know that Elizabeth listened carefully whenever she heard her attendants whispering, knowing that they didn’t think she was old enough to understand what they were talking about, and that was how she found out the truth about her Papa and Lady Jane.

One of the things about Elizabeth that most enchanted Brandon was her intelligence.

She was remarkably clever and precocious for a child of her tender years, which was usually a wonderful thing but, at the moment, it seemed like a burden rather than a blessing.

An ordinary child of not quite four years would have accepted any explanation they were given for why their mother was gone and why they now had a new stepmother in her place, and would probably have accepted it if they were told that they were to be titled Lady from now on, not thinking that they should argue against their demotion, but Elizabeth was not an ordinary child. She was too intelligent to be fobbed off with a pat excuse and, however she had learned of Jane’s connection to her mother’s execution, it would not be easy to persuade her not to blame her, especially as he could say nothing that would imply that her father should be blamed.

He released her from his embrace, taking her by the hand and walking down the garden path with her, away from Lady Bryan, so that he could speak to her without being overheard by the governess. It was not that he distrusted Lady Bryan, he knew that she would never say or do anything that would compromise the interests of her young charge, but he felt that it was best if his words were for Elizabeth’s ears alone. Once they reached a carved stone bench, he sat down, lifting the little girl onto his lap and holding her for a few moments before he began to speak.

“What I have to say to you is very important, Bessie,” he began, speaking seriously but kindly. He didn’t want her to think that she was in trouble but, at the same time, it was vital that she understood the importance of what he was about to tell her. “I need for you to be a big girl, and to listen to me very carefully, alright?” She nodded solemnly. “And don’t talk to anybody about what I am about to tell you, do you understand? Some people might not like to hear it, and they might be cross if you mentioned it to them. If you want to talk about it, you need to talk to me, only to me.”

“I will.” Elizabeth promised.

“Your Papa is the King of England, and the King is the most important person in the country,” Brandon explained, hoping that he would be able to put it in a way that she would understand. “He was chosen by God to rule over us all, and he has to make decisions about what is best for the whole country, do you understand? Sometimes it’s hard for people to understand why the King does what he does, but it’s not for us to question him. The King is the King... and he loves Queen Jane very much. If you come to court, he’s going to want to see that you like her too.”

“I’ll never like her,” Elizabeth insisted stubbornly.

Brandon sighed. He could understand her feelings.

Even if he didn’t believe that Jane was responsible for Anne’s death, he could see why it might be easier for Elizabeth to believe that she was, so that she didn’t have to lay the blame on Henry for robbing her of her mother, just as Mary had blamed Anne when Henry sought to set Katherine
aside, refusing to believe that her father would ever have done so of his free will. It was natural that both of Henry’s daughters would want to blame somebody other than their father for the misfortunes heaped on them. However, if there was to be any hope of Elizabeth making a place for herself at court, as befitted the King’s daughter, she couldn’t be allowed to say anything of the kind towards anybody who might repeat her words around the Seymours or their friends.

“I hope that you’ll feel differently if you meet her. She really is a good lady, and she would be very kind to you,” Brandon told her, rubbing her back lightly. “But what’s important is that, no matter how you feel about her, even if you dislike her, you can never tell her that, or your father. If you come to court, when you’re a little older, you’re going to need to be polite to her, and remember that she’s the Queen and your father’s wife. You don’t have to like her, not if you don’t want to – though I think that you should give her a chance; if you do, maybe you’ll find that you like her after all – but you need to try to behave like you do, alright? To please the King, so that he won’t be angry.” He kissed the top of her head. “Can you try, Bessie? For me?”

After a long pause, she finally nodded, snuggling close to him and smiling up at him. “I’ll try, Your Grace.” She promised solemnly. “For you.”
Chapter Eleven

12th August 1537

His valet gave him the message as soon as he had entered his quarters, letting him know that the King had commanded him to attend him in his Privy chamber.

Brandon knew that Henry could not be kept waiting but, at the same time, he couldn’t appear before his sovereign travel-stained and reeking of sweat from the exertion of his long ride to Hatfield and back. He washed himself hastily and changed into fresh clothes before he hurried downstairs to the Privy chamber, waiting until he was announced before he entered.

He bowed low before Henry. “You wanted to see me, Your Majesty?”

“How is my daughter?”

The question was put so simply, as though Brandon should have expected that Henry would ask after Elizabeth when he returned from Hatfield, as though his friend had not all but disowned the child, that Brandon was too surprised to answer at first.

For the past year or more, every time he had travelled to Hatfield to see Elizabeth, knowing that Henry must be aware that he was making the journey, he had hoped that Henry would ask after Elizabeth, allowing him an opening to encourage him to bring her to court, but his friend never mentioned the child. Henry preferred to ignore his absences, perhaps telling himself that Brandon was as likely to be travelling to his own estates to ensure that all was running smoothly as he was to be visiting Elizabeth, rather than allowing the child’s name to pass his lips.

Now that Henry had finally broken his silence on the subject of Elizabeth, after so long, Brandon felt tongue-tied and it took him several minutes to find his voice.

He knew from the slightly strained tone of Henry’s voice as he asked the question that his friend had wrestled with the choice of whether or not he should broach the subject of Elizabeth with him, whether or not he was ready to let what happened in the past stay in the past, at least as far as possible, instead of allowing it to poison his relationship with the child he once loved so dearly. For Elizabeth's sake, it was crucial for him to handle this delicate moment with the care it needed, encouraging Henry without pushing him, and saying nothing that might discourage him.

“Princess Elizabeth is very well, Your Majesty,” he said at last. “She is a credit to Your Majesty; she’s a very clever child, and witty and charming too – and she is growing to be a great beauty.”

“Of course she is,” Henry said, more to himself than to Brandon. “She’ll take after her mother in that way.”

If he was ever able to get his fellow monarchs to accept Elizabeth as a legitimate princess, the rank that he no longer had the power to deny her, even if he wanted to rob himself of a marriageable pawn – and, with hindsight, he could see that it would have been foolish of him to lightly throw away the marital alliance Elizabeth could have cemented for him and for the son he would have to succeed him, had he chosen to declare her a bastard when he believed that her mother would soon be dead, especially when it would not have impacted his freedom to marry Jane as soon as Anne was dead – he was sure that when she was older, her portrait would be temptation enough to have the princes of Europe vying for her hand.
The last time he saw Elizabeth, he could already see that she was a lovely child, and her resemblance to her mother was uncanny. When she was grown, she would break hearts and enslave men with her beauty, just as Anne once enslaved him but Elizabeth was a Tudor as well as a Boleyn, and she would not lose her hold on a man once she had claimed him as her own.

One day, she would be an ornament to a court somewhere... likely leading its King a merry dance, charming every courtier and visitor, and making sure that she was in a position to have a great deal of influence, he mused, thinking that a child of his and Anne’s would be somebody to reckon with, even if that child was only a daughter.

He couldn’t allow himself to imagine what their son would have been like.

It had taken all of his courage to bring himself to speak of her now, to even consider the idea of allowing her to be a part of his life once more.

He knew that if he allowed himself to think about the son he had hoped Anne would give him, if he allowed himself to remember the happy times he had had with Anne, how much he had loved her and how bitterly he had come to hate her when their relationship soured, he would never be able to bring himself to do what he was now resolved to do. As much as he missed Elizabeth, and as much as he regretted that he had allowed their separation to continue for so long, banishing his innocent little child from his life because her mother had lost his love, he knew that if he allowed himself to think of the son he might have had, he would never be able to bring himself to see his daughter again, something Brandon’s words convinced him would be a waste.

“She is very like you, Your Majesty,” Brandon insisted, afraid that Elizabeth’s likeness to Anne might cause Henry’s budding interest in the child to wane when it was just beginning to awaken again and wanting to reassure his friend that his daughter had a great deal of him in her too. Henry would not be the only person at court who would find the prospect of a miniature Anne Boleyn disconcerting. He couldn't imagine that Jane Seymour would be able to warm to the little girl if she saw her predecessor in her. “She may resemble her mother in looks, apart from having the late Queen Elizabeth's hair, but she’s your child in every other way – she's very clever and she already loves her music, and she plays very well. I think that you would be very proud of her.”

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“Hmmm,” Henry murmured noncommittally, looking into the fire and smiling slightly at the thought of his little daughter playing music. She was young but she was not the first Tudor child with a passion for music. Mary loved music too, and he could remember that when he was a little boy, not much older than Elizabeth was now, he had played the lute and virginals quite well, well enough to win the approval of his stern grandmother, which was not an easy task by any stretch of the imagination, and to delight his sweet, gentle mother... Elizabeth’s namesake.

He had not thought that he would miss Elizabeth.

He thought that, once he had his sweet Jane, and the promise of children by her, and once the Lady Mary repented of her pride and disobedience and allowed him to welcome her back into his life as a penitent, loving and dutiful daughter, ending a separation that had lasted too long before Mary finally relented, he would have no cause to regret that Anne's child, the child he was forced to accept as legitimate whether he wished to or not, was not part of his new family but he was wrong.

For a time, he was able to tell himself that he was happy with Jane, despite the circumstances of their union, and that he could be content with only her and the children they would have.

When the Lady Mary finally repented of her obstinacy and disobedience, accepting that she was illegitimate and showing herself to be properly grateful for the kindness he had willingly shown her now that he was no longer obliged to treat her sternly to break her defiance, knowing that she
enjoyed a much more honoured position than the bastard daughter of another monarch could hope to enjoy, he was delighted to be able to welcome her back into his life, especially when he saw that she and Jane were genuinely fond of one another.

Jane was overjoyed when he told her that they were to pay a visit to Mary at Hundson, and she had done all she could to make Mary feel welcome once she came to court.

For a time, he was able to tell himself that he had no need of Elizabeth, able to leave his daughter to the care of her household and try his best to put her from his mind, able to allow the bitter anger he felt towards Anne to poison his love for her daughter, but, inevitably, she began to creep into his thoughts, making him wonder how she fared and miss having her his his life.

Perhaps it was the thought of his coming child that had forced Elizabeth to the forefront of his thoughts. As much as it pained him to know that his sons by Jane would be bastards in the eyes of God, he could not continue to make himself hold Elizabeth at fault for Anne’s choices.

He did not want his son to be born into a family that remained divided, or for his daughter to view him as a stranger.

It stung to know that another man, even his dear friend, visited his child more frequently than he did and knew her better.

Brandon was a friend to Elizabeth but Henry would be all but a stranger to her.

His daughter was fast approaching her fourth birthday and he had not seen her since several months before she turned three, since that dreadful day when Anne had accosted him in the garden and, with Elizabeth in her arms, pleaded with him to give her a second chance.

What might have become of them all if he had listened to her that day?

Would Anne have been able to convince him that she was innocent, convinced him to give her the second chance she pleaded for, or would his love for Jane have remained steadfast?

Would he have gone back to Anne, perhaps conceiving a son with her at last, knowing that if she bore him a Prince, he would have no choice but to forsake his vow to take Jane as his wife?

Would he have been able to let Jane go, so that she could marry another man and give him children or would he have had to keep her in his life, even if only as his mistress?

Would Jane have loved him enough to be willing to be his mistress once it became clear that she could not be Queen?

They were questions that he could not answer, and might never be able to answer.

“She asked after you today,” Brandon persisted, taking advantage of the opportunity presented by Henry’s unexpected softening. “She always wants to know how you are. She was so happy when I told her that you were well. She admires you very much – and I know that she misses you,” he added daringly, aware that he was taking a gamble and that he should take care to say nothing that Henry might construe as an allegation that he neglected his little girl in case he made him angry and marred Elizabeth’s chance of being welcomed back into her father’s life.

He would not allow a careless word to adversely affect Elizabeth, not if he could help it.

He owed it to Elizabeth to repay the loss of her mother by ensuring that she was restored to her father's favour. If a day ever came when she learned of the part he played in her mother's downfall,
if she was ever told that the first allegation of misconduct against her mother came from his lips, he wanted to be able to swear to her that he had done all in his power to make amends, promoting her interests at every opportunity, despite Catherine's repeated attempts to persuade him to forget Elizabeth as his time and energy would be better spent urging Mary's restoration.

Henry said nothing for several long minutes, and Brandon was afraid that he might have gone too far but he was relieved when his friend turned around to look at him with a wry smile.

His decision was made.

“You had a hard ride to Hatfield and back today, didn’t you, Charles?” Henry remarked, not waiting for answer before getting to the point. “How would you feel if I asked you to ride there again tomorrow, to escort a very special guest back to court?”

Brandon smiled widely, taking Henry’s meaning. “I’d love to.”

13th August 1537

Lady Bryan was so delighted to hear of Henry’s intention to receive Elizabeth at court that she had not made so much as a murmur of protest when Brandon – half-afraid that if he delayed too long, Henry would send a messenger telling him that he had changed his mind and did not want him to bring Elizabeth to court after all – had insisted that they should set out within two hours of his arrival at Hatfield. Although that did not give Elizabeth’s attendants much time to pack her things, it was more important that the child should set out for court as soon as possible.

The King must never be kept waiting, especially when they had waited so long for this invitation.

Half a dozen of Elizabeth's finest gowns were packed in a trunk for her, along with her lute, her hornbook and her favourite doll. Anything else that she needed would be sent on the next day.

Although she was so excited when they set out that she was bouncing on the seats of the carriage, gazing out the small window at the scenery as they moved through the countryside, Elizabeth soon became drowsy and dozed off, despite the jostling of the carriage and the occasional shouts from people who saw the little royal procession. Even those who disputed the child's right to the title of Princess, and who hoped to see the Lady Mary legitimised, could not help but be interested in and awed by the royal procession. The little princess was fast asleep when they reached London and Brandon had to wake her when the carriage stopped in the courtyard at Whitehall Palace. He held one of her hands as they walked into the palace, while Lady Bryan held the other.

Two grooms followed, carrying Elizabeth’s trunk between them.

“Did His Majesty say where Princess Elizabeth is to lodge while she is at court?” Lady Bryan asked, looking rather worried.

During Queen Anne’s time, a large, airy apartment had been set apart for Elizabeth’s visits to court, with the Queen personally giving directions for the opulent decoration and luxurious furniture. Lady Bryan knew that she could bring her charge there without needing to ask where to go but she felt uneasy about going to that apartment now, without express instructions. She was afraid that the King might not intend for his daughter to occupy the same suite of rooms that she had before. He might even consider it impertinent of them to take it without being given leave.

For all she knew, Elizabeth’s old apartment was intended for a nursery for the coming prince, in which case the King would surely be very angry if they presumed to usurp it.
Brandon shook his head. "No, my lady – I will send a message to the King’s steward to ask him. I am certain that suitable lodgings have been readied for Her Highness. In the meantime,” he smiled down at Elizabeth, whose pleasure at being back at court once more was plain and who was looking around with avid eyes, matching what she saw around her to her memories of her last visit, “I would be pleased to offer you the use of my apartment so that you can wash and change, if you will do me the honour of accepting, my Lady Princess.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Elizabeth said solemnly, nodding her head.

A princess must always be courteous to those around her and, when somebody did her a service, she should respond graciously, so that they did not think that she was rude.

“It is very kind of Your Grace,” Lady Bryan thanked him sincerely, inwardly thanking God for leading the Duke of Suffolk to take such an interest in her little charge after Queen Anne’s death. She didn’t know what they would have done without his visits all these years, and she was certain that they could thank him for the King’s decision to welcome Princess Elizabeth to court now.

It was strange that a man who was known to have had no love for Queen Anne, and who was rumoured to sympathise with the Princess Dowager and her daughter, should take such a keen interest in the welfare of the Princess but Lady Bryan was not going to question their good fortune. Any influential courtier willing to stand a friend to the Princess was a blessing.

“It is my honour and my pleasure.” Brandon assured her, leading the way to his apartment.

As a duke, he occupied a large, comfortable suite of rooms – in fact, he was lodged more comfortably than the Lady Mary, even though, as the King’s acknowledged daughter, she was now entitled to permanent lodgings at court and to a small retinue of servants, befitting her station – and he was happy to place them at Elizabeth’s disposal, until he could find out from the steward of Henry’s household where Elizabeth could expect to be lodged. He only hoped that Mary had not been turned out of her apartment to accommodate her younger sister.

Catherine was in their apartment when he arrived and she raised a surprised eyebrow at the sight of Elizabeth and her governess, regarding the child silently for a few moments before her husband cleared his throat pointedly, reminding her that she was expected to curtsey to Elizabeth. She swept a deep curtsey to the child, as etiquette demanded of her, murmuring a greeting.

“My Lady Princess.” Although she would have preferred to address the child as ‘Lady Elizabeth’, to show that she did not think that she had a true right to the title of Princess, the title that should belong to Mary, Catherine knew better than to try anything of the sort. It would not be safe to thus snub Elizabeth, who was very young, and likely to repeat her words. The King had decided to welcome his younger daughter back to court and she knew that he was certain to demand the honours of a princess on her behalf, since it was he who declared that the title should be hers.

As unjust as she thought the King’s decision to honour Elizabeth above Mary was, she could not presume to question his right to decide the terms on which he recognised his daughters, not unless she desired to pay a visit to the Tower as an unwilling guest of the Constable’s.

If the King could order the execution of a woman he insisted on thinking of as his Queen, a duchess could not think herself safe from the scaffold if she offended him.

Even her husband’s friendship with the King would not protect her from his wrath.

“This is my wife, Catherine, Your Highness,” Brandon made the introductions. “It is my honour to
present the Duchess of Suffolk to you.”

Elizabeth smiled up at Catherine, inclining her head regally by way of greeting.

“It is an honour to meet you, Lady Suffolk,” she said solemnly, glancing up at Brandon to see if she had greeted his wife appropriately. His approving smile, which was mirrored by the one on Lady Bryan’s face, assured her that she had and she was glad of that. As well as her ordinary lessons, Lady Bryan always gave her lots of lessons about how a princess ought to behave. There were a lot of rules that she needed to remember and she was determined that she wasn’t going to forget a single one of them now that she was at court. She was going to do everything perfectly.

She didn’t want her Papa to decide to send her back to Hatfield because she couldn’t behave herself well enough to be allowed to stay at court.

Although she said nothing, Catherine gave her husband a questioning look, wondering why he would choose to bring Elizabeth to their apartment, and Brandon hastened to explain.

“I invited Princess Elizabeth and Lady Bryan to come to our apartment, so that my Lady Princess can wash and change her gown,” he explained, smiling down at Elizabeth and squeezing her hand reassuringly. “While I find out from His Majesty’s steward where this young lady is to lodge.” He looked up to address Lady Bryan, indicating the door to the right. “The bedchamber is through there, Lady Bryan, and the water closet is beyond. I’ll send a message to His Majesty, to let him know that you have arrived, and I’ll have hot water sent up to you right away. Lady Suffolk will help the Princess dress – won’t you, my dear?” He gave her a pointed look.

Although the expression on Catherine’s face indicated that she would rather not tend to Elizabeth, she nodded and forced herself to smile at the little girl. “Of course, my Lady Princess.”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth turned to Lady Bryan, an appealing expression on her small face. “May I wear my new gown, Lady Bryan?” She asked, hoping that her governess would say ‘yes’.

She no longer received as many new gowns now as she used to when her Mama was alive.

When she asked Lady Bryan why this was, her governess explained to her that her Papa sent an allowance for her clothes now, but it wasn’t as much money as her Mama used to have to spend on her clothes. Because of this, they had to be careful that they were never extravagant, which meant spending too much money on things that they didn’t really need.

Elizabeth liked it better when she could be as extravagant as she wished and have so many beautiful gowns that she couldn’t count them all but she understood Lady Bryan's explanation and knew that she should not grumble about things she couldn't change, and that she should remember to be grateful for the nice things she did have. There were lots of little girls whose papas were not the King, and who had no fine gowns at all. Her new gown was made for her last week, and she hadn’t worn it yet because it was a very fine one, meant for special occasions, but since she was at court now, she would need to look pretty when she saw her Papa, as a princess should.

“You may,” Lady Bryan told her, smiling indulgently at Elizabeth’s pleasure and feeling relieved to be back at court with her small charge.

Now that Elizabeth was at court, she was sure that the little girl would be able to charm the King when he saw her.

She was a wonderful little girl, beautiful, clever and charming, and Lady Bryan was certain that the King would be very proud of his daughter. She was a credit to him and, once he saw her, he would
surely forget the anger he had harboured towards Elizabeth’s mother and remember that, above all else, she was his daughter and, until Queen Jane bore her baby, his only legitimate child.

If Queen Jane shared her predecessors’ misfortune and failed to give the King a living son, Elizabeth would be Queen one day… though Lady Bryan would never dare voice that thought aloud.

It was only fitting that the Princess of England should be received at court and, now that she was here, the King would surely want to make sure that she dressed in a manner befitting her royal rank, so that she would not look like a pauper before his court. It would cause great shame to the King and the country if ambassadors from other courts saw that the little princess was ill-provided for and the King's pride was no secret. Now that the child would be seen by the nobility and foreign dignitaries, Lady Bryan could hope that she would be supplied with a more generous dress allowance for her small charge, instead of being left to haggle with cloth merchants and seamstresses to stretch the money she was given as far as it could go.

It would be a relief not to have to be constantly counting every shilling, and to be free from the indignity of knowing that her charge's household was indebted to those who supplied them.

Catherine led the way into the bedchamber, covering her irritation at the intrusion into her family’s private quarters with a pleasant smile. Lady Bryan knelt in front of Elizabeth to help her out of her travelling clothes, while Catherine summoned her maid to take the garments away to be laundered. When another maid arrived shortly afterwards with a large jug of hot water, Catherine took it from her and poured it into a silver bowl, stepping back while Lady Bryan washed her charge’s face and hands before turning her attention to her hair, which needed combing.

Her husband’s frequent visits to Hatfield were a source of irritation to her, especially as his duties at court allowed him little free time, time that she felt would be better spent visiting Edward, who was at an age where he needed his father's guidance more than ever, than travelling back and forth to Hatfield to see Elizabeth. She knew that Charles sympathised with Mary and that he had had no love for Anne, so she did not understand why he persisted in visiting Elizabeth, making the journey on a monthly basis, even when he was very busy, and why he was so charmed by the child, at least not until she saw the little princess for herself.

That Elizabeth was a lovely child was undeniable.

Her small, heart-shaped face was solemn in repose, far too solemn for a child her age, but it lit up when she smiled, and Catherine could imagine that when she was ten years older, she would be blossoming into a beautiful young woman. Young as she was, she carried herself with all the grace of a princess, accustomed to the obeisance she had received since her infancy.

There was a hint of sadness in her blue eyes however, and Catherine could guess the cause.

She might not have had any love for Anne, she might believe that it was better for all of England that the woman had been sent to the block before she could do the country any more damage and that the King had replaced her with a good, gentle woman like Queen Jane, but for all her faults, Anne had been Elizabeth’s mother, and she had loved her child very much.

For Elizabeth, who was coming to court for the first time since her mother’s death, the prospect of being received by the father who had ordered her mother's execution, after being exiled from his life for over a year, not to mention seeing another woman sitting in her mother’s place by the King’s side, had to be a daunting one and Catherine pitied her.

Queen Jane would be kind to her, Catherine was sure of that. She would treat her far more
graciously than Anne ever treated Princess Mary.

The Queen opened her heart to Mary, ensuring that the young girl would be reconciled with her father and welcomed back to court, where she would be honoured as the King’s daughter, enjoying as many of the privileges of a trueborn princess as the King could be persuaded to allow her. She was sure to treat Elizabeth well rather than holding the child accountable for her mother’s sins.

However, Catherine could see how the child’s return to court might also cause problems for Jane.

Since Mary’s return to court, Jane had seen to it that she was treated as the second lady of the court, yielding precedence only to the Queen while the highest-ranking noblewomen were obliged to defer to her – something that virtually all of them were pleased to do, rejoicing for Mary’s sake – but that was something that was bound to have to change now.

In the eyes of the law, and according to the Oath she had taken when she submitted to her father’s will, Mary was a bastard, and Elizabeth was a princess.

It would be unthinkable for the King’s illegitimate daughter to be allowed to take precedence over the Princess of England, even if the latter was a little child while the former was a young woman, but for Mary, who had gone through so much and whose restoration to her father’s good graces had come at such a heavy price, it was certain to be galling to watch her half-sister take precedence over her, and even more galling to be obliged to pay her respects to her, especially as she was certain to be called upon to do so in the presence of the court.

For Mary, this would surely be a bitter reminder of the days when Anne held power and she was constantly coaxed and ordered to accept that her infant half-sister was the true heir to the throne.

Catherine could only hope that, if Mary was distressed about it, she did not allow her father to see it, undoing her previous good work in winning his favour by angering him.

Only one with the patience of a saint would be able to endure the indignities heaped on Mary since Anne Boleyn tempted the King away from the sainted Queen Katherine but the King would never be willing to tolerate any protests on Mary’s part and would never allow himself to admit that he had treated his daughter unjustly. Instead, he was likely to punish Mary for her defiance, perhaps banishing her from court and stripping her of the privileges he had allowed her.

Once Elizabeth was washed and her hair was combed, Lady Bryan unpacked her new gown from the trunk, shaking it out and inspecting it carefully, satisfying herself that it was not crumpled and would not require pressing. She passed the gown into Catherine’s hand while she hunted through the trunk to find the right petticoat, of white damask, the hem embroidered with tiny roses in gold thread. The gown was simply cut but it was made from soft blue satin, which would bring out the little girl’s eyes. The matching blue hood was trimmed with gold ribbon and tiny seed pearls and the tiny slippers were covered in the same blue satin that the gown was made from.

Between them, Catherine and Lady Bryan got Elizabeth dressed, carefully arranging her hood. Lady Bryan fastened a tiny pearl pendant on a gold chain around Elizabeth’s neck to complete her outfit, and the little girl touched it with careful fingers, looking sad.

“My Mama gave me this before she went to Heaven,” she confided in Catherine in a soft voice, stroking the pearl gently and closing her eyes, picturing her mother kneeling in front of her, fastening the pendant around her neck. It seemed like such a long time ago, so long that Elizabeth was afraid that she was beginning to forget what her Mama looked like. She was not allowed to have any likeness of her Mama, even when she begged Lady Bryan to get one for her and promised that she would never tell anybody about it if she did. “She was very beautiful,” she spoke firmly, as
though reminding herself of this, making sure that she didn’t forget that. Her memories of her Mama were precious and she never wanted to lose them. “The most beautiful Queen in the world. Now she’s the most beautiful angel in Heaven.”

“My Lady Princess,” Lady Bryan’s reprimand was a gentle one as she laid a hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder to silence her. “Remember, we have spoken of this – you must be very careful about what you say at court; you must not anger the King’s Majesty, or offend the new Queen.”

“I know,” Elizabeth said quietly, fingerling her pendant once more before lowering her hand.

Catherine felt awkward, unsure what she ought to say.

Despite her feelings about Anne, despite her belief that it would have been better for England if the ship that had carried the other woman home from France had sunk, it made her uncomfortable to hear Lady Bryan cautioning Elizabeth against speaking of her mother. She didn’t like to think that a young child could find herself in trouble for nothing more than mentioning her mother. Elizabeth would not turn four until next month, and she was expected to pretend that her mother had never existed when she was at court, because it might make the King angry if he heard Anne’s name mentioned, even from their child’s lips. It was wrong, she knew that now, and for the first time, she was thankful that Charles had reached out to the lonely child.

Princess or bastard, Elizabeth needed somebody she could rely on.

When Elizabeth was ready, Lady Bryan led her out of the bedchamber by the hand, with Catherine following after them. Brandon was waiting in the reception area for them and he bowed as Elizabeth approached, bending down to kiss her tiny hand.

“You look beautiful, Bessie,” he told her kindly, thinking that she must be nervous. An audience with the King was daunting for an adult, let alone a child. “The King will be very proud of you.”

“Am I going to see my Papa?” Elizabeth asked, wondering what would happen now.

Before, when she came to court, her Papa would usually come to the nursery to see her, and they would play games together and sometimes go out to the gardens, but she knew that other people went to see him in his rooms and she wasn’t sure which would happen this time. Part of her wanted to see her Papa in private, so that he could hug her and play with her instead of them having to behave formally, like a King and Princess instead of like a Papa and his little girl, but she also wanted all of the lords and ladies of the court to see her dressed in her beautiful new gown.

Lady Bryan said that it was very important that they should remember that she was the princess.

Elizabeth didn’t know how anybody would ever be able to forget it.

“You are,” Brandon promised her. “His Majesty wants me to bring you to his Privy chamber as soon as you’re ready, so that he can greet you. The Queen will be with him, and the Lady Mary will be there too,” he added, hoping that the promise of seeing the older sister she admired and was very fond of would be enough of a pleasure for Elizabeth to outweigh her unwillingness to meet Jane. He extended his hand so that she could take it. “Are you ready, my Lady Princess?” He asked her, his warm smile softening the formality of his address.

She nodded solemnly, placing her hand in his. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Good girl. Chin up.” He encouraged her gently. “There’s nothing to be frightened of.”

“I’m not frightened!” Elizabeth frowned indignantly, as though Brandon had accused her of a truly
unspeakable crime, and her indignation banished any trace of fear she might have felt, allowing her
to walk with him with her head held high, downstairs from the Brandons’ quarters to the Great
Hall, where the courtiers were gathered. Some of them were probably waiting to see her Papa but
they would have to wait because Elizabeth was more important than they were and had to be
allowed to see the King before they would be permitted to.

Before they entered the Great Hall, Brandon spoke quietly to the liveried herald, who nodded
comprehension and banged his staff on the ground three times before announcing Elizabeth in a
ringing voice that easily filled the expansive Hall.

“Make way for the Princess Elizabeth’s Grace! Make way for Her Highness!”

The sea of courtiers parted before them, and as Elizabeth passed through, she saw that while many
of them were smiling at her as they made their bows and curteys, there were some of them who
weren’t. One man, who wore dark clothes and who had grey curling hair, stared at her with cold,
hard eyes as she walked past him, not bowing like the other men, not even a little bit, and Elizabeth
felt like shivering as she looked at him. She didn’t know who this man was, but she knew that he
didn’t like her and it made her feel very uncomfortable.

She had never seen him before, and never said or did anything to him that might have offended him
so she couldn’t understand how he could dislike her.

Outside her Papa’s Privy chamber, two grooms were standing on either side of the door and one of
them knocked for her, waiting for her Papa to call for them to enter before he opened the door and
announced her to him.

“The Princess Elizabeth, Your Majesty.”

Elizabeth curtsied as soon as she saw her Papa, feeling glad that Lady Bryan made her practice her
curtsie so often since it meant that it was perfect now, without any wobbling at all.

“My Majesty,” she greeted him politely and she kept her eyes downcast, as she was taught to.

Until the moment his daughter stepped into the room, Henry wasn’t sure how he intended to greet
her.

For over a year, he had done everything in his power to banish every reminder of Anne from his
life, not wanting anything to bring her to mind. All he wanted was to forget her; if he could forget
her, he could forget all of the things he had done while he was infatuated with her, just as he could
forget that she was still his wife, not the woman sitting next to him, but Anne was not an easy
woman to forget and little Elizabeth was so like her mother that the resemblance was uncanny, and
he had not been able to bear the thought of looking at his child’s face.

Even when the Pilgrimage of Grace was in progress and Cromwell, along with some of his other
advisors, had recommended that it would be better for him to bring both of his daughters to court to
show the people that the royal family was a united one, he couldn’t bring himself to send a
message to Hatfield and to Elizabeth’s governess to let her know that she should bring his daughter
to court at once. Fortunately, there had been no rebellion near Hatfield and no whisper of a plot to
abduct the child to place her on the throne as a pretender against her own father, a puppet ruler in
whose name the rebels could do whatever they wished, so he was not forced to bring Elizabeth to
court for her safety and to ensure that she was not used against him.

From time to time, he found himself missing his spirited little girl and longing to see her again but
he was always able to suppress that impulse, especially once Jane came to him to tell him that she
was carrying his child, and he had the promise of the son that she would surely bear him later in the autumn, together with the presence of Mary, the prodigal daughter welcomed back into his court and into his heart, to console him for little Elizabeth’s absence.

Now that his little girl stood before him, however, he felt like weeping when he saw how much she had grown and he realized how much time he had missed with her, time that they could have had together under other circumstances, had he not been so stubborn and so foolish as to try to cut his child out of his life. She was Anne’s daughter, yes, but she was his daughter too and that was what truly mattered. To all intents and purposes, Elizabeth was left motherless and as her father, he owed it to her to see to it that she would have a place in his new family.

It might be awkward, especially at first, but that did not absolve him of his duty to her.

Steeling his courage, he strode over to her, lifting her up in her arms and kissing her on both cheeks, holding her close and smiling when, after the briefest moment of hesitation, she put her arms around him and returned his kiss.

“My Elizabeth.” His voice was tender as he spoke her name and he hugged her to him, marvelling at what a pretty child she was growing into. She was a toddler the last time he saw her, a frightened toddler clutched in the arms of her terrified mother, but she was a little girl now, one whose intelligence shone from her keen blue eyes and whose face made it plain that the reports of her prettiness and the predictions that she would be a beautiful woman one day were not exaggerated. “Welcome to court, my sweet little princess.”

“My Papa.” She was still angry with him for sending her Mama to have her head cut off but Elizabeth couldn’t help feeling glad that she was back in her Papa’s arms once more, as his princess, and she didn’t think that her Mama would mind that, not really. Her Mama had loved her Papa very much and she wouldn’t mind Elizabeth loving him too, even if he had done a very wicked thing. She would want for her to be safe and happy at court, and for her Papa to take care of her, instead of wanting her to stay at Hatfield with only Lady Bryan and her servants.

Henry twirled slowly with his daughter in his arms before kissing her cheek again and setting her on her feet. He laid his hands on Elizabeth’s shoulders as he turned to acknowledge Lady Bryan, who curtsied deeply when his gaze fell on her.

“Thank you for your diligent care of Princess Elizabeth,” he told her, inclining his head slightly and feeling thankful that his daughter’s governess was a kind and diligent woman who seemed to genuinely care for her welfare instead of valuing her position in the child’s household only as a means of securing royal favour for herself and her kin. He was uncomfortably conscious of the fact that Elizabeth’s household at Hatfield had been neglected from time to time, and that Lady Bryan could have had a difficult time seeing to it that Elizabeth had everything she needed and he resolved to make arrangements with Cromwell to increase the allowance for Elizabeth’s household expenses and to ensure that the quarterly installments would be paid without fail.

His daughter must never be allowed to want for anything.

“It has been my honour to have the care of the Princess.” Lady Bryan assured him, sweeping another curtsy and looking very pleased with his praise.

Henry nodded, and reached out to take Elizabeth’s hand in his, leading her over to the fireplace, where Jane was sitting on a cushioned chair, with Mary standing directly behind her. Jane began to rise as he approached but he motioned for her to stay where she was, not wanting her to exert herself in her condition. Their son was growing in her womb, and he needed to be protected. He smiled down at Elizabeth, bending down a little and indicating Jane.
“Allow me to introduce you to your new stepmother, Elizabeth. This is Queen Jane.”

Had he looked back at the doorway, where Brandon and Lady Bryan stood, he would have seen the nervous expressions on their faces as they watched Elizabeth’s movements with avid eyes, afraid that the child would show her dislike of Jane and anger him. However, they need not have worried. Elizabeth might not have liked Queen Jane but she was a clever girl, and she remembered Brandon’s warning that she should never demonstrate any dislike of her new stepmother.

She curtsied to Jane, showing all present that she had inherited her mother’s inborn grace. “I am pleased to meet you, Your Majesty.” She said politely, taking a half step back towards her Papa and smiling up at him. Even if being at court meant that she had to be around Jane as well, she was glad to be with her Papa again.

“I am so pleased that you could come to visit us, Elizabeth,” Jane said, addressing her by her name rather than using the title of Princess, which she knew would surely have upset Mary. She smiled, wanting to make the little girl feel welcome, even though she was concerned about the impact that her visit might have on Mary. It was not Elizabeth’s fault that she was the daughter that the King chose to acknowledge as legitimate, after all, and the sins of the mother could not be held against the child. Mary was a true friend as well as a daughter to her but she was also Elizabeth’s stepmother, and she had a responsibility to stand in a mother’s place to her and treat her kindly.

Elizabeth made herself smile in return, even though she didn’t want to. “Thank you, Your Majesty.” Jane shifted a little in her chair, making Elizabeth feel afraid that she might expect her to give her a hug and a kiss as she had her Papa. She didn’t want to do that so she looked away from her quickly, before she had to let her kiss her, and beamed up at Mary. “Sister!” She ran towards Mary, feeling excited to see her sister again, after so long. Mary bent down to let Elizabeth put her arms around her neck and give her a kiss on the cheek. “Do you live at court now too?”

“Some of the time.” Mary answered, stroking Elizabeth’s hair and marvelling at how much her sister had grown. “I also live at Hundson sometimes.”

“Is it nice there?” Elizabeth asked innocently, feeling pleased when Mary nodded in response to her question. She was pleased to know that her sister had a nice place to live, and that she was allowed to visit the court too, something she wasn’t allowed to do before. Lady Bryan told her that Mary was not permitted to come to court because she had offended the King by disobeying him, which was a very wicked thing for any of his subjects to do, and doubly wicked for one of the King’s children who owed their father obedience, but Mary must have decided to be good.

Elizabeth was sure that her Mama would be pleased to know that Mary had been good.

She knew from some of the things she had overheard Lady Bryan and her other ladies say that it made her Mama very unhappy and cross when Mary behaved badly.

“Very nice,” Mary said, suppressing her feelings of resentment over the fact that, while Hundson was a pleasant residence and while she had a household of servants, her residence was not as grand or her household as large as those granted to Elizabeth. Even though she now enjoyed her father's favour, and even though he had insisted that she should be treated with the respect due to her royal blood, she was not to be allowed to forget that she was no longer a princess. Despite her hopes of restoration, her father showed no inclination to reinstate her to her rightful position and, with the exception of Ambassador Chapuys, nobody at court would dare to address her by any title higher than the one her father had decreed should be hers.

Henry came over to stand next to his daughters, laying a hand on Mary’s shoulder.
“The Lady Mary has recognised her error, and proven herself to be a loyal, obedient subject,” he said, his words meant less as an explanation to Elizabeth than they were as a reminder to Mary of what was expected of her, now that she had taken the Oath.

During Elizabeth’s infancy, he received reports from Lady Bryan and Sir John Shelton at Hatfield, both of whom regretfully reported that Mary had steadfastly refused to accord her baby sister the honours due to the Princess of England, the title she insisted belonged to nobody but herself, despite being made aware of the situation with regard to his marriage to her mother and of her royal father's orders with regard to her title and position. No attempts at persuasion or censure had had any effect on his stubborn daughter, who would only deign to call Elizabeth 'sister'.

However, now that Mary had recognised her mistake, expressed remorse for her past defiance and come to an understanding of the truth, he expected her to behave properly towards Elizabeth.

It might not have been his choice to allow Elizabeth to retain her royal status but, as he had decreed it, he expected Mary to abide by his commands.

Mary could not mistake her father’s meaning, and in an instant, the pleasure she felt at seeing Elizabeth after so long a separation evaporated.

She could make no protest, however, not now. She had to do what her father expected of her, however galling it might be, however much she might wish to be spared this indignity. She could sense Jane’s eyes upon her and she could imagine that her stepmother and friend was looking on her with the same sympathy that Mary often saw in Jane’s eyes when she was addressed as Lady. She imagined that Jane wanted to protest on her behalf, to argue that such a gesture was unnecessary or perhaps to forestall this humiliation by suggesting that there was no need for such formalities within the family circle, but Jane knew as well as anybody at court that she could not dare to do so, not when the King’s mind was made up.

Her father was the King and not even his wife could give him cause to doubt her loyalty.

She moved away from Elizabeth, sweeping a curtsey that was almost as deep as the one that she was expected to make to the Queen but, while she had never objected to curtsying to Jane, despite the fact that she was the daughter of a knight while Mary was the daughter of a King, it was different with Elizabeth, and she had to bite her lower lip to keep tears from flowing, tears of dismay that her father, who had been so kind to her over the past year or so, since their reconciliation, could command her to pay her respects to Elizabeth like this when he knew how it would make her feel, and tears of anger for her own weakness in taking the Oath.

If her mother could see her now, Mary was sure that she would be heart-broken to see the daughter of Katherine of Aragon curtsying to the daughter of Anne Boleyn, heart-broken to know that the husband she loved would demand that their beloved daughter should abase herself before the Concubine's child, but it had to be done if she did not wish to lose all she had gained and more.

She told herself that her mother would not have wanted her to defy her father if it meant that she would suffer for it.

“My Lady Princess,” she greeted Elizabeth formally, waiting for her father to nod before she rose from her curtsey.

The approving smile he gave her was scant comfort.

Seemingly oblivious to the tension emanating from Jane and from his elder daughter, Henry bent down to lift Elizabeth into his arms once more, hugging her and tickling her under the chin.
“Everything’s going to be alright, Elizabeth, I promise,” he vowed to her. “We are a family now.”
Chapter Twelve

7th September 1537

Although he had served as an ambassador for years, and was well-schooled in the art of diplomacy, Eustace Chapuys, ambassador of the Holy Roman Emperor at the court of the King of England, could not conceal the distaste he felt as he watched the celebration that was taking place in honour of the King’s younger daughter and, despite his efforts, he couldn't keep a frown from his face.

The child he had scorned as the Little Bastard from the moment of her birth was dressed up in a beautiful green satin gown trimmed with gold, with a gold, diamond and emerald diadem crowning her carefully curled hair and a matching pendant around her little neck, as though dressing the brat like a princess could dupe people into believing that she had a true right to the royal title she carried. She was being carried around the Great Hall in the arms of her royal father, who frequently stopped to converse with the lords and ladies assembled for the occasion, and who was plainly eager to hear his courtiers praise his child.

His voice rang out in the Great Hall as he enquired of the lords and ladies whether they thought his little Elizabeth was the most beautiful little girl they had ever seen. He smiled in proud delight when they agreed with his assessment of his daughter’s beauty, each of them insisting that she was a beauty and that she was very like him, with the older ones remarking on her likeness to her grandmother and namesake, the lovely Elizabeth of York. Everybody who commented on the little girl’s looks knew to politely ignore her undeniable likeness to her late mother, whose name was never mentioned at court these days, as the King could not bear to hear it spoken.

Elizabeth might be the living image of her mother, in all but her colouring, as well as having inherited Anne’s undeniable grace and charm, but nobody was going to allude to that fact aloud, especially in public.

After everything that had happened with Anne, the King would not want to be reminded that the child in his arms was as much Anne Boleyn’s daughter as she was his.

For Elizabeth’s sake, it was better that nobody mentioned her mother in her father’s hearing, for fear that the King might find the recollection unpleasant and decide to banish his little daughter from his sight once more, rather than keep a living reminder of Anne at his court, where he would have to look at her lovely face and remember the woman who looked so like her.

Chapuys had not visited the English court often before the King sought to set his wife aside but he knew from Princess Mary that there was once a time when her father showed her off as enthusiastically as he was now displaying Elizabeth, if not more so. He knew how painful it must be for her to see her father lavish affection on her half-sister and wished that he could comfort her.

Almost all of the nobles at court were present today.

The Duke of Norfolk, great-uncle to the little girl whose birthday was being celebrated, was treading warily, as he had since his niece and nephew were condemned to death and it was plain to all that the Seymours were in the ascendant while Anne’s kin could not hope to be anywhere near as favoured as they had been in the past, not even if they had the sense to desert Anne before they could be dragged down with her when she fell, as virtually all of them had, without hesitating.

Norfolk had not made a move to greet Elizabeth until he saw that others were doing so, and that the King was pleased to see them fawn over the child.
He was not a man who would take any chances.

If he knew that Elizabeth was in her royal father’s favour, then he would be keen to cultivate her affections, and to make his regard for her known, with an eye to endearing himself to a child who might be able to be of great use to him and to his family in the future, whether she became Queen of England or a royal suitor was found for her, and of pleasing her father by complimenting her. However, until he knew where Elizabeth stood, until he was certain that her restoration to her father’s good graces was a permanent one and that she was not going to find herself out of favour and banished from court once more, while the King turned on those who praised her, he was not going to take any chances or make any assumptions about what was safe for him to do.

Most importantly of all, he would want to make certain that the King was given no reason to doubt the loyalty of the Howard family towards the prince that he confidently expected Queen Jane to bear him next month, knowing that it would be the ruin of his house if the King thought that there was a risk that the Howard family would back Elizabeth as her half-brother’s rival.

The King might be affectionate towards Elizabeth at the moment but that would not stop him executing anybody who preferred her as heir to his son.

The Duke of Suffolk was watching with a smile on his face, chuckling in pleasure when Elizabeth spotted him and waved enthusiastically, pleased to see the face of somebody she counted as her friend. He returned her wave, grinning. Chapuys could see that the Duchess was less enchanted than her husband was by the festivities and by the young lady in whose honour they were held, remaining still and silent by his side, a smile fixed to her face, but one that didn’t reach her eyes.

Chapuys could sympathise with her feelings.

Given the choice, he would not have attended any form of celebration in honour of Anne Boleyn’s child and would have found some other activity with which to occupy himself.

However, the King singled him out for an invitation when he decided that he would have a party to celebrate the little girl’s fourth birthday since she would be spending it at court. Perhaps it amused him to know that Chapuys was reluctant to attend and that he would not deign to put in an appearance without being pointedly encouraged to do so, amused him to be able to compel the Imperial ambassador to celebrate the birth of the child who had supplanted Mary.

Chapuys knew that he could not refuse to attend, especially as the French ambassador was there and making a great show of admiring Elizabeth. He had already presented the child with a little pearl and diamond bracelet as a birthday gift from his master, whose good wishes he conveyed to both the King and Elizabeth, telling them that King Francis hoped that this day would be a very happy one for King and Princess alike.

The Emperor might have decided that, for the time being, he would not press the King of England with regard to his cousin's status and demand that she should not endure an inferior position to the child, but he drew the line at sending a birthday gift to the Concubine's little bastard. Even the King knew better than to expect that he would, but it still would not do for the Imperial ambassador to appear churlish when the French ambassador was doing his best to be amiable.

“A most charming child, Your Majesty!” The French ambassador’s voice rang out in the Hall, his words carried to Chapuys’ ears. He bowed low before the King and before little Elizabeth, a wide smile on his face as he regarded the little girl. “And already a beauty, I see – I predict that you will make some lucky prince a very happy bridegroom one day, Your Highness,” he told her jovially, doffing his hat with a flourish and smiling when Elizabeth offered him her tiny hand to kiss, as gravely as a grown woman might have.
For her part, Elizabeth seemed charmed by his attention and smiled brightly at his compliments, as she had at every word of praise lavished on her. Like both of her parents, she had a tendency towards vanity and those who complimented her were always able to endear themselves to her.

Chapuys would have liked to laugh scornfully at the ambassador’s prediction that Elizabeth would marry a prince, to believe that it was impossible that any prince would ever contemplate the idea of accepting Anne Boleyn’s bastard child as his wife, of tainting his house with both an illegitimate bride and of giving his children the blood of that harlot but he could not shake the fear that there might be a great deal of truth to the words, far more than he was comfortable with.

Much as he hated to admit it, Elizabeth was a very pretty child, one who promised to be a beautiful woman when she was grown, having inherited many of her mother’s best features and combined them with the fair colouring of her paternal grandmother. When the time came, her portrait would prove to be quite a carrot to be dangled before potential suitors. Even a King had to look at his wife, and to lie with her if he hoped to have an heir, so he would want a woman who was comely enough to please him, one he would not be ashamed to have by his side.

As the King was determined to see her regarded as his legitimate child, he would want to see her marry royally, and was likely to provide her with a lavish dowry in order to ensure this.

One day, little Elizabeth would be a very tempting prospect for a prince or King.

Although the pope continued to insist that the child was illegitimate and that Princess Mary was the true, rightfull heir to the English throne unless King Henry fathered a son of a true marriage – and, as the sentence of excommunication had not been lifted, and would not be lifted until the King renounced his blasphemy in full and sought absolution for the great sins he had committed against the Church, the pope would not acknowledge any marriage of the King’s as valid, including his present union with Queen Jane – the King of England determinedly persisted in recognising Elizabeth as a legitimate princess, though he knew well that his elder daughter had many supporters who knew her to be the true princess.

It was only a matter of time before he began to offer her as a bride to the sons of his fellow monarchs, confident that the prospect of an English alliance by marriage, coupled with a lovely girl as a bride, would be enough of an inducement to get them to agree to accept her, no matter what the Holy Father had to say about the matter of her legitimacy.

And if King Henry could have Elizabeth accepted as a royal bride in years to come, what would it mean for poor Mary, for whom he was steadfastly refusing to agree to any matches, royal or otherwise? He was afraid to allow the young girl to be wed to any of the princes who might be willing to take her as their wife, or even one of the higher-ranking nobles in his own kingdom, in case she and her husband proved to be a threat to his power or to the claim of the child he hoped to have by Queen Jane? Even Mary’s submission last year, and her vow that she recognised that she was illegitimate and had no right to succeed to the throne, was not enough to reassure him.

Under other circumstances, Chapuys would have cared little about Elizabeth’s marriage prospects, thinking that if King Francis, or any monarch in Europe, chose to betroth one of his sons to a bastard, it was his own business and folly. However, he could not think that way when Mary was so closely involved in these matters, and when she would be adversely affected if her little sister became a prince’s bride while she was left as an unwanted spinster until she was too old to have any hope of marrying and of having a family of her own. Even if the English people would prefer to see her as heir ahead of her young half-sister now, it would be a different matter once Elizabeth married a prince and bore his children while Mary remained unwed.

The King was not an old man.
He might easily live another fifteen years, or even twenty.

If he refused to allow Princess Mary to marry during his life time, she would be too old to become a mother by the time he was dead, while Elizabeth would be a young woman in her prime, a young woman who would have had many years to worm her way into the hearts of the English people.

He felt that he owed it to Mary to do everything in his power to advance her interests, whether that meant encouraging the Emperor to renew his insistence that she should be recognised as the rightful Princess of England, or doing his utmost to see to it that a splendid match was made for her, to a worthy prince. If he could not see her succeed her father as Queen of England, he wanted her to be Queen by marriage. He had not been able to see to it that her mother, the sainted Queen Katherine, was restored to her rightful place but he was determined to do better by her daughter.

It was his dearest dream that he would one day see Princess Mary sit on the English throne.

His master might have decided that it was better for him to cease to press for the restoration of Princess Mary – or Lady Mary, as he was now willing to call her, in deference to King Henry’s clear wishes on the matter, and his refusal to deal with any monarch who would not accept that Mary was illegitimate – for the present, at least, but Chapuys still hoped that King Henry might one day be persuaded to restore his eldest daughter to her rightful place, disinheriting his younger daughter, who owed her royal status to her mother’s scheming and witchcraft but this was something that would not happen if Elizabeth was betrothed to a royal suitor, who would naturally wish for his bride to be called legitimate and who would defend her claim to the title of Princess.

He listened intently to the French ambassador’s words, praying that he would not hear the man allude to the prospect of a match between Elizabeth and one of King Francis’ sons, an idea that might yet be revived, even if it had been dismissed before, during the lifetime of the child’s mother, during a brief period of peace between the King of France and the Emperor.

King Francis would be eager to both secure King Henry’s friendship and to deal a blow to the Emperor, and he might be prepared to do so by allowing a match between Elizabeth and one of his sons. If Queen Jane enjoyed the same ill-luck as her predecessors, and bore only daughters or stillborn children, the match would be even more inviting for King Francis, who would be eager to press his son's suit to a girl who could be the future Queen of England. In law, Elizabeth would be her father’s legal heir if she had no legitimate half-brother, unless King Henry was willing to swallow his pride and have Parliament repeal the acts that had vested the succession in the child, drafting new succession laws in Mary’s favour.

At present, this move would be a very popular one with the people, among whom Mary was beloved, both for her own goodness and virtues and for being the daughter of Good Queen Katherine, who was still remembered fondly by the people she have served to the best of her abilities, but that might not be the case in years to come.

Even people who had had no love for Anne Boleyn could not help but pity her motherless child and it was likely that those people would be glad to see that Elizabeth was being made welcome in her father’s court, and that they would have no desire to see a little girl suffer.

If Elizabeth could capture their hearts, winning them from Mary with her prettiness and childish charms, if she could ensure that they would not want to see her lose her title, as she had lost her mother, then their enthusiasm for Mary’s restoration would be greatly diminished.

As things stood, while Elizabeth was called legitimate, Mary was doomed to bastardy but if Mary was to be declared the King’s trueborn daughter, born in wedlock, Elizabeth would have to be rendered illegitimate. There was no way that she could be called anything but a bastard, when her
mother’s so-called marriage to her father was contracted during the lifetime of Mary’s mother.

If Elizabeth married a prince before her father died, perhaps producing a grandson for him before he died, while Mary was obliged to remain unmarried until she was beyond the age of bearing children, then it was very possible that the people might prefer to back the younger sister as Queen rather than the elder. If the King was able to get them to accept his newly established religion, his misguided people would resist the succession of a Queen who would guide the country back to the true faith.

There were already far too many English lords who benefited from the seizure of property belonging to monastic houses, and who would not willingly surrender it to the true Church.

While Chapuys was glad that the French ambassador said nothing about a future marriage, he gritted his teeth as he listened to the man praise Elizabeth, knowing that the compliments would be welcome to King Henry, who seemed as pleased by the compliments as he would if they were directed at himself, and who was bound to expect that the Imperial ambassador would be just as generous with his praise for his child. It was unlikely to occur to King Henry that it was unreasonable to expect that a subject of the Holy Roman Emperor, and a man who never made a secret of his admiration for Queen Katherine and her daughter or of his disdain for Anne Boleyn and all connected with her, should be expected to exalt the Concubine's little bastard.

Chapuys knew that King Francis would have given his ambassador instructions to be amiable to Elizabeth once he knew that the little girl was permitted to come to court, after being away for so long. It would not be in King Francis’ interests to see Mary, who had Spanish royal blood flowing in her veins, succeed to the English throne. Elizabeth might be able to call on French support to deprive Mary of the crown even if she was not married to a French prince.

“Princess Elizabeth is a credit to you, Your Majesty,” the French ambassador said with a smile, inclining his head respectfully to the little girl.

“Indeed she is. She’s a true Tudor rose, aren’t you, my Elizabeth?” Henry agreed good-humouredly. If he could remember that there was a time, not long ago, when he had questioned whether Elizabeth was his child at all or whether she might have been fathered by one of Anne’s alleged lovers, he gave no indication of it. He shifted Elizabeth in his arms, settling her weight more comfortably, and planted a smacking kiss on the cheek of his giggling daughter, who was thrilled by his attention. “Beautiful, charming and already a clever scholar – did you know that the Princess can speak French, Your Excellency?” He asked, beaming as Elizabeth proved the truth of his words by addressing the ambassador in pretty, fluent French, her accent almost perfect.

For a moment, Henry remembered the day when Anne had greeted Jean de Bellay, the former French ambassador, in his own tongue, which she had learned during her time at the French court, but he determinedly banished the memory.

He was very happy with Anne that day, pleased to see the immediate rapport she had struck up with the ambassador, knowing that it was a good sign of her budding diplomacy and eagerly anticipating the day when he would be able to make her his wife. He little knew that it would be years before he was able to achieve this aim, and that even after he made her his Queen, Anne would fail to please him, fail to bear him the son she had promised him, cause him no end of trouble and, in the end, betray him... if she had betrayed him.

In a way, it was more painful for him to doubt her guilt than it was to believe her faithless.

Things turned sour for them so quickly, but he couldn’t think of her, not today.
Anne was gone now, far away where he need never see her again.

It was their daughter he held in his arms, a daughter he was very proud of and from whom he was parted for too long.

“Brava, Your Highness!” The French ambassador praised Elizabeth, applauding her lightly.

“And just four years old today.” Henry boasted, delighted with the attention his daughter was attracting and happily conscious of the fact that the ambassador was certain to report on Elizabeth’s beauty and quickness of wits to his royal master, who must be keen to learn all he could about the English princess who would be eligible for marriage before very many years had passed. He might have refused to agree to a match between Elizabeth and one of his sons before but Henry was confident that he would soon be eager for an alliance with England, sealed by a marriage. “Her governess, Lady Bryan, tells me that she is the cleverest child that she has ever known, and very keen to learn, and I think she’s right about that, don’t you, Your Excellency?”

“I think so, Your Majesty.” He agreed. “Your Majesty must be so pleased to be able to have the little princess at court with you, and on such a special day too.”

“I’ve missed her very much this past year, Your Excellency,” Henry agreed quietly, hugging Elizabeth to him and ruffling her hair lightly. He could admit, at least to himself, that it was folly on his part to refuse to have anything to do with his little daughter for so long but at least he could rectify his mistake now, and in the future. “We will have to have her at court with us far more often from now on, as a princess should be.” He declared, his words thrilling Elizabeth, who planted a kiss on her father’s cheek in delight, and filling the listening Chapuys with dismay.

Chapuys would have preferred it if Elizabeth had remained in exile at Hatfield, allowing Mary to spend time at court with her father and with her new stepmother without having to compete with her little sister for their attention and affection. Handicapped as she was by her grief for her sainted mother and by the constant shame she endured having been forced to accept the status of illegitimate daughter, she could not be expected to be always cheerful and charming, as the King wished her to be and as little Elizabeth was.

Queen Jane’s affection for Mary was genuine, as was her desire to see her in favour with the King and honoured at court, and Chapuys knew that she had done all she could to make sure that Mary would be accorded near-royal honours, as close to the state of a princess as possible, but now that Elizabeth was back, Chapuys feared that, armed with the natural charm of a young child, she would be able to win her stepmother’s affections away from Mary, as she seemed to be winning her father’s. Queen Jane wanted harmony within the royal family, so she would welcome Elizabeth.

A woman who was soon to be a mother could easily fall prey to the charms of a young child.

The King had spent a great deal of time with little Elizabeth since her return to court, especially today, and he was spending less time with Mary.

After her long absence from the court, Elizabeth was able to capture his attention and keep it for herself, effortlessly enchanting her father and making him determined to spend as much time as possible with her for as long as she remained at court before returning to her residence in the country, which was healthier for her than the court, as though he wanted to compensate her for her long exile and for the loss of her mother by lavishing her with his attention and affection.

It was certain that he would expect Queen Jane to show affection to his child as well, wanting to see her showering her attention on the daughter of the woman she had supplanted, filling the place of a mother in the little girl’s life and treating her as kindly as she treated Mary, if not more so.
Elizabeth was so young that Queen Jane’s children would be playmates for her, and because of this she would be bound to them more closely than Mary, who was so much older, could be.

Chapuys was afraid that, in all the fuss over the return to favour of the King’s younger daughter, the elder daughter would be forgotten, neglected as she was before her restoration.

Hadin’t Mary lost enough to Elizabeth without losing more?

At least he could be thankful for one small mercy; Elizabeth seemed to have no interest in winning herself a place in Queen Jane’s heart. Her coolness towards her new stepmother had been marked by many of the courtiers, although the King seemed oblivious to it, happily convinced that his family was the picture of domestic harmony.

Under the circumstances, who could blame Jane for feeling far warmer towards Mary than she did towards Elizabeth?

To do her justice, Mary was showing no sign of envy towards Elizabeth today.

Chapuys suspected that, despite everything, she was pleased to see her sister welcomed back to court as the King’s daughter, even if she hated that Elizabeth was given the title of princess, the title that she had been forced to renounce in order to be allowed back to court and into her father’s life, when it became plain that even the good will of her new stepmother would not allow her to be restored as a Princess or spared from having to take the Oath.

Mary had a kind heart and she would not want to see Elizabeth in exile, even if it made her life more difficult to have the child at Whitehall. She did not even seem to be jealous of the way that the King was devoting his time to Elizabeth now that the child was at court, undoubtedly feeling pleased to see the little girl welcomed back so openly after the way she was neglected before.

She had been the only daughter in her father’s life for a full year, and she was generous enough to be willing to share him with Elizabeth now.

Even if it would be better for her that Elizabeth had never come back to court, Mary would not think to wish her banished from their father’s sight and if anybody treated the child unkindly, Chapuys believed that she would be the first to defend her. He knew that Mary had communicated with her half-sister’s governess while the child was in exile, and that she often spoke about Elizabeth to the Duke of Suffolk when he went to Hatfield to pay a visit to Elizabeth, sending gifts to her sister and asking after her health.

Like the other courtiers, she was smiling at Elizabeth’s obvious delight in the celebration in her honour, and speaking warm words of praise about her little sister and, although for some of the courtiers, their smiles and kind words might be feigned, Mary’s good wishes for Elizabeth were genuine. Despite the fact that Elizabeth was given her rightful title as Princess of England and despite the fact that she was the child of Anne Boleyn, the woman who had caused such chaos in her life, and such pain to her and to her sainted mother, Chapuys knew that Mary would always strive to ensure that she did not allow her bitter feelings towards Anne to lead her to think harshly of Anne’s child, something he admired in her, even if he could not emulate her attitude.

Some might argue that the sins of the mother should not be used to condemn the child, who could not help the fact that she was born the child of the woman whose ambition had almost led to the ruin of the kingdom and who had caused such harm to England, but Chapuys could not believe that any child born of Anne Boleyn could be truly innocent.

Half of the blood that flowed through Elizabeth’s veins was Anne’s and, combined with her
father’s blood, what kind of person would it make her when she was grown?

He was sure that Elizabeth would not become somebody that he would wish to see ruling England.

Mary had confided in him that when Robert Aske came to court last Christmas, he had spoken with her privately, telling her that he had every hope that, one day, she would succeed as Queen of England, for the sake of their faith, reminding her that she was beloved by the people. Chapuys believed that Aske was right about the importance of Mary’s succession for England.

Despite the fact that, with the harlot safely dead, the Holy Father would be willing – no, delighted – to welcome the King of England back into the Catholic Church of Rome, King Henry had shown no inclination to take advantage of the opportunity to return to the true faith, choosing instead to continue to cling to the pretended title of Supreme Head of the Church of England rather than humble himself before the pope by accepting his authority. He was also unwilling to surrender the property confiscated from the religious houses, property that had yielded millions of pounds for the Crown. England’s ties to Rome would not be restored during King Henry’s lifetime and, of all his children, Mary was the only one who would be willing to return the true faith to the country.

If the child that Queen Jane carried was a healthy son, then he would become Prince of Wales and, in time, he would succeed his father on the throne, supplanting Elizabeth as heir, but he would be taught from his earliest years to believe in the teachings of the Church of England, to believe that his father was Supreme Head of the Church and that, in time, he would inherit this mantle. Despite the fact that Queen Jane was rumoured to be of the true faith, she would not direct the education of her son, a task that would be left to the charge of tutors selected by the King and his advisors. Her son would not know any better than to continue to lead England down the path that King Henry, at the instigation of Anne Boleyn, had led them down.

However, if Queen Jane was never blessed with a son, it would be worse still, for Elizabeth would then be her father’s acknowledged heir, an heir that he would not be willing to disinherit if disinheriting her meant that he would have to humble himself and return to Rome, accepting that the Holy Father was the true spiritual leader of Christians everywhere. If King Henry was able to make the country safe for Elizabeth’s succession, if he could make his people accept her as his heir in place of Mary, his trueborn daughter, then there would be no hope for England’s salvation.

The daughter of Anne Boleyn would never submit to the authority of the pope who called her mother a whore and Elizabeth herself a bastard. The pride she had inherited from both of her parents would prevent her from doing so, even if she knew in her heart that it was the truth.

She would never give up the royal titles that her mother had won for her, or the inheritance that was stolen from Mary on her behalf.

Queen Jane was seated on a large, cushioned chair, as her swollen belly did not allow her to remain on her feet long. Despite her physician’s exhortations, along with those of the King, that she should ensure that she took plenty of rest and did not exert herself in any way, for the sake of the child she carried, she had been determined that she would be present for Elizabeth’s special day, wanting to show the child that she was pleased to have her at court with them and that she should know that Jane would be a kind stepmother to her.

Although Elizabeth seemed like a very confident child, Jane felt that if she was in her stepdaughter’s place, she would be nervous about coming to court and about meeting her stepmother. It would reassure her to see that her stepmother was a kind woman, somebody who wanted to spend time with her and who would never treat her coldly or harshly, and never try to prevent her father from showing her the love a father should have for his child. When she married
the King, Jane knew that she wanted to be a kinder stepmother by far to Elizabeth and Mary than Anne was to Mary and she was determined to keep the promise she made to herself.

Both girls had endured great hardships in their young lives, and she wanted them both to know that they would never have cause to think that she had worsened their lot.

She was aware that, even now, there were still some who whispered that Anne had been innocent of the charges laid against her and that she had died for her sake, so that the King might be free to make her his new wife, and that she had known of his plans and encouraged them, willing to see an innocent woman sent to block for the sake of his ambition, so that she might be Queen.

It was distressing to think that anybody could imagine her to be capable of such evil but those rumours persisted, refusing to die out entirely.

She knew that there was also speculation that she, feeling guilty over Anne’s death, had not wanted to have Elizabeth brought to court, not wanting to have to look at the child who was rendered motherless for her sake. Many were convinced that she was the one who convinced her husband to leave his child exiled at Hatfield, out of her sight and her thoughts. Few knew that she had asked the King to bring his younger daughter to court before, urging him to bring his family together, but that her requests were always refused. She wanted to be here today so that they would know that she was pleased to have Elizabeth at court with them.

In Chapuys’ opinion, she need not have bothered attending the ceremony, given the way Elizabeth responded to her stepmother’s overtures of affection.

It was subtle, far subtler than he would ever have expected from a child of such tender years – though perhaps he should have expected it from Anne Boleyn’s daughter, anticipated that she had inherited her mother’s cunning – but as an ambassador whose work required that he should cultivate the skill of reading people, it was plain that Elizabeth did not think highly of Queen Jane.

She had not spoken a word to the Queen at the banquet, except in response to a direct question, and even then her answers were brief and did not encourage further conversation. She addressed her remarks to the King as much as possible, as though she knew that her obvious delight in being back at court and close to her father once more would enchant him, ensuring that he would not notice if she snubbed her stepmother, much less reprove her for it.

Knowing King Henry, he would be flattered to be the focus of Elizabeth’s attention and would be quite content not to have to share her with his wife.

Even Queen Jane’s gift of a pearl necklace was received with no more than a polite ‘thank you’, though her delight at the doll that Mary had presented her with, clad in a yellow satin gown of Mary’s own working, was openly expressed, with the little girl jumping down from her seat, in the place of honour next to the King, so that she might run to Mary and thank her with a kiss.

The King and the court had found the affection between the sisters enchanting but Chapuys did not miss the hurt in Jane’s eyes at being excluded from the family joy.

Chapuys swept a low bow as he approached Jane, taking a seat when she motioned to the chair next to him.

“Your Majesty,” he greeted her, giving her a wide smile and inwardly thanking God that He had led King Henry to replace the harlot with Queen Jane.

She might not have succeeded in convincing the King to restore Mary as Princess – and, in all
justice, he doubted that anybody would have the power to sway King Henry in that regard, once he
made up his mind to leave her as a bastard – but she had always treated Mary kindly and
generously, unlike her predecessor. She did her best to repair the fractured bond between father and
daughter, when another lady might have been content to see Mary remain out of favour, so that the
King’s affection could be directed to herself and, in time, to her own children.

While he half-expected that her kind heart would lead her to reach out to Elizabeth as well, now
that the child was at court, he prayed that she would continue to put Mary’s interests first,
recognizing that the brat was already far better-situated than she had any possible right to be, while
Mary stood in greater need of her protection and kindness.

“It is a proud day for His Majesty,” he remarked genially, glancing at the King, who was still
holding Elizabeth in his arms and hoping to test the waters with Jane, at least somewhat.

Since she first received him, shortly after her marriage to the King, in a meeting that was supposed
to be private but that the King had clearly eavesdropped on, he had tried to be cautious, for the
most part, doing nothing that might lead Jane to inadvertently say or do something that might make
trouble for her later, if the King learned of it. However, this was one issue that he was prepared to
take some risks over, thinking that he needed to know how she truly felt about it.

“Yes, it is,” Jane responded, returning his smile with effort before glancing down at her swollen
belly, caressing it absently before looking back up at Elizabeth, wondering how her husband would
react if she presented him with a third daughter next month.

A princess was not without value, as she could be used to contract a marriage with another royal
house, strengthening her father’s position and that of his successor, but for the son-hungry man she
had married, she suspected that only a strong boy would do, the boy she prayed for daily.

Her husband frightened her before, when he would not speak to her and made it plain that his
silence was because he was disappointed with her for not yet becoming pregnant, even though they
were married for scarcely a month when he said it. She loved him, and had believed that he loved
her as a woman, not just as the mother of the sons he hoped that she would bear him but when she
heard the coldness in his voice, and saw the look on his face, as though she had betrayed him by
not yet being able to give him the news he wanted to hear, she felt chilled and afraid, frightened by
the thought of what would happen if, like both of her predecessors, who had prayed for a healthy
boy in vain, she was unable to give her lord a son.

What would happen to her if she failed, and to the child she bore?

What would happen to Mary, whose cause she had sought to champion as much as she could,
urging that she should be treated with royal honours as the King’s daughter, if the King were to
turn on her and perhaps, by extension, on her child if it failed to be a son, and on Mary because he
knew that they were friends and that it would hurt her to see her stepdaughter suffer?

For a moment, Jane thought that, in a way, little Elizabeth was fortunate, compared to Mary and to
the daughter that she might be carrying, because she had already lost her mother.

If she failed the King, if she bore a girl and he sought to set her aside so that he could try again
with a fourth wife, one who would hopefully prove to be more fortunate than her predecessors, he
would have to annul their marriage in order to do so. She would never betray him as Lady Anne
had, so their marriage could not end as his union with her had. An annulment would mean that her
daughter would be called a bastard, as poor Mary was, titled Lady rather than Princess and denied
the royal honours, not to mention the fatherly love that would have been lavished on her if she was
born a son. Lady Anne was dead, so the King did not need to free himself from her and would have
no need to formally brand Elizabeth with the name of bastard, even if he wanted a new wife.

His new wife might be cunning enough to see that she should make a point of cultivating Elizabeth’s affections, in order to please the King, but she would have no such motivation to encourage her to promote Mary’s interests when she was known to be a friend to Jane, much less to want to see Jane’s daughter welcomed into the royal family or honoured at court.

For the sake of the child she carried, Jane could only hope and pray that it was male.

If it wasn’t, she would not be able to protect it.

“He seems very proud of her.” Chapuys said, unable to keep the sour note from his voice. He intentionally did not apply the title of Princess to Elizabeth, partly because he could not bear to use it in reference to Anne Boleyn’s child if he could possibly help it and partly so that he could test Queen Jane, to see how she would react to the omission, one that she could not fail to notice. Would she correct him and remind him of the child’s title, making it plain that she accepted Elizabeth’s status as a Princess and, by extension, that Mary would not hold that title, or did she agree with him that, though the King might call her legitimate, his younger daughter was a bastard usurping her sister’s title? “He seems very proud of her.”

“And why shouldn’t he be?” Jane asked mildly, sensing that Chapuys would like to hear her speak against Elizabeth but unwilling to satisfy him in that regard. She would have been lying if she had claimed that she was not distressed by the way that her young stepdaughter had taken a dislike to her but it was understandable that he would be reluctant to allow her mother to be replaced and Jane was certain that they would be able to build a friendlier relationship in time, if she took care to show Elizabeth that she would care for her as a mother, in place of the mother she had lost. In the meantime, she must make certain that it was plain to everybody that she harboured no ill will towards the little girl. The last thing she wanted was for anybody to think that he ought to be rude to Elizabeth in order to please her. She met his gaze squarely as she spoke. “Lady Elizabeth is a delightful child, and a very pretty one – and clever too.”

A hand on her shoulder made her jump, startling her so much that she nearly fell out of her chair and when she turned, she was dismayed to see Henry glaring down at her, the furious expression on his face telling her that even the complimentary terms in which she had described Elizabeth could make up for the fact that she had referred to her as ‘Lady’ rather than ‘Princess’. Elizabeth was balanced in his free arm, holding her head high, as a princess should, with a matching scowl on her small face, one that almost frightened Jane.

No child of four should ever have such a look on her face.

Though it was plain from the expression on his face that Henry’s hold on his temper was a precarious one at best, he was able to keep his tone even as he addressed them, though there was an edge of iron to it that spoke of his displeasure. “Madam,” he inclined his head in Jane’s direction before looking to Chapuys, “Your Excellency. May I present my daughter, the Princess Elizabeth?” He asked, pointedly emphasizing the title to let them know that he had heard them deny it to Elizabeth and that he was far from happy about it.

For his part, Chapuys could recognize that he had made a mistake by broaching the issue as publicly as he had, and he sought to do what he could to dissipate the tension and to draw King Henry’s attention and wrath onto his own head, knowing that not even he would dare to unleash the full force of his temper on the Imperial ambassador, an insult that would almost certainly enrage the Emperor, deflecting it from Queen Jane as much as possible. He was the one who had caused this trouble and the last thing he wanted was for Jane, who had been a good friend to Mary and whose family supported an Imperial alliance, to suffer for his words.
Much as he hated having to do so, he directed a low bow at little Elizabeth, covering his disdain with a smile as wide as he could bring himself to make it, knowing how important it was for him to do what he could to smooth the issue over.

“An honour, Your Highness,” he murmured respectfully.

“Your Excellency,” Elizabeth inclined her head gravely by way of response but her tone was cool.

She did not offer Chapuys her hand to kiss, as she had the French ambassador, an insult more pointed than one would have expected from such a baby. She snuggled closer to her father, resting her head on his shoulder and frowning at the ambassador and at her stepmother, both of whom were pretending that she wasn’t a princess. She felt vindicated when she looked up at her Papa to see that he had also heard them calling her ‘Lady Elizabeth’ and that he was very cross with them for it. She hoped that they would know that it was very wrong of them not to give her her proper title, now that they saw that the King was angry with them for it.

It was wicked to tell lies and, in a way, by pretending that she wasn’t a Princess, that she was just a Lady like Mary, they were telling a lie, which was very naughty of them.

Henry could not express his anger in public, he knew that.

He had no desire to cause a scene that would set the tongues of his courtiers wagging and the pens of foreign envoys scratching as they carried word of any quarrels to the ears of their masters, who would be eager to hear of any information about his marriage to Jane. They were undoubtedly waiting to see if he would tire of her, and seek to set her aside as he had Katherine and Anne – as though they thought that he had wanted to do so for personal gratification, and not for the good of his realm, so that he could give them a Prince to secure the succession! – and perhaps replace her with a daughter of another royal house, one of their daughters, sisters or cousins.

It was bad enough that Chapuys should deny Elizabeth her title as Princess – and, if he was honest with himself, Henry had to admit that he should have expected as much from a man who had been such a devoted supporter of Katherine and Mary, and who had always despised Anne – but for Jane to do the same was intolerable, and he intended to make it clear to her that he would not allow it, now or ever. He was allowing her to call herself his wife, and he expected her support in this matter, and in all others. It was not her place to defy him like that.

A rustle of silk signaled Mary’s approach and, when Henry turned to look at her, he saw that the girl was pale, aware of what had happened and troubled by it.

After looking at her for a few moments, he allowed his expression to soften, not wanting her to be afraid of him, or to think that his displeasure extended to her. Mary had taken the Oath, admitting that she knew that his marriage to her mother was invalid and that she was illegitimate while Anne, for all her faults, had been his rightful wife and Elizabeth was his legitimate child, the Princess of England.

He would not blame her for the fact that two of those who supported her had done wrong, Henry told himself, settling Elizabeth more comfortably in one arm and extending his free hand to Mary.

“Come, my daughter. We three will walk together,” he said, smiling to show her that it was alright and that she was welcome to join him and Elizabeth, rather than being expected to gracefully decline his invitation and leave the King and Princess alone. She was his daughter too, after all, and even if he had not been married to Mary’s mother, he would never forget that she was his child. Once Mary had slipped her arm through his, Henry turned to Jane, inclining his head slightly in a frosty bow. “Excuse us, madam.” He said, before he moved away with his two daughters, so
that they could circulate through the courtiers together. “I will speak with you later.”

Jane watched him leave, keeping her smile frozen on her face until the celebration was over and she could slip away.

Her daughter was four years old today.

It was more than sixteen months since Anne laid eyes on Elizabeth, more than sixteen months since she held her child in her arms and pleaded with her child’s father to remember the love he bore them, to persuade him not to choose that slut, Mistress Seymour, over his wife and daughter. She begged him for one more chance to give him a son, thinking that, even if she was unable to do so, the extra time would give her the chance to mend their relationship so that, even if Henry was resolved to remarry and father a son by a new wife, their parting would be an amicable one. She would leave without a fuss, provided that Elizabeth’s position remained secure.

She might as well have pleaded with a wall to show her mercy.

A day later, the Duke of Suffolk came to her to tell her that she was to be arrested and conducted to the Tower.

A day later, she knew that Henry was not going to content himself with dissolving their marriage and depriving their child of her birthright so that he could replace them with his slut and the brats he expected her to give him. Instead, he had chosen to see her dead rather than know that, in freeing himself from her, he would also set her free.

Was it because he loved her more than he loved Katherine that he was unable to bring himself to leave her free to love another – as if she could ever have trusted another man with her heart after Henry! – or did he hate her so much more that he wanted to destroy her utterly?

She had too much time with her thoughts at Pembroke Hall.

No matter how many activities she found to fill the endless hours of her day and to occupy her mind with something other than thoughts of the husband who betrayed and abandoned her and the beloved daughter she was parted from, there was nothing that could distract her for long.

When she practiced her music or composed songs of her own, she pictured Elizabeth dancing to the sprightlier tunes, her silk skirts swirling around her tiny body while her hair escaped from its dainty coif, or sitting quietly by her side, listening to the more sombre music with rapt attention.

When she resolved to embroider new altar cloths and frontals for the chapel, thinking that such a large project would occupy her for years before the chapel was outfitted to her satisfaction, she did not anticipate that while she stitched at the rich fabric, her thoughts would drift to Elizabeth, leaving her to wonder if her little girl’s taste for finery was being indulged or if she was left to make do with old clothes, as the Lady Mary was when she defied her father.

She cried for hours the first time she saw the goldfish swimming in the garden fountain, frightening the maids with her hysteria, but knew that Elizabeth would have wanted her to care for them.

Her offer to teach her maids to read and write was born of a combination of boredom and awareness that their birth led to them being deprived of the education she enjoyed as a child. Only one of her maids, the youngest, Maggie, availed of the opportunity at first but, eventually, Sarah and Edith also joined their lessons. As much as Anne enjoyed the challenge of her role as tutor, the lessons kept Elizabeth constantly in her thoughts. Her daughter was so clever that she would surely
be the equal of any scholar in Christendom, if she was given an education worthy of her. Would she have a tutor who could nurture her intelligence and guide her along her path to knowledge or would it be left to Lady Bryan to teach her as much as she could manage?

True to his word, Archbishop Cranmer wrote to her with updates on Elizabeth’s progress but he could only communicate with her infrequently and, until recently, his news was not optimistic.

Anne had anticipated that, once she was gone, Henry would keep his distance from Elizabeth at first. His conscience was, for the most part, a tamed beast but even he would not be able to look into the face of the daughter whose mother he would have murdered, had a higher power not interceded to prevent him straight away. She also thought that it would also take time for him to muster the will to present Mistress Seymour to Elizabeth as her new stepmother when he knew that his bedfellow could not truthfully be called by that title.

However, she never expected that Elizabeth’s exile would last as long as it had.

Her separation from her child was a constant, gnawing ache in her heart. Even knowing that she had had no alternative, and that she had done everything in her power to protect Elizabeth could not ease the guilt she felt at knowing that her daughter was growing up without her.

How could Henry, who was free to end his separation from their child whenever he chose, willingly deprive himself of Elizabeth’s presence in his life for so long?

She couldn’t imagine that Mistress Seymour would be able to keep him enraptured for so long.

The Lady Mary’s capitulation, the news of which reached Pembroke Hall through gossip long before Cranmer’s letter arrived, would have pleased Henry. Anne was sure that he would have made a show of welcoming his prodigal daughter back into his life and ensuring that she was treated with honour, praising himself for being such a loving and forgiving father but surely even his reconciliation with Mary would be scant consolation for Elizabeth’s continued absence from his life.

When she heard that Mistress Seymour was carrying a child, she was frightened.

Henry had had no luck fathering a prince but he had succeeded in siring a bastard son before. Who was to say that he would not manage it again, except that this Fitzroy would be thought a prince?

If Mistress Seymour’s child was a son, Henry’s delight would surely be scarcely dimmed by his awareness of the boy’s true status. He would lavish attention and affection on him, ensuring that the boy’s birth was marked by the most magnificent celebrations and doing his utmost to convince himself that it was God’s will that his son should be his successor.

If he had a son before he was reconciled with Elizabeth, would he choose to leave their daughter exiled from his life rather than have her at court, a living reminder of his true wife and true heir?

Cranmer wrote to her the day Elizabeth returned to court, stressing that she received a warm, affectionate welcome from her father, who expected his court to show her the honour and deference she was due as Princess of England. He also related that the King had almost immediately begun to plan a celebration in honour of Elizabeth’s birthday.

Anne rejoiced to know that, unlike her third birthday, spent in exile, ignored by her father, Elizabeth would celebrate her fourth birthday at court, as befitted a princess.

If she was still at court, if the world knew that she was still alive and still Queen, she would shower Elizabeth with gifts in honour of the occasion, everything from jewels to new gowns, hoods and
slippers to toys and dolls.

As it was, she could only send her a gift through Cranmer, and was obliged to restrict herself to a
gift that would not seem strange coming from an Archbishop and Elizabeth’s godfather.

Sir Anthony commissioned the jewelled box, crafted to Anne’s specifications, and saw to it that it
was delivered to Cranmer weeks in advance of Elizabeth’s birthday, ready to be presented to her.

Cranmer would not present the gift to Elizabeth in view of the court.

One look at it, and Henry would know that the box was not something that Cranmer would have
chosen, and know its true origin. He was likely to confiscate and destroy it if he knew.

It would have to be given to Elizabeth in a quiet moment, and Cranmer would have to trust in the
discretion that she had had to learn at far too young an age to keep from being discovered.

Anne could take a small measure of comfort in the thought of Elizabeth’s pleasure when her
birthday gift was presented to her, knowing that, even from a distance, she could make her happy.

For now, it was all she could do.

For now, it was the only consolation she had as she spoke a birthday wish that Elizabeth would
never hear.

“Happy birthday, my darling girl.”
Chapter Thirteen

7th September 1537

"Do you think that it is your place to decide the titles of my daughters, madam?" Henry's voice was cold, and his eyes were even colder as he frowned down at her.

Jane's ladies had scarcely finished helping her into her nightgown and were brushing her hair before she went to bed when Henry entered, not even waiting for them to sweep their curtsies before he curtly ordered them from the room, his tone making it plain to them that it would not be wise to delay or to try to hover by the door, in the hopes that they might be able to overhear snatches of the conversation between the royal couple. Jane saw Lady Rochford cast a sympathetic look in her direction as she backed out of the room and she felt thankful for it, glad to know that her lady-in-waiting was genuinely concerned for her and wished her well.

Her brother Edward was not pleased when he learned that, of all the ladies at court, she had singled out Lady Rochford to be her principal lady-in-waiting.

He could see the logic in her decision not to nominate one of their younger sisters for that role. Such a move could have caused great offence to other noble families, who would view it as nepotism if the role was given to Bess or Dorothy, who were both young, who had no experience of service in the Queen's household and who were born of relatively humble stock, as the daughters of a knight. However, while Edward commended her for not advancing their sisters, remarking that it was a mistake for the Boleyns to allow themselves to be seen to snatch up positions for themselves and their kin at the expense of other families, he disagreed with her choice.

He thought that she should have offered the position to somebody like the Duchess of Suffolk, or perhaps the Countess of Salisbury, if the King would consent to her appointment, viewing both as suitable choices for the honoured role. Choosing Lady Suffolk would help them secure the friendship of the King's dearest friend, and choosing Lady Salisbury would have showed that she had the support of the Pole family, in whose veins Plantagenet blood flowed strongly.

He made no secret of his opinion that the widow of a man executed for treason and incest, a woman who had been closely connected to the Boleyn family, was not a woman that Jane should wish to have in her household, much less to single out for such honour, trust and favour.

Though she was normally guided by her brother, knowing that he was a clever man, well-educated and with a shrewd understanding of the court, a shrewder understanding than she would ever be able to lay claim to, Jane had adamantly refused to consider the idea of withdrawing her offer of the position to Lady Rochford, much less dismissing the poor woman from her household altogether, as Edward advocated when he learned of her decision to appoint her.

George Boleyn's crimes could not be blamed on his wife, who must have suffered greatly, being married to such a man, unable to speak to anybody about his behaviour.

Jane would not want to see Lady Rochford punished for her husband's wrongdoing, any more than she wished to see Mary punished for the fact that her mother had not been able to bear the King a son and had lost his love, or Elizabeth punished for Anne's horrific sins. It was not Lady Rochford's fault that her husband was a traitor, willing to bed his own sister in the hope that she would conceive an incestuous bastard to sit on the throne, any more than it was Mary and Elizabeth's fault that they were born the daughters of a King who craved a son.
Even if it was true that Lady Rochford had given evidence against her husband, she should not be blamed for telling the truth.

If anything, Jane thought that she should be praised for it, given that she had given up a life of wealth and prominence as the future Countess of Wiltshire, and as the sister-in-law of the Queen, for the sake of telling the truth and revealing the foul crime that had been committed against the King. Many women in her position would not have spoken up, choosing instead to remain silent in order to keep the family they were tied to in power, so that they might benefit, knowing that, as women, their lot in life was dependent on position and fortunes of their family by marriage. Instead, Lady Rochford told the truth, even when telling the truth meant that she would be an outcast, both from the family she had married into and from the court that shunned her.

Jane had wanted to help her, and she had.

She had not had cause to regret her decision to honour Lady Rochford.

The other woman was deeply thankful to be offered such a post, one that afforded her an honoured position at court and a generous pension with which she could support herself.

Her late husband's property was confiscated after he was convicted of treason and the Earl of Wiltshire was unwilling to provide for her more generously than he was obliged to. He blamed her for the loss of his son and for the downfall of the Boleyn family and would have seen her utterly impoverished if he thought that he could get away with refusing to support her. Jane tried to turn a deaf ear to gossip, knowing that it was beneath her dignity as Queen to listen to idle chatter, but she had heard that even Cromwell's support had only succeeded in securing a very modest jointure for Lady Rochford, scarcely enough to live on, especially at court.

Lady Rochford was also loyal to Jane, who knew that she needed to have loyal friends and servants by her side.

She would have liked it if Lady Rochford could have remained by her side when Henry entered her apartment, his anger written on his face, but even if he had not made it plain that all of her attendants were to vacate the rooms at once, she would not have demanded that Lady Rochford should stay when she could imagine how uncomfortable it would be for her to have to witness a quarrel between her King and Queen, unable to do anything except listen in silence, afraid to draw any attention to herself for fear that the King's anger might turn on her.

Given her connection to Anne, it would be especially distressing for her to witness such a dispute.

She would never have asked that of Lady Rochford.

It was for her to diffuse this situation, as best she could, living up to the title of Peacemaker, which Chapuys had once given her, after their first formal audience.

"Of course I don't think that, Your Majesty," she said in response to Henry's question. She knew that her best defence for his anger was to humbly apologise for the offence her words had caused him and make sure that he knew that she would not repeat it, and hope that he would be satisfied with that and would not press the issue any further.

They had been so happy together since the day she was able to tell him that she carried his child, and she didn't want anything to happen that would spoil it.

If she believed that the King might listen to what she had to say, and consider her words, perhaps even allowing himself to be swayed by what she had to say, then she might have been able to
explain her position to him. If she could, she would have explained to him that, although she had
not intended any harm or any challenge to the King’s authority when she failed to accord Elizabeth
the title of princess, it was a title that she did not truly believe the child should carry. To her mind,
the title belonged to Mary by rights while Elizabeth should be Lady Elizabeth, honoured as befitted
a natural daughter of the King but unworthy of royal status. However, she knew that he would only
be offended by her words if she spoke them, and it would make matters worse for them all.

He was the King and he had decreed that Elizabeth was legitimate while Mary was a bastard.

Even after he welcomed Mary back to court and commanded that she be treated with honour, he did
not seem to have considered the idea of restoring her to her former royal status.

How could she tell him that, in her heart, she thought of his daughters as Princess Mary and Lady
Elizabeth, and that it had seemed natural to her that Ambassador Chapuys should refer to the child
as Lady, and that she should do the same when she responded?

How could she tell him that she viewed it as a grave injustice that Mary should be stripped of the
royal title and honours she had once enjoyed and that she, the daughter of Katherine of Aragon,
should be forced to yield precedence to Anne Boleyn's daughter, knowing that her little half-sister
was the child of the woman who had torn her family apart and robbed Mary of her place as
Princess, when he was the one who had decreed which of his daughters would have the right to call
herself a princess, and which must content herself with the status of a royal bastard?

He would not want to hear it, least of all from her.

With hindsight, she wished that she spoken of Elizabeth in more neutral terms.

Calling her 'Princess' would have offended Chapuys, not to mention the Emperor, to whom her
words would almost certainly be reported and who would have taken it as a sign that she agreed
that Elizabeth was the King’s legitimate daughter and the rightful Princess of England, while Mary
was a bastard and could not hope that Jane would support her restoration that the succession.
Calling her 'Lady' had angered the King, who was now taxing her with her slip. She should have
referred to the child by her name alone, with no title, or as her stepdaughter, which could offend
nobody but she had not thought of this at the time so she had to deal with the consequences.

"Then why did you speak of her as 'Lady Elizabeth'?" Henry demanded, feeling indignant. "Why
did you imply that my daughter was a bastard – and in front of Ambassador Chapuys, of all
people?"

That he would have annulled his marriage to Anne and declared their child illegitimate if not for
Anne's miraculous survival and her insistence that she would only cooperate and go into exile to
allow him to be with Jane if he left their marriage to stand valid was beside the point.

Jane was not aware of what had transpired, and did not know about Anne's bargain with him.

To the best of her knowledge, it was his decision and his decision alone to continue to recognise
Elizabeth as a princess and as his heir after his sons, his decision that his younger daughter should
remain legitimate, even though her elder sister was a bastard, and yet she still disputed his decision,
slyly supporting Chapuys, knowing that the Imperial ambassador wished to see Mary restored to
the succession and Elizabeth declared a bastard and showing him that she agreed.

He would never have believed that his sweet Jane could defy him like that if he had not heard her
for himself.
Had anybody else, even somebody as trusted as Charles Brandon, reported Jane's words to him, he would have condemned them for daring to accuse her when she must surely be guiltless.

Chapuys seemed to be convinced that the power of the Emperor would ensure that, sooner or later, Henry would yield to the pressure to restore Mary to the succession and that he would declare her a princess once more. The fact that Mary herself had acknowledged her illegitimacy and admitted that she was not entitled to royal titles or to a place in the line of succession had not swayed him from his resolve to see her styled Princess once more.

At least it proved that Mary was more honest and sensible than the ambassador who sought to champion her cause, not to mention the cousin who might use his power to unjustly benefit her.

The Emperor might have accepted, however grudgingly, that he was not going to be able to bully his fellow monarch into restoring Mary by threatening England with the enmity of his Empire, especially when England would find a willing ally in France, but now he was trying a different tack.

He was negotiating possible matches for Mary to powerful princes, in the hope that they would not be willing to dishonour their houses by taking an illegitimate daughter of a King's as their wife and hoping that the prospective marital alliances would be tempting enough to ensure that Henry would legitimise his eldest daughter rather than lose the chance to ally England with another country.

If that was the Emperor's leaning, he would soon learn that he was mistaken.

Henry was not a man who was going to allow himself to be brow-beaten into pretending that his Great Matter had not been entirely justified and that he had been wrong to expose his union with Katherine for the abomination against God that it was, and strip his elder daughter of the titles that she should never have been allowed to claim. The Emperor could negotiate as many splendid matches for Mary as he liked but if the worthy princes he recommended for Mary would not take her as she was, as the natural daughter of the King of England, Henry wasn't going to alter Mary's status for their benefit, no matter how good a match it was for the girl, and for England.

Mary's prospective husbands would take her as a bastard or not at all.

He would supply her with a sizeable dowry, to compensate for her illegitimacy and her lack of succession rights, and her future husband would enjoy the friendship of England, just as he would if he was marrying a legitimate princess instead of a bastard. If those terms were not sufficient inducement for Mary's suitors to take her as their wife, so be it.

He would not regret the loss of a prospective son-in-law who only cared about his bride's title.

"I have told you before that I will not have you meddling in my affairs, remember," he scowled darkly at Jane, his expression and his tone making her feel as though her blood was freezing in her veins, forcing her heart to beat faster and faster in order to keep her blood from stagnating.

She remembered, all too well, the way he had spoken to her, his voice calm but cold, reminding her of his predecessor and making it clear that, if she persisted in meddling in affairs that he regarded as his concern and therefore none of her business, the love he cherished for her would not save her from following Anne to the scaffold. He had already cast two women, both of whom were dearly loved, from his life and it was clear from his manner that he would rather do the same to her than allow her to challenge his will.

When she spoke to Edward about it, praying that her brother would assure her that she did not need to worry, that Anne had only died because she was an adulteress and that, if she remained a
virtuous wife to the King, she would never have cause to fear that she might find herself meeting the same grim fate, her brother had not given her the reassurance she craved.

Instead, he reproved her for angering the King, warning her that she would put herself and their whole family in danger if she continued to court his displeasure.

"The King is the King, sister." His tone was sombre as he spoke, and his eyes held a grave expression. This was a warning that he was giving her for her own good but, though she knew that, there was a brief instant when Jane hated her brother for being the one to speak such an unpalatable truth. "That is how you must think of him, first and foremost, even when you are alone with him. Lady Anne was clever in many ways, clever enough to hold the King for many years and to win herself a crown, but she was still foolish in the worst way; she thought of His Majesty as her husband first and her King second. You must never make the same mistake."

"I remember," Jane said softly.

The baby in her womb turned restlessly, as though he was distressed by the tension she was feeling. She instinctively lay a hand over her swollen belly, caressing it gently in order to calm the child she carried, and she inwardly breathed a sigh of relief when the King, after a moment's pause, placed his hand over hers, the anger clearing from his face at the reminder that she was soon to be the mother of his son, the son he had waited for for so long but who had never come to him with Queen Katherine or Lady Anne.

No matter how angry he was, the thought of a healthy Prince of Wales could soften his wrath.

"We should not quarrel," Henry said quietly, forcing himself to smile at Jane and to suppress the anger he felt towards her over the way she had spoken about Elizabeth. For the sake of their son, he needed to make sure that she was not permitted to be upset or distressed in any way, not when it could harm the child she carried… their Edward. He felt the gentle thump of his son kicking and he rejoiced at the sensation, at the knowledge that this child was a strong one, the fine boy he was praying for. However, despite his joy, he knew that he needed to make his position clear, so that they would never again have to have any unpleasantness over the matter of Elizabeth's title. "I hope that you will be careful from now on, my dear." He warned lightly, waiting for Jane's nod of agreement before he continued. "I'm sure that you meant no harm by it and that it was a slip of the tongue, nothing malicious, but you must take care that it does not happen again. I cannot have my Queen giving the wrong impression, especially to foreign ambassadors. From now on, you must never allow yourself to forget Princess Elizabeth's rightful title."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Jane agreed at once, seizing the opportunity to escape so lightly. "I am sorry that I made such a mistake when I spoke to Ambassador Chapuys. I know that Elizabeth is a princess and I will make sure to call her that from now on." She wondered if she should offer to apologise to Elizabeth for not referring to her by her title but she decided against suggesting it; Elizabeth was only four, and it was best not to remind her of the incident or to encourage her to dwell on it or to harbour resentment. Jane would say nothing and she would soon forget about it.

"Good. Then we will forget about it," Henry said magnanimously, taking one of her hands in his and kissing it to let her know that she was forgiven. He patted her swollen belly with his free hand, smiling when he felt his son turn within her. With her condition so far advanced, there could be no question of them sharing a bed, for fear that it would not be good for his son, but he could accept the restriction in good part, especially as he had the consolation of Lady Misseldon's company, whenever he required it. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

With a parting kiss, he left the room, leaving Jane feeling a mixture of relief and unhappiness.
As glad as she was that she had managed to escape an argument that might have turned bitter and, worst of all, one that might have led her to blurt out her feelings on the subject of her stepdaughters' titles and positions, rousing the King's ire, she deeply regretted the fact that she had had to keep silent where Mary was concerned, instead of pleading with the King to restore the poor girl as a princess, allowing her to once more enjoy the honours she was born to.

Of all the things she hoped to accomplish as Queen, Mary's restoration was the cause dearest to her heart, and the goal she was most loath to abandon.

Even if the King was not willing to consider the idea of disinheriting Elizabeth – and Jane did not want to see her suffer either, as she was just a child and innocent of any wrongdoing – there had to be a way in which Mary could be legally legitimised and restored without her sister's position being affected in any way, save that she must yield precedence and move a step further down in the succession in deference to Mary as the elder princess. Jane hoped that it could be found.

Her brother had cheerfully predicted that, once she gave the King a healthy son, there would be no boon that he would not be prepared to give her as a reward for succeeding where her predecessors had both failed, nothing she could ask that he would refuse her.

Jane knew exactly what she would ask for.

15th September 1537

As pleased as he was that the King had charged him with the task of organising suitable celebrations for the birth of his son, commanding that no expense should be spared, Edward Seymour couldn't help but feel disappointed that his royal brother-in-law had not also made mention of plans for Jane's coronation, or commanded that he should begin to make preliminary arrangements for that ceremony to take place once Jane recovered from childbed.

It would take months to plan suitable festivities in honour of England's new Queen, especially since they needed to ensure that the celebrations were so lavish that nobody could allege that Anne's coronation was grander, and they could not begin work on the preparations too soon.

Despite the fact that she had been married to the King for more than a year, despite the fact that she was expecting his child within a month, the King had, as yet, made no move to arrange a coronation for her and, whenever the subject was alluded to, however tactfully, he showed no inclination to discuss the subject, avoiding the issue and turning the conversation to another topic immediately to signal that, as far as he was concerned, the subject was closed. If pressed, he was likely to snap at whichever of his councillors was too enthusiastic in advocating a coronation for Jane, telling him that it would be arranged when he saw fit to arrange it, and not a moment before.

Edward found it very worrying.

He understood that, in the immediate aftermath of Queen Anne's execution, which had shocked the people, who found it difficult to adjust to the idea that an anointed Queen – even a Queen whose title many of them had rejected, believing that she had no right to it while Katherine lived – could be executed like a common criminal, the King might have thought it best not to have a coronation for Jane immediately after their wedding, in case the people resented her for what had happened to Anne and snubbed her on her special day. That was the last thing that he would have wanted, and had he been asked, he would have agreed that it was best to wait.

He believed that, given time, his sister would win the people and that it would be best if her coronation was postponed until the celebration would be widely welcomed.
However, Jane had proven to be a popular Queen, especially when the people saw how kind she was to the Lady Mary, whom she had helped to reunite with the King, an act that was greatly appreciated by those who loved Mary and who had grieved to see her out of favour and in disgrace. Edward was certain that, if the King had staged a coronation for Jane, the people would have welcomed their new Queen with far more good will than they had welcomed Queen Anne... not that this would have proven difficult.

After the King's previous matrimonial trials, his people must be only too glad to know that he had a proper wife and that they had a proper Queen at last.

Why wouldn't they want to celebrate that?

Admittedly, the Pilgrimage of Grace had not helped matters. The suggestion that Jane should be crowned in York was used as a sop to the rebels but Edward could recognize that the King had no intention of giving in to any of their demands or showing them any concessions. It was understandable that, with a rebellion to deal with and then, once the rebellion was quashed, with traitors to be punished for their crimes, the King had too much on his mind to worry about Jane's coronation but the rebellion was long over and still nothing had been said about Jane's coronation.

No plans were made, not even preliminary ones, and the subject was never broached at Council meetings these days, even though there was plenty of discussion about the christening of the Prince, and about his future household. It seemed as though the King was content to leave his Queen uncrowned and Edward was very worried about why he would want to do this.

He could not forget the note of resentment in the King's voice as he noted that the joust he had planned when Queen Anne was pregnant for the first time had had to be cancelled, especially as he could remember that, prior to Princess Elizabeth's birth, her parents had consulted a famous astrologer who had vowed to them that their child would be the son they both longed for. Their fervent desire for a son had ensured that they did not question the astrologer when he promised them one. Neither of them wanted to believe that he could be wrong about it.

Thanks to their overconfidence, extensive preparations were made to celebrate the birth of a Prince, leaving the King humiliated when he was left to present a Princess to England instead.

Anne had been dead for more than a year, and had committed worse betrayals against the King than a mere failure to provide a son, at least as far as the King was concerned. Edward didn't believe his sister's predecessor to have been guilty, though it had suited his family's cause well that she should be condemned when she was, ensuring that she would be cast aside at the height of the King's love for Jane, paving the way for a Seymour Queen. However, the King was plainly still resentful over the fact that the lavish celebrations he had planned for the son he expected Anne to give him had had to be cancelled because their child was only a girl.

Edward could imagine that the King could still remember the disappointment he felt when he was told that he had a new daughter, and the embarrassment it must have caused him to know that there would be many people, in England and abroad, laughing at him because, after all the trouble it had cost him to make Anne his wife, all she was able to give him was another unwanted girl, and because instead of the Prince he had craved, the Prince he expected that all of his people would welcome, regardless of whether or not they supported Katherine and Mary, he only had another Princess, one who was called a bastard by the Bishop of Rome and by half of England.

Could the King be afraid that he would be disappointed in his hope for a son this time, despite his optimistic attitude towards the birth and his seeming conviction that he would soon have a son?
Was he already contemplating the possibility that Jane would present him with a daughter next month, as Queen Katherine and Queen Anne had before her, and unwilling to go to the trouble and expense of providing a coronation for her until he felt that she had earned it by giving him a son?

Was he unwilling to solidify her position as Queen by having her crowned and anointed because he was thinking of the possibility that she might fail to bear him a son and did not want to strengthen her position with a coronation, so that it would be easier for him to set her and the daughter she bore him aside if she failed him, as her predecessors had?

If he wanted to set Jane aside, it would be very possible for him to manage it.

Archbishop Cranmer, the highest ecclesiastical authority in England after the King, was a timid man and one who would find some kind of grounds for annulling the marriage if he was told that this was what the King wanted. Edward imagined that Cranmer might even be pleased to find himself commanded to do so; he had served the Boleyn family for years as their chaplain before Anne became Queen, and he was known to admire her deeply and rumoured to be distressed by her fall from favour and by her execution so perhaps he would take satisfaction from the opportunity to see her successor set aside, especially if Jane's daughter was branded a bastard while Anne's daughter continued to be honoured as a princess and as the King's heir.

Like everybody else at court, Cranmer must know that, unlike Katherine, who had had powerful kin to protect her, the Seymours would not be able to do anything to protect Jane if the King decided that he wanted to be rid of her. They were nothing more than the King's subjects, and they owed all of their power and advancement to him.

If the King wanted to set Jane aside, her family would be powerless to prevent it.

If they attempted to protest on her behalf, they would lose everything they had gained.

Edward was all too aware of what it would mean for him and for his family if Jane failed and the King decided that he no longer wished for her to be his wife.

He needed only to think of the Earl of Wiltshire to know how bad things could become for the family. Thomas Boleyn was once one of the most powerful men at court but he was now forbidden to come within sight of the King, on pain of death if he disobeyed. He was stripped of the official posts he had enjoyed, and that had fattened his purse considerably, and was left to live in lonely obscurity in Hever Castle, with two of his three children dead and the third married to a common soldier, a man he would not willingly own as his son-in-law, or wish to see as the father of his grandchildren. He might have been allowed to retain his earldom, but it could bring him little joy, especially when he knew that he would be the first and last Boleyn to hold it.

The last thing Edward was wanted was for the Seymours to follow in his footsteps, going from being one of the first families in the land to disgraced pariahs in an instant, at the King's whim.

He intended to be the first in a long line of Seymour noblemen.

When the King's fancy first fell on Jane, and when it became clear that his interest in her was deeper than the brief fancies he had cherished for various ladies of the court, the Seymour family found themselves courted by many people who wished to be their friends, people who could see that Anne Boleyn was foundering and that, if she fell, her family would fall with her, people who were shrewd enough to be able to see where the King's love lay and who knew that, if he could free himself from Anne, they would soon see Jane Seymour as their new Queen.

Just as they had fawned over the Boleyns when they were in the ascendant, hoping that when Anne
became Queen, she would see to it that those who had stood her friends rather than shunning her as Katherine's supporters had, fearing to offend the Queen they believed would prevail, were rewarded for their loyalty, they now cleaved to the Seymours, the new favourites, abandoning Anne so that their positions at court would not be marred by her fall from grace.

As soon as Anne was arrested, before her trial, when there was still a possibility, at least in theory, that she would be found to be innocent of all charges and restored to her place as Queen, several of the highest noble families in the land had written to Jane, dropping heavy hints that, if she could find places for their daughters as ladies in her household, they would be grateful to her.

Edward, recognised as the leader of the Seymour family, even before the death of his father, was surrounded by courtiers, some of whom belonged to exalted families and who would have once deemed themselves to be too grand to spare a civil word for a mere knight's son. Now they were falling over themselves to assure him of their respect and admiration for him and for his family, and of their joy in knowing that a lady as lovely and as virtuous as his sister would soon be their Queen. Where he had once had to fight for advancement, knowing that his relatively humble stock set him at a disadvantage when it came to court appointments, he was now being showered with favours, honoured as the King's brother-in-law and finally given a chance to show his abilities.

He did not want to risk losing all he had gained.

If Jane failed – and, as unpleasant as the thought was, the possibility that she would bear a daughter or, worse still, that the child she carried would be born dead, perhaps convincing the King that their marriage was accursed and would never be allowed to bear healthy male issue, could not be dismissed –he knew that he would have to make it plain to the King where his allegiance lay.

Just as the Earl of Wiltshire was quick to voice his condemnation of his daughter and her alleged lovers, quick to guard himself against the possibility that he would be accused of conspiring with her to place the bastard son of one of her lovers on the English throne if it was thought that he might try to defend her, Edward would have to show the King that, if Jane could not bear him a son and he wanted to take another woman as his new wife and Queen, the Seymour family would never presume to stand against him on Jane's behalf.

If his niece was declared a bastard, he would utter no word of protest, leaving it to the King to decide how her would treat the girl.

Edward would willingly dance at the King's fourth wedding if, by doing so, he could retain favour… but even if he continued to enjoy royal favour, it would be small consolation for all he would lose.

If Jane bore the King a strong, healthy son, then her position would be assured and Edward would become the uncle of the next King of England.

At the very least, he would be made an earl. Even marquess or duke was not out of the question.

In time, when his nephew sat on the throne, he could look forward to the advantages that his close kinship with the monarch would bring him and, if his nephew succeeded the King before he reached manhood – a very real possibility, given the King's state of health, though it was a possibility that nobody would dare to speak of – he might find himself wielding more power than he could ever have dreamed possible two years ago.

He might be Lord Protector for his nephew, King in all but name.

If Jane was carrying a girl, if she failed to give the King the son he desired, then he would see his
hopes slip away from him. Even if the King chose to keep Jane as his wife, perhaps thinking that it would look ill with the people if his third wife was set aside when he had divorced one wife and executed another in recent memory, their daughter would not be the heir to the throne.

Princess Elizabeth was the King's legal heir, and those who did not support her claim to the title would rally to the Lady Mary instead, believing her to be the King's trueborn daughter and rightful heir. With her elder half-sisters as rivals, each with her own party of supporters to back her claim to the throne, a daughter of Jane's would have no chance to challenge them for the Crown.

At best, she would be destined to be married off abroad, given to a foreign prince in order to seal an alliance for the King and for England if she married within her father's lifetime. She was likely to be married to a minor royal if one of her sisters arranged the match, fearing that Jane's daughter might become their rival if she was allowed to marry a powerful husband. At worst, the King would take the birth of a daughter to Jane as a sign that their marriage was destined to be a sonless one, and choose to cast mother and daughter aside, and begin again with a new wife.

In Princess Elizabeth, he had an heir, in the event that he had no son, so he would not suffer much of a loss if he decided to brand Jane's daughter a bastard, as he had the Lady Mary when he decided to annul his marriage to her mother.

The King was certainly defensive about Elizabeth's title, Edward thought sourly, tracking the child with his eyes as he walked into the Great Hall, where the little girl was mingling with the courtiers, under the watchful eye of her governess. Most of the courtiers had the sense to pay their respects to the child and flatter her to her face, knowing that the King would take a dim view of any reports of disrespect. Jane had confided in him that the King had reproved her for denying his daughter the title of Princess, warning her against repeating her offence, which Edward took as a bad sign.

Given the choice, he would rather have had the comfort of believing that the King's love for Jane was strong, so strong that it would ensure that, even if their first child was a girl, he would not only be willing to give her another chance to bear him a son but he would also want to see their daughter as Princess and as his first rightful heiress, ahead of Katherine and Anne's daughters, whose mothers had lost his love and paid dearly for doing so, but this now seemed highly unlikely.

Despite his anger towards Anne, the King still recognised their child as his legitimate daughter and showed no inclination to diminish her status in any way.

To Edward's mind, that meant that unless Jane bore a son, the little girl could be a threat to them.

Princess Elizabeth might still be too young to understand the circumstances of her mother's death but, like all children, she would grow up and, when she was older, she would have many questions about her mother, questions that she was going to want to have answered.

Even if the King forbade anybody to speak of it to her, he would not be able to keep her from hearing the truth eventually. And when she heard the story of her mother's fall, he couldn't imagine that her feelings towards the Seymour family would be very warm, not even if they did their utmost to treat her with kindness and respect during her childhood. Others blamed them for Anne's fall, so he would be far from surprised if Elizabeth came to feel the same way, and to resent the Seymours, even if she was obliged to hide it while they were in favour.

Should she become Queen, she would have little reason to think kindly of them.

He watched in silence, his eyes never leaving Elizabeth as she walked through the Great Hall, with her governess following a couple of paces behind her.
Although she was barely four years old, it was plain at a glance that Elizabeth was well schooled in the behaviour expected of a princess in public. She walked with her head high and her back straight, nodding and smiling in response to the bows and curtseys that the courtiers made to her as she mingled among them. Edward, who derived more pleasure than he would ever have cared to admit from the respect that he was shown as the Queen's brother, even before the King made him a viscount in his own right – and hopefully, he would be granted an even higher title should his sister bear a prince, as befitted the eldest uncle of a future King of England – could recognise that little Elizabeth enjoyed the attention and deference.

His face did not betray any hint of humour, or of any other emotion, but he was inwardly amused by the thought of how Elizabeth would react if she ever learned that, for some of those who were now paying their respects to her as Princess of England, smiling at her as though it was a great honour to be allowed to bow and curtsey before her, she had no true right to the title and would never be anything more than the King's bastard by his unpopular paramour.

But bastard or not, Elizabeth was the King's heir, and as his heir she might one day be powerful… and watching her now, Edward could imagine that, despite being only four years old, the little girl was already very conscious of her importance, aware that her status as a princess meant that many of the great lords and ladies of the land would wish to court her favour, hoping that if they showed her friendship now, when she was a child, she would remember when she was older, and in a position to offer them her patronage, and the advantages that came with it.

A frown creased Edward's face as he watched Elizabeth walk through the Great Hall, when he saw which of the courtiers present had attracted the child's attention, and in whose direction she was now walking towards, a smile on her face, seemingly unaware of the fact that her governess, following her gaze, was trying to distract her attention from the lady she wished to greet.

"My Lady Princess." Lady Ursula Misseldon curtsied deeply at Elizabeth's approach.

Elizabeth motioned for her to rise with a graceful gesture. "You may rise," she told her gravely, liking the look of this lady. "What's your name? You're very pretty," she said approvingly, before the lady could answer her question, favouring her with a smile. The lady wasn't as beautiful as Elizabeth's Mama – she privately thought that no lady in the world would ever be as beautiful as her Mama, though she hoped that she would come close when she was older – but she was still very pretty and she had a kind face, one that appealed to Elizabeth.

She was also wearing a very pretty gown of silvery-grey satin, which Elizabeth considered to be far nicer than the dull gowns that Queen Jane's ladies wore when they attended her.

Her Mama's ladies had worn much prettier gowns.

Elizabeth couldn't understand why Queen Jane would wish for her ladies to look so plain.

Ursula smiled, touched by the compliment, especially coming from the little princess.

Although the Queen treated her with unfailing courtesy, never treating her any differently to the other ladies-in-waiting, the Lady Mary avoided her, preferring to ignore her father's mistress, even if she did not dare to snub her openly. Elizabeth was too young to think to shun her.

"You are very pretty too, Princess, if I may say so."

"You may," Elizabeth told her, pleased by the compliment. "I haven't seen you before." She couldn't remember much about the ladies who had served her Mama before, many of whom were no longer allowed to stay at court now that Lady Jane was Queen instead, but she was sure that this
lady was not one of them. She would have remembered her if she had.

"I have come to court recently, my Lady Princess. My name is Lady Ursula Misseldon. I am a lady-in-waiting to Queen Jane," Ursula explained, feeling sorry for the little girl who had been banished from her father's court for so long that quite a few of the people she had seen since her return to Whitehall must have been strangers to her. She could imagine how difficult it must have been for a young child to come back to the court where she used to visit her mother now that her mother was dead and another woman occupied the Queen's throne in her place.

Ursula always made a point never to speak of political matters with the King during their time together, aware that she was there for his pleasure, not to be his councillor. However, she was still aware of the talk about the little princess in the wake of her mother's execution and her father's remarriage, when few courtiers could understand why the King would wish to honour Anne Boleyn's child when he had been so determined to disinherit Katherine of Aragon's daughter.

Some, who desired nothing more than the restoration of the Lady Mary, privately alleged that little Elizabeth was not the King's child at all but one look at the child made it plain that there could be no truth to those allegations. Elizabeth was a true Tudor; there could be no mistaking that.

After seeing the King with his little daughter, since her return to court, and witnessing how affectionately he treated her, Ursula thought that he had allowed Elizabeth to retain her royal status out of love for her, even if he was unable to bring himself to visit her at first. She was just an innocent child. She was no threat to the position of the new Queen and the children she would bear, and there was no reason to punish her for the crimes her mother was condemned for.

"Oh." A slight frown creased Elizabeth's brow at the mention of her stepmother but she recovered her temper very quickly. It wasn't Lady Misseldon's fault that she was one of Queen Jane's ladies, after all, and since she seemed like a very nice lady, Elizabeth didn't want to let her new stepmother stop them from being friends. When she asked Lady Misseldon to be her friend, she saw her eyes widen and she could hear Lady Bryan's hasty whispers that they ought to be getting back to the nursery now but she ignored her governess so that she could explain to Lady Misseldon. "I don't have a lot of friends here, except for my Papa and Lord Suffolk and the Lady Mary, not anymore," she explained, feeling sad when she thought about her Mama's ladies, who were always so kind to her but who weren't here now. "Will you be one?"

Although she was aware that it was a breach of etiquette for her to do so, Ursula impulsively knelt down to Elizabeth's level and drew the little girl into her embrace, kissing her cheek gently and wishing that there was more that she could do to ease the hurt that she must be feeling over her mother's loss. She couldn't even express her sympathy over Elizabeth's loss, knowing that if she did, somebody was certain to run to the King to tell him that she disputed his justice where Anne was concerned. No matter how fond of her he was, she would never get away with that.

"I would be honoured to be your friend, my Lady Princess," she pledged gravely.

Elizabeth's answering smile was wide as she kissed Ursula in return. "Thank you, Lady Misseldon."

Edward, watching the exchange between the little princess and the woman who had become his brother-in-law's mistress, felt his face harden as he watched, though he did his best to conceal his feelings beneath an expressionless mask, not wanting to betray what he was thinking to anybody who might be watching him, eager to see what the Queen's brother was up to.

It was not that he objected to the idea of Lady Misseldon being the King's mistress.
He was realistic enough to know that the King was not a man who would be an especially faithful
husband, even if he did love his wife, and he certainly could not be expected to embrace a life of
celibacy while Jane was with child and forbidden to share his bed. Given that it was inevitable that
the King would stray from the marriage bed, Edward had actually been rather pleased that his
fancy had settled on Lady Misseldon rather than on another; at least, since Lady Misseldon's father
was dead and since she had no brothers or any close relatives, apart from her mother, she did not
have her male kinfolk suing for favours from the King, enjoying some of the spoils that would
otherwise belong to the Seymour family. She also seemed to take little interest in politics, and
would never have tried to guide the King's hand when it came to matters of state.

Now, however, when Jane was carrying the King's child and when they would know, within a
matter of weeks, whether that child was a son, who would secure his mother's position as Queen
and ensure that the Seymours would be firmly in favour with the King as the relatives of the lady
who had given him his great desire, or a daughter who could lead the King to decide that he
needed to set Jane aside and take another wife, one who would bear him the son he wanted instead
of failing as her predecessors had, the sight of Lady Misseldon irritated him.

What if Jane should bear a daughter, while Lady Misseldon became pregnant with the King's
child?

Might the King decide that he should annul his marriage to Jane, in case Lady Misseldon was
carrying a boy and he lost out on his chance to make their child his legitimate heir by waiting too
long before setting Jane, who had failed him, aside so that he would be free to remarry?

What if the King was tiring of Jane's quiet, dutiful ways and wanted a more exciting woman?

What if the King, seeing how Princess Elizabeth was taking to Lady Misseldon, when she was so
cool and so distant with Jane, believed that Lady Misseldon would be a better mother to the little
girl, and decided that he would rather have her by his side?

Judging by the way the two of them were chatting happily together, Edward doubted that Elizabeth
would object to the idea of Lady Misseldon becoming her new stepmother. She might even
welcome it, especially if Lady Misseldon was able to recognise that it would please the King to see
that she was affectionate towards his youngest daughter and to make sure that she showered
Elizabeth with attention, encouraging him to favour her over Jane's daughter and the Lady Mary.

"Princess Elizabeth is certainly her mother's daughter." He did not even realise that he had spoken
his thought aloud when he saw that the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk were looking at his
quizzically, wondering what he meant by his words. The prudent thing for him to have done would
be to keep his mouth shut and to pretend that he had not spoken, to hope that the Duke and Duchess
would go along with this and forget what he had said. But, for once in his life, he didn't want to do
the prudent thing. He wanted to speak his piece, even if his words might be dangerous. He
motioned to Elizabeth and Lady Misseldon, feeling his mouth curve in a sneer. "Is it not strange,
Your Grace, that of all the lords and ladies present, the child should be drawn to the King's
whore?" He asked rhetorically. "It seems that like attracts like."

It was an open secret that Chapuys sometimes referred to Elizabeth as the Little Whore in his
reports to his royal master. Perhaps the ambassador was closer to the truth than he knew.

He didn't know what kind of reaction to expect but he had not expected to see the Duke reach out
and seize him by the collar of his doublet, shaking him roughly, his eyes bright with anger.

"Charles!" Although she had not approved of Edward's words about Elizabeth, hating to hear
anybody speak so disparagingly about a child who was too young to cause any offence, Catherine
was still astonished by the violence of her husband's reaction. Though she was aware that, in his youth, he had been impulsive by nature, rarely stopping to think of the possible consequences of his actions, he had changed a great deal since then... or at least she had thought so.

Brandon ignored her, shaking Edward a second time, not caring who saw him manhandling the Queen's brother.

He truly didn't know if he was angrier about Edward's words or about the fact that the other man seemed to think that he would turn a receptive ear to them, despite his visits to Elizabeth.

"You will never speak a word against the Princess Elizabeth again, do you understand me?" He said through gritted teeth, feeling furious with the other man. He would be the last person to deny that Anne had not been the most likeable person in England but Elizabeth was just an innocent child, and he would not stand by while Edward Seymour dared to insult her.

Edward's eyes were wide and bright with indignation but he said nothing, knowing that he could not hope to beat Brandon if it came down to a fight. All he could do was hope that word of this was not carried to the King's ears, as he was uncomfortably aware that his brother-in-law would be far from pleased to hear that he had not only insulted little Elizabeth but also spoken of Anne, who was never supposed to be mentioned at court. It could cost him his place at court.

When he managed to recover his tongue, his voice was meek and trembling, unlike his usually confident tones. "I'm sorry, Your Grace, I spoke out of turn and..."

"If I ever hear that you have insulted the Princess again, you will answer to me for it," Brandon threatened darkly, ignoring the feeble apology. He released the other man, wiping his hand on his doublet in a purposefully contemptuous gesture, as though contact with Edward might soil him, before turning on his heel and stalking away, leaving Catherine to take her leave of Edward and hasten after him, leaving several curious onlookers behind them.

Edward watched them leave, feeling more unnerved than he cared to admit.

It was well known that the Duke of Suffolk was no friend to Anne, and that he had even been instrumental in her ruin yet that had not kept him from befriending little Elizabeth and championing her, even against Edward, one of the most powerful men at court and a man who would become more powerful still if his sister gave the King the legitimate son he craved.

Young as she was, Elizabeth had already won herself an ally, one that Edward would not have expected.

He did not like to think about how powerful her charm might make her when she was an adult.
Chapter Fourteen

1st October 1537

Chapuys could understand the reasons why his master was reluctant to push too hard with regard to the matter of Princess Mary's succession rights, for fear of alienating King Henry and pushing him into a French alliance that would be detrimental to the Emperor's interests. Nevertheless, he made a point of reminding him of the young girl's plight when he wrote to him, stressing that, although Mary was now received with honour at court and although both her father and stepmother were behaving affectionately towards her, it still did not make up for all she had lost.

Now that Elizabeth was, once more, welcomed back to court, the royal honours showered on the brat were a bitter reminder to Mary of the fact that she was robbed of the rights of a princess.

He did his best to encourage his master to help his cousin however he could. His encouragement was discreet, of course, as it would have been unseemly for him to give the appearance that he was issuing instructions to the Holy Roman Emperor, who might see fit to withdraw him from his post if he thought that he had cause to fear that his ambassador would place the interests of another monarch's daughter over his duty to his master, even if Mary was his master's kinswoman. However, he knew that the Emperor must know how fervently he wished to help Mary.

Today, he was delighted to receive a response from the Emperor that let him know that his pleas had not been in vain.

The Emperor might not be willing to resort to war to bring about the restoration of Princess Mary's birthright but there were other ways, peaceful ways, of accomplishing the same thing.

He sought and was granted an audience with King Henry and Queen Jane and his heart was lighter than it had been in a long time as he made his way to their private apartments at the appointed hour, being careful not to anger the King by being late. He was eager to share his news with them and felt confident that it would be as welcome to them as it was to him, if not more so.

No matter what difficulties the King and Princess Mary had had in the past, he had behaved in a loving manner towards her since they were reconciled. He must surely rejoice to learn of something so beneficial for her, and would be eager to ensure that this opportunity would not pass her by. He also knew that Queen Jane genuinely cared for her stepdaughter and that she would be happy for her when she heard Chapuys' news. He hoped that, even if the King had reservations about the Emperor's proposal, Queen Jane would be able to persuade him of its merits.

One of the King's grooms of the Privy Chamber bowed to him when he arrived, before opening the door and announcing him to the royal couple.

"Your Majesty, His Excellency Ambassador Eustace Chapuys."

As Chapuys made a low bow to the couple, he was pleased to note that their demeanour with one another was very friendly, which was not surprising, given that Jane was heavily pregnant, with the King confident that their son would soon be born, and that it would be the healthy son he had craved for so many years. Chapuys knew Jane to be a supporter of Mary's cause, always encouraging the King to bring his daughter to court and treat her with honour. It was the lady's fondest desire to persuade the King of the wisdom of restoring Mary to her rightful place in the line of succession, and to the position that was her right as the King's only legitimate daughter.
He was pleased to see that one who was a true friend to Mary enjoyed the King's love and favour.

Perhaps she would help convince the King of the advantages of this offer, especially if she succeeded in giving him the son he craved. There would be little he would deny his son's mother.

He thanked God that the Concubine was gone, knowing that, if she had not miscarried her son, she would have little difficult persuading the King to decline this opportunity on Mary's behalf. She would see it as a threat to her children's interests and would be determined to prevent it. As the mother of a son the King called Prince of Wales, her influence would be strong enough for her to thwart the efforts Chapuys made on Mary's behalf. He was sure that she would take pleasure in doing so, knowing that it would break Mary's heart to remain in England as an unwed bastard.

However much it still rankled to know that the King preferred to honour the Concubine's little bastard over Princess Mary, he could at least be thankful that she could do no further harm.

"Excellency." Henry inclined his head slightly. He was not entirely pleased to be interrupted when he was enjoying a pleasant morning with Jane, chatting with her and placing his hand on her round mound of a belly to feel their son kicking within her. However, he was able to suppress his disappointment when he had business to discuss. Cromwell's spy system was even more efficient than Wolsey's had been, allowing him to learn of virtually everything that happened in the English court and in the courts of other monarchs and to keep his royal master well-informed. Henry could easily guess why Chapuys had sought an audience with him today, and he certainly saw no harm in listening to what the ambassador had to say.

Mary was no longer a little girl, after all, so perhaps it was time that she was married, assuming that a suitable husband could be found for her, a man who was worthy of the honour of becoming the husband of a King's daughter and a man who would treat her kindly. He was enjoying his married life with Jane, for the most part, and looking forward to finally becoming the father of a healthy son. He would like to know that his daughter would be happy in her marriage, as happy as he and Jane were, whoever her husband might be.

Mary might have defied him in the past but he wanted her future to be a happy, secure one.

She was certainly pretty enough to charm any man, intelligent and learned enough to be stimulating company. If she obeyed her husband, as a wife should, she was sure to please him.

"Your Majesties," Chapuys began, "the Emperor sends you his love, and he has charged me with the grave responsibility of negotiating, with Your Majesty, a suitable marriage for your daughter, the Lady Mary."

Although he was always exceptionally careful to refer to Mary by the title of 'Lady' rather than that of 'Princess', especially around the King and those he knew to be loyal to him and to have no special cause to champion Mary and when he was seeking to improve her position, the mode of address still felt awkward on his tongue, even after long months of practice. Every time he spoke it, he felt as though he was betraying the memory of Queen Katherine, who had so steadfastly refused to compromise her faith by pretending that her daughter was a bastard rather than the true, rightful heiress to the throne, even though he knew that it was the only way to help Mary.

How the sainted Queen Katherine must weep to know that the Concubine's little bastard was honoured above her beloved daughter!

The dear, sweet lady had consoled herself with the thought that the King's love for Princess Mary was still strong and that, but for the Concubine's influence, he would surely restore her to her rightful place. As she lay dying, she commended their daughter to the King's hands, beseeching
him to be a good father to her and trusting that his love for their child would prove stronger than
the influence of those who wished to see the Princess downgraded and denied her inheritance.

It would have broken her heart to know that her plea would be ignored.

He stole a glance in Jane's direction, seeing her unfeigned pleasure at the idea of a marriage for
Mary, and he prayed that it would not be long before he could once again call Mary a princess.

"Who does the Emperor propose?" Henry asked, curious about the match that would be offered. He
knew that the Emperor wished to forge an alliance with him, but he was not going to accept a petty
duke or minor member of the royal family for his daughter. Illegitimate or not, Mary had Tudor
blood in her veins, and that alone made her worthy of any prince in Christendom. No trouble or
expense had been spared to ensure that she enjoyed an education worthy of a princess. She spoke
several languages and was an accomplished musician. She was also very pretty.

He could not imagine that Francis or the Emperor or any other monarch had managed to father so
fair a daughter.

"His Highness Don Luis, the heir to the throne of Portugal and the brother of the Emperor's wife,
Isabella," Chapuys responded calmly. He felt confident that such a promising match would be
enough to tempt any monarch, as it would give him ties to Portugal, Spain and the Holy Roman
Empire, as well as ensuring that his grandson by Mary would be King of Portugal one day.

It would have been a worthy match for Mary when her father still acknowledged her as Princess
and when it seemed certain that she would rule England one day, let alone now.

"What type of man is he, this Don Luis?"

Chapuys had anticipated Henry's question and prepared his answer, an answer that would please
any father he knew.

"He is, in every way, a paragon," he assured him, meeting his gaze squarely so that Henry would
not suspect that he was being dishonest or evasive. "A man of great integrity and virtue. A man
who has fought military campaigns and won. A man with a profound knowledge of the world." Having
met Don Luis, as well as speaking with others who knew him and who all spoke highly of
him, deeming him to be one of the finest princes in Europe, a prince that any princess would be
fortunate to be able to call her husband, Chapuys was confident that he would be a good and kind
husband for Mary, the husband she deserved. He knew that he would never be able to feel at ease
if he thought that she was to be sent to the bed of a man who would treat her unkindly, as her father
had treated her mother, no matter what grand title the marriage might bring her.

It pleased him to know that Don Luis would never behave thus to his wife.

It also pleased him to think that he might be instrumental in making Mary the Queen of Portugal.

"My daughter has no knowledge of the world," Henry cut in, seizing on Chapuys' last remark. He
seemed to be determined to find fault with the paragon of a prince the ambassador described,
perhaps unwilling to believe that another man could be as fine a prince as he believed himself to
have been during his youth – as he probably still believed himself to be, despite everything. "She's
an ingénue, an innocent, and she is a very spiritual person. How will this Don Luis treat her?"

Had he dared, Chapuys would have dearly liked to point out that Henry was in no position to
criticise another man's treatment of his wife, given the treatment he had meted out to his sainted
first wife before hounding her to her grave, not to mention the way he had taken a mistress mere
months after he became the husband of Queen Jane, not caring whether the lady was hurt by the knowledge, or frightened that she might be cast aside for her rival's sake, as her predecessors were. The King persisted in his claim that the Concubine was his lawful wife during her lifetime and, though few would say so, it was widely believed that he sent her to her death knowing her to be guiltless of the charges laid against her, caring only that he would be free of her.

It was fortunate that he had set his sights on one of his own subjects when he chose his new bride. Chapuys could not imagine that any princess in Christendom would willingly wed him.

However, he knew that he could not dare to breathe a word of his true thoughts, so he held his tongue and kept his expression pleasant and respectful.

Princess Mary's future was too important to be jeopardised by careless words on his part, no matter how much King Henry deserved to be put in his place.

"Like a nun," he answered shortly, his tone discouraging further talk on this line.

Henry chuckled lightly. "In which case, alas, it may be difficult for them to produce children." When his joke fell flat, with only a nervous smile from Jane as a response to it, and no sign of humour from Chapuys, he gave a half-hearted chuckle before motioning for Chapuys to leave the room. "Excellency," Chapuys bowed low to them before backing out of the room and, once he was gone, Henry felt himself relax, laughter bubbling out of him. Jane was laughing too, and he put his hands on her shoulders before leaning forward to kiss her on the cheek.

"This is a wonderful match for Mary!" Jane said, delighted that it had worked out so well.

Although Henry occasionally made remarks about how it was past time for him to arrange a marriage for Mary, who would be nineteen on her next birthday, those remarks were usually non-committal and, as far as she knew, he had never made an attempt to offer his eldest child as a potential bride to any royal suitors. He mentioned the need to arrange a match for little Elizabeth once or twice but, for the most part, he was interested in choosing which princess would be most deserving of marriage to their son, when the time came.

At one point, shortly after Mary's restoration to her father's favour, Jane was afraid that he intended to marry Mary off to a petty noble, rewarding an ambitious courtier who pleased him with the hand of the King's daughter. Much as she loved her brothers, Jane had to admit that although Thomas would leap at the chance to marry Mary and gain royal favour, as would Edward if he wasn't married already, they were not worthy of a King's daughter. Even one of the greatest lords of England would not be a suitable match for Mary, who deserved nothing less than a prince.

Fortunately, the King seemed to recognise that his daughter should marry royally.

This was better than she had dared to hope.

Mary would be a Queen one day, as Queen Katherine would have wanted her to be.

"Yes," Henry agreed absently, his gaze directed at the door through which Chapuys had exited. He was not insensible to the benefits of such a match, for himself and for his country as well as for his elder daughter, but he was not a fool, whatever the Emperor and Chapuys might think of him. "I wonder what the Emperor is expecting from me in return for arranging it," he mused aloud, knowing that no monarch would expend so much energy on arranging a marriage for the daughter of another monarch, even if she was his kinswoman, without expecting to benefit from it.

"I am sure that he just wants to see Mary settled and married well," Jane suggested hopefully, not
liking to think that this chance for Mary might be lost if Henry suspected ulterior motives on the Emperor's part, or anybody else's. He was not a man who would ever want to allow himself to be manipulated and she knew that he would turn down the match, scorning the chance to see Mary as Queen of Portugal, rather than allow the Emperor or any other man to triumph over him or to have him in his debt, neither of which he would be able to abide. "She is his cousin."

It made perfect sense that the Emperor would want to do whatever he could to help Mary now, just as he had supported Katherine for so many years when the King wanted to set her aside.

Had it not been for Anne Boleyn, and for the way she tempted the King away from his marriage, Mary would be the wife of a great prince by now, and the mother of charming little royal children.

Perhaps the Emperor even felt guilty that he was unable to do more for Queen Katherine than he had managed to accomplish on her behalf, unable to persuade the King to send Anne away and restore his true wife to her proper place. Jane could also imagine that he must have been dismayed when he learned that, as far as the King was concerned, his marriage to Anne was valid while his marriage to Queen Katherine was unlawful, leading him to regard little Elizabeth as a princess, heir to the throne after their sons, while Mary was a bastard.

If so, he might want to redouble his efforts on Mary's behalf, securing her as great a marriage as any princess could hope for, to make up for his inability to do more for her mother.

Henry smiled slightly, bending down to plant a gentle kiss on her forehead, resting his hands on her shoulders. "You're so naive, Jane, you know so little about this sort of thing," he told her, his tone affectionate, even approving, rather than chiding.

It was only right that a woman, even a Queen, should be innocent of political machinations, he told himself. He thought that a sweet lady like Jane was a better companion to him than Katherine, who had prided herself on her heritage as the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella and who had often sought to give him unsolicited advice on matters that were no concern of hers, as though she believed that he was not capable of ruling his own country without her guiding hand, and Anne who had tried to do the same, both before and after they were married.

At least Jane would never forget her place, or the obedience she owed to her husband.

"Do you think that he doesn't mean for this marriage to take place?" Jane asked, worried. She stroked her belly absently, feeling the child within her kick and wishing that there was a way in which she could know for certain that she was carrying a boy. Her brother Edward had already made it plain to her that, if her child was a girl, she would need to do everything she could to see to it that the baby could be betrothed to a prince, so that Henry would know that another princess could have her uses and so that his disappointment in the child's sex would be blunted.

He warned her that she would have to make her own daughter's marriage her focus and forget about a betrothal for Mary, so she wanted to know that Mary was settled before she gave birth. If so, she would be able to devote herself to securing her own daughter's future with a clear conscience, without having to choose between her child and her beloved stepdaughter.

She steadfastly ignored the soft, insistent voice of her conscience, which reminded her that she had two stepdaughters, and that she owed it to them both to have a care for their interests.

Henry was sure to find a proper match for Elizabeth, since he saw her as a princess.

The Holy Father might deny her legitimacy but earthly rulers would accept her as a princess for political reasons. When she was older, the prospect of a strong alliance with England was certain to
ease the scruples that monarchs would feel about marrying their sons to Anne Boleyn's daughter.

Mary stood in far greater need of any help that Jane could give her.

Henry considered her question before shaking his head decisively. "No, I'd say that this Don Luis is serious about his interest in marrying Mary, and that the Emperor is agreeable to the match, but I wouldn't put it past him to want to attach strings to the offer, if he thinks that I want the match badly enough to go along with whatever he demands in exchange for it." He frowned, stepping away from Jane and pacing back and forth for a few moments, well able to imagine the condition that the Emperor and Don Luis were likely to impose if they believed themselves to have the upper hand as far as the marriage negotiations were concerned, as they undoubtedly would. "They might insist that I declare Mary to be my legitimate daughter before the marriage can take place."

They would want him to pretend that he was wrong to expose his union with Katherine for the invalid farce that it was, wrong to declare Mary a bastard.

They would want him to humiliate himself before his people, and all of Christendom, by acting as though he was a naughty child who now knew that he had erred, and repented of his mistake.

He could only imagine how confused Mary would be by the whole matter.

When she was younger, Katherine, Lady Salisbury and Ambassador Chapuys, between the three of them, convinced the girl that she was the product of a true marriage and that, by challenging the validity of his union with her mother, he father would rob her of her birthright as Princess of England and as heiress to throne. It took years before Mary was able to bring herself to accept the truth of her status. Now, she knew that she was illegitimate, though no less dearly loved than she would have been if she was born of a lawful union. If he declared her legitimate, Mary would surely wonder why he spent so long trying to make her understand that she was a bastard and she would resent him for the measures he was obliged to take to make her see the truth of her position, just as she would resent him for obliging her to yield to Elizabeth as the true Princess.

His daughter was too honest and too innocent to ever imagine that her father might declare her legitimate for diplomatic reasons, despite knowing her to be a bastard.

He had no intention of reigniting the conflict over his daughter's status, or of disturbing the tranquility of his family life.

Knowing that she couldn't appear to be too eager for him to agree to exactly this condition, Jane kept silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts before she spoke.

"I suppose that the heir to the throne of Portugal would need to be married to a princess," she said tentatively, hoping that Henry would understand that it was only to be expected that Don Luis would want his bride to be confirmed as legitimate. She was sure that, when their son was a young man, Henry would never consider the idea of betrothing him to the illegitimate daughter of another monarch, even for the sake of an alliance, no matter how desirable or necessary that alliance might be. He would surely be insulted by the suggestion that their son should marry another King's bastard daughter. He would have to understand that the Portuguese royal family would feel the same way, and that they would want to be reassured about Mary's royal status.

"But she's not a princess, is she?" Henry countered quickly, his mouth tightening in displeasure when Jane did not immediately tell him that he could not and should not allow himself to be browbeaten into declaring Mary to be legitimate when he knew that she was a bastard, not even when such a fine match was being dangled before him as an inducement. He had thought that she had come to an understanding of the truth of the matter, and accepted that, no matter how much
she loved Mary, it would be wrong for the girl to be allowed a status to which she had no right.

He had not forgotten the way that she had denied Elizabeth her title as Princess when she spoke of the child to Chapuys, or the way she had pleaded with him not to proceed against Mary when the girl was stubbornly refusing to accept the truth and admit her illegitimacy. He wondered if she truly agreed with his decisions, and the decisions of the Church of England, about the status of his daughters or if, in her heart, she believed that they were wrong... that he was wrong.

He did not rebuke her for it, not when she was carrying his son and mere weeks, perhaps days, away from the birth but he was still displeased and couldn't hide it.

"No," Jane said softly, lowering her head and silently asking Mary to forgive her for her words.

"My union with the Lady Mary's mother was incestuous and accursed. It was never a valid marriage, and it is a union that I would never have entered into if I knew that it was against God's will that we be married," Henry insisted staunchly, his sharp tone making it plain that Jane should not try to convince him otherwise. "I cannot pretend that it was, not even to see Mary as Queen of Portugal." He loved Mary, he told himself firmly, but even for her sake he could not live a lie by pretending that she was his legitimate child, born of a true marriage, and he would not do it.

If Mary was truly a loving, dutiful daughter, as he believed her to be, she would never want her father to lie about so important a matter, even if she would benefit from that lie.

"But what if Don Luis won't agree to marry Mary unless..." Jane began before Henry cut her off.

"I will make sure that Don Luis knows that Mary will be richly dowered," he assured her, "as richly as she would be if she was truly a Princess of England, and he will be as much my son-in-law and ally as Elizabeth's husband will, when the time comes. I will make no distinctions there. I will make sure that he knows that, should he marry Mary, he will not have cause to regret it but it will be made clear to him that, if he marries Mary, he will be marrying her as my natural daughter. He cannot hope that she, or any children born of their union, will ever sit on my throne. Princess Elizabeth and her line will be heirs to the throne after our sons," he laid a pointed stress on the child's title, making it plain that she should not presume to challenge him. "If Don Luis is truly sincere in his offer, that can make no difference to him," he pronounced pompously. "If he refuses to accept the offer... well, then he can't really want Mary as his wife, can he?"

Jane's heart sank as she listened to his words, tilting her cheek for Henry's kiss before he left her to attend a meeting with his Privy Council, undoubtedly intending to discuss the Emperor's offer with them and to seek their advice, provided that their views were in accord with his own.

She knew that it would not be long before Henry was thoroughly convinced – if he was not convinced already – that he was doing everything for Mary that could possibly be expected of a loving father who wanted to see a dearly cherished daughter happily settled and well-married. He would tell himself that it was Don Luis who was being unreasonable if he could not agree to be married to Mary as long as she was classed as Henry's illegitimate daughter rather than as a princess, and even that it was proof that Mary was better off without a husband who was more interested in the title she bore than in the young woman he sought as his bride.

It would not take him long to persuade himself that it was his duty to ensure that Mary was not allowed to marry a man who did not care enough for her to take her if she was illegitimate.

Before a fortnight passed, he would be convinced that no man who loved Mary would care about what title she was known by. She could be certain that, when another match was proposed, the King would first ensure that it was made plain that there could be no question of Mary being
restored as a Princess, regardless of the status of the man who sought her as his bride.

The more the Emperor and the Portuguese envoys insisted that Mary should be declared legitimate, the more adamant he would be that he would not agree to their condition.

She stroked her belly, feeling her child kick and renewing her prayers that he would be a boy.

"Edward," she spoke softly to her child, using the name Henry had chosen for him. "Your papa wants a son so badly," She told him, though she knew that the child would surely not be able to change its sex, even if it knew that all of England was praying for it to be a Prince of Wales... even if it knew that the happiness of its sister, and of its mother, depended on it being male. The baby kicked again and she hoped that he was reassuring her that she didn't need to worry, that he was a boy, reassuring her that his birth would keep his mother safe as Queen of England for the rest of her days, and prompt Henry to restore Mary, if the mother of his long-awaited son asked it of him. "Your sister needs for you to be a boy."

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"The Emperor has suggested a splendid offer for your hand," Chapuys told Mary. She was listening eagerly to his news, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth despite her attempts to appear suitably grave. "His Highness Don Luis is twenty-four years old, from a very rich and distinguished family." Mary rose from her chair as he spoke and Chapuys hastily followed her example, not wanting to remain seated while his princess was standing. Even if he could not call her by her rightful title, he could still see to it that he treated her with the respect she was due. God knew that there were far too many at court who neglected to treat Mary as they ought to treat her, as though the illegitimate status her father had forced on her was an excuse to forget the deference due to the royal blood that flowed through her veins.

Chapuys would never be numbered among those who showed Mary any hint of disrespect.

When he paused, Mary encouraged him to continue, wanting to hear more. "Go on."

"I am told that he is a great favourite at the Imperial court."

"With women?"

Mary sounded nervous as she posed the question and Chapuys' heart ached for her. It made him sad to see that her experience with her father, and her memory of his deplorable treatment of her mother could dampen her happiness even on a day like today, when he was bringing her news in which she must rejoice, as any girl in her position would. His poor princess could not suppress her fear that she too might find herself married to a man who would abandon her so that he could amuse himself with mistresses, neglecting his wife while he showered them with affection – a man like her father. He would have liked to reassure her, not wanting her to have any fears about this match, but he knew that he could not promise her that her future husband would be faithful.

Nobody could make her that promise, save Don Luis himself – and even he might break it.

It was a sad truth of life that there were many men, particularly men of power and means, who were willing to take their pleasure outside the marriage bed. He could only hope that, if Don Luis was a man who would keep a mistress, he would at least do his wife the courtesy of keeping his other women hidden from her view, instead of expecting her to receive them at his court. No man who respected his wife should expect her to turn a blind eye while he publicly lavished attention on his mistresses, loading the women with jewels so expensive that nobody, including his wife, could help but be aware of their origins. If there were bastards, they should be provided for discreetly, not
feted and honoured as though they were their father's trueborn heirs.

The Emperor would never have condemned King Henry for taking his pleasure with a mistress but it was intolerable that he showed his bastard son, the Duke of Richmond, such favour and under no circumstances should he ever have dreamed of expecting Queen Katherine to yield her rightful place to a girl who had bewitched her husband. He would never condone such disrespect.

"With everyone," he said, keeping his tone light and hoping that she would believe that Don Luis was friendly by nature and popular as a result and not dwell on the question of whether or not he would prove to be a philanderer once they were married. "Because he is so honourable and gallant and good-natured," he told her, emphasising Don Luis' good qualities, hoping to distract Mary from thoughts of the faults that her potential suitor might possess and to encourage her to look forward to her marriage with a glad heart.

After everything the poor girl had endured, she deserved happiness in her marriage and he prayed that Don Luis would prove himself to be worthy of such a bride.

"Is he, um... good-looking?" Mary asked bashfully, aware that this was a question she was unlikely to be expected to ask. Don Luis would undoubtedly wish to see her portrait and hear the assurances of ambassadors that she was pretty before he committed himself to the match. Princes might have the good fortune to be able to look elsewhere if their prospective bride was ill-favoured, and if the alliance was not so vital to their country that they must take the bride chosen for them, regardless of looks, but she was not supposed to be concerned with such things.

However, Chapuys would not judge her for it.

"Yes, I have seen him myself," Chapuys told her. "He is tall, with very dark hair but piercing blue eyes." He was glad that he was not stretching the truth with his assurance. Don Luis was a handsome man. "I am sure that your mother, God rest her soul, would have approved," he added gently, certain that he was speaking no more than the truth.

Much as she might have longed to see her daughter sit on the throne as Queen of England, and as fervently as she had believed that God intended Mary to rule and that there could be no question of her renouncing her daughter's rights as the King's lawful heiress, Chapuys knew that Queen Katherine would have acknowledged that, once her death made him a widower, the King would be entitled to remarry if he chose, and that any sons of that union would take precedence over Mary as heirs. However, it would have pleased her to see her daughter as Queen of Portugal.

Mary smiled sadly at this, regretting that her mother would not be able to be by her side when she was married and hoping that she knew what was happening to her daughter.

Sensing her mood, Chapuys hastened to cheer her up. "And everyone at court is talking about you," he told her. "They say that the Queen hopes to persuade the King to restore you to the succession, as a boon to her when the Prince is born and he will be happy to please her." His tone was cheerful, not without cause. Chapuys was sure that, after waiting for a living, legitimate son for so long and being disappointed each time, most recently when the Concubine presented him with the brat, Elizabeth, before miscarrying their next two babies, the King would be so delighted if Queen Jane gave him the son he craved that he would do anything she asked of him by way of a reward, even restoring the daughter he had disinherited to her rightful place.

If his pride balked at the idea of going back on what he had previously declared about Princess Mary's legitimacy, he could tell himself that he was only doing it as a favour to Queen Jane, a reward to the lady who gave England its Prince, not because justice demanded that Princess Mary should be restored to the place she should never have lost to the Concubine's daughter.
God willing, the promise of a match between Mary and Don Luis would also help encourage this happy end, as even King Henry must know and accept that the heir to the Portuguese throne could not marry a bride whose father would not acknowledge her right to legitimacy and the title of Princess. Regardless of Mary's kinship with the Emperor, her status would need to be regularized before she could marry into the Portuguese royal house, so that nobody could allege that Portugal's future Queen, and the future mother of its heirs, was nothing more than a bastard.

King Henry would be a fool to let his pride rob Mary of this splendid chance... but King Henry had been a fool before.

Mary's eyes were wistful as she looked up at him, full of hope and fear. "Do you think that the King will agree?" She asked, hardly daring to believe that it was possible.

It was more than a year now since she had humbled herself and taken the Oath, trusting in the kind offices of her new stepmother and the love that she was sure her father still cherished for her to ensure that her welcome back to court and to her father's life would be a warm one, and that Jane would do her best to encourage him to restore her to her rightful place.

Since then, her father had received her at court, treated her with affection and seen to it that she was treated honourably, as he expected a daughter of his to be treated. She wanted for nothing as far as gowns, jewels, money and her household were concerned, and at her father's command, she was honoured her as the second lady at court – third now that Elizabeth was there – but he had made no move to grant her the right to call herself a princess once more, or to declare her his heiress until he had a legitimate son, and she was losing hope that he ever would.

If he had any intention of revisiting the issue of her legitimacy, surely he would have done so by now, before Elizabeth was allowed to come to court and enjoy the honours due to a princess.

"I hope that he will, my lady. If Queen Jane is blessed with a healthy son, then His Majesty will wish to please her," Chapuys told her, trying to sound as optimistic as possible, for Mary's sake, so that she could hold onto some hope.

While he did not doubt Jane's determination to take advantage of the opportunity to press for Mary's restoration, knowing that her kind nature and her affection towards Mary would make her stepdaughter's welfare her first consideration when the King was ready to reward her for bearing him a son – a more pressing concern by far than encouraging him to grant titles and estates to her brothers, as uncles to the future King of England – he was not sure that she would be able to succeed, even with a prince in the cradle. This was one of the reasons why he was so pleased that the birth of Jane's child was to happen soon after Don Luis made an offer for Mary's hand.

Between the two factors, perhaps it would be enough to convince King Henry to swallow his pride and agree to do the right thing by his daughter.

Only Elizabeth would be worse off for it, and Chapuys knew that he certainly would not grieve to see the Concubine's little bastard downgraded.

Mary nodded, putting a brave smile on her face. "I pray that Queen Jane will be blessed," she said softly.

When her father was married to Anne, the last thing that Mary wanted was for that woman to bear him a son, especially when she knew that, if Anne was able to present her father with a son, the supporters of the Boleyn family would be quick to insist that this was proof that she was the King's true, rightful wife and that God was showing England that he blessed this union, when He had withheld the same blessing from his union with Mary's mother. They would pretend that they knew
God's will, and that the birth of a boy was proof that He sided with them.

With a strong son in the cradle, Mary didn't doubt that Anne and her family would have been quick to urge her father to send herself and her mother to the scaffold, so that they could not threaten the boy's inheritance, claiming that they were traitors if they refused to swear that Anne's boy's claim to the throne was a just one, and that Mary had no right to be her father's heir.

Although she did not want to believe that her father would ever have agreed to that, Mary couldn't help but wonder if he might have decided that ensuring the safety of his son's succession was so vital that it would justify sending his own daughter to the block if she wouldn't accept her half-brother's place as the rightful heir to the throne and take an oath to that effect.

Perhaps even her father would have been in danger if, once the English people were prevailed upon to accept the boy as heir, the Boleyns decided that they would rather seize power for themselves by arranging for the King's murder so that Anne could rule England as Regent, with her father wielding power behind the scenes as Lord Protector, King in all but name, instead of contenting themselves with the honour and favour that would come their way as the kinsmen of the so-called Queen and Prince while the King ruled the country.

Mary had prayed with all her heart that Anne would never have a living son but with Jane, it was different. She knew that, if Jane had a son, he would become her father's heir by rights, something even her most loyal supporters would have to acknowledge, and her chance to become Queen would vanish. However, she also knew that, as lovely and sweet as Jane was, it would not be long before her father tired of her if she did not give him a son, and she would never want to see Jane cast aside so that her father might take another wife, or for her kind stepmother to be subjected to the same humiliation and sorrow that Mary's mother was subjected to when Anne Boleyn came to court, enchanted the King and cast such a dark shadow over all of their lives.

Jane was so kind to Mary that Mary could never wish to expose her to such hardships and, given the choice, she would rather see Jane's child supplant her as heir than little Elizabeth.

If Jane bore a son, she would be happy for her... even if Jane couldn't make her a princess.

______________________________

9th October 1537

During the long months of Jane's pregnancy, she and her ladies spent much of their time making preparations for the arrival of the hoped-for Prince, especially when she grew ungainly and was obliged to spend most of her time in the calm sanctuary of her apartment instead of among the courtiers. The tiny, dainty garments that made up the layette were crafted from the finest cloth, and embellished with exquisite embroidery, and the cradle where the baby would lie in state had already been brought to her apartment, awaiting its precious occupant.

There was an unspoken rule that everybody should remain cheerful and optimistic about the birth and, in truth, nobody would have dared to speak aloud of the possibility that, instead of the hoped-for Prince of Wales, a new princess might await birth or, worse still, that the child might be one of the countless infants who did not live long enough to cut their first tooth.

Nobody wanted to be accused of ill-wishing the King's unborn child, if he suffered another disappointment.

God alone knew what he would do if he thought that somebody had cursed him.

Mary was very aware of the fact that there were a few of Jane's ladies who regarded her with slight
suspicion when she came to keep her stepmother company after Jane entered confinement, spending long hours amusing her and encouraging her to keep her spirits up, for the sake of the child. Although everybody at court was well-aware that she and Jane loved one another dearly, she knew that some were surprised that she would be so kind and so supportive of the woman who might be carrying a Prince who would put an end to any hope she might have of regaining the place she once enjoyed as her father's heir, and that they wondered if she was truly sincere when she prayed with Jane that her son would be born healthy and strong, or if she was secretly praying that the child would be a girl or stillborn, so that it could not challenge her for the throne one day.

It hurt to think that anybody would believe her capable of such wickedness and ingratitude but she took comfort in the knowledge that Jane would never believe it of her.

She watched as Jane spoke briefly to Lady Rochford, and then to Lady Misseldon, one hand supporting her swollen belly, and the other at the small of her back, and gasped in alarm when Jane groaned in pain, almost losing her balance. Like the other ladies present, she hastened to support her and help her. She tried to conceal her anxiety but knew that it must be plain to see.

Jane alone remained calm.

"Do not be alarmed, ladies, but I think my time has come," she told them, keeping her voice even, despite the pain she was feeling. "Lady Mary." She reached out to clutch Mary's hand.

"Majesty?"

"Please swear to me that you will stay with me now and not forsake me."

Although Jane's voice remained even, Mary could see the flicker of fear in her eyes, and knew how apprehensive her stepmother must be feeling.

In a matter of hours, the King would be presented with his newest child.

If the child was the son, the Prince of Wales he had craved since he first married, when he was even younger than Mary was now, he would be overjoyed, and he would love Jane forever for granting him this boon. If the child was a girl, a third daughter, her birth would be an unwelcome embarrassment rather than the cause for joy that the birth of a child should be. He might feign pleasure, thanking God for sending England a second fair princess, rather than allow others to see just how disappointed he was, and he might insist that the infant should be honoured as a princess, but he would be displeased with Jane for failing to give him what he wanted.

If the baby was stillborn, as so many were, the King could decide that his new marriage was accursed, and God alone knew what reason he might come up with to explain this curse.

Jane's time as Queen would be brief if she failed to bear him a son, and she knew it.

Mary knew it too, and would never have dreamed of abandoning the lady who had shown her such kindness, now that she had need of her support.

"I do promise." She pledged.

Jane visibly relaxed at her words. "Then all will be well. Go fetch the midwife." She ordered one of her ladies, allowing Mary to support her as she guided her towards her bed.

11th October 1537
Mary knew that bringing a child into the world was a messy, painful business, but she had never imagined anything like this.

Jane had laboured two nights and a day now, with no sign that the baby was ready to be born. Her ladies were exhausted with tending her, some of them dead on their feet, but they all wanted to be there to help her and would only leave when ordered to by the midwives, who told them, in no uncertain terms, that they would be more of a hindrance to their mistress than a help if they didn't get a few hours of sleep, enough to allow them to function and to be of some use. The physicians had been summoned and hovered anxiously, debating the best course of action in hushed tones.

Mary hadn't left her side. She held Jane's hand in hers, murmuring words of encouragement and praying for the lives of her stepmother and her new brother or sister, asking God to protect them. She kissed Jane's hands, wondering why God would have chosen to inflict such suffering on a good, kind woman, a woman who wanted nothing more than to be a mother to her child.

"Lady Mary," Jane's eyes were bright with pain, and her face was flushed and sweaty when she turned to speak to her.

"Yes, madam."

"The box." She was too weak to even gesture in its direction but Mary knew the one she meant. When she returned with it, she opened it and passed the rosary to Jane, who clutched it as though it alone had the power to see her safely through her ordeal. "It used to belong to your mother."

Had it been Anne, Mary would have considered it unforgivable for her to keep something belonging to the Queen she had tried to see cast aside, especially something as precious as her rosary, which had once belonged to Isabella, that great Catholic Queen, but Mary knew that Jane revered her mother, and couldn't begrudge it to her.

"I think she is here with us," she said, watching Jane kiss the rosary, the relic of her predecessor, the Queen who suffered so much because her only living child was a daughter but who bore her suffering with such fortitude. "I believe with all my heart she will help you."

*Please, Mama,* she prayed, thinking that her mother must be there, watching over them, and that she could help them, *let the baby be born. Let him live. Help Jane.*

She suspected that only the angels could help Jane now, and she put her faith in them, in God and in her mother.

They had to save her.
Chapter Fifteen

24th October 1537

“The Queen’s health is rapidly deteriorating. Yesterday evening, she had a loosening of the bowels and we felt sure we could save her. But during the night, her fever grew worse again.”

The black-robed physician had to scurry to keep up with Henry as he strode through the corridors. The man babbled his report of Jane’s condition, his head bowed and his tone almost apologetic as he delivered the news that a part of Henry had dreaded hearing since the day Jane told him that she carried their child, as though he feared being blamed for the news he had to deliver.

“We have tried everything we know,” the physician continued helplessly, desperately, “but Her Majesty continues to weaken.”

Henry wished that he could believe that the man was lying.

He wished that he could believe that he was exaggerating the severity of Jane’s condition, making it sound as though she was near death in the hope that, when she pulled through, he would be richly rewarded for managing, against all odds, to preserve the life of the beloved Queen who had borne the Prince that the King and country had waited for for so long.

He wished that he could believe that there would be a miracle, that though all hope seemed lost, Jane would rise from the brink of death, resurrected and restored to health, ready to lead a long, happy life with him and their newborn son and, in time, to give him more children.

But he couldn’t make himself believe it, much as he wanted to.

There had only been one miracle... if it was a miracle... and that miracle had saved Anne, and doomed Jane.

As delighted as he was when she sweetly admitted to having a particular fondness for quail, knowing that he would understand what she meant, and confirmed that she was indeed with child, and as much as he wanted to convince himself that his troubles were over and that, this time, he would finally have the son he wanted and needed, there was still a part of him that was afraid.

He did his best to fight the feeling, to convince himself that there was nothing to be afraid of, that a woman as sweet and as loving as his Jane was sure to be blessed with a son, that God would see England’s need and give them a Prince of Wales, a fine boy who would one day be a fine King.

Surely God would understand the need for the deception and recognise that, although she was the only legitimate child Henry could boast, Elizabeth could not be the ruler the country needed. He knew that she was born in wedlock, as his union with Katherine was an abomination in the sight of God, but the Bishop of Rome still slandered the child as a bastard, refusing to admit that he had allowed the Emperor to bully him into finding for Katherine instead of allowing truth and justice to prevail. Even after Mary acknowledged herself to be illegitimate, the product of an incestuous, unlawful union, the Bishop of Rome continued to peevishly insist that she was the true heir.

Even if Mary respected the truth of her position and did not allow herself to be tempted by the prospect of a crown, there would be other claimants to challenge Elizabeth’s rights, like the Poles.

Those members of the family, scions of the Plantagenets, who remained in England were careful to maintain a low profile – Lady Salisbury’s visit to the court at Christmas was a rarity – but that did
not mean that they would not be happy to accept it if a rebellion was mounted in their name. That wretch, Reginald Pole, was safely in Rome, where he could solidify a support base. He was sure that not one member of that family was properly grateful to him for the generosity with which he treated them. They feigned loyalty but might turn on him in a heartbeat.

In order for England to continue to be safe and prosperous, he needed to give his people a King.

Despite his attempts to convince himself, he was unable to banish the fear from his heart.

Had he acknowledged his fear rather than trying to fight it, had he prepared himself for this dreaded possibility, perhaps the ache would be lessened, if only slightly.

“It’s childbed fever. I know because my mother died of it.”

He was a boy of eleven when his mother died but despite his youth, he felt anger towards his father. He knew well that his father and his determination to have another son, now that Arthur was dead and Henry was the sole hope for the future of the Tudor line, bore part of the blame. He was so determined to have another living son that he had not cared about the effect that another pregnancy might have on the health of the wife who had already given him many children. Had he had faith in his surviving son, and recognised that his wife was growing too old for childbearing, she might have lived, instead of having to be buried with the frail daughter whose birth had cost her mother’s life, and who had died before she finished her second week of life.

Would a day come when Edward was angry with him for Jane’s death, or would the boy blame himself, not realising that, given the choice, Jane would gladly have died so he might live?

“Get out. Leave.” The words were softly spoken but they carried all the force of a royal command, and every courtier, physician and lady-in-waiting obediently bowed or curtsied, and left the room, moving quickly but silently, only a few of them whispering “Majesty” to him as they passed.

Most of them knew better than to think that he wanted to hear them speak.

Henry reached for Mary as his daughter came near him, taking her hand in both of his and holding it for a moment before kissing it, and letting her go. He had heard that Mary had stayed by Jane’s side throughout her ordeal, despite being a maiden for whom the sight of an ordinary childbirth would have been frightening, let alone the nightmarish birthing that Jane had endured to bring their son into the world. As a man, he could not be present but he was grateful that Mary had stayed by Jane’s side, supporting her and praying for the health of mother and child.

Mary had proven herself a truly loyal and loving friend and stepdaughter to Jane.

He would not forget it.

Jane was unconscious, her breathing shallow and her face drained of colour and covered in a sheen of sweat. Her ladies changed her nightgowns and bedding frequently, as they wished for her to be as comfortable as possible, but the nightgown she was wearing was already damp with sweat, as were the pillow and sheets on which she lay.

It wasn’t supposed to happen this way, not now, when they were so happy.

When Jane’s labour dragged on for so long that he was warned that he might have to choose between the life of mother and child, condemning one to death to allow the other a chance at life, and when his prayers seemed to be ignored, his heart was full of fear.

He was afraid that the force protecting Anne was not content with preserving her life, and seeing
her permitted to retire to the country, where she would lead a life of luxury and security instead of ending her life on the scaffold. It might not be content with ensuring that Henry would be unable to sever their marital bond and would be left to take Jane as his unwitting mistress, tricking a good lady into living in a state of sin with him and conceiving bastards with her rather than legitimate royal children who would inherit his throne by right. He feared that it intended to see to it that an even heavier penalty was exacted, one that Henry would be unable to bear paying.

He even wondered if it might be a punishment from God, who was displeased to think that they would pass a boy born out of wedlock off as a trueborn heir, thus depriving Elizabeth of her birthright and making an unwitting pretender of the boy, and that instead of celebrating the birth of an heir, he would be left to mourn the deaths of his sweetheart and their unborn child.

He had thought that he would lose them both, until Edward Seymour came to him, and spoke the words he had longed to hear since the days when he thought himself Katherine’s husband.

“Her Majesty is delivered of a healthy son.”

When he first saw his newborn son, he was sure that he was to have the new beginning he longed for, with a beloved wife and a son whose claim to the throne none would think to question.

Edward had arrived a few weeks sooner than he was expected, and he was slightly smaller than a baby born full-term, but he was in perfect health, and surely the most beautiful boy that God had ever made. When he cried, he made it plain to all who heard him that his lungs were healthy, and when he opened milky blue eyes to look up at his father, Henry was sure that he was intelligent.

Jane was pale and tired when he saw her, and weak after her long labour but three days later, she was well enough to sit up in bed, propped by pillows, so that she could receive their son when the Lady Mary brought him to receive his parents’ blessings before he was brought to the Chapel Royal to be christened, his first formal appearance before the court as England’s new Prince.

Throughout the court and the country, the birth was celebrated and this time, there was no need to cancel the jousts and masques, as they had when Elizabeth was born.

They could celebrate the birth of a fine, healthy boy to the fullest.

Mary was delighted when he told her that he and Jane had decided that she was to be Edward’s godmother, and when he saw his older daughter holding her new brother in her arms, cradling him as tenderly as a mother would, he could see that Mary already loved Edward, showing no hint of jealousy towards the baby boy, and that she would always love and protect him.

The christening was a splendid occasion, and although it was traditional that the parents of the royal child being christened should not attend the ceremony, Henry was determined to be present, determined to be part of the glorious moment when his heir entered the Christian flock. Every courtier was in the chapel, with the highest-ranking lords and Jane’s brothers standing close to the font while everybody else was ranged in rows behind them in order of precedence, everybody watching as Mary held Edward over the font while he was baptised.

Aside from his coronation, Henry never felt prouder than he did when he heard his son announced as Prince Edward, Duke of Cornwall and Earl of Chester, most dear and entirely beloved son of King Henry the Eighth, and knew that England was rejoicing with him.

It had taken him too many years to provide his country with a Prince.

The task of carrying the chrism was entrusted to little Elizabeth, who carried out her role with a
gravity beyond her years, although she had insisted that she wanted Brandon to be the one to carry her, not Edward Seymour, whom Henry had initially wished to honour with the role of escort to the Princess of England. He had thought that the eldest uncle of his new son should have a prominent role in the christening, and one that showed him to be connected with the royal family. He indulged Elizabeth’s whim, however, thinking that it was natural that she would prefer Brandon, who she knew and liked, to Edward Seymour, who was a stranger to her.

The newly elevated Earl of Hertford had graciously surrendered his role when Elizabeth made her wishes known, and Charles was happy to take over the task of carrying her into the Chapel Royal.

After the christening, Edward was borne away to the nursery that had been lovingly prepared for them, while the rest of the court celebrated.

They were only given a few days to relish the joy of Edward’s birth before Jane’s health began to fail in earnest, and it became clear that her life was in danger. Now, although they did not dare to say so, for fear of his reaction, they held out little hope that her life would be spared.

Jane’s body would try to fight the fever but, after Edward’s birth, she had no strength left to do it.

When he leaned forward to kiss her, she did not stir.

Hands clasped, he knelt by her bed, pleading with her to stay with him.

“Don’t go. Please don’t go. Just because you have done everything that you promised, please don’t leave me.” He was uncomfortably aware that, had Anne not miscarried their son and instead carried him to term, only to die in childbirth, he would have regretted that their children lost their mother—even when he was angriest with her, he couldn’t deny that Anne was a loving, devoted mother—but, for himself, her death would have come as a relief, as he would have been free to marry his dear Jane without having to set Anne aside, and make a bastard of their son. However, the last thing he wanted was for Jane to be snatched from him. She might have done as she promised, and given him what he desired above all else, but that did not mean that he was ready to let her go. He would never willingly let her go. “You are the milk of human kindness, the light in my dark, dark world. Without you, life is a desert, a whole world of loneliness.”

Jane lay there, unmoved by a plea she could not hear.

“Please, God,” Dawn was beginning to break but the rising sun was shrouded by clouds, and the light was dull and grey. It seemed fitting that the sun should hide itself, in deference to his fear and grief. It shouldn’t presume to shine on a day when the King of England felt such sorrow. “In Your mercy, don’t take her away from me. It was my sin, not hers. She never knew about Anne. She never knew that she was not truly my wife. She never knew that we were living in sin and that our boy would be a bastard. Don’t punish her for it when she is not the one to blame.”

Had he doomed Jane by tricking her into sin, allowing her to believe herself to be his wife in the sight of God when he knew that they could never truly be married?

At the time, it seemed like the best solution.

He had had no intention of taking Anne back, whether she was saved by the Devil or whether her survival truly was a miracle, and divine proof of her innocence, or of being deprived of the opportunity to be with Jane and to see her bear him a son to succeed him.

Anne had spoken truthfully when she pointed out that, if her survival remained a secret, he would never have to worry that anybody would think to question the validity of his marriage to Jane, or
the legitimacy of any children born of their union, but she had not showed him the other side of the coin. She allowed him to believe that the arrangement would benefit them both but had not warned him that he and Jane might be forced to pay a heavy price for not only living in sin but for doing so under a cloak of virtue, tricking the world into believing them to be husband and wife.

If it had angered God to see Henry living as man and wife with Katherine, and if He had punished them for their unknowing sin, how much more severe would the punishment be for knowingly entering a sinful union, and for pretending that it was a union blessed in the sight of God?

He had mocked the sacrament of marriage by pretending that Jane was his wife.

Had Anne realised what he had not, and known that, sooner or later, a heavy price would be exacted for all that Henry hoped to gain from the ruse?

Had Anne thought that this would be her revenge?

He knew that, after everything that had happened between them and how their time together had ended, it was absurd to feel thus. Even so, he couldn’t help but be hurt that Anne could have allowed him to fall into a trap like that without a word of warning, that she might have stayed silent because she wanted him to suffer for loving another. He wondered if she was as ignorant about how she was saved as she claimed to be, or if her protector had promised her that he would see to it that those she blamed for her downfall would pay the price for threatening her, even somebody like Jane, who would surely have never wished to see any harm befall Anne, no matter how much she loved Henry and no matter how much she wished that she could be his lawful wife.

The only blessing was that Edward was spared, that God could see that an innocent infant should not die for the circumstances of his birth... but Edward needed more than to live.

“My son needs his mother,” he pleaded, hoping that God would recognise that his remorse for dragging Jane into sin was sincere, and that He would understand that there could be no question of him revealing the truth about Anne’s survival, the invalidity of his union with Jane and the illegitimacy of their son. Once he committed to this course, there was no turning back.

After all that had happened, there was no way that he could announce to his people that he had lived in sin for over a year, allowing them to believe that Jane was their Queen when the true Queen lived in seclusion in Wales, barred from the court and cut off from her only child, nor could he tell them that the boy they believed to be their Prince, and whose birth had caused such rejoicing, was nothing but a bastard who had no claim to the title of Prince and no possible right to one day sit on his father’s throne, and should be known as plain Edward Fitzroy.

If he did, there would be an outcry among his people, who would condemn him for his deceit, condemn Jane for being dragged into this mess, consider Anne a saint in everything but name, and reject Edward in favour of Elizabeth. If Mary knew that she was to lose Jane as a stepmother, and that instead of her brother by Jane becoming King, Anne’s daughter would be Queen, she might even denounce the oath she swore, recognising that she was a bastard, and if she tried to proclaim herself his heir, he would have no choice but to see her executed, a prospect that it was even more painful now, when he had enjoyed Mary’s presence in his life for more than a year, than it was when his eldest daughter was exiled from his life for her disobedience.

It would break Jane’s heart if he had to tell her that she was never his Queen, and that their son was no more than a royal bastard.

The cost of the truth would be too high for him to pay.
Even for Jane, he could never tell the world what he had done.

If she knew, he was sure that she would understand.

Even if Jane knew the truth, she would never want him to disinherit their boy. She would never want Edward to be shamed as the bastard son of a woman duped into believing herself a wife.

She would want their son to be King one day.

In the weeks and months and years to come, he would never be able to remember how long he sat by her side, her hand in his, as he prayed desperately for her to be spared.

He prayed for God to remember that he was the one who led her to believe that they were married, and that Anne was the one who had set the condition that forced him to keep her as his wife, the one who had prevented him from marrying Jane as he wanted to, and kept their son from being born a legitimate heir who would surely be blessed by God.

It felt as though he was sitting there for days but it was likely that only hours or perhaps even minutes passed before Jane’s breathing became slower and shallower with each passing breath until, with a soft gurgle, she exhaled for the last time.

Henry soaked her bedcover with his tears.

29th October 1537

The news of the birth had reached Anne before Archbishop Cranmer’s letter did, and the same was true of the news of Mistress Seymour’s death.

For the most part, Anne’s maids and chaplain kept to themselves, with little interaction between them and the rest of the household, but they knew that they could not cut themselves off entirely without provoking unwanted gossip and arousing even more curiosity about the mysterious lady of Pembroke Hall. The last thing they needed was for one brave or reckless soul to try to sneak up to Anne’s quarters to catch a glimpse of her. God only knew what Sir Anthony was under orders to do to anybody who threatened their secret. The maids made a point of venturing to the kitchens for some of their meals, and it was there that they heard the news that the King had a son.

None of the maids wished to tell Anne of the birth of the child who was known as Prince Edward, wanting to spare her pain, but Sir Anthony believed himself to be duty-bound to inform her.

“Mistress Seymour has borne the King a son, Your Majesty.”

His use of the forbidden honourific for her, and his omission of the title of Queen for Mistress Seymour, could not soften the blow he was obliged to deal her.

She kept her emotions bridled when she was told the news.

She didn’t want to give way to temper, railing at poor Sir Anthony when it was no fault of his that it pleased Henry to call Mistress Seymour’s bastard a prince, allowing the boy to unknowingly usurp Elizabeth’s rightful inheritance, or that Henry would have willingly abandoned her to her death so that he might marry the wench. She also didn’t want to let him see her cry, knowing that it would only serve to make both of them feel uncomfortable; him immediately, when he had no idea how he could comfort her or even if he should presume to attempt to do so, and her later, when she was calm and embarrassed by her loss of control in the presence of her guardian.
She thanked him as calmly and as courteously as she could manage, and once he was gone, she made her way to the garden, issuing instructions that she was not to be disturbed.

Only when she was alone did she allow her tears to flow, allowing herself the luxury of giving way to the feelings welling inside her.

She didn’t know why it affected her as badly as it did.

She had steeled herself against this day since she made her arrangement with Henry, and the prospect became an even more real one when she was told that Mistress Seymour had Henry’s brat in her belly. She had known that there was no way that he would willingly take her back, no way that he would give up Mistress Seymour when he was convinced that he loved the wench and that she would succeed where Anne and Katherine had failed, and bear him a son.

God could have sent a host of angels from Heaven and they wouldn’t soften Henry’s resolve.

All she could do was protect Elizabeth as much as she could, using every tool at her disposal.

She could ensure that her daughter never had to endure the taint of bastardy, even if she could not spare her the pain it must cause her to hear her mother called whore and traitor.

She could ensure that Elizabeth would never have to lower herself to wait on whatever puling brats Mistress Seymour bore, and that she would always enjoy the honours that were her due as Princess. Even if she was robbed of her rights as heir to the throne, she should have that much.

And, if she was honest with herself, Anne had to admit that it amused her to know that, even if Henry managed to get a son on Mistress Seymour, he would know that the child was illegitimate and that there was nothing he could do to change that.

She knew that Henry would try to convince himself that he was doing nothing wrong by passing the child off as a trueborn prince, to convince himself that it was the right thing for his realm, but his conscience would not remain a tamed beast forever. Sooner or later, he would not be able to avoid acknowledging that he was cheating his only trueborn child, the daughter God gave him to rule England when he was gone, for the sake of a bastard and the knowledge would eat at him.

What must he be thinking now, as he pretended that England had a prince at last?

Was he thinking of the other sons he fathered out of wedlock, and of their fates?

She hoped that he was.

She hoped that he was haunted by the memories of the sons he had lost, and crippled with fear at the thought that his newest son would follow in the footsteps of his half-brothers.

After all he had done to her, and all he would have done to her and to Elizabeth, had he been able to, he deserved to suffer.

Almost a fortnight had passed since she was told of the boy’s birth, and Anne’s thoughts continued to run along the same lines.

It had seemed that the only consolation she was to have for her rival’s success, and the birth of the boy who would rob Elizabeth of her rightful place as Queen of England, was to be her awareness that, thanks to the agreement she and Henry had made, he would be unable to truly rejoice in the birth of his son without thinking about the boy’s true status.
It was cold comfort to imagine the chill of fear he must feel as he paraded the boy around his court, showing him off to visiting envoys and to the people, wondering all the while if God would strike him down for his blatant lie, but it was the only solace she had.

Then Maggie brought her the news of Mistress Seymour’s death, news that she hadn’t wanted to allow herself to believe until it was confirmed when Archbishop Cranmer’s letter arrived today… and her first thought was that it was a pity that the wench’s brat had not followed her to the grave.

It horrified her that such a thought could cross her mind, even for an instant.

It broke her heart to know that her enemies transferred their hatred from her to her sweet child.

It frightened her when she heard remarks like those Chapuys made when Elizabeth was christened, and he claimed that, while Archbishop Cranmer warmed the water so that Elizabeth would not become chilled, the water he used should have been boiling. She was terrified that, despite the precautions taken to safeguard Elizabeth, that odious man would find a way to harm her, believing that if Elizabeth was dead, Henry would welcome Mary back into his life as a princess. She warned Lady Bryan to be always on her guard, for fear that somebody might seek to harm her baby. She knew that there were many who resented it when Mary was discovered to be illegitimate, and who hated Elizabeth for being born to rights her half-sister was denied. The possibility that one of Katherine and Mary’s supporters might seek to harm her precious child was a horrifyingly real one.

Now she was the one to ill-wish an innocent child, resenting him for living to steal her daughter’s throne.

If Archbishop Cranmer, Maggie, Edith and Sarah could know what was in her mind, they would cease to think of her as a saint and see her as a monster.

Father Parker’s expression was sympathetic as he listened patiently to her confession.

“How is the matter with me?” Anne asked after her almoner had listened to all that she had to say and absolved her for her evil thoughts. The penance he set was a very light one, and she wondered if he truly understood how deeply she had sinned. Ill-wishing Henry was bad enough but there was no excuse for turning her anger and hatred on a newborn child just because he had not obliged her by being born female. “He’s just a baby! He’s an innocent little baby and I wanted him dead!”

Were her enemies right all along?

Was there something evil in her, waiting for the opportunity to be unleashed?

She didn’t realise that she spoke aloud until Father Parker reached out to clasp one of her hands in both of his. His face was full of compassion, without a hint of the disgust she expected to see.

“You are not evil, Your Majesty.” In the privacy of the chapel, far from prying ears, Father Parker refused to treat her with anything less than the honours that were her due as Queen. His voice was firm and steady and he held her gaze as he spoke. “You have been badly hurt by one in whom you placed your love and trust, and that pain will not soon fade. You have been robbed of your daughter, and you lost your son, and this has wounded your heart and soul. Your pain is the gateway through which a wicked thought entered your mind, and you must guard against that in the future, but you are not evil. If you were, you would not have tried to cast these feelings from your heart and you would feel no remorse for your thoughts.”

He didn’t say so but he was certain that none of Anne’s enemies felt such remorse when they ill-wished her or the little Princess.
“I can’t stop feeling angry,” Anne confessed. “I know that I should forgive those who trespass against me, and I pray for the strength to do this but where is it written that I must forgive those who trespass against the people I love?”

Her brother, George, murdered on the evidence of his spiteful wife, so that Henry and Cromwell could further blacken her name with an allegation of incest to crown the charges of adultery.

Mark Smeaton, Henry Norris and William Brereton, three men who met a bloody end through no fault of their own.

Had she not called on Mark to play for her so often, on the evenings when she was sad and lonely and the hours dragged on, he might have been spared.

Had Sir Henry not been one of the few men who, in the later months of her marriage, when everybody at court surely knew that her hold on Henry’s heart was fragile and failing, was prepared to express his admiration for her, nobody would have thought to accuse him.

She had no idea why Brereton was singled out as one of the men who was to die to allow Henry to free himself of her. She never said a word to him during his three years in Henry’s household but somebody had decided that the poor man should be dragged down with her.

There was nothing she could do for any of them apart from remembering them in her prayers.

And, worst of all, there was Elizabeth.

Her innocent, clever, beautiful, perfect little girl was robbed of her inheritance, cut out of her father’s life for over a year before Henry deigned to see her again, and taught to think of her mother as a whore and a traitor and to feel shame over the blood that ran in her veins. Had Henry had his way, he would have branded Elizabeth a bastard so that she would be forced to think of herself as inferior to the half-Seymour brats he planned to honour as the true royal children. He wouldn’t even have cared if he looked ridiculous when he announced that he had managed to stumble into a second unlawful union, not if he could hurt Elizabeth and, in so doing, hurt her.

How could anybody, even God, possibly expect her to forgive Henry for all he had done to Elizabeth, and for all that he would have done had she not prevented him?

Father Parker had no answer to give her. His hand was warm and strong as it clasped hers and, although he was nothing like George, she was reminded of the comfort she derived from her brother’s presence when he tried to comfort her with reassurances that nothing was going to happen to her, and that he would take care of her.

“My daughter would have been a great Queen for England. The best ruler it could have had.”

She believed this with all her heart.

Elizabeth was cleverer than Anne would have believed a child could be, had she not witnessed her daughter’s startling intelligence and precocity for herself. Mistress Seymour’s boy would never be her equal, no matter how many tutors Henry engaged to cram knowledge into his brain. Elizabeth had no tie to a foreign monarch to cloud her loyalty to her country and her people, as the Lady Mary did. She would not blindly tie England to Spain, ruining the nation by involving it in the Emperor’s wars. Anne hoped that those who had charge of her child would teach her of the reformed faith, even if they could only do so in secret. Even if they didn’t, she couldn’t imagine that Elizabeth would persecute those who followed the new religion, as Mary surely would if she ever had the power to try to force her papist beliefs on the English people, whether they wished it
or not. Elizabeth would know that, as Queen, her duty was to her subjects.

Once, Anne thought that the son she carried would bring about a golden world but now she was certain that Elizabeth was the one destined to usher in a golden age for England.

She couldn’t believe that Elizabeth was to be robbed of her birthright, and England robbed of the greatest ruler it could ever have known, for the sake of a half-Seymour bastard.

“Do you believe that it is God’s will that the Princess Elizabeth should be Queen of England?” Father Parker asked her quietly, holding her hand in his and meeting his gaze.

“I do,” Anne vowed.

God had not sent a girl as remarkable as Elizabeth into the world so that she might grow up to be married off to whatever prince her father – or her half-brother – chose for her, to be valued only as the breeder of royal sons and to be humiliated when her husband openly favoured another woman.

Elizabeth was not born to answer to a man, as her mother had.

She was born to rule.

“Then why can you not have faith that He will see it done?” He asked. His tone was gentle but pointed. “If it is God’s will that the Princess will be Queen one day, do you believe that His will can be thwarted by something as insignificant as the birth of one little boy begotten by your husband?”

When he put it in such plain terms, Anne’s concerns seemed rather foolish.

Henry might like to think that his will was the will of God but, if God intended that Elizabeth should be Queen, it surely wouldn’t matter if Henry fathered a hundred bastard sons by a hundred different women, and tried to call every one of them a Prince. If God had called Elizabeth to sit on the throne, there was nothing Henry could do to keep her from becoming Queen.

She shook her head in response to the question. “No.”

“Have faith, Your Majesty,” Father Parker urged her. “And trust in God. He knows His business better than any of us ever could.” He waited for Anne’s earnest nod before he released her hand and rose, bowing deeply. “I will leave you to your prayers, Your Majesty,” he told her, knowing that she needed some time alone.

“Thank you, Father,” Anne said, feeling a renewed sense of gratitude towards the man who chose to join her in her exile, so that she might have the benefit of his compassionate support and his spiritual guidance.

Once he was gone, she remained in the chapel for over an hour, praying to God to keep Elizabeth safe and to ensure that, even though Anne could not be with her, she would always be loved.

She believed that God had chosen her daughter to be Queen of England, just as she believed that, instead of being weakened or destroyed by the trials she would face in her life, Elizabeth would not only survive anything life could throw at her but that she would be strengthened by it.

Father Parker was right.

She had to trust that, if God intended for Elizabeth to be Queen, nothing and nobody could keep her from achieving her destiny.
No expense was spared for Jane’s funeral.

As King, Henry could not attend but he gave orders that Jane was to be buried with all the honours appropriate to a Queen of England, and that his court should go into mourning for the lovely, gentle lady who lay down her life to give him their beautiful son. The celebrations in honour of Edward’s safe arrival were abandoned, and the palace was shrouded in black.

Although Jane’s death left Elizabeth as the highest-ranking royal lady, her youth made it impossible for her to act as chief mourner. Even if it had not, Henry thought that he wouldn’t want her to fulfil that role; it would be obscene to have Anne’s daughter acting as chief mourner at Jane’s funeral when he knew that news of Jane’s death would cause Anne no sorrow.

The Lady Mary was appointed to that position, and had said that she would count in an honour to lead the procession in honour of the stepmother who treated her with such kindness. Although his elder daughter tried to control her tears when he spoke to her, so that she did not add to his distress, her eyes were red and her cheeks streaked with the evidence of her grief.

He thought it would please Jane to know that Mary was honoured with the role of chief mourner. She had always loved Mary dearly, and wished to see her take her place in their family.

Jane’s body was laid out on a bier in the Chapel Royal, there to lie in state until it could be removed to Windsor, the burial place he had chosen, tomorrow. A grand monument was to be built in Jane’s honour, and he had already approved the design of it.

One day, he would be buried by her side.

One day, he prayed that God would forgive them, and allow them to be reunited in Heaven.

He spent a great deal of his time in the chapel with Jane, both before and after her funeral, standing vigil next to her cold, still body.

After her death, the embalmers had worked to preserve her body but, despite their skill and the great care they took with their art, knowing how important it was, they could not keep the ravages of death from touching her. Even the flowers strewn over her body and the heady scent of incense wafting through the chapel could not completely disguise the smell of decay.

Today, Jane looked much as she had in life.

He could almost make himself believe that she was sleeping, if he ignored the smell, if he ignored the fact that her skin was grey rather than simply pale, and if he made sure not to touch her and allow the chill of her flesh and the unyielding rigidity of her body to shatter the illusion.

Before long, however, she would be buried and the flesh would rot from her bones.

Before long, she would be unrecognisable and only her name on her tomb would allow anybody to know who she was in life... and that name would be a lie.

There was no such person as Jane, Queen Consort to King Henry the Eighth.

His true Queen was in Wales, and must have heard the news of her one-time rival’s death by now.
Anne was a clever woman, and would never delude herself into believing that, now that Jane was dead, he would come to her and ask her to return to court with him, telling her that he knew that it was a mistake on his part to set her aside and vowing to make the truth known to the world.

He knew that Katherine believed that, when the Bishop of Rome finally yielded to the pressure of her wretched nephew and pronounced their union valid, pretending that its issue was legitimate rather than obliging the Emperor to accept that his cousin was no more than a royal bastard, he would defer to Rome’s judgement, and that he would set Anne aside, disinheriting the child she was carrying, so that he might reinstate her and Mary to what she stubbornly insisted were their rightful places. He had even heard accounts that, when she was told of the verdict, Katherine gave orders that her belongings should be packed, so that she would be ready to begin her journey to court as soon as the messenger came to let her know that Henry wanted her back by his side.

He wondered if Katherine’s servants - those few who remained with her when she rejected the generous allowance provided to her as Princess Dowager, and therefore could not pay their wages - had humoured their mistress and packed her trunks for her, or if they had had the good sense to see that they were wasting their time, and creating unnecessary work for themselves later on, once Katherine realised that nobody was coming to conduct her back to London with royal honours, as she expected, and her belongings had to be unpacked again.

He had never thought to ask.

Anne was not such a fool that she would make the same mistake.

Anne knew better than to believe that he would announce to the world that his only living son was nothing but a bastard if it meant that he would be able to have her as his wife again, even if there was a part of him that couldn’t help but miss her. Anne knew better than to think that he would ever consent to dishonour Jane’s memory by revealing that she was never more than his mistress, and the mother of his bastard. Anne knew better than to believe that he would ever say that four blameless men died for no other reason than to let him rid himself of his wife to marry the lady of his choice, and that he would have seen his wife dead and their child called a bastard if it meant that he could take another woman as wife and call their children his legitimate heirs.

Would it give her pleasure to hear of Jane’s death?

Would it amuse her to learn that, though Jane gave him a son, she was not allowed to live to enjoy the honour that should have been hers as mother of the Prince?

Would she resent the fact that, despite Jane’s death, Edward was still accepted as the heir to the throne ahead of Elizabeth? Or would she put her trust in her protector, relying on the power that had kept her from dying as she should have to see to it that Elizabeth became Queen?

He had to visit the nursery when that thought struck him, to reassure himself that Edward still lived, that his life was not snatched away by Death, as little Prince Henry was.

Baby Henry’s death was so sudden.

One moment, he was celebrating the safe arrival of the future King Henry the Ninth, and making plans for the household and education of his little son, and the next, a messenger came from Richmond Palace, bearing the sorrowful news that the infant had died in his sleep.

Death could strike without warning, particularly when he sought to claim the fragile life of a baby.

His son by Katherine was not allowed to live to cut his first tooth because God knew, even if
Henry did not yet know in those days, that his union with Katherine was no true marriage and the
son she bore him was no true Prince but a bastard born of an incestuous, accursed union, unfit to
rule a country. Their son’s death was a warning that they had not heeded, a sign that God would
not allow a boy who was a bastard in all but name to live to sit on the throne.

If one of his sons died because he was born out of wedlock but was called a prince, the same fate
might befall Edward.

Lady Bryan and the nursemaids who attended Edward withdrew from the nursery at his command,
curtseying deeply as they left but knowing better than to speak to him.

Edward slept peacefully in his cradle. His cheeks were pink and growing plump, and his tiny hands
clenched in fists and unclenched in his sleep. His breathing was soft and even.

Just as he was unable to tear himself away from Jane’s side as she lay dying, and as he had spent
long hours standing by her body in the chapel, he could not bring himself to leave Edward.

He watched as his precious son breathed in and out, watched his tiny hands move, praying that his
little boy would continue to breathe, that he would continue to grow strong and healthy. After all of
this, Edward had to live to be the fine Prince that England needed, had to grow to be the man who
would be able to be the third King of the Tudor dynasty, inheriting the crown that Henry’s father
had won and serving the country that they had created and preserved from pretenders. Everything
that happened to him, to Anne and to Jane couldn’t be for nothing.

When he heard a tentative knock on the door, he could guess who it was before the visitor was
announced.

There were very few men at court who would not be barred entry to the room when it was clear
that the King would rather be alone, and of those men, Charles Brandon was the only one whose
concern for his well being would outweigh any misgivings he had about the likely reception from a
grieving King who wished to be alone with his son. Other men would be too afraid to approach.

Henry waited until the groom had closed the door behind Brandon before he spoke.

“Have you come to pay your respects to my new bastard, my Lord of Suffolk?” His voice was
almost too low for Brandon to make out his bitter, resentful words. Nobody outside the room
would be able to hear what he said and Brandon was thankful that, even in Henry’s current state, he
retained enough sense to know that he could not broadcast the truth about his infant son’s true
status. Henry tore his gaze away from Edward’s sleeping form to meet Brandon’s eyes, his gaze
challenging. “He is a bastard, after all, isn’t he, Charles?”

For a moment, he wished that Jane could have borne him a daughter instead.

Surely it would cause God less offence to know that he was honouring a daughter he knew to be
illegitimate as a princess than to know that he intended to knowingly raise his bastard son to the
throne. Jane’s life might have been spared, and he could rest easily, knowing that their daughter
would not be a threat to Elizabeth’s lawful succession and would not be struck down for it. He
would have another little princess with whom he could make a valuable marital alliance, finding an
ally who would support the rightful claim of his trueborn daughter.

He determinedly banished the thought from his mind.

For better or worse, he had a son now and his son would be King one day… if he was allowed to
live long enough to be crowned.
“Your Majesty...” Brandon couldn’t think what he should say, not knowing if Henry wanted to be contradicted or reassured or if he was supposed to speak at all. Silence seemed safest.

“I was never married to his mother, was I?” Henry continued bitterly, hot, angry tears pricking the back of his eyelids. “I knew that he was going to be a bastard before he was born. I knew that he was going to be a bastard when Anne and I came to our agreement.”

At the time, it seemed like the only solution to the problem that Anne’s survival presented, the only way that he could hope to be free of her, but now that Edward was here, now that he had a living son asleep in his cradle, a son he had condemned to bastardy, he was angry with himself for agreeing to a course of action that condemned any sons he had in the future to be born bastards, angry with Anne for making the demands she had, and angry with everybody who was there when they made their bargain but who had not presented him with another option, an option that would have allowed him to satisfy Anne without sacrificing his son’s rights... if such an option existed.

Would Anne have contented herself with anything less than the continuation of their marriage when she knew that he had no power to harm her?

He doubted it.

She was not a woman who would easily surrender if she had the advantage. He should probably be thankful that she was prepared to agree on terms with him at all.

“I could annul my marriage to her now, couldn’t I? In secret? Elizabeth could keep her title, that would keep Anne from finding out, wouldn’t it?” He knew without Brandon saying so that this was impossible, that Anne would have to be notified of the annulment for it to be finalised. Even if that was not the case, he couldn’t do it, and he knew why he couldn’t do it. “Something is protecting Anne. We know that. What would it do to me if I tried to cheat her of her rights?”

“I don’t know, Your Majesty.”

As much as he sympathised with Henry, Brandon couldn’t bring himself to hope for his friend to find a way to render Elizabeth a bastard, even if nobody ever learned of it and Elizabeth’s status was unaltered in the eyes of the world. He also thought that it would be unwise to court the anger of Anne’s protector, who could well be able to see and know things that his charge did not.

To his mind, anyone powerful enough to protect somebody from death as well as Anne was protected was somebody whose anger no sensible man should want to court.

Even the King of England should tread warily in the face of such a powerful force.

“Neither do I.” Edward woke, and began to whimper. Henry bent down to pick his son up in his arms, rocking him to soothe his whimpers before they could become full-fledged wails of protest. “But bastard or not, Edward will be King one day.” His tone was fierce, as though he expected Brandon to argue, to advocate that he make Edward’s illegitimacy known, that he reveal that Anne still lived and that she was still the rightful Queen of England, while her daughter was the King’s only legitimate child. “Anne knew when we made our agreement that if Jane gave me a son, he would be Prince of Wales and would rule England after me. She wouldn’t let me annul our marriage or declare Elizabeth a bastard and I haven’t. I’ve kept my word. Elizabeth is still a Princess, and one day, I will make a royal marriage for her. Maybe she will be Queen of another country one day, if I can manage to arrange the match. I never agreed that Elizabeth would be Queen of England and Anne knows it. She can’t say that I have broken my word to her, can she?”

“No, Your Majesty,” Brandon knew that there was only one answer that Henry wanted to hear but
it seemed to give his friend no comfort to hear it.

*Anne* was not the one Henry feared.

She was not the one who had the power to punish him, and he didn’t believe that she would be able to choose to call on that power if she thought herself cheated. She was not God, who might be angry to think of Henry setting his illegitimate son on the throne that was the birthright of his legitimate daughter, and who might snatch that son’s life away as a punishment.

But she *was* the one who put him in this position, and who put Edward in this position, even though she was intelligent enough to know the price that might have to be paid.

How could she do this to him?

“I think that it’s time for the Princess to return to her own household at Hatfield.” Henry tried to tell himself that he wanted Elizabeth to leave because a court in mourning was no place for a young child, and because it would be healthier for her to live in the countryside, but he knew his true reason for wanting his younger daughter far away from him. He knew that, if he saw the face of Anne’s child, if he had to see a living reminder of the bargain he had made, the bargain that robbed Edward of the position that should have been his and that might even endanger his life if God could not see that the only way to keep England safe and at peace was for Edward to rule one day, he would never be allowed to forget his bargain with Anne, even for a moment. Fear for Edward, and perhaps even for himself, would rule his days. “You know who to give instructions to.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Although Lady Bryan had transferred to Edward’s service, Brandon knew that Mistress Catherine Champernowne had taken charge of Elizabeth’s attendants for the present, until a governess of more exalted standing could be found for the child. She was now the one to whom he should speak about a move to Hatfield. He would also have to write to Sir John Shelton to let the man know to expect the return of his royal charge within the next few days, so that her household might be made ready to receive her. “May I bring the Princess to bid you farewell?” He asked tentatively, knowing that Elizabeth was bound to want to see her father before she left, especially since she was now old enough to realise that it might be months, if not more, before she was summoned to court again, or before Henry decided to pay a visit to her at Hatfield.

“No!” The vehemence of Henry’s response seemed to catch him by surprise but he did not relent. “I don’t want to see her... I don’t want to see anybody,” he amended, finding the idea of being pestered by courtiers, and even his own daughters, unbearable.

Jane was hardly cold but it wouldn’t be long before he was encouraged to take a new wife, rather than leaving the succession vested in one infant boy and one little girl of four. He couldn’t listen to their attempts to convince him that it was in England’s interests that he move past his grief for his sweet Jane, and seek a third wife. How could he bring himself to trick another woman into a mockery of marriage and father another bastard son to be called the Duke of York? How could he make it clear to his Privy Council - those who did not know about Anne - that he would no contemplate the idea of remarriage and ensure that they would not continue to cajole him?

All he wanted was to shut himself away from the world, and forget.

He was the King, and he would have what he wanted.

“See to it that the Princess Elizabeth is gone within the week,” he ordered Brandon. “And tell the court that I will grieve for Jane in seclusion.”

“Your Majesty...” Brandon was alarmed. The country needed its King, despite his grief.
"I will see nobody, Charles," Henry cut him off before he could say anything else. "Not even you. I want to be alone."

12th November 1537

During the later months of Jane’s pregnancy, in addition to preparing a lavish layette for her coming child, she and her ladies had busied themselves with preparations for the nursery, with Jane choosing the furnishings and decorations and, with the help of her most trusted ladies, selecting the women in whose care her child would be placed after his birth.

Each potential member of the nursery household was carefully vetted, to ensure that there was no history of madness or criminal behaviour in their family, and that they were of good character.

They could not be too careful where the health and welfare of a royal child was concerned, especially if that child was the Prince they all hoped for.

The nursery at Whitehall Palace was only ever intended to be a temporary home for the royal infant, one to be used during his first few months of life, before a proper household was prepared for him in a royal residence of his own. After that, the nursery would only be used to house him and his attendants when he came to court to visit his parents, and those visits would be very infrequent during his earliest years, when he was so vulnerable to disease that he was safer away from court. However, that did not mean that every effort was not made to ensure that the apartment would be prepared in a manner befitting the status of its small occupant, or that any expense would be spared when it came to ensuring that the baby would enjoy every comfort.

There was nothing that would be too good for the future Prince of Wales.

The rooms set apart for baby Edward were large and luxuriously furnished but the atmosphere was sombre, as befitted a court in mourning. The women who had charge of the royal infant wore black gowns, with hoods trimmed in white to signify that his mother had died in childbed, as the ladies who had served Jane did, with many of the other ladies at court following their lead.

Edward slept in his ornately carved cradle, oblivious to the grief surrounding him, while Lady Bryan and the Lady Mary watched over him.

"Poor lamb, never to know his own mother." Her opinion of Jane had not been a high one, and she had been indignant when the new Queen had not had more of a care for her predecessor’s child, favouring the King’s illegitimate daughter over the trueborn Princess of England, but Lady Bryan had nothing but sympathy for the motherless infant Jane had left behind. It was no fault of his that his half-sister’s mother was killed so that his mother might take her place, and Queen Anne’s fate did not make it any less of a tragedy that another innocent child was deprived of his mother.

It seemed that all the King’s children were to have the misfortune to lose their mothers too soon.

The Lady Mary looked up at her words, determination in her eyes.

"No," she contradicted, her voice soft but firm, "he will know her. Through me. Through others who knew her gentle kindness. We shall all keep her memory so green that he will think it always spring, and she still so young and fair when he first hears talk of her."

After all that Jane had done for her, and all the loving kindness she had shown her, Mary felt that the least she could do to repay her stepmother was to ensure that her son did not forget her.

In a few years time, she would tell him about the sweet, gentle woman who had borne him, making
sure that he knew how much Jane had loved him, even before he was born. She would not be able to speak to him of the past, of the time before Anne had poisoned their father’s mind and seen to it that Mary and her mother were robbed of their rightful places until he was much older and could understand both the magnitude of what had happened and the need for discretion around their father. He would be very angry if he knew that she had spoken of the past he wished to forget to her little brother. Nonetheless, she would still be able to tell him how kind Jane was to her, how indebted to her she was for that kindness, and how much she loved and missed her.

Had it not been for Jane’s intercession on her behalf, and her constant efforts to ensure that Mary was honoured at court, even if she was denied her rightful title and place in the succession, Mary imagined that she might still be living at Hunsdon, invited to court infrequently at best, seeing very little of her father and having few opportunities to remind him how much he loved her.

Elizabeth might be his most beloved daughter now, effortlessly winning his love away from Mary and ensuring that he did not regret his estrangement from the pearl of his world.

Thanks to Jane, the King was not able to forget how much he loved Mary.

Lady Bryan smiled at her words, before moving away from the cradle, for fear that the sound of their voices might disturb the sleeping child.

“My lady’s household is now to be dissolved. The King himself seems very grieved by her death but he has commanded that no effort be spared to protect this precious jewel, his only son. A new household is to be established for him at Hampton Court and I am to head it, responsible altogether for his nurture and education.”

Lady Bryan had not expected to be offered such a position, an offer that was truly a royal command. She was surprised when Master Cromwell had informed her that it was the King’s wish that she be appointed Lady Governess to the Prince, and that she should begin her duties immediately by taking charge of the Prince’s first nursery.

Although it was a great honour to be entrusted with the upbringing of the future King of England, as well as a sign of the King’s esteem for her and satisfaction with how well she had carried out her duties as Princess Elizabeth’s governess, the pleasure and honour she felt in her new position – her promotion, to put it plainly – was tempered by her concern about what this change would mean for Elizabeth. She had had the care of the Princess since she was a little baby and, after the tragic loss of her mother, it would be doubly difficult for the child to endure any further loss.

When she asked if the King wished for Princess Elizabeth to share the Prince’s household, and that she should act as governess to both children, Master Cromwell made it plain that the King intended his son to enjoy a household of his own. The Prince’s health must be carefully guarded and it was imperative that his well-being should be the sole focus of his attendants, who would have little time to spare to care for another child. Lady Bryan could not dispute that, knowing as she did that the future stability and prosperity of the realm depended on it having a healthy Prince to succeed his royal father, when the time came. They would be able to take no chances with the baby boy.

When asked who the Princess’ new governess was to be, all Cromwell could tell her was that the King had not yet given him any instructions on the matter.

For the immediate future, she was certain that Mistress Champernowne would be able to take charge of Elizabeth’s care, and to supervise the running of the household, with Sir John’s help. However, it would be better for Elizabeth to have a lady of higher-rank and of more mature years presiding over her household, especially now that she was growing older, and Lady Bryan was concerned that, in his present state of mind, it could be a long time before the King considered the
question of which noble lady should act as Lady Governess to the Princess... if he remembered that his daughter had lost her governess, and needed another.

“I can think of no one who could be trusted more, Lady Bryan.”

They may have clashed during Mary’s time in Elizabeth’s household, when Lady Bryan was commanded to ensure that she was kept from contacting anybody outside the household and that she was never allowed to enjoy any privilege that could be thought unfitting for an illegitimate royal child, and expected to treat her harshly in order to bully her into admitting that she was a bastard, but Mary knew that the older woman would be conscientious in her duty towards any royal infant placed in her charge.

If little Edward could not have the love of his mother, he could do worse than to have the devoted care of Lady Bryan.

“Perhaps someday soon, God willing, Lady Mary, you yourself will have a child. I hear some rumour of a Spanish prince.”

“Yes, but there is nothing definite.” In her heart, Mary knew that the proposed match with Don Luis was not to be. It would be many months before her father’s grief abated and he was in a frame of mind to consider the question of his daughter’s marriage. The future King of Portugal could not remain unwed for too much longer, and it was certain that he would be offered the hands of other princesses, princesses whose fathers did not call them bastards. “And in the meantime, I shall return to Hunsdon and live quietly in the countryside like an English gentlewoman.”

She thought that she could live happily in the countryside.

Hunsdon House was a fine manor, and the household the King provided her with would ensure that she would be honourably served. The members of her household wore the King’s livery rather than hers, and they addressed her as Lady Mary rather than as Princess but there was no fault to be found with their work or their devotion to their mistress. Since she first set foot in her new household, they had been diligent in their efforts to ensure that she was comfortable and that her every need was cared for. Not one member of her household had ever showed her a hint of disrespect. It would also be a relief to be away from the court, and the atmosphere of grief that pervaded it, a relief to be able to mourn Jane privately and pray for her.

For now, it was better for her to be away.

“Perhaps the King may allow Princess Elizabeth to visit me there.”

It hurt to apply the title of Princess to her younger sister but it was a necessary habit to cultivate, as she could never know which ears might be unfriendly to her. Lady Bryan might treat her respectfully and kindly now but Mary was sure she was loyal to Elizabeth and that she would report her if she failed to accord her little sister the honours their father demanded on her behalf.

Mary didn’t know if she would ever ask her father if she might have Elizabeth pay a visit to her at Hunsdon, especially as a visit from Elizabeth would oblige her to receive her younger sister with the honours due to a princess, and to watch the household that was forbidden to address her by by the title that was her birthright bend the knee to the little girl who had usurped her rightful place. As Elizabeth’s older sister, she had a duty to take an interest in the child, who lacked the guidance of a good, loving mother, but she wondered if it might be easier for her to undertake this duty from afar, corresponding with those who would have charge of the little girl and giving them instructions about what the child should be taught.
God be praised that Anne had not lived to infect her innocent little daughter with her heresy!

“And knowing that young lady, you shall have no quiet at all,” Lady Bryan opined, thinking that her spirited young charge would find life in the Lady Mary’s household quieter than she liked. Elizabeth was wise beyond her years but she was still a child, one who loved to run and play and who had yet to develop the patience needed to sit through Mass without fidgeting. As much as Princess Elizabeth loved her half-sister, she would not wish to share her devotions.

“I don’t mind. She and my brother Edward are, excepting the King, my only family, and I shall love them all.” She was sure that Jane would want her to take her place, and keep the family united by loving bonds. Lady Bryan curtsied, and turned to walk away, before Mary spoke again. “Oh, I had forgotten. How is your son, Sir Francis? Has he not gone away for the King?”

“He has, my lady, but alas, I have no news of him.”

Mary nodded acknowledgement but made no further comment.

She prayed that there was no truth the rumours that Sir Francis Bryan was on a mission to assassinate Cardinal Pole but she couldn’t pretend that it was impossible.

It was yet another sign of the lasting damage that Anne had done to her father, and how far away from God she had led him. The husband her mother loved would never have contemplated ordering the murder of a Prince of the Church, and would have utterly condemned any man who committed such a grave sin, knowing that such wickedness would damn a man. Anne had urged her father to reject the authority of the Holy Father and of the Church in Rome, and now he had caused the death of one cardinal and could be plotting against the life of a second.

Master Aske told her that he believed that she would be Queen, and that only she would be able to preserve the true faith in England but Master Aske was dead now, executed for his part in the rebellion against the new order Master Cromwell had forced on England.

How could she hope to be Queen when she was forced to renounce her claim to legitimacy, and forced to defer to her little half-sister as Princess?

Edward was first in line, in any case, and few Englishmen would prefer a Queen to a King, even if the King was but a child.

Mary knew that, after the great kindness Jane showed her, she could never seek to challenge the right of Jane’s son to sit on the throne but, if she could not be Queen, she could teach England’s future King about the true religion, so that Edward could be guided by her and could one day restore England’s allegiance to Rome.

Perhaps this was what her father truly wanted, even if his pride would never allow him to admit it.

He had chosen Mary as Edward’s godmother, after all, chosen her to help ensure that her half-brother was brought up a devout Christian. He must know that she would teach Edward the truth about God and the Church, the truth that he once defended so vehemently when it was threatened by Luther’s lies, instead of allowing him to be corrupted by the teachings of heretics.

It was her duty and her destiny to restore the true faith to England, she had no doubt about that.

But perhaps, if she was not to be Queen, her destiny would be achieved through Edward.
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