Daughters of A Rose Without A Thorn

by FalconHonour

Summary

Cross posted from FFN. My favourite of my old fics...

What if Kitty Howard had been Henry's second wife and given him two daughters, but died on the scaffold for adultery? What if Jane Seymour had only been his mistress? What if Anne had been his third wife? What would have happened to Kitty's daughters?
Chapter 1

Prologue - 1544

I am Princess Elizabeth Tudor, daughter of King Henry the Eighth, by the Grace of God King of England, Ireland and France. My mother Katherine Howard was his Queen for twelve long years. Yet despite this, my father no longer allows her name to cross anyone's lips at Court, for three years ago, when Blanche was six, and I eleven, our mother was executed for treason, on our father's orders... He executed her because he found out about her adultery with Thomas Culpepper, which resulted in her having twin girls, Eleanor and Jessica. Though the girls are not Princesses, they are my mother's daughters and because of this, Blanche and I look upon them as our sisters. When Father banished Blanche and I to Hatfield after Mother's fall from grace, he was too furious to think about anything else, meaning that the twins, even though they were the living proof of Mother's adultery, were left in our retinue. Indeed, three years on, they still live with us, in plainly furnished rooms off our own. I do my best to keep an eye on their attendants to see that they are treated as Howard girls, born in wedlock or not, ought to be. It is not easy, but by God, I am half Howard as well as half Tudor. I am not one to shirk a challenge.
"Elizabeth? Come and sit with me by the fountain."

My mother held out her hand to me, and I twisted away from the eager hands of my little sister, Blanche, to run over to her. It was a glorious day in late September and my sister and I had persuaded our mother, who had ridden over from Court to steal a few precious hours with us, to come out into the garden and watch us play with our ladies there.

Slipping my hand into my mother's, I allowed her to lead me over to a bench against a wall trailing Michaelmas roses. My mother leaned back and pulled a flower off the bush, tucking it into the hood of my gown.

"There. A rose for the Rose Princess."

I smiled, leaning my head against her shoulder, looking over at the sparkling jets of the fountain. Beyond them, my sister Blanche still played. Our maids were all chasing after her merrily. Normally I would join them, but not now. Not while there was a chance of me having my mother to myself. I loved her too much for that.

Suddenly my mother reached out and cupped my chin in her hand, turning me to face her. "Elizabeth, you love Nora and Jessie, don't you?" she asked solemnly, looking me straight in the eye, treating me almost like an adult.

"Of course I do! They're your daughters!" I exclaimed, my heart sinking at the gravity of her voice. What was this about?

"Listen to me, Bessie. No matter what anyone ever tells you, those girls, those Culpeppers, are your sisters. I need you to promise me that you'll look after them no matter what. Do you promise?"

"I promise!" I replied instantly and I meant it. I was thrilled that Mother would ask me to do something so grown up. I'd have done anything for her; even died for her if she'd wanted it, so something like this seemed simple to me. The twins were sweet – they were little more than babies. What trouble could they be? However, Mother obviously still had her qualms.

"I'm serious, Bessie. Your Papa loves you; and Blanche. You'll always have him, no matter what, but if anything should happen to me, Nora and Jessie won't have anyone. They'll need their older sister's protection. Will you do that, my Rose Princess? Will you watch over them for me?"

"Of course, but what could happen to you, Mother? You're the Queen of England!" I asked, wide eyed and innocent.

My mother didn't answer, only wrapped her arms around me silently and held me tight. I automatically responded to her embrace, swallowing the questions that burned within me. Maybe I didn't need to know any more. Maybe, for once, I would just do what my mother asked of me without question.

Across the lawn, Blanche shrieked with joy as she managed to evade the reaching grasp of one of her attendants. The delicate scent of the Michaelmas roses filled the air around us.
I sat bolt upright, breathing hard. I didn't need to touch my cheeks to know that they were wet. I had had this dream countless times in the past three years and I always woke up crying. It was hardly surprising, since, in dreaming it, I was reliving the last time I ever saw my mother. However, in this she always asked me to look after my little half-sisters, Eleanor and Jessica Culpepper, even though she never had in reality. In reality, we hadn't known it would be the last time we'd ever see one another. When we had last seen each other, Mother was still the favoured Queen, and I was still my father's beloved Princess Elizabeth – his Princess of Roses.

Realising that attempting to go straight back to sleep was fruitless, I slipped out of bed and went to the window, careful not to wake my maid Anne Boleyn, who slept on a pallet at the foot of my bed. Not that she would have minded if I had. Anne had been nothing but a tower of strength for me ever since my mother died.

She was only three years my senior, but during those first few difficult months following my mother's beheading, it had been her, alongside my governess the Lady Katherine Ashley – my first governess, Lady Margaret Bryan, now ruled my sister's household rather than mine – who had made the simple decisions, such as what to wear, what to eat and what I should do to pass the time, for me. She had gently guided me through each and every day whilst I struggled to come to terms with the enormity of my mother's actions - which had only then dawned on me – and eventual death.

Because of this, I owed Anne; owed her a debt I could never repay, except with adoration. I adored Anne as fiercely as I adored my own full sister Princess Blanche, and everyone who served me knew it. To hurt Anne was to incur my full displeasure, for it broke my heart to see her upset, and I strove to right every injustice ever done her.

I don't know how long I stood there, weeping softly, but some time later a noise behind me made me turn. Blanche stood behind me, her long blonde hair tumbling down her back, ruffled with broken sleep.

"Are you all right, Bessie?" she asked me, her voice soft and sweet. I turned back to the window.

"I can't sleep. And what about you? Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"I woke up thirsty and then I heard you crying. Are you okay?"

"Not really. I had the dream again. The one where Mother asks me to look after the twins." I confessed, gripping the window ledge so hard my knuckles went white.

"Oh Bessie!" Blanche came forward into the room, stepping gingerly over Anne's sleeping figure. Eventually she stood beside me, and though I knew that I should do the responsible thing and encourage her to go back to bed and back to sleep, I could not find it in my heart to do so, for she was offering me more comfort just by being there than anyone else ever could, no matter what they said.

"If only Mother were still alive." I whispered suddenly, my voice hoarse with longing as we stood there together gazing out of the window absently. Blanche stayed quiet, bless her, knowing that there was plenty more that I wanted to say. "She would have given him a son too, if he'd given her..."
a chance. A Prince of Wales for England. A true Prince. A Prince with Howard blood; not the
Seymour bastard of a Duke Father's trying to turn into his lawful heir these days!" I continued, not
caring that anyone might be listening to my bitter outburst. Blanche put a gentle hand on my
shoulder.

"At least you were eleven. At least you still remember her, and what she looked like. I don't. I'd
have forgotten her face by now, if it wasn't for the portrait."

"That's true." I drew Blanche to my own bed, stooping to draw from beneath the mattress the last
portrait that Father had ever had painted of our mother – the May Day portrait of 1540, which was
the last carefree summer we had together, the last summer before he executed her. Blanche and I
bent our heads over the miniature, one of us dark like her, the other fair like Father, both of us
taking in every detail of our mother's face, staring at it greedily, learning her features by heart. I
held the painting in one hand, but my other arm curved tenderly about Blanche's waist, as she
rested her head on my shoulder.

"I won't let you forget her, Blanche. Not you, nor Nora, nor Jessie." I suddenly promised my sister
in an urgent whisper. "She's our mother. Her blood runs in our veins. Besides, I miss her as much
as you do, if not more. We need to talk about her, and damn Father's rules." I swore fiercely.

"Can I stay here tonight, Elizabeth?" Blanche asked softly into my chest. I nodded, stroking her
golden curls.

"Of course."

I woke the next morning to the sound of Father's heavy footsteps. To my horror, as I woke, I
realised I had fallen asleep still clutching my mother's portrait. Not wanting to anger Father if I
could help it, which displaying the portrait would certainly do, for all reminders of my Mother,
save myself, Blanche and the twins had been destroyed in the wake of her execution, I thrust it
hastily beneath the blankets. To no avail.

Father came in, stripped the blankets off me and Blanche in order to wake the latter and scold her
for being so wanton as to fall asleep outside her own bed, and froze as he caught sight of the
painting. Then he rounded on me.

"You've been telling them lies about their mother, haven't you?"

"You forget, Your Majesty, that the Lady Katherine was also my mother. What I tell them are
nothing but memories." I replied cautiously. Not cautiously enough.

"No. Your memories, as you call them, are lies. Nothing but lies. Your mother was a whore, an
adulteress, and a traitor!" he roared.

Perhaps I would have ignored the first two accusations – they were both half-true, at least, but the
last one really stung. Forgetting for the moment who I was dealing with, I jumped to my feet.

"My mother was no traitor! She was faithful to you, and loyal to England for the whole length of
her life! 'Twas you, Father, who drove her into Thomas Culpepper's arms in the first place with
your rage over her short-lived sons! You are nothing but a monster and a tyrant! My God, you're
meant to be a great King. Act like one!" I spat.

Everyone else around me froze, and I did too, when I realised what I had said. Though I trembled
inwardly, however, I refused to beg Father's pardon, but instead stood, unrepentant, with my head
held high in defiance, knowing his anger at what I had said would be great, but refusing to show I was afraid, and awaiting his verdict.

Father glared at me venomously for a moment, then, realising that I was too much a Howard, never mind Tudor, to fall upon my knees, weeping, at the first sign of his displeasure, snarled "Very well, Elizabeth. If you think like that then your favourite maid will have to be dismissed. I will ask Katherine Ashley to see to it that they go from Court this very day, and you and your sister will remain locked up in these apartments until I hear that you are willing to apologise for your wilful behaviour."

I opened my mouth to protest – I knew Anne would be chosen to leave, and she had done me too much of a service ever to deserve to be dismissed in disgrace - but Father turned his back on me, leaving me unable to do anything except sweep him a low regal curtsy, saying as I did so "If that is what pleases Your Majesty."

I was far too proud to apologise immediately, even though it would have saved Anne from disgrace, and myself a lot of heartache later. Instead, I watched him go with poison in my eyes, honestly proud that I had, for once, spoken out in defence of the mother I had loved so much, and only wishing that I had done so sooner.
"Kat! Please don't dismiss Anne! Just get rid of any one of my maids! I'll beg Father's forgiveness; I promise. Just don't dismiss Anne! Please! I'm begging you!"

I was practically in tears as I faced my governess, pleading with her to reconsider her decision to dismiss Anne Boleyn from my household.

When Father had first uttered his order for my favourite maid to be dismissed, I had expected Kat to send away one of my other maids and tell my father that she had sent away my favourite even if she hadn't. In fact, I had already been composing my speech of apology in my head, preparing to act the penitent daughter to such an extent that Father believed I had learnt my lesson, and learnt it well.

However, the realisation that my governess Katherine Ashley, or Kat, as my sister and I called her, actually intended to follow Father's orders to the extent that she would force Anne to leave my household, had shocked me to the core, shaken me so badly that all I could do was stare at Kat with tears of rage in my eyes, willing her to cede to me on this.

Kat stepped forward and laid her hand on my arm.

"I would, Elizabeth. If I could, I would. But the thing is, you know I'm not the only one who knows that you favour Anne. Everyone in your household knows that you favour her. If I was to get rid of another girl, say, Mary Norris, and she complained to her father, then we'd all be in trouble. You know how close her father is to yours. The King would get to hear of it, Princess and he'd know we'd deceived him. I'm sorry Princess, but there's nothing we can do. Anne has to go."

"It's not fair! She doesn't deserve to be dismissed in disgrace!" I almost shouted. Glancing at the closed door of my bedchamber, Kat, who I had pushed away in my anger, came forward again and put her arms around me.

"No. She doesn't. But life's not fair, Elizabeth. You of all people should know that."

That did it. My self-control deserted me, and I broke down in Kat's arms, weeping with rage, wounded pride and frustration. Kat held me while I sobbed, rubbing my back gently as though I was but a child.

When I was finally somewhat more sedate, she released me, giving me a last reassuring smile as I went out into the sitting room that I shared with Blanche.

Trying not to allow anyone to see how I had been crying, I seated myself in the window seat with my lute in my hand. Music always calmed me down. With that in mind, I began to play, play a song my mother had taught me and that I was now teaching Blanche.

As I played I sang

"And she shall bring the birds in spring
And dance among the flowers
In summers heat her kisses sweet
They fall from leafy bowers"
Getting up from the desk in the corner, where she had been completing a Latin translation under the watchful eye of her governess Lady Margaret Bryan, Blanche came to sit beside me, carrying her own lute. She sat beside me and tried to copy my fingers' swift movement on the strings, with little success. Being five years younger, she simply wasn't up to my standard yet. Listening to her valiant efforts dispelled the last of my melancholy thoughts. I laughed and laid down my own lute to curve my hand around hers.

"No, Blanche. Not like that. Like this, look." I guided my sister's hand through the notes of the song once and then twice, until she could just about play it on her own.

"That's it! Good. Good."

Blanche giggled and raised her voice to blend with mine as I began to sing the song again. We smiled lovingly at each other, the sweet music and the simple words bridging a gap between us that could never normally be bridged – the gap of five years in age, the gap that meant, no matter how much I wanted to, I could never quite treat Blanche as an equal, the gap that we never spoke about, never acknowledged, because we longed to, nay, needed to be able to rely on each other utterly, no matter what, just as we always had, especially in the three years since our beloved mother had died.

The tender moment between us was shattered as the herald by my door coughed and announced "His Grace Lord Edward FitzTudor, Duke of Richmond and Somerset."

I could feel Blanche stiffen where I had my arm around her as our ten year old half-brother entered the room with a couple of his companions, strutting in as if he owned half the palace, and inclined our head stiffly to us.

"Sister Elizabeth. Blanche."

"Brother Edward." I greeted him coldly as I disengaged myself from Blanche and rose to my feet. If it had been any other boy, I wouldn't have acknowledged him until he had bowed to me properly, but as my father had ruled that there was to be no need for ceremony between us three, due to our supposedly young ages, (despite the fact that I was of marriageable age), I knew that I wouldn't get more than a cursory incline of the head from my half-brother, so I merely asked "To what do we owe the honour?"

"I thought to look in and see how you did, Sister, now that you have displeased our royal father to such an extent that he orders you to be kept to your rooms." Edward answered haughtily.

His manner set my teeth on edge. Did he really have to be so insufferable? I supposed it wasn't his fault that our father favoured him because of his gender, but the way he let it go to his head and spoke to me almost as we were equals irritated me beyond compare. I answered him shortly, contempt masked beneath a veneer of icy politeness.

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"I see. Well, as you can see, we keep ourselves occupied, so if there is nothing else -" I glanced pointedly at the door, but Edward, pretending he did not see where my gaze was leading, threw himself casually down in the best armchair by the fire, gesturing for his companions to come and join him there, which they did, though they at least had the courtesy to greet me and my sister with swift bows and our rightful titles of "Your Highness" as they entered. One of them, Edward Brandon, the Duke of Suffolk's fourteen year old heir by his second wife Catherine Willoughby, even went so far as to drop to one knee before me and kiss my hand, greeting me as "My Lady Princess".

I smiled down at his handsome dark head, and put out a hand to help him up as I told him "You may rise, Lord Edward."
As he got to his feet, Edward's eyes met mine and, for one delicious moment, it seemed as though no-one else in the world existed, that it was just the two of us.

My heart was thudding beneath my rich gown and it only sped up when Edward Brandon flashed me a sly smile before we turned to join my half-brother by the fire. Edward pulled out my chair for me, thankfully making it seem more natural for me to twist in my seat and thank him with a gay laugh.

Then the awkward silence descended once more until I eventually called upon Blanche to entertain us by playing her lute.

Sadly, she was so pleased with her accomplishment of having composed her own piece of music – Anne had helped her do it in honour of my birthday the previous September – that she played it even though it was about a Princess who, though she grew up forever overshadowed by other members of her family, eventually became the most triumphant Queen in Christendom. On the day, I had been deeply touched that my little sister would go to so much trouble for me, but as I had feared, to my brother Edward, the implication was clear; Blanche did not view him as the next King. Rather, she supported me in my right to become England's first ever Queen Regnant after our father's death. All of a sudden, Edward's temper snapped and he lashed out at my sister, snarling "You think to become Queen, do you, Blanche?"

Blanche flinched at his tone, yet answered him steadily.

"I do not seek to become Queen, Edward. Why would I? After all, I have an older sister. However, why Elizabeth not succeed our father?"

"Because she is a girl. And your mother was an adulteress and a traitor besides."

"Oh, and you are really so much more suitable to take England's throne, are you, my Lord of Richmond?" I retorted, leaping in to save Blanche before she had to come up with a suitably cutting response. Wordplay wasn't one of her strengths.

"Remind me, who was your mother again? Oh yes, the Lady Jane Seymour. Our father's harlot."

"My mother was no harlot!" Edward was on his feet now; I really had made him angry.

"She loved my father and he loved her. Tell me, Elizabeth, where's the shame in a woman giving herself to the man she loves?"

"There is none, unless said man happens to be married. Then the woman is a common slut, a whore, fit for nowhere but a brothel, never mind the Queen's ladies!"

"Your mother was unworthy of being Father's Queen! She had another man's children, for God's sake! Father was right to execute her, and right to want to marry my mother. If my mother had lived to be crowned then there would never have been a finer, nobler, gentler Queen to have sat on England's throne!"

"Noble? Gentle? Don't make me laugh!" I sneered, taking a great delight in watching my younger brother's face as I slandered his mother, Jane Seymour. He was torn between horror, shock and fury. Sensing I had the upper hand, I drove my point home.

"If your mother Jane really was as noble and gentle as you say she was, then surely she wouldn't have minded Blanche and I appearing with our father on public occasions? After all, what harm could two sweet little girls have done to her position? But no. As I remember it, she was too busy championing the cause of the misbegotten Lady Mary, our father's first mistake, to remember that
there were two girls at Hatfield who'd just been rendered motherless through their own father's cruelty. She never once spared a thought for Blanche and I and I'll tell you why; it was because she was a vile ambitious snake whose only thought was to ensconce her son in his father's heart and in the hearts of the people. She didn't want us challenging your position and that's all there was to it.”

"I'll be King. Father's going to make it so." Edward snapped. "I'll be King, Sister, and when I am, I'll never ever receive you at my Court, either of you."

"Father promised you that three years ago, brother." I rejoined, layering my voice with contempt as I addressed him as brother, as he had done when he called me sister. "Why do you think he hasn't done it yet?" I continued, lowering my voice. Soft and determined was probably the best way to deliver the coming message.

"Because he can't. That's why. The people would never stand for it. They'd never accept you as heir to the throne above me. You are a bastard Duke, whilst I am a legitimate Princess of the House of Tudor. There's a world of difference between us, Edward. A world of difference. You cannot take my place in the Succession. Not with success."

Having said all I wanted to say, I stood my ground calmly. Edward gulped like a goldfish a couple of times, trying to think of a clever comeback, but then, to my immense satisfaction, he gave up and stormed to the door in a temper.

His companions, who had sat quietly whilst the two of us battled it out, rose to follow him, but Edward Brandon looked back at me swiftly. The sight of his head twisted to glance back suddenly set my brain whirling. Bells were ringing in my mind as I gazed in his direction. Maybe if I was clever, there was a way to obey Father, that was to say, to send Anne from my household, and yet still save my dearest cousin from disgrace! I would need Edward Brandon's help, and that of his mother, Lady Catherine Brooke, Duchess of Suffolk, but in that moment, I knew it would work. I could trust Edward to do his best for me, as he had done ever since he had been placed in my half-brother's household, keeping me informed of any developments there, no matter what said developments were, so I could trust him to help me make this work.

"Lord Edward? Would you stay behind a moment, please? I wish to speak to you privately."

"Of course, Your Highness" Edward Brandon bowed his head slightly, falling back from the group of my half-brother's companions and turning back to face me, shutting the heavy oak door as he did so. Meanwhile, I dismissed my ladies with a glance over my shoulder and a slight wave of my hand. They filed out in silence, dipping curtsies as they passed me. Sensing what I did not say, Blanche rose to her feet and went with them, for which, though I had no right to order or even ask her to leave me, I was extremely grateful.

The next moment, all formality was dropped between us. I ran forward and flung my arms around him, holding him tight. "Edward!"

"Elizabeth!" He kissed me lightly on both cheeks; slipped an arm about my waist. The feel of his touch left me breathless with delight, and I shivered as I leaned into him and looked up trustingly. "I need your help."

"Anything for the Queen of my heart." Edward answered, guiding me over to the window, where we stood, I resting my head back against him as he held me. Edward let the comfortable silence extend for a second or two before asking "Now, what can I do for you?"

"The thing is, because I angered my father, he wants my favourite maid to leave my household, and it would have to be Anne Boleyn, but she's my cousin. I don't want her to go, or if she has to, at
least not in disgrace. She doesn't deserve that, not after how she helped me get over my mother's death." As I finally paused for breath, Edward let go of me and sank into the window seat, considering, before he looked up at me, puzzled.

"I see. Well, I can sympathise of course, but how do you want me to help?"

"Here's what I was thinking. One of your mother's maids is pregnant, isn't she?"

Yes, Frances de Vere. Why?"

"Well, Lady Frances will have to leave Court to have the child, won't she? Couldn't you ask your mother if she'd take Anne on in Lady Frances's place? Please? That way I could be sure that, even if Anne leaves my household, she'll still be a maid to one of the highest-ranking Ladies in the Kingdom. Please?" I sat down across from him and leaned over to place a hand on Edward's arm, gazing up at him pleadingly.

Edward looked at me, taking in my bright eyes, my flushed cheeks and the way my unruly auburn hair was beginning to escape from the confines of my bejewelled French hood and then his eyes travelled down to peer at the way my hand lay on his arm. I knew from his silence that I had a chance of persuading him – I just had to press forward.

"You're your mother's son and heir. Parents dote on their boys. Trust me, I know that much. Surely she'll take Anne on if you ask her to. Just tell you heard of Anne's plight and wanted to help though; don't mention me, whatever you do. She'll admire your chivalry to a damsel in distress. She'll want to help you help others, I'm sure of it. Please; just ask her."

Edward glanced down towards my hand on his arm once more and then at last made his decision. He reached out to rest his hand upon my warm rosy cheek.

"I'll do my best, Elizabeth. You have my solemn word. Look, tell Anne to go home to…Hever, isn't it?" Receiving my nod of assent he continued. "Tell her to wait for a letter from my mother, summoning her to Court. It might take a while, but I can wear my mother down, particularly if I appeal to her kind heart. You're right, she does dote on me. I will get Anne a place at Court if you wish it. You have my word." he repeated, and then, having vowed this to me in a fierce whisper, Edward rose to take his formal leave of me. I called my maid Lady Susanna to see him out as he kissed my hand – for the benefit of any would-be spies: I could trust no-one in my household, no-one save Anne and Kat – and then bowed to my sister, who had also come back into the room, before leaving our apartments and heading back to rejoin my half-brother in his. I watched him go before scrambling to my feet and hurrying into Anne Boleyn's small room, where she was already packing her belongings.

I lingered by the half-open door, just watching Anne move around the small room, the way I used to when I was younger and suffering the effects of my mother's beheading, before raising a hand to knock "Anne? May I come in?"

"Oh! Of course, my Lady!" Anne started, but dropped into a curtsy at the sound of my voice behind her. As I came in and shut the door behind me, I laughed and lifted a hand to raise her from her obeisance.

"Anne! Honestly, how many times must I remind you to call me Elizabeth or Cousin, at least when
"we are alone?"

"Once more, my lady, as always." Anne chuckled, before adding "Elizabeth." as I frowned at her.

"That's better. Now, when do you leave?"

"As soon as I can. George is coming to get me from your household and take me home."

Anne glanced over her shoulder at her half-packed trunk. I reached out to touch her shoulder.

"I'm sorry it's you who have to go, Anne. I begged Kat, honestly. If there was anything I could do..."

"No, Elizabeth. Your father's a dangerous man. My years in England have taught me that much. You couldn't have defied him, Cousin."

Anne tentatively stretched out her arms, as though she wanted to embrace me, but did not quite dare to do so. I solved the conundrum for her by stepping forward and catching her in a swift hug of my own.

Anne stiffened in surprise, but slowly relaxed in my arms, raising her own arms to wrap them around me, holding me tightly. Protocol was broken for us in our last few private moments.

"I am defying him, though, Anne." I murmured into my cousin's shoulder.

"What?" Anne pushed me away to look me straight in the eye. I pulled away from her grasp and sat down on her narrow bed, gesturing to her to join me.

"You have to leave my household, yes, but I'm not letting you leave in disgrace. Kat is writing a letter for you to take to your father, telling him that you've been nothing but a model of good conduct ever since you joined my household and that you're only being dismissed because my father ordered it because of my rudeness to him, and not because you deserve it through any fault of your own. I've also asked Lady Catherine Brandon to write to your father offering you a position in her household as Duchess of Suffolk."

Anne, who had been listening to my hurried explanation with her eyes downcast, suddenly looked up at me mischievously.

"A certain Lord Edward wouldn't have anything to do with the delivery of that request of yours, would he, cousin?"

I flushed. "Yes. How do you know?"

"Elizabeth, it's obvious!" Anne laughed. "You glow like a milkmaid in springtime when you're around him. And he's clearly taken with you."

"You think so?" Even though I knew the answer, I couldn't help the question that slipped from my lips before I could stop it. Anne nodded.

"Of course he is. Why do you think he treats you so much like a Princess, even in front of the Duke of Richmond? Edward Brandon adores you, Elizabeth."

Without really knowing what I was doing, I leaned back against Anne, resting my head against her shoulder in a way that I hadn't done since that difficult time three years ago when my mother had been executed and she was the only one, aside from my governess Kat and my sister Blanche who
could even begin to comfort me. Anne slipped her arms around me and held me without a word. She knew as well as I did that words just wouldn't cut it this time.

At last, I got up. I went to the door and then turned.

"Anne? Don't bother saying goodbye to me formally. As of here and now, I release you from my household."

"Elizabeth -" She went to step forward, but I shook my head.

"It would be too hard. Just go. Godspeed and God Bless, Cousin."

With that, I left the room. Behind me, I heard the rustle of Anne’s skirts as she sank to the floor in a silent curtsy, but I didn't look back.

I couldn't look back. If I did, I'd break down like a child; like my sister Blanche would have done, had she been in my place. But I wasn't Blanche. I was Elizabeth.

I was fourteen years old and a Princess of the House of Tudor.

I had to act grown-up.
Chapter 3

A day later, as my governess, Kat, and old nursemaid, Lady Blanche Parry, were dressing me, Lady Blanche said "Oh Princess, I forgot to mention; your father plans to pay you a visit this morning."

I froze as Kat pulled my heavy amber velvet gown over my head. "What? I thought he wouldn't see me until I'd promised to beg his pardon for angering him."

"Apparently not. I overheard him talking about it when I passed his rooms this morning."

"Ah. Very well. Forewarned is forearmed, as they say. Thank you, Lady Blanche." I thanked my maid calmly, but at her words, my mind – my swift Howard and Tudor mind – had begun to whirl. Forewarned was forearmed indeed, especially when it came to my father. I knew him well; I had been his best girl Bessie and his heiress for the first eleven years of my life, after all. If I could appeal to his sentimental side and persuade him that I still loved him, despite what I had said the day before, then maybe, just maybe, if I was careful, I could cajole him into punishing Edward, his golden boy, for what he had said to me.

I breakfasted quickly and began to study my lessons with Kat. I had finished my Latin, my Greek and my French and was about to start upon my Italian and Hebrew with Signor Battista when we heard the cries to "Make way for His Majesty the King's Grace! Make way!" resounding a couple of passages away.

Instantly I pushed aside my books and dismissed my maids and Signor Battista with a smile and a wave of my hand. Blanche, who had been studying her French verbs across the room from me, glanced up puzzled, but, wanting to get her out of the room – she would be too young to understand what I was doing and ruin it, most likely, I whispered "Would you go and visit Ellie and Jessica for me this morning? I can't be seen to do it if Father's here. Now, please?"

I knew Blanche wanted to ask why, so I fixed her with my most steely look. One glance at my white determined face told her that I would not answer, so she merely came over to me, hissed "All right, but you've got to think of something to tell Father." into my ear, flashed a quick look at her governess, Lady Bryan, and vanished through the door into our half-sisters adjoining but far less opulent rooms, the elderly woman two or three paces behind her.

I seated myself by the window and pretended to be gazing out of it vacantly. Mere seconds after I had arranged my skirts around me to make it seem like I had been sitting there for a long time, the door opened, my herald announced "His Majesty the King" and my father stamped in. Thanking my lucky stars that I was a talented actress, I called up false tears so that my sapphire blue eyes were swimming with them and rose to curtsy to him.

"Good morning, my Lord Father."

"Elizabeth. Daughter." He greeted me coolly, not even bidding me rise from my curtsy before he continued "Has your favourite maid left your household?"

"She has." I tried to make my voice tremble as though I was close to tears.

"Do you miss her?" Father's voice was sharp. Time for me to play the abject daughter begging for forgiveness.
"No, my Lord. I know I deserved to lose her. By God, I'd rather -" here I fell to my knees before him and allowed a tear or two to escape my eyes and trickle down my cheeks delicately – "I'd rather lose every servant I've ever had than lose Your Majesty's love."

"Is that so, daughter?" Father looked down at me hard before seating himself in the best armchair by the fire. Remaining on my knees, I nodded.

"It is, Your Majesty. You're the greatest King England has ever had; the greatest father any girl could ever have. I am heartbroken to have displeased you."

"You called me a tyrant. You accused me of not being a great King."

"I knew not what I said, my lord. I beg your pardon a thousand times over."

"If you are so sorry now, why would you say what you said before in the first place?"

"I spoke without thinking, my Lord. You see, when people slander my mother, though in my heart I know she deserves it, for she was an adulteress and a traitor to you and to England, I do not think of her like that. I only remember the mother I adored, the gentle sweet mother that I used to have, the mother who would have died rather than even contemplate betraying you. You were the centre of her world, Sire. You were her guiding star and now you are mine." I let my shoulders shake as though I was about to start crying in earnest. Father lifted a hand and beckoned me closer.

"Come here. Let me look at you." Rising from my knees, I went to him, keeping my eyes lowered. Father reached out and grabbed my chin, jerking my head up, forcing me to meet his gaze.

"You have your mother's eyes, daughter." he snapped. "She used to look at me like that."

"I cannot help my eyes, my Lord, but I can help my nature. I swear to you upon the Holy Bible that I would rather die than betray you."

"Truly?"

"Truly. I deplore my mother's actions and I would never ever repeat them. I am Your Majesty's humble and obedient daughter – I am a Tudor long before I am a Howard and because of it, because I am Your Majesty's daughter, my loyalty lies with you, with my father. I would do anything for you – even lay down my life for you if you asked it of me."

"Then, Bessie, if that is true -"

"It is! My lord." I added belatedly.

"Then we are friends again." Father smiled kindly at me as I stood before him. "Will you play your lute for me?"

I curtsied swiftly. "As you command, Your Majesty."

"Oh, Father, Bessie. Father to you, my sweet Bessie."

Turning to fetch my lute, I hid a smile. If he was calling me Bessie and telling me to call him Father, then we had indeed made peace.

Still, it was probably best to flatter him so I ran my fingers over the strings of my lute to tune it before beginning to play one of his compositions.

I leaned my head against his legs as I sat in front of him and so that was how Blanche found us
when she came back into the room.

Pausing on the threshold, she raised her sweet voice; a voice sweeter than mine, if I was honest; and, catching my eye, began to sing.

"Green groweth the holly,
So doth the ivy.
Though winter blasts blow never so high,
Green groweth the holly.
As the holly groweth green
And never changeth hue,
So I am, ever hath been,
Unto my lady true."

"Blanche, my dear daughter! Where have you been?" Father called across to my younger sister jovially. My heart started thudding and I had to force myself to keep playing and not to snap my gaze across to her. Maybe I shouldn't have sent her to visit Ellie and Jessica in my place after all. She was only nine. If she couldn't hide where she'd been from Father, then he'd get angry all over again and all my hard work to soften him towards me would be ruined.

I underestimated Blanche, however. She didn't even hesitate as she dropped to the floor in a graceful curtsy and then rose, coming across towards us. "At the altar in the other room, Papa. I mean, Your Majesty."

"Papa. Call me Papa, my darling." Our father beckoned Blanche even closer as she began to seat herself beside me and lifted her on to his lap. Smiling, especially when Blanche began to run her hands through my hair, plaiting it as she had seen my ladies do countless times, I continued to play my lute, delighting in the soft notes and basking in my father's love. Volatile as he was, it was always best for Blanche and I to enjoy his love and favour whilst he deigned to lavish it upon us rather than upon his bastard.

Though I was itching to tell Father of Edward's misconduct during his earlier visit, I knew that to do so would be to risk shattering the fragile peace that was newly blossoming between us, so I bit my tongue and would have held my peace, had Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, my father's oldest and dearest friend and father to my sweetheart Edward Brandon, not come into the room and bowed to us, before bending low to murmur into my father's ear.

"Your Majesty, it has come to my attention that Lord Edward -"

Father tipped Blanche off his lap and gestured to us to leave him in peace for a moment. My heart leapt – if Charles Brandon was telling him what I thought he was telling him, about my argument with Edward, then I would have a chance to get my story in first, and spin things to my advantage.

Blanche looked up at me, stung. Of course, she was too young to understand what was going through my mind, only that Father had tipped her off his lap without so much as a word of warning, so I didn't tell her, only led her over to the other side of the room and sat down with her on my lap, soothing her by telling her her favourite tale, that of St George and the Princess that he rescued from the dragon.

I was barely halfway through, however, when Father said "Elizabeth. Come here, my girl."

I rose to my feet and went over to him, sweeping a deep curtsy to him and then dipping a slight one to the Duke of Suffolk.
"My Lord Father. Your Grace."

"Is it true that Edward shouted at you and Blanche, accused you both of wanting to be Queen, even though you are the daughters of an adulteress and a traitor?"

My heart leapt, but I knew that if I was too eager to tell him, Father would still take Edward's side. I allowed my face to flush but turned my gaze aside, looking down at the floor. "I could not say, my Lord. It is beneath a Princess to tell tales to get others into trouble. We in the royal family must be gracious at all times, even with members of our own family."

"Bessie. I will not be angry with you. I swear it. I only want to know. Tell me."

"I am sorry, my Lord, but I cannot say." I repeated, acting more and more uncomfortable. Father whirled round on my governess. "Then you, Mistress Ashley. You tell me. What happened?"

"I was not within earshot for the whole conversation, Sire, but from what I could tell, Their Highnesses received the Duke of Richmond with grace and extended him every courtesy, but he still lost his temper with them. It was out of the blue, I swear it. No one was expecting it."

"I see. Go on. What did he say to them?"

"He said you would make him King after you, Papa, but that cannot be, can it? After all, is he not equal in rank to the Lady Mary, our half-sister? She cannot expect to be Queen. Can she?" Blanche suddenly came over to us, and I would have turned to hush her, but I caught sight of her eyes out of the corner of my own. They were as wide as saucers, and as blue as sapphires. She was playing the innocent; bless her – playing the innocent to discomfort Father. I kept my mouth shut and let her continue.

Father went red in the face and then blustered quickly "Of course she cannot expect to be Queen and nor can Edward expect to be King. You and Elizabeth are my beloved Princesses, Blanche, and Elizabeth will be Queen of England after me. She is the one true heiress to the throne; both by law and by the will of the people, after all."

Blanche curtsied gravely. "I see. Thank you for explaining, Papa. I hoped that would be the case, but when Edward started to shout at us that we harboured ambitions to be Queen…I no longer knew where I stood."

"After all, I do not wish to be Queen of England after your death, Sire." I cut in swiftly before Blanche could get herself into trouble, sending a fierce glare in my younger sister's direction to remind her to call him by his title in front of the Duke of Suffolk.

"You do not?" Father looked nonplussed.

"No, Sire. Of course not. If, by God's Grace, you were to remarry to a foreign Princess or an English lady of noble birth, noble enough to be your Queen, and sire a healthy son, then I would willingly step back from my place as your heiress. God knows I pray to the Lord to send you a strong Prince of Wales every single day, and so does Blanche."

"I do, Sire." Blanche agreed.

"Hmm…" Father seemed to be musing over something as he looked at us both standing before him, heads held high as befitted Howard Princesses of England. Suddenly he snapped "Have your maids fetch your diadems. Quickly!"

Puzzled, I signed to Lady Susanna and Lady Margaret Bryan to do as he said. Lady Susanna set my
golden coronet set with rubies on my head and Lady Bryan placed a silver one set with aquamarines on my sister's head, before the pair of them spread our curly hair out over our shoulders and stepped back with a simultaneous curtsy. Blanche and I thanked them both with swift grateful smiles and then looked to our father, who held out his arm to me. "Come with me. We are going to pay your half-brother a visit."

Blanche peeped up at me and I flashed her a sly smile behind our father's back, before laying a gentle hand on his arm and stepping up to his side. The Duke of Suffolk hastily offered Blanche his arm and the pair of them fell into step behind as we left the apartments.

The guards outside my half-brother's rooms bowed to us as they flung the doors wide and the four of us swept in without a backward glance.

Edward was having his lessons with his companions when we entered, all of whom got up instantly and sank to one knee before my father, chorusing "Good Morrow, Your Majesty." Edward rapidly followed suit, but, whereas his companions then turned to my sister and I and wished us both a good morning, calling us "Your Highnesses", Edward merely straightened up and stiffly inclined his head to us, even though I stood by my father's side. I bit back the retort that automatically sprang to my lips, knowing my father would soon be angry enough for both of us.

Sure enough, Father glowered at Edward and snarled "Is that how the Duke of Richmond should greet England's Princesses? Bow to them, lad. Now!"

Edward looked startled. "But, Sire –"

"Now!"

I could hardly restrain a triumphant smile as Edward glanced at me, shock clearly written all over his face, before sulkily sinking into a shallow bow. "Princess Elizabeth. Blanche."

"Not good enough. You look as sulky as a baited bear!" Father suddenly roared, startling even me. "You'll do it again and you'll do it with a smile on your face! Now!"

Stunned, Edward straightened as taut as whiplash to stare at Father, but one look at Father's face, stormy and savage with rage, told him that he was seriously expected to do as he was told. At last, he sank to one knee and kissed my hand. "My Lady Princess." Then he did the same to my little sister, who was a year his junior. "Princess Blanche."

I deliberately glanced at my sister and kept Edward in his bow a moment longer than was strictly necessary before carelessly allowing him to rise with a flick of my hand. "You may rise, Your Grace."

Edward thankfully did as he was told before glancing at my father, expecting approval. To my delighted relief however, Father merely snapped "Better. I'm glad you haven't forgotten all your manners."

"What do you mean, Father? Your Majesty?" Edward hastily amended, but it was too late. Father's temper had been fully unleashed.

"I mean the way you shouted at the Princesses! The way you constantly and wilfully forget to treat them with the honour that their rank demands! Have you forgotten, boy, that as Princesses of the House of Tudor, they still rank above you, the Seymour Duke of Richmond?"

"But, Father, Elizabeth called my mother a harlot. A whore, not fit to be in the traitoress Queen's
household. She called me a bastard." Edward pleaded, desperate to make my father listen to him, but not realising that Father was so angry that he would not listen to anything anyone said.

"Well, what if she did? Your mother was a whore. You are a bastard. I recognised you as my own and raised you as befits a King's son because I loved you and because I believed you were mine, but now I begin to wonder! Any son of mine would have died rather than shout at England's acknowledged Princesses! You will apologise to Elizabeth and Blanche here and now for slandering their mother and for presuming to rank yourself above them, and then you will pack your bags and leave for Wolfhall immediately. If you cannot behave as befits a King's natural son - as befits the Duke of Richmond - you will have to live the life of a baseborn Seymour brat until you can!"

Edward stood silently for a moment, but when Father growled "Do it. On bended knee, boy. Or do I have to strike you myself?" he glanced at me and muttered "I apologise."

"On bended knee, boy!" Father roared. Blanche came up to slide her hand into mine, startled by Father's outburst as Edward abased himself before us. I longed to be able to comfort her, for tears were swimming in her sapphire eyes, but I too was shaken. I hadn't expected Father to insinuate that Edward might not even be his son and banish him from Court. That was going a bit too far. After all, he'd only locked me in my apartments.

However, I had to act the regal Princess, and so, when Edward whispered "I humbly beg Your Highnesses' pardon. I did not mean to say what I did and I swear I meant no offence." I merely answered frostily.

"You are forgiven this time, Your Grace. Take care that it does not happen again."

"Do you see, lad? That is how a King's child should act. With grace and decorum at all times. Thank your sisters for their clemency."

"Thank you, My Lady Princess, for your clemency. Thank you, Princess Blanche." Edward muttered sourly and I inclined my head briefly in acknowledgment before Father said "Now, since you cannot be expected to behave around them, perhaps one of your companions will see the Princesses back to their rooms?"

"I will, Your Majesty. It would be an honour." Edward Brandon stepped forward and bowed deeply from the waist before extending his arms to us, I on his right and Blanche on his left. "Shall we, Your Highnesses?" I nodded, Blanche and I swept down into low curtsies to our father as he left my half-brother's apartments through the other door, and then we too were gone, striding out of the room without a backward glance.

Blanche chattered incessantly as Edward escorted us back to our rooms. She liked Edward because he was nice to her and treated her like a Princess no matter what - though she had no idea of how I felt towards him, of course - she was a sweet enough little sister, but I couldn't risk her telling someone else and then Father getting to hear of my flirtation - for a Princess to dally, however innocently, with a boy beneath her station, particularly one of marriageable age, was strictly forbidden. It wasn't as though Edward was even the heir to his father's dukedom - that was Henry Brandon, the Duke's first son and my first cousin through his mother the late Princess Mary Tudor, Dowager Queen of France and Duchess of Suffolk. Henry was two years older than Edward and I, having been born in the midst of the sweating sickness epidemic of 1528.
There was no way Father would approve of Edward's courtship of me, but I couldn't help it. I knew it was wrong but I couldn't help it. Edward was sweet and handsome, and one of the few friends I had, since I, unlike my half-brother the Duke of Richmond, had no companions to share my games and lessons.

All of this went through my mind as I walked back to the apartments that I shared with Blanche silently, half-listening to my sister's idle chatter to the boy I loved, but too shaken by what had just happened to be able to join in.

Blanche, caught up in the tales she was telling Edward, didn't notice my unusual silence, but he did. As we approached our suite of rooms, he gently disengaged Blanche from his arm, and bowed to her, kissing her hand, before he bent down and whispered to her "Why don't you go on ahead, Princess? I'd quite like the honour of a private word with your sister."

Blanche looked as though she was about to protest and, had it been anyone else suggesting it, she might well have done, but because Edward was such a good friend to both of us, she just nodded and thanked him in her high clear voice before walking forward towards the doors and disappearing through them.

Edward waited until the doors had closed behind her before pulling me aside to the other side of the passageway. "What's wrong, Elizabeth? You've just managed to get your father to scold Edward. To take your side over his. Edward, his golden boy. I thought you'd be absolutely thrilled and yet you look like you've seen a ghost."

"Edward, I -" my voice shook and I realised I was trembling. Taking a deep breath, I steadied myself before pressing on in a whisper. "I never thought my father would get so angry – that he'd actually banish him from Court. I practically said my mother's adultery was his fault and yet I was only confined to my apartments. If Father can get so angry with Edward, his precious son, then I tremble to think what he's capable of doing to the rest of us. His anger will know no bounds. Please, promise me that you'll watch your step around him."

Edward glanced at my white face and then pulled me briefly into his arms, glancing around to check that no one was watching. He pressed his lips briefly to my clammy forehead and murmured "I promise." into my ear before releasing me and kissing my hand formally.

I stepped away from him, dipped a slight curtsy, just to honour him, though as a Princess, I didn't actually have to do so, and then, with a last fleeting look of longing over one shoulder, followed my sister into our apartments.
I was seated in the gardens, revelling in the lovely spring day, and reading aloud to Blanche from one of our favourite tales, Mallory's Morte de Arthur, when Edward's letter first reached me.

It was one of the first nice days we'd had this year, and I had seized the opportunity to ask our tutors to let us study outside, for lively Tudor that I was, long hours of being cooped up indoors, especially during winter, never suited me. Luckily, they had granted me my wish, and so, now that our lessons were over, Blanche and I had remained outside with a couple of our ladies present for form's sake – in the weeks since I had lost and then regained our father's favour, I was being very careful not to do anything that might incur his wrath again – or at least, not while there was any chance of him finding out.

Blanche, sitting with her back against a nearby tree, was sketching whilst I read, her hand flowing over the page of her sketchbook in skilled confident lines. Glancing up from my book, I watched my little sister quietly with something akin to envy. She was a skilled artist, which was something I'd never be. I was too impatient for that. No, words and physical skills such as riding and archery were my forte, whereas singing and art were my little sister's.

Laying aside my book, I got up and tried to creep up on Blanche to see what she was drawing, but to no avail. I was too careless and let my shadow fall over her page. Fiercely possessive as ever, she snapped her sketchbook shut and clutched it to her chest, refusing to open it, no matter how much I pleaded.

"No! It's not finished yet! You know I hate it when you look, Bessie! Especially if I'm not finished!" I was about to retort, about to let her know that I was her sister; I wouldn't laugh, that she could trust me, when eager voices reached my ears.

"Elizabeth! Bessie! Beth!" I turned. My younger half-sisters, Eleanor and Jessica Culpepper, were running towards me, clamouring for my attention. Kneeling down to their height, I opened my arms to them.

"Nora! Jess! How are my darling sisters this morning?"

"Well!" Nora, the bolder of the twins, snuggled into my arms and looked up at me with candid dark eyes, as I pulled Jessica into our embrace too. "Will you play with us?"

I was about to refuse, but one look at Nora's bright little face and Jessica's wistfully hopeful one and I couldn't find it in my heart to say no. "All right then. As long as we don't disturb Blanche. She's busy drawing."

Releasing Jessica and straightening up with Nora in my arms, I smiled at the twins' nurse. "You may go, Constance. I'll take care of them for now."

"Very well, Your Highness. Thank you." Constance curtsied and withdrew, vanishing back into the palace. I turned back to Jessica. "Well then, Jess. What shall we play?"

"I directed the question at Jessica, but it was Nora who chose, as she did only too often. She chose chase, so we played that until their legs tired and then I started to weave flower crowns for them both, inventing an elaborate story about two girls who lived in a forest on their own and one day found a unicorn and a magic kitten who took them on lots of adventures as I did so.

It was whilst I was immersed in this activity, secure in the knowledge that Father wouldn't find out;
he was at Whitehall on State business, though Blanche and I were to join him at Greenwich for the
May Day celebrations; and anyway, I could always bribe or threaten any of my maids into silence
if need be – that a liveried page came up to me, bowed and gave me a small roll of parchment,
sealed tightly with wax and bound with scarlet ribbon. Dropping Nora's half-finished crown of
flowers into my lap and breaking off the tale I was telling them, I opened the letter.

"It is done. Anne will arrive at Court in time for St. George's Day.

Ever yours, my Elizabeth.

Edward"

My heart leapt, but I could see that my half-sister, the Lady Mary, who still served me, as she had
done ever since I was a baby, had raised her head in what she tried to pretend was just casual
interest, but I knew very well was not, so I laid Edward's letter aside and carried on weaving
flowers for Nora's hair.

After I had done that, I smiled at them, hugged them, promised to visit them in their rooms as soon
as I could and then sent them back to their rooms with Lady Susanna, one of my most favoured
Ladies in Waiting.

I got to my feet and started to gather my things, hoping to get inside before Lady Mary presumed to
speak to me, but to no avail. She set aside her Bible immediately, and strode over, dropping into a
reluctant curtsy as she reached me. Keen to get this over with, I jerked my head to tell her she could
rise.

"I do wish you wouldn't spend time with those baseborn Culpepper brats, Sister." Mary started,
even before she had properly risen out of her curtsy. "They are the product of an illegal, adulterous
union, and much as I hated your mother, you and Blanche are still my sisters. I wouldn't like you to
be corrupted by their influence. And as to that letter, who sent it?"

That did it. I wouldn't stand for Mary prying into my private affairs. After all, I was still a Princess,
no matter what had happened to my mother.

"That is quite enough, Lady Mary." I interrupted, my voice steely with anger. "Eleanor and Jessica
are in no way going to corrupt either me or Blanche. They are two innocent children, who do not
deserve to be punished or held accountable for their parents' sins. Did Our Lord Jesus Christ
himself not say "Let the little children come to me?" That's what I intend to do. It is only my duty
as a good Christian, after all." I took a breath and paused to let that sink in before continuing. "I
view Eleanor and Jessica as my sisters, and since I do, it is only natural that I will spend time with
them. Besides, I am worried about the way they will turn out if I do not concern myself with them.
They have no mother to guide them, after all, and they are still so young and impressionable. I
merely want to help them as they try to find their place in this world. I know you will understand
my feelings perfectly, since it is for exactly the same reason that you concern yourself with the
state of not only my soul, but also Blanche's."

"If the King knew, Sister -"

I cut Mary off, tired of the argument. "But the King does not know, Lady Mary. Nor will he, for,
though I know better than to forbid you to tell him, I hope I can rely on you, of all people, not to try
to impede the Christian virtues of kindness, pity and mercy."

With that, I swept away, my other Ladies in Waiting scurrying behind, carrying my books and
cape. I held Edward's letter tight in a clenched fist, heart thudding.
"It's done. It's done." The words echoed in my mind, easing my turmoil.

Anne would be soon be back at Court, as she deserved to be.

Anne would be back at Court and my defiance of my father would be complete.

Two weeks later, it was St. George's Day and Blanche and I were back at Court for the celebrations.

As the joust began, Father and I paraded up to the Royal Box with great pomp and ceremony, Blanche, who, with our half-brother still banished to Wulfhall in disgrace, had the great fortune to be escorted by His Grace the Duke of Suffolk, two or three paces behind us.

As we took our seats, Edward Brandon, the latter's son, whispered into my ear "I hope you will enjoy the joust, My Lady Princess. May I ask which knight will be lucky enough to gain your favour today?"

I turned to answer him, longing to kiss him, but with the eyes of the Court upon us, I could not. Instead I answered his question with a question. "Do you not joust today, my Lord?"

Edward smiled as he realised where this was leading. "I do, for the first time. My father has finally decided I am old enough."

"Well then. May Lady Fortune smile upon you."

"Thank you, my Lady Princess. Now, I had best go and prepare." Edward bowed to me, and went to leave, but my father called to him as he broke off his conversation with the Duke of Suffolk. "Well, Lord Edward, I hear you are to joust for us today."

Edward swept a deep bow as he replied. "Aye, Your Majesty. I look forward to it. I am heartily grateful that my father allowed me to stay at Court for the St. George's Day celebrations and I hope to repay him by proving myself worthy to tilt with the best knights in England, nay, in Christendom."

My father roared with approving laughter, waving Edward away, and Edward took his cue, bowing, backing off and turning to leave the pavilion. Before he left, however, he leant over the back of my chair to murmur "I do not need Lady Fortune to smile upon me. Only you, my Princess."

I couldn't turn to reply to that, not in front of the Court, but my heart skipped a beat as he spoke and when, a few minutes later, he rode up to the stands on his bright bay hunter and asked for my favour, I gave it to him without a second thought.

Much to my delight, he won his joust, but there was no time to congratulate him, for now the older men of the Court were tilting for us, and all of a sudden, George Boleyn, Anne's elder brother, was riding up to the stands on his horse and drawing rein as he bowed before my father. "With Your Majesty's permission, I would like to ask for the favour of one of the Princesses."

Father gazed at him searchingly for one long moment and then nodded stiffly. "Granted, Master Boleyn. Elizabeth?"

I started to rise, untying the ribbon I still wore around my other wrist, but George shook his head, smiling gently across at my younger sister. "I was wondering, Sire, if I might beg for the favour of the Princess Blanche?"
Surprised, I slowly sat back down as Blanche rose to her feet and walked forward to the edge of the stands. She untied the silver ribbon that she wore around her wrist and reached up towards George. George, for his part, tilted his lance down into the stands so that she could tie her favour around the end. Then he bowed to her courteously, his eyes warm, soft and generous, and rode away. Blanche watched him go and then turned and came back to her seat. Her sapphire eyes were sparkling and I didn't doubt the reason.

George was the first ever gentleman to ask her for her favour and she took a childish delight in this sign that she was growing up. Of course, the bestowing of her favour meant nothing at her age – it didn't hold the significance that it did for Edward Brandon and I, but nevertheless, it meant something to her.

Smiling, I took Blanche's hand and squeezed it as George turned his horse at the top of the lists before charging at his opponent, Sir Francis Knollys.

With one firm thrust of his arm, George caught Francis between the shoulder blades and knocked him sideways in the saddle. Francis clung on, but George was clearly the superior horseman and two or three passes later, he was indeed declared the victor. Forgetting her dignity, Blanche leapt to her feet and applauded her champion, calling out above the clamour "Bravo, Sir George! Bravo!"

My eyes snapped over to my father. Would he be angry at Blanche's show of emotion?

He wasn't. Surprisingly, he wasn't.

The courtiers were all laughing and smiling indulgently at their pretty Princess's delight and Father, knowing how important it was for us to charm the people, was smiling along with them. In fact, he even beckoned Blanche to his side, and snaked his arm around her waist as he gave out the prizes, so that the two of them stood happily united, much to the people's wild joy.

Then Father rose to his feet and proclaimed the joust over, leading us inside for the banquet.

I sat between Blanche and my Father, and we had just started on our meat course when the Master of the Revels, Andrew Cornish, entered and glanced at the dais. Father nodded abruptly and Master Cornish signed to the musicians, who struck up a gay salladre. A dozen young women, all clad in Tudor Green, came out on to the floor to dance, and a group of young men soon followed, as did the players dressed in wild red fabric. They were all re-enacting the tale of St George and the Dragon.

I watched with pleasure. The annual St. George's Day masque always was my favourite part of the celebrations, and one day I intended to dance in it, whether Father approved or not.

Even more happily, as the masque ended and the knights, dead or alive, rose up to take their bows and dance with their partners, I caught sight of my cousin Anne's distinctive dark tresses flying out behind her as she twirled under the Earl of Surrey's careful hand.

Eager to speak to her, I asked Father if Blanche and I might leave the table and mingle with the dancers. Annoyingly, he refused, so I had no choice but to stay where I was, but, as I chatted aimlessly with Blanche and the other high-ranking ladies who had approached the dais, I noticed that Father's attention was straying from the conversation he and the Duke of Suffolk and the Lord Chancellor were having about the navy.

Stealthily following his gaze, I saw that he kept staring at a little knot of courtiers who had gathered at one end of the hall and were therefore hindering the dancing as couples were being forced to dance around them.
His face dark with anger, Father thrust back his chair and stomped down the steps of the dais, determined to find out who was spoiling the royal entertainment. I watched him go, praying to God and all the angels and saints I knew that whoever had had such audacity also happened to possess the wit to amuse him and avert his anger before it ruined the beautiful evening.

I had just started on my sweet course, however, when Father suddenly came back to the High Table, escorting Anne on his arm. She smiled at me and curtsied swiftly. "Princess Elizabeth."

"Cousin Anne." I rose to kiss her on both cheeks, only then realising that it would declare to Father that we had met before. Indeed, he was looking at us oddly, but Anne spun on her heel and faced my father, saying gaily "I served in the Princess Elizabeth's household for a while, Your Majesty. Besides which, my mother, the Lady Elizabeth Boleyn, used to take me and my sister Mary to play with our royal cousins when we were girls. I always looked forward to it."

"Well, my girls can be quite charming." Father blurted, unaware of what he was saying as Anne spoke to him so boldly. Breathing a silent sigh of relief and thanking God for Anne's swift mind, I sank back into my seat as Anne pulled up a stool and joined us.

The next few hours passed merrily enough, and after the Duchess of Suffolk had retired, pleading a headache, Anne followed her mistress.

Father watched her go, seemingly entranced by her every movement. In turn, I watched him. I'd seen him pursue mistresses, both before and after Mama died, and I knew the signs. Anne had well and truly caught his eye.

The idea of Anne becoming Father's mistress, or even, if he really became entranced with her, his third wife and Queen, threw me into turmoil. I couldn't deny that to have a Howard in a position of influence would be good for Blanche and I, especially if said Howard already knew and liked us, but on the other hand, I was fourteen and in love. I knew what life felt like once you had a sweetheart. If Anne's family pushed her into Father's bed, or worse, on to the throne, Anne's chances at experiencing that for herself would be gone. She was only seventeen!

In that moment, I knew that my bringing Anne to Court had triggered a chain of events that I had no control over. No control whatsoever. The thought filled me with apprehension, but there was nothing I could do. I would just have to watch them pan out and then live with the consequences.
Chapter 5

September 1544

A few months later, it was my birthday, and though I wasn't invited to spend it at Court, I had hardly been expecting an invitation. I hadn't spent a birthday at Court since I was eleven.

However, for once Father did not forget my birthday. On the contrary. He sent me a bolt of ivory silk to be made into a gown and a new hunting horn.

To my surprise and delight, it was not the customary page who delivered Father's gifts. Oh no. As I was breakfasting with Blanche, delighting in the copy of Marguerite of Navarre's "Miroir de l'âme pécheresse" that she had given me, the guard by my door coughed slightly and announced "Lord Edward Brandon, Lord Boleyn and Lady Anne Boleyn to see you, Your Highness."

"Edward! George! Anne!" I rose from my seat to greet them, allowing Edward and George to kiss my hand before turning to Anne, raising her from her curtsy and embracing her warmly, whispering as I did so "Lady Anne? That's new. You were Mistress Anne when I saw you last."

"My father's become an Earl. Earl of Ormonde. I'll tell you later." She murmured in reply before releasing me and saying "His Majesty the King sent us, Princess. He wants us to present you with these gifts in honour of your birthday."

Edward stepped forward then, carrying the hunting horn, while Anne went to relieve the maid who had come with them of the bundle of ivory silk that was folded over her arm. I took both gifts from them, caressing the horn and admiring the delicate carvings of my initials "E.T" and the Tudor Roses that were intertwined all over it, before running my hand over the glossy bolt of silk and then handing it to Blanche, who was desperate to take a look at it. Dresses had always interested her more than they had me.

"Thank you, My Lords. Thank you, Lady Anne. These are wonderful gifts. Please convey my feelings to the King and assure him that I am honoured to be thought worthy of receiving such presents."

"His Majesty thought that you could have the silk made up into a gown for the banquet being held in honour of the Tuscan Ambassadors next month." Edward piped up and my eyes flashed to his face, sending him a frantic message "Is my half-brother to be there?"

In answer, he nodded almost imperceptibly. Despite myself, my jaw clenched at the thought of Father recalling his bastard to Court to welcome some Ambassadors. Were Blanche and I, the Princesses of England, not high-ranking enough to do so on our own? Did we really have to be...
supplemented by the baseborn Duke of Richmond? A moment later, however, I put the matter firmly from my mind. I wouldn't let thoughts of my father's bastard spoil my day for me – not this day, at least.

"We shall see." was all I said before changing the subject completely. "Are you both here for the whole day? Shall we ride out together this morning?"

"Yes. Why not, Your Highness? Nothing would give us greater pleasure, would it, Lord Edward? Brother George?" Anne replied and Edward concurred, smiling at me.

Within the hour, Blanche, Edward, George, Anne and I were saddled up, along with a number of my ladies, but as we mounted, Edward shot me a smile – a promising smile, one that seemed to say "You wait until we're alone and then I'll wish you a proper Happy Birthday."

And he did. Edward and I were both fine riders, so it didn't take long for us to surge ahead and lose our companions, with the exception of Anne, who I didn't mind, because I trusted her with my life. She wouldn't tell anyone about whatever would transpire between Edward and me. Besides, I had just turned fourteen. I was a young lady of marriageable age. I would need a chaperone, if my reputation wasn't to suffer for this private ride. Anne would serve admirably, especially since she already knew that Edward was in love with me, and I with him.

All of a sudden, Edward swung off the bridle path into the relative privacy of the woods, leaning low over the saddle, coaxing his mount into a full gallop. I followed, keen to get to somewhere that we could truly be alone.

We reached a lonely clearing, and it was here that Edward drew rein, halting his horse and sliding to the ground, helping Anne down from hers before he came over to me, ready to catch me as I too dismounted. He embraced me as my feet touched the ground, pressing his lips to mine in one sweet, soft, lingering kiss. "Happy birthday, Elizabeth."

"Thank you." I cupped his cheek in my hand, the gesture tender and intimate. "I'm sorry about Anne having to be here." I murmured. "I'd much rather be alone with you, you know I would, but - "

"It's fine. Scandal cannot be allowed to besmirch your name, my love. That's more important than anything. Don't worry about it. Now, let me give you your birthday present."

Edward disengaged himself from my hold and went over to his horse. I stood, not quite knowing what to do with myself, until he came back to me.

"Here. Sit down." Swinging his cloak off his shoulders, Edward spread it on the ground for me to sit upon before dropping to one knee in front of me with his lute in his hand. "My Father will no doubt have sent you something from the Brandons, but I wanted something more personal as a birthday present, so I've written you a song." He admitted, before strumming the strings of his lute twice and then bursting into song.

"Some say love, it is a river that drowns the tender reed. 
Some say love, it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed. 
Some say love, it is a hunger, an endless aching need. 
I say love, it is a flower, and you its only seed."

I looked over my shoulder at Anne. To my delight, she had quietly withdrawn a pace or two to give us the illusion of privacy. Smiling, I lost myself in Edward's song again. Anne understood. She had
always understood.

"...Just remember, in the winter
far beneath the bitter snows
lies the seed that with the sun's love
in the spring becomes the rose."

Edward's full tenor voice lingered on the last note and I found I had tears in my eyes. I couldn't believe that he had gone to all that trouble for me.

"You wrote that for me?" My voice was scarcely more than a whisper.


"Edward!" I flung myself at him, throwing my arms around his neck. I hugged him passionately and then made to move away, but he leaned over and captured my lips in a kiss, rendering me unable to breathe, let alone move.

"You take some liberties, Lord Edward" I scolded him teasingly when I could breathe again. "Have you forgotten that I am first in line to the Throne of England?"

All of a sudden, Edward released me and fell to his knees before me. "Never, My Lady Princess. Never." He vowed, kissing first my hand and then, as I bade him rise, my lips. "I'd do anything if it meant you were secure on your throne. You know that. I'd die for you if you needed it, Elizabeth."

"Don't say that!" I begged, a jolt of fear coursing through my veins at the thought of losing my beloved Edward. This conversation was taking a far too serious turn for my liking.

As if she sensed my fear, Anne was behind me instantly, smoothly taking charge of the situation. "Perhaps we should rejoin the others. They may be beginning to notice the length of our absence." she suggested. Edward nodded quickly. "Yes. You are right, Lady Anne. We should go and find them."

He helped me into the saddle and then went to assist Anne. Whilst we were waiting for him to mount his own horse, I turned to see Anne's horse fretting at the short length of rein she was holding him on. I glanced up at her in surprise. She was a good horsewoman herself – her keeping up with me and Edward was proof enough of that. Why was she now so intent on keeping her horse on such a tight rein? The sparkle in her eye was answer enough. She was about to challenge us to a race and she wanted to tighten her reins in preparation for cantering off from a standing start.

Sure enough, as soon as Edward had settled himself in the saddle and picked up his reins properly, Anne looked at us both and said boldly "Your Highness, My Lord, I challenge you to a race. The first one out of these woods."

Edward and I shared a reckless smile. Why not?

"We accept, Lady Anne." He shouted, leaning low over his horse's saddle as he spurred it forwards. Fiercely competitive, I followed, urging my precious bay Irish gelding, Sovereign, first into a canter and then into a flat out gallop.

The muscles bunched under Sovereign's flanks and he bounded forwards, as delighted as I was to be out in the crisp September air, the dry leaves crunching under his hooves. I felt the pins holding my hood in place begin to slip so I gathered my reins in one hand, putting the other up to my head.
to keep my hood in my possession. My coppery hair streamed out behind me, hanging what Father
or Lady Bryan would call "brazenly loose", but I had no time to worry about that. The trees thinned
out not a hundred yards away from me and although I had already overtaken Edward, Anne was
still three lengths ahead. I was determined not to let her win.

Flattening myself along Sovereign's neck, I crooned to him. "Go on! Go on, boy! You can do it.
Run for your Princess. Run as you've never run before."

Somehow, he listened. Somehow, he did what I asked of him. Sovereign kept running and soon we
were gaining on Anne, drawing level with her, pushing on ahead of her.

I broke out of the trees, instinctively knowing that Sovereign had almost reached the limits of his
strength. Anne's horse was level with the cantle of my saddle.

Laughing aloud in triumph, I sat up and loosened my reins, letting Sovereign slow from a gallop to
a canter and then to an ambling trot.

"Well done, My Lady Princess. You're a true Tudor. You know what you want, and you'll do
anything to get it. Mind, you ride like a Howard. We never look back."

I heard Anne's voice behind me and twisted in the saddle to speak to her. "I told you to call me
Elizabeth, remember?" Anne laughed in response and waited for Edward to catch us up before
saying "We'd better find the others. They can't be far. Besides, we need to get back to the palace
before you run that poor horse of yours into the ground, Elizabeth."

"Oh, Sovereign would do anything for me." I replied.

"Forget a Howard. You ride like a Diana, dear cousin. However, even a huntress has her limits."
Anne retorted, continuing "Anyway, I need to talk to you. Alone."

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My curiosity was piqued, but it wasn't until we had gone back to the palace, eaten lunch with my
sister Blanche and left her playing cards with Edward and George Boleyn, who seemed to be
treating her very indulgently, almost as if she was his little sister, rather than a Princess of England,
whilst I retired to my room to change for the dancing that Kat had decided to permit us because of
my birthday that Anne and I were finally able to be alone.

She came into the room where Lady Susanna was brushing my hair, and I instantly dismissed
Susanna. Anne stepped forward and took over the gentle arranging of my curls in silence, until,
unable to bear the suspense any longer, I spoke. "Well, Anne?"

"Well, Your Highness? I mean, Cousin?"

"You promised me some answers. Why is your Father now Earl of Ormonde? Why did Father
allow you to visit me? And to bring his presents for me with you? Not to mention Edward."

Anne sighed and set down my hairbrush, before taking a necklace, brooch and a ring out of her
skirt pocket. She held them up to my looking glass. I knew what they were at once, even before she
asked "Do you recognise these, Cousin?"

"Of course I do." I breathed. They were my mother's."

"Your father gave them to me last month. I didn't ask for them; I never even wanted them. In fact,
as far as I'm concerned, you and Blanche should be the ones wearing them."
Anne gently reached out and clasped the necklace around my throat, caressing my shoulders tenderly as she did so. "The brooch is for Blanche. I thought the emeralds would go better with her blonde hair than the aquamarines. They wouldn't have enough contrast."

"And the ring? The amethyst ring? Can I have that?" I asked impulsively, realising immediately afterwards how spoilt and greedy the question would sound. Hastily, I rescued matters by adding "I didn't mean for myself, Anne. I was thinking of Eleanor and Jessica. Mother was their mother too. They deserve a keepsake of her."

"I know, Elizabeth, but they can't have this." Anne held up the ring as she spoke. "This came out of the Royal Treasury at the Tower. It's part of the Queen's official jewels. Nobody's going to accept this being given to a pair of bastards. No, I was thinking of giving this to the Lady Mary."

"Why her?" I was too startled to act with decorum, and spat the words out without thinking. "All right, so she's my sister. So are Jess and Nora. Mary's still only my father's bastard. No more and no less. Though God knows she seems to think she's something special. She never shows me respect if she can help it. Nor Blanche."

"Lady Mary's mother may not have deserved to have been Queen, Elizabeth, but she held that title for nearly twenty years before the Blackfriars trial."

"And then Cardinal Campeggio decided in my father's favour and annulled her marriage to him within the space of a week!" I cried triumphantly, snapping my fingers at Anne's cautious words. Anne sighed. "Yes, that's as may be, but what I'm trying to say is; Dowager Princess Katherine used to be Queen, Elizabeth. The common people were used to viewing her as such. They were used to viewing Mary as a Princess. The fact that she's now a bastard doesn't mean much to them. Haven't you noticed the way they shout for her as well as for you when you travel among them? She's still a cut above other children born out of wedlock – even other royal ones like the Duke of Richmond."

"Still, to give her a ring from the Queen's own collection – hang on, did you say that ring came from the Tower?"

Anne nodded and I began to muse aloud as my mind whirled.

"If that came from the Tower and Father gave it to you…if he's given you more gifts than that…if he's created your father Earl of Ormonde…" my voice trailed off as I grasped the sheer enormity of the situation.

Anne nodded again, her face grave. "Your father's courting me, Elizabeth. It's how I was able to persuade him that I should come down to Hatfield for your birthday – and bring Edward Brandon with me."

"Yes, thank you for that." I flashed Anne a blaze of a smile, before getting straight to the heart of the matter, like any Tudor with Howard blood would. "Has he proposed?"

"No. Not yet." Anne shook her dark head. "But it's only a matter of time, little cousin. He falls more and more in love with me every time he sees me; and I won't ever become his mistress. I've made that clear enough already."

"What are you going to say when he does ask you?" I was genuinely curious, though Anne's answer shocked me to the core.

"I'm going to have to accept. What else can I do?"
"Anne, for God's sake! My father's three times your age!"

"Your father is also the King of England!" Anne snapped back.

Immediately regretting her harsh choice of words, she softened. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shout at you, Elizabeth. I just – look, if I refuse to marry your father, not only will he be angry, but my own family will be too. They'll accuse me of not caring for the advancement of our family. You know how this Court works. We all jockey for royal favour all the time. It's why my uncle abandoned your mother at the time of her disgrace. It's why the Culpeppers will have nothing to do with your little sisters. At least if I'm Queen, I can help you. Make things easier for you, for Blanche, even for the Lady Mary. I might even be able to secure a proper governess for Jess and Nora, if I tell your father I want to raise them to be worthy of becoming Maids of Honour to you or Blanche at some point in the future." Anne paused for breath and also to let all of that sink in properly, before pleading "Please understand, Elizabeth. This isn't a case of what I want to do. It's a case of what I have to do."

I let the silence between us extend for a moment or two, fiddling with the brooch and ring that lay on the table in front of me.

Then I pushed my chair back and got up.

"All right." I sighed. "Let's go and find Blanche so that you can give her the brooch."
May 1545

Blanche and I returned to Hatfield the week after the banquet and resumed our daily lives, our somewhat monotonous routine only broken by the occasional visit from either Anne or our father and the Christmas season.

However, my father and Anne were marrying in May, with Anne's coronation following on Midsummer's Day. Since Blanche's tenth birthday fell in early June and Anne was eager to help her celebrate it, the way she had done for me, my sister and I were travelling to Court for May Day and remaining there for the entirety of May and June.

Blanche was giddy with excitement and, though I tried to hide it, I was just as pleased. I had only seen Anne once since the day we chose the fabrics for our gowns for her wedding, almost six months earlier, and that was over the Christmas season, so we had barely had time to speak to one another in between all the festivities. I had missed her desperately.

I was slightly puzzled as to why Anne's engagement to my father had been so long. He wasn't the kind of man to waste time in securing himself a pretty girl, but when I mentioned this to Lady Bryan, my sister's governess, she explained. "Your father, besides being an impatient man, is also one who believes in such things as symbols, Princess. He wants his marriage to the Lady Anne to represent a new start; both for himself and for England. The best way to do that is to have a summer wedding and coronation, so that's what's going to happen."

The only trouble I had with our visit to Court was the fact that our half brother Edward was travelling with us and sharing a carriage too. Granted, he didn't actually say anything I could openly object to, but his sullen silence, interspersed with scornful sniffs whenever Blanche questioned me about the wedding and what I thought it was going to be like, said more than enough.

By the end of the journey, I was sick and tired of him, so much so, in fact that, when Kat said "Your Highnesses, Your Grace, we are almost there." I let out an audible sigh of relief, despite the cheers of the common people lining our route and the blessings they shouted upon both Blanche and myself. It was a sigh Edward was only too quick to pick up on.

"Tired of the journey already, Sister? Honestly, anyone could tell you're a Howard. They're always impatient."

"At least the common people seem to wish the Howards well, impatient or not." I replied swiftly, turning to Blanche before Edward had a chance to react.

"Now Blanche, we'll be going to our rooms to change before we go to see Anne. I don't doubt that Father will be there too, so for Goodness sake, don't get too excited this time. They may not be married yet, but Anne will be Queen of England before the month is out. Treat her like it."

Blanche nodded, faint irritation sparking in her eyes as I played the role of the responsible older sister. Edward sneered "Imagine having to tell a Princess how to behave in front of the King. My mother would never have stood for it."

"Your Mama never became Queen. Mine did." Blanche hissed, her cornflower blue eyes flashing briefly. Edward was so stunned that it was Blanche, the quieter, younger, sweeter Howard Princess
that was responding so sharply to his jibe that he actually fell silent and remained that way for the rest of the journey.

Two hours later, washed, changed and rested from our journey to Court, Blanche and I proceeded through the halls of Richmond Palace to be formally received by our father and soon to be stepmother.

For once, Edward was not escorting us, but I was not such a fool as to think that that meant that he would not be putting in an appearance that evening. He was Father's son; his pride and joy. Of course he would be gracing us with his presence. He would walk in alone, every eye in the Court upon him. He would be received almost as though he were a Prince! A Prince!

At the thought of the honour likely to be accorded my half-brother, my teeth clenched. It was not that I would have resented him the honours; not if he'd been my full brother, or even a legitimate Prince of another marriage of my father's. A Prince was more valuable than a Princess. It was just that, as a true-blooded Princess, I felt that I deserved more honour than a bastard Duke. But no, I was not even to walk in alone, as he would. I was to walk in beside my younger sister, sharing the appraisal and reverence of the crowd with her.

Alerted to my inner turmoil and anger by the tautness of my upper back, Blanche slipped an arm around my waist. Relaxing a little at my beloved sister's touch, I glanced down at her with a smile. Disengaging myself from her hold, I took her hand, whispering, "Let's show them how Howard Princesses really behave," before shortening my stride a little so that it matched hers as my father's herald announced "Their Highnesses the Princess Elizabeth and the Princess Blanche!"

Keeping my hand firmly within Blanche's, I halted the required distance away from the dais and sank into a curtsy. "Your Majesty. Lady Anne."

"You may rise, Daughters." Our father beckoned to us with his free hand, the other being clasped in Anne's.

Side by side, we rose, smiling widely and came forward to first kiss Father's cheek then embrace Anne as she rose and stretched out her arms to us. "Your Highnesses. How glad I am to see you. Elizabeth. I trust you are well?"

"Yes, My Lady. Thank you for asking. And yourself? How goes it with you?"

"Well enough, Princess, thank you for asking. How did you leave Hatfield?"

"Everything in order and blossoming" I smiled before Anne turned to greet Blanche, embracing her warmly.

"Blanche my dear. How are you? Progressing well in your studies, I hope? Lady Bryan looks after you well?"

"Oh yes. Very well, Lady Anne." Blanche replied eagerly. Anne touched her hand.

"Good, I'm glad. And Blanche? Tonight we can be informal. Call me Mama, if you like."

Anne flashed a look at Father as she spoke, but he only nodded jovially.

"Of course…Mama." Blanche answered with a blaze of a smile. Father roared with laughter.

"Charming little vixen, aren't you, Blanche?"
"I try, Papa."

"With another laugh, Father motioned Blanche to sit beside Anne. I took the other empty seat beside my sister, and had just accepted a tumbler of wine from one of the pages standing ready to serve us, when the herald announced "His Grace Lord Edward FitzTudor, Duke of Richmond and Somerset."

My half brother marched into the room, head held high. Father rose and helped him from his bow – before he had even reached the floor properly, I noted irritably – before turning him to meet Anne properly.

"Anne, my love, may I present my son Edward? Edward, this is your future stepmother, the Lady Anne Boleyn."

"I am pleased to meet you at last, Your Grace. Your father has told me so much about you." Anne spoke so cheerfully, you would never have guessed that Edward's family and hers were practically mortal enemies. Nor that Edward had stormed out of her rooms the last time they had met, a time I was amused to notice we were all clearly pretended had never happened.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said of Edward.

Murmuring "Madam" through gritted teeth, he gave Anne's hand the briefest brush with his lips and then straightened up to speak to Father."Father, has Master Swinton told you how I have progressed in fencing this last month?"

Annoyance flared in Father's eyes for the briefest of moments before, at a quiet murmur from Anne, he rearranged his features into a smile and led Edward to a seat at his left hand. "No, Edward, he did not. Come, tell me all about it."

There was dancing after supper but to my delight, Edward did not partner me. When Father suggested we dance, Anne was quick to agree, saying "Yes. What a wonderful idea, Henry. I'm sure my brother George would like to partner one of his beautiful new nieces. George?"

"Yes, indeed, Anne. Would the Princess Blanche care to dance?" George Boleyn asked, cocking his head to one side as he regarded my little sister, so that he looked ridiculous.

Giggling at George's antics, Blanche agreed, jumping up to take his hand. Satisfied, Anne moved swiftly on, saying "But of course, if her sister is to dance, the Princess Elizabeth cannot be left without a partner. Will you dance with her, Henry?"

Father sighed regretfully. "I wish I was able to, darling, but I can hardly caper through the speed of these dances and anyway, that would leave you without a partner. We can't have that. Why doesn't Elizabeth dance with someone of her own age?"

"Well, if you're sure…" Anne put her hand over Father's and glanced around as though reluctantly. "My Lord Edward, why don't you partner the Princess?"

With a barely repressed sigh, Edward started forward, but Anne halted him in his tracks, shaking her head. "Not you, Lord Edward. Forgive me, but I would rather you partnered the Lady Mary. No, I meant Lord Edward Brandon. Would you care to dance with the Princess, Lord Edward?"

"My Lady Anne, if it was for you and His Majesty, I could dance with her all night." Edward Brandon replied, stepping out of the shadows to offer me his arm.
"So too could I dance with him." Hardly able to restrain a beam of delight, I took his arm and let him lead me to the centre of the floor.

"She knows, doesn't she?" Edward asked, glancing back at Anne as the musicians tuned their instruments.

"Of course she does. She's my cousin. I used to tell her everything. Besides which, she heard you sing that song to me for my birthday in September last year. If she hadn't known by then, she will have done afterwards." I reminded him, laughing, twirling slowly on the spot.

Edward clapped hands with me and whirled briefly away as the tempo of the music increased.

"True. I'd forgotten she was there." he replied as he returned to take me into his hold. "Have you heard about the plans for her wedding banquet?"

"No. I know I'm to be bridesmaid, along with Blanche, but nothing else."

I ducked under the arch made by two of our fellow dancers, before Edward and I replaced them at the head of the line. As, a few bars later, we made an arch of our own for the others to dance through, Edward picked our conversation back up.

"My father's in charge, and apparently Anne's asked him to make sure you and Edward are not paired together. Or he and Blanche for that matter. She clearly doesn't trust you around him."

"We're not the problem! He is! It's his arrogance that annoys me!" I retorted automatically, before realising that Edward was having trouble hiding his amusement.

"Will you let me finish? He's pairing William Paulet with Blanche, and, because my father has to escort my mother and my brother has to escort his fiancée…" Edward trailed off, but I was easily able to finish his sentence for him.

"You'll be escorting me."

Edward nodded and I squeezed his hand. Just then, the point in the music arrived when we had to switch partners and because we found ourselves beside Margaret Neville and her partner Barnaby Fitzpatrick, I danced off with Barnaby while Edward gave his hand to Margaret. Of course this meant that Edward and I were no longer able to continue our conversation, but as the musicians changed tune and we passed each other in our search for new partners; Edward being pressured into asking one of his mother's many Willoughby relations to partner him, he murmured "Remember, My Lady Princess, I stake my claim for a Volta" into my ear.

The very warmth of his voice set my spine tingling.

"Princess? Are you ready to go?"

The knock at my bedroom door startled me out of my reverie. I jumped as I realised I had been caught daydreaming.

"Almost. One moment more, Kat!" I exclaimed.

"Well, make it a quick moment then, my Lady. Blanche is already ready and we need to be in the Lady Anne's rooms in little more than a few minutes."

Rather than waste my breath shouting that I knew that, I sprang to my feet and sorted through my
jewellery. By rights, one of my ladies ought to have done that, but today I had asked them to leave me alone, even though I had not yet chosen my necklace, so that was up to me.

In the end I decided on the crystal pendant Father had given me as a New Year's gift. Clasping it around my neck, I glanced at myself in my looking glass. My dark green clung to my slender body, accentuating my curves and my red hair was neatly braided and coiled beneath my hood in a complex twist of some sort. I looked every inch the young lady; the regal Princess.

. And yet, I still wasn't quite sure of myself. Not today. I wanted to be so perfect for Father and Anne's wedding and I wasn't sure I'd managed it.

"What do you think, Mother?" I whispered. "Do you think Father will be proud of me today? Would you be proud of me?"

All of a sudden, I heard her voice, stronger than I had heard it for years.

"Of course he will, Bessie. We're always proud of you. You're our Rose Princess, our Princess of Roses. Now, go to Anne's wedding and bless her in my name. Bless her in the Howard name, daughter. I love you."

"Je t'aime, Maman." I whispered, crossing myself quickly, before hurrying out to join my sister and governess as we made our way to Anne's large, luxurious apartments.

Anne greeted us with true affection as we entered. "Elizabeth! Blanche! You do look beautiful! True Tudor Roses, both of you!"

"You're beautiful too! You're the prettiest woman I've ever seen!" Blanche cried, eyes shining with excitement.

Anne flushed. "Thank you, Blanche."

"You'll be a Tudor Rose soon enough." I replied carelessly, taking advantage of the fact that we were alone and that Anne wasn't quite Queen just yet to treat her informally, teasingly.

"No. She'll be a Falcon among Roses. Her emblem's going to be the falcon." A second voice replied, making me jump. I whirled around. A second woman, this one in her early twenties, had just entered the room, carrying a heap of silver ribbons in her arms. She had golden brown hair and her eyes, though lighter than Anne's, were just as piercing.

The woman met my eye for a couple of seconds; just long enough for me to register how familiar she looked, before sweeping a low curtsy. "Princess Elizabeth. Princess Blanche. You have grown up."

"I'm sorry, I don't..." My voice trailed off as I tried to come up with a way of admitting to the woman that I didn't know who she was without actually seeming rude.

To my relief, while I was still standing there, speechless, she straightened and went over to Anne, starting to weave the silver ribbons she was carrying into Anne's raven hair.

"You look beautiful, little sister. If only Mother could be here today; see her little Annie all grown up, about to marry; marry the King of England."

At her words, I realised who the woman had to be. "If you're calling Anne sister, then...Mary? Mary Boleyn?" I glanced across at the woman for confirmation and Mary looked up in surprise. "}
You've only just realised who I am?"

"Mary! Elizabeth hasn't seen you since you married William Stafford at sixteen! How do you expect her to remember you? I'm sure you've changed in that time! And as for Blanche, I don't think she's ever even met you!"

"That's not true! She has! She was only about four or five, but we've met." Mary answered cheerfully, throwing a smile at my little sister. "I've got a daughter around that age now."

"I know! Lady Anne told me. She's called Katherine, isn't she?" Blanche chimed in, emboldened by Mary's free and easy manner.

"That's right, Your Highness." Mary grinned at Blanche, obviously about to launch into some tale about her life as a wife and mother deep in the English countryside, but the chiming of the church bells cut her off. We glanced at one another. We had to hurry.

Mary wove the last of the ribbons into Anne's hair, Blanche helped pin her veil into place and I kissed Anne on both cheeks before going to pick up the long heavy train of her gown. "I've never seen you look more beautiful, Anne."

"Thank you, Elizabeth. That means more than you know, Cousin."

Anne cast me a grateful smile; her last one as my cousin and then went out to marry my father. To marry the King of England.

When we appeared in the chapel doorway, there was a collective gasp. In her sumptuous gown of cloth of silver trimmed with dark green velvet ribbon and studded with tiny chips of jade and emerald, Anne looked every inch the radiant young bride; every inch the Queen of England to be.

She acted like it too. When Archbishop Cranmer asked "Do you, Lady Anne Boleyn, take this man King Henry VIII of England, to be your lawfully wedded lord and husband? Do you swear, on your solemn oath before all these witnesses, to love him and cherish him and to honour and obey him for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, and to forsake all other men for him for the rest of your natural lives until death does you two part?", her voice rang out steady and clear as a bell.

"I do."

I watched Father's face as Anne spoke. It was shining; shining with joyful excited hope. He was gazing at Anne with an almost puppy like devotion; a devotion so strong it almost unnerved me. It was as though he couldn't believe that this radiant young English beauty was really, in a matter of minutes, going to be his, be his wife and Queen. And when Cranmer gave him permission to kiss the bride, he kissed her like a starving man might eat a loaf of bread he has just been granted – intensely, concentrated, almost desperately.

Anne staggered slightly as he finally pulled away for breath. Her lips moved silently as she gasped for air and I was close enough to make out the words.

"Your Majesty!" she breathed, offering no resistance when Father reached for her hand to present her to the crowd.

"God save the Queen!" Father bellowed and we shouted it straight back at him, echoing his words in a jubilant bellow. "God Save the Queen!"

Hand in hand, the two of them stepped down of the dais and made their way to the chapel door,
acknowledging the murmurs of congratulations from the crowd of nobles as they went.

Rising from my curtsy after they had passed me – Anne smiling down at me as they walked by – I found Edward Brandon already beside me, holding out his hand to me. "Shall we, Princess?"

"Certainly, Lord Edward."

I accepted his outstretched arm, peering around to see who was lining up behind us. William Paulet, the Marquess of Winchester's heir, was stood by my sister, her petite hand already resting on his sleeve, while Thomas Boleyn had been paired with my older half-sister, the Lady Mary.

To my intense delight, I saw that this meant that a certain Duke had been forced to escort our Scottish cousin, the Lady Margaret Douglas, which he was doing with ill grace, a dark scowl marring his otherwise reasonably pleasant features. "Have you seen how angry he looks?" I hissed, nudging Edward and gesturing to my half-brother with the slightest jerk of my head.

"Hmm. Who do you think he's blaming for this?"

"Me most likely." I sighed. "Or Anne. He's determined to hate her for just about every wrong ever done him."

"It's because of his mother, isn't it? The Lady Jane Seymour?"

"Of course it is! It's ridiculous! Even if she hadn't died of a fever; even if she was still alive today, my father would never have married her!"

"Unfortunately, Edward's managed to delude himself into thinking that he would have done. He thinks Anne's usurped his mother's rightful position as Queen."

I nodded. "Yes. That's it, exactly. I doubt the way my father treats him helps but, yes, you've pretty much hit the nail on the head."

Edward grimaced. "I wouldn't put it past him to try and ruin Anne's coronation. He's worked himself into such a temper."

"I hope he has the sense not to. Anne doesn't deserve it; she's never done anything to him. I hope he can see that. Anyway, Father would be furious!"

"I know that, you know that, but who knows if Edward knows it? Anyway, don't worry about it now. Just enjoy the festivities. I'll be back later to claim you for a dance."

Edward leaned forward and pressed a stolen kiss to my cheek, led me to the dais, kissed my hand, bowed to Anne, who sat alone up there whilst my father spoke to Charles Brandon to thank him for organising such a wonderful banquet, and then disappeared into the milling crowd. As he left, I swept Anne a curtsy worthy of a Queen.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty." I murmured, using her new title for the first time.

Anne laughed. "Thank you, Princess. Take a seat."

I sat down, stunned by how formal Anne was being with me.

However, as I seated myself, Anne leaned towards me. "Don't tell your father, but it feels very strange hearing you call me that! I've called you "My Lady Princess" for far too long!"

I stifled a chuckle with the palm of my hand and reached for my sparkling wine as Blanche and the
Lady Mary joined us on the dais. A couple of people looked askance at my merriment, but I didn't care. There was cause to be merry tonight. A very great cause indeed.
A month later, Lady Susanna was styling my copper curls on the day of the banquet for the Tuscan Ambassadors, when my half-brother barged into my rooms without warning.  

"Are you not ready yet, Sister?" he demanded. "Father's already greeting the Ambassadors in his Privy Chamber."

Lady Susanna glanced at me worriedly, but, no matter the circumstances, I would not let Edward see me rush. Gesturing to her to carry on weaving my curls into a circlet of copper around my head, leaving the lower layers free to tumble down my back, I met his eye in the looking glass coolly.  

"We're not expected down until the banquet formally begins. I've got time. Lady Blanche, fetch me the amber and crystal necklace, would you, please?"

"Yes, my lady. And the crystal earrings?"

"You read my mind." I smiled at Lady Blanche as she went to my jewel casket and pulled out the jewels I wanted. As she looped the necklaces around my neck, I held my head perfectly still before I tilted it to let her hook the earrings into my ears. By this time, Edward was going wild with impatience and when I finally rose to my feet, after Lady Susanna had framed my face with a ivory coloured French hood studded with tiny chips of dark polished amber, he grabbed my hand so hard it hurt.  

"Finally! If we're late, I'm blaming you and your fripperies!"

"We won't be late." I sighed, but I gave in and let him pull me along roughly. It would be far better for me to appear the calm, long-suffering one than for me to be caught brawling with an insolent boy four years my junior.

It wasn't until we reached the top of the stairs leading down into the Great Hall that Edward let me go, and that was only because he had paused to pull his doublet straight. Taking a deep breath and fixing a regal half smile in place, like I always did whenever Edward escorted me, I laid my hand on his arm when he offered it to me.

We descended the steps and my father's herald announced "Her Highness the Princess Elizabeth and His Grace the Duke of Richmond and Somerset."

Edward and I proceeded down the length of the hall, before halting in front of the dais and performing our required bow and curtsy side by side. Father bade us rise and then came down to us and, taking my hand, presented me to the Ambassadors.

"My older daughter, the Princess Elizabeth."

"Enchante, Your Highness." The older of the two Ambassadors kissed my hand, whilst the younger murmured "She's a true English Rose. You must be proud of her, Your Majesty."

"I am, but she is not for your eyes; well, not as a bride anyway. Her sister Blanche is younger and
sweeter. She will suit your master's son better, I should think." Father replied, whilst I smiled in response to the Ambassador's compliments. "It's a pleasure, Your Excellencies."

Father seated me between himself and the Ambassadors, as courtesy required, and only once he had done so did he turn to Edward to present him, eager pride leaping into his voice as he did so.

"My son, Edward, the Duke of Richmond and Somerset."

"I'm honoured, Your Grace." The elder Ambassador bowed briefly to Edward. By courtesy, Edward should have returned the gesture, made some appropriate comment and then taken his seat, but he did not. Instead, he lifted his chin and met the Ambassador's eye challengingly. "Have you come for Blanche?"

The Ambassador looked nonplussed and I didn't blame him. Didn't Edward know that even if Blanche's betrothal to the little Tuscan Prince went through to the final stage of marriage, she wouldn't leave England until her bridegroom was fourteen, unless she was sent earlier to accustom her to her new country before she had to rule it?

At last, the Tuscan Ambassador answered Edward as best he could. "My colleague and I have come to meet her, that is true, Your Grace. We must decide whether the Princess Blanche, so fair and gentle, is the right person to be little Prince Francesco's future wife and Duchess."

"I see." Edward said gravely. Father, his eyes gleaming with pride, gestured for Edward to seat himself at the High Table, but, used to reading every nuance of Edward's body language, I knew there was more to come. I was right. Edward tilted his chin a fraction higher and spoke with thinly disguised arrogance.

"Prince Francesco is welcome to my sister, Your Excellency, and I am sure I hope that Blanche will make him a fine bride one day, as Princess Joan will to me."

"Princess Joan, Your Grace?"

"Joan of Spain, Your Excellency. My Lord Father the King does not want a Princess of some paltry city state to be my wife. He has opened negotiations for the hand of the daughter of the mightiest monarch in Christendom."

There was a stunned silence when Edward had finished. The Ambassadors exchanged glances. Father hastily interposed "Excuse my son, Your Excellencies. The lad is young yet, but precocious. He cannot wait to be a married man."

Father chuckled and the Ambassadors forced themselves to laugh along with him. However, though they had schooled their faces not to show their emotions, I could tell what they were thinking. I was thinking it myself. "King Henry is a fool to treat his bastard like he's anything special and an even bigger one to try to win him the hand of Joan of Spain. The Emperor will never let his daughter degrade herself by marrying a mere Duke — and an illegitimate Duke at that."

Gritting my teeth and inwardly cursing Edward for putting me in this position – for making me have to save him in order to save face – I stepped forward.

"Would Your Excellencies care for some wine? Or, if you prefer, we have cider, fresh off the boat from Brittany."

"Cider would be wonderful, Princess, thank you." With some relief, the Ambassadors turned their attention to me, leaving Edward free to slip to his appointed seat. He did so without another word. I think even he realised that he'd pushed things a little too far.
Due to the length of the exchange, we had only just sat down when the herald coughed again and announced "Her Highness the Princess Blanche Tudor and the Lady Anne Boleyn."

Blanche walked steadily into the room, every inch the regal Princess. She was wearing a tight fitting gown of cream silk embroidered with Tudor Green and the emerald brooch Anne had given her the month before. Emeralds glittered in her hair and ears as well and the string around her neck caught the light as she came forward and swept her formal curtsy.

"Your Majesty. Your Excellencies."

"Princess Blanche, it is an honour." The Ambassadors rose and bowed to her deeply. Then they looked at Anne and inclined their heads to her. "Mademoiselle."

I followed their gaze, puzzled. What was Anne doing, entering the Hall behind Blanche like that? This was a public supper for the Tuscan Ambassadors. Father wouldn't jeopardise things by flaunting his new sweetheart before them, surely? Especially not after what a spectacle my bastard brother had made of himself with his usual arrogance?

But I was wrong. Anne wasn't just Father's new paramour. Even as she curtsied before us, I noticed the sumptuousness of her new gown. It was scarlet damask and her intricate gold necklace ended in a cascade of rubies and rose pearls. The whole ensemble was an outfit worthy of a Queen.

Or a King's fiancé.

Standing, Father quickly nodded to Anne to rise. Walking around the table, he reached for her hand and clasped it in his own as he turned to the Ambassadors.

"Excellencies, may I present the Lady Anne Boleyn, my fiancé and England's future Queen?"

If Edward's announcement had stunned the Ambassadors, this one was a hundred times worse. They just gaped at Father and Anne in disbelief. For my part, I was struggling to find a way to save the situation. Out of the blue, Blanche beat me to it, stepping forward and turning wide innocent eyes on the pair of them.

"Congratulations, Papa. Congratulations, Lady Anne."

I wanted to kick Blanche for not calling Father by his formal title in public, but then she made it worse, impulsively blurtling out "May I call you Mama now?" to Anne. She didn't mean it; the shock had made her unable to tell what she was saying, but I caught my breath. If Anne didn't save her now, we could all be in serious trouble, particularly Blanche. She was nine years old and a Princess. She should have known better than to be so open with her feelings.

Luckily, after Anne had stared at Blanche in surprise for a moment or two, she laughed merrily. "Yes, if you like, Princess. After all, I will be your Mama soon. May I call you Blanche?"

"Of course!"Blanche ran round the banquet table and hugged Anne impetuously. Father roared with joy at their warm embrace and pulled off Blanche's hood so that he could ruffle her blonde hair affectionately. The Ambassadors laughed too, clearly charmed by my little sister, and offered their congratulations on Father's impending marriage. In an instant, the whole evening suddenly seemed a thousand times merrier, and I found I was smiling widely as we all sat down and began to eat.

However, my half-brother didn't seem to be enjoying himself nearly as much as the rest of us. Once he had asked when exactly Father intended to wed Anne and found out that the ceremony was to take place at Nonesuch at the end of the month, he lapsed into a sullen silence. A sullen silence
that he only broke when courtesy demanded that he ask me to dance with him.

As he led me away from the adults, he growled "You planned this, didn't you?" He was careful to keep his voice down, but the implication, that he didn't like Anne for some reason and was blaming me for her having caught Father's eye, was clear.

"I don't know what you talking about." I hissed in reply, forcing a thin smile as we lined up to take our places in the set.

"This! Our Father planning to marry Lady Anne. Everyone knows she's a Howard like you and your mother. Everyone knows she used to serve you. Everyone knows you liked her best of all your maids. You must have primed her; told her how best to enrapture our Father. Father would never marry a girl like her of his own free will."

We separated for a moment so that we could dance through the arch being formed by my Father's best friend and his wife, the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk, but as I took his hand again, I retorted "Believe me, brother, I had nothing to do with this. I might be Father's best girl Bessie, but even I don't know how to play him that well. Trust me, if I did, you'd leave Court immediately and never come back."

Before Edward could respond, I twirled away from him and danced a few steps on my own. As he pulled me back into his hold, however, he answered through gritted teeth "I already have. Do you have any idea how horrible my mother's family were to me? They wouldn't let me do anything I wanted to do. I had to spend hours praying Father would forgive me. Every day! Every single day!"

"You deserved it." I shot back, unable to help myself. "Maybe now you'll realise that the world doesn't revolve around you."

"What, like you?" Edward scoffed.

"Yes, like me!" I retorted in a whisper. "I learnt the hard way."

Fortunately, the music ended just then, so I was able to drop the stiff curtsy that etiquette demanded and then walk away from him before he goaded me into openly losing my temper.

As the clock struck midnight, Blanche and I were sent to bed. Edward came with us, still grumbling about Father's choice of bride and blaming me for it. Eventually, even Blanche, the patient one among us, grew tired of his complaints.

"Oh Edward, please! Bessie had nothing to do with Anne catching Papa's eye. Papa doesn't take orders from anyone. Besides, Anne doesn't even serve us any more. She's in the Duchess of Suffolk's household."

"She used to be. Now she's got a household of her own, with all of us forced to bend the knee to her."

Blanche opened her mouth to say something, but Edward cut her off angrily.

"Don't tell me she's sweet and gentle and all of that rubbish. Of course she is to you. You share her blood and she knows it. You and Elizabeth are going to be her bridesmaids when she marries Father, but what am I going to be?"

"You're going to be the ring bearer. Anne told me so." Blanche protested.
"Only because Father ordered it, I'll bet."

Blanche flinched at the harshness of Edward's tone. "Can't you give Anne a chance?" she begged. Her voice trembled, and I could tell that she was close to tears. Scowling at Edward, I slipped my arm around her shoulders. "Come on."

Without even glancing back at our bastard brother, much less bidding him good night, I pulled Blanche into our shared apartments and shut the door behind us.

Almost at once, Blanche dissolved into tears, burying her face in my chest.

Lady Bryan hurried forward, but I shook my head. Blanche didn't need her governess, she needed her sister.

Taking my younger sister into my room, I gently untied the laces of her corset, and unpinned her hood. Calling Mary Norris to fetch me my sister's night shift, I quickly changed my sister for bed, and then guided her to sit down on my bed so that I could change my own clothes. Kat and Lady Blanche got me ready for bed between them and then I dismissed them so that I could kneel behind Blanche to brush out her cloud of golden curls myself. I tended to her silently, pretending I didn't see the tears still coursing down her cheeks. At last, she choked "Why does Edward hate Anne? He's never even met her properly."

I sighed. How to explain this to Blanche in a way that she would understand? I swept the brush through her golden hair a couple more times whilst I considered how best to answer her.

"It's because Anne's a Howard like Mother was." I said finally. "Because Mother loved another man apart from Father and had his children, a lot of people hate her. They hate the other Howard girls too, because they don't trust them. They think they'll be like Mother and not stay faithful to their marriage vows. Edward's been brought up to think like them, so he does."

"But that's not fair! We're not like Mama! We're not! Why would Anne be like her?" Blanche sobbed. I broke through the last of the knots in her hair and turned her round to face me as I set down the brush. "There. All done."

Flinging her arms around my neck, she pressed herself against me with a strangled cry. "It's not fair!" she repeated.

"No, sweetheart, it's not. But don't worry. Anne will soon be Queen, and when she is, she'll win the people over very quickly. They'll forget that they ever grumbled over another Howard being chosen for the throne and fall in love with her for herself. Don't worry. Don't worry."

Unfortunately, the stress and the excitement of preparing for the Ambassadors' banquet had taken their toll on Blanche. This, coupled with the shock of Father's announcing his remarriage to Anne and the realisation that Anne would have to battle a number of prejudices when she came to the throne, not least among them the hatred of our father's bastard son, the Duke of Richmond and Somerset, which effectively ruined Blanche's hope that we would all become one stable happy family, was all too much. She was inconsolable. All I could do was hold her close and whisper sweet nothings into her hair as she finally cried herself to sleep.

However, Blanche was far too much of a Princess to ever show anyone, save her family and most favoured ladies, how she felt. The banquet had been an accident and now she was putting things right. When Anne called us to her rooms to discuss our bridesmaids' gowns and also the gowns we would wear to her coronation, she was all smiles. Especially when she realised that Anne was
allowing us to choose our own fabrics. Blanche loved that kind of thing.

Anne was to wear silver silk trimmed with dark green for her wedding, so Blanche and I chose Tudor green damask studded with tiny crystals for our dresses. Anne's dress had so many emeralds sewn on to it that it probably could have stood up on its own. Edward was to wear black velvet for his role as ring bearer, but when Anne offered him the choice of the fabrics to have another doublet made for her coronation, he refused.

"I'd rather not, my lady." He answered stiffly. "I'll make do with just the one new doublet, thank you. Black velvet will do nicely for your coronation too."

"But, Lord Edward, you cannot wear black to a coronation. It is meant to be a joyful day." Anne protested. "A wedding is just about understandable because it is tradition, but not for a coronation. Come, choose your fabric."

"I said, I'd rather not!" Edward flared up at Anne. "Black reflects how I'll feel that day!"

"Lord Edward!" Anne cried, shocked. I stepped forward, as did both Kat and Lady Bryan, but Anne raised her hand to halt us in our tracks as Edward continued "You can play Happy Families with the girls as much as you like, Lady Anne, but it won't work with me! My mother should be in your shoes. She should be on the cusp of being Queen of England. You don't deserve to be as lucky as you are. You're nothing but a loose-moraled Howard, like Lady Katherine used to be, and you don't deserve to be marrying my father!"

With that, Edward spun on his heel and walked out, leaving Anne staring after him and me shaking with barely suppressed rage.

"Anne, I'll go after him. I'll make him see sense. You don't deserve to be treated like this!" I exclaimed, but Anne shook her head.

"No, Elizabeth. I know you mean well, but you'll only make it worse, my dear. Stay here, please."

"Then let me go, My Lady." Lady Bryan offered. "Her Highness is right; he cannot be allowed to get away with this!"

"No, Lady Bryan. I won't allow you to go either. No, leave Lord Edward alone. He's only young, and his world's changing around him. Of course he's going to resent the change. He just needs time to come around to the idea of me marrying his father. We'll all get along soon enough. Just give him time and he'll come round."

I opened my mouth to answer "I'm not sure he will." but Anne didn't give me time to say anything, instead turning to the Lady Mary as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened and asking "Well, Mary? Have you decided what colour gown you would like to wear to my wedding?"

"Yes, I have, Anne, thank you." Mary replied calmly. "I'd like to have one made of this dark blue satin, if I may."

"Of course you may, Mary." Anne replied, nodding approval of her choice. "It's a good choice. I think it will suit you."

Personally, I couldn't see much of a difference between that colour and the black that Mary usually had her dresses made out of, but at least it wasn't a mourning colour. After all, she was going to witness the wedding. To my surprise, Mary actually seemed happy about that. I couldn't see why. Anne was younger than her and a Howard. Since Mary hated Blanche and myself who were both half Howard Tudors, and resented us our positions as Princesses, I couldn't understand why she
should be happy about another Howard marrying Father.

However, when I pulled Anne aside and asked her about it, she wasn't surprised at all.

"Lady Mary, Elizabeth, has had a very hard time of it. You probably don't remember it, because you were grieving yourself, but after your mother was executed for treason, your father put her under increasing pressure to sign the Oath. She was twenty-five, then, Elizabeth, with a decade of hardships behind her. A decade. Ten years of pain, of humiliation, of being cast aside by the father she adored. She broke, as most people would. She signed the Oath. But the damage has been done. Your father still never sees her alone or favours her. If I can help her; make things easier for her, she'll be grateful. We were friends once, the two of us and now I'm hoping to build on that to be a kind stepmother to her. I want to be a kind stepmother to all of you."

"Good luck with that one." I scoffed. "You saw how Edward reacted when you offered him a new doublet for the coronation."

Anne sighed and nodded. "I know. But he's only ten, Elizabeth. I'm hoping I can bring him round."

She turned and took a couple of steps away, moving to help Lady Mary choose a colour for her Coronation Day gown, but I called her back.

"Hang on. Anne?"

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"I've been wondering...you don't expect me to call you "Mama" or "Mother", do you? I mean, I know Blanche already does, but -" I couldn't go on. Luckily, Blanche, though she was unaware of what we were discussing, proved my recent point by calling "Mama?"

"I'll be there in a moment, Blanche!" Anne called back before turning back to me, walking over and resting a hand on my shoulder.

"No, Elizabeth. I don't. I know I can never replace your mother. Besides, I'm only three years older than you are. I wouldn't feel comfortable with you addressing me as "Mother". No. It's going to have to be "Your Majesty" in public, of course, but in private, I hope that you and Mary will carry on calling me Anne, like you used to."

For a moment, the childish part of me rebelled against calling Anne anything that the Lady Mary called her, but then common sense prevailed. Anne was her given name. Of course we would both be calling her that, at least until we found our own nicknames for her. I nodded silently.

"Good. I'm glad that's settled." Anne grasped my hand and squeezed it gently before hurrying over to Blanche, stopping to commend the Lady Mary on her choice of crimson velvet for her gown for the Coronation Day celebrations.

"Mama, can I wear this cloth of gold for your coronation?" Blanche asked, too young to realise that cloth of gold didn't suit her, even with her artist's eye. She was just dazzled by the sumptuousness of the cloth.

To Anne's credit, she didn't laugh. Slipping her arm around Blanche's shoulders, she answered "I'm not sure gold's the best colour for you, Blanche. Let me show you what I had in mind for you."

With that, she deftly led Blanche over to the paler colours like pale blue, rose pink and pale green. I watched them go, appreciating the efforts Anne was making towards us, even now that my baseborn brother had stormed out.
As for Edward, I only hoped that his longing to be part of the celebrations and to show off would outweigh his inborn dislike of our soon to be stepmother. Not for my own sake. Oh no. Personally, I couldn't care less whether His Grace deigned to join the celebrations or not, but Anne genuinely seemed to want to bring us together. She wanted the common people to see us all happily united at her Coronation, and for her sake, I wanted it too. For her sake, I hoped we could pull it off.

But first, I would have to choose my gown. Putting the awkward topic of my half-brother from my mind, I turned my attention to the task at hand.
Chapter 8

I woke to the sound of bells pealing loudly. Still half-asleep, I lay, unable to work out why the bells were ringing. Bells were only rung either in times of great sorrow, such as when a member of the Royal Family died, or of great joy, such as a Royal wedding, birth or…

I sat bolt upright. Of course! It was Anne’s coronation day! The maid sleeping at the foot of my bed, Lady Susanna, stirred at the sound of me waking.

“Princess?” she murmured.

“Get up, Lady Susanna. Get up and bring me a hot drink and some breakfast, please. Then lay out my golden taffeta gown. Make sure Lady Bryan and Mistress Norris attend to my sister too. Oh and tell the Lady Mary that if she wishes to withdraw in order to dress and prepare herself, then she may. I will not need her this morning.”

Lady Susanna stared at me in astonishment. She hadn’t seen me this animated in a long time. I laughed at her as I sprang from the bed. “Have you forgotten, Lady Susanna? England welcomes her new Queen this morning. Hurry!”

Lady Susanna gulped and disappeared.

Unable to keep still, I danced out into the Privy Chamber that I shared with Blanche. Kat caught sight of me still in my nightgown and rushed over.

“What are you doing, Princess?” “My cousin is to be coronated today, Kat! Can I not be pleased on her behalf?”

“Have some decorum, Princess, please!” Kat steered me back into my bedchamber, clearly irritated by my behaviour. “Pull yourself together. You’re acting no better than a child. And you a grand young lady of almost 15 summers. What do you think the Court would say to that if they knew?”

I looked at Kat, stunned. She had hardly ever spoken to me that sharply. Not in the nearly ten years since she’d become my Lady Governess. And she wasn’t finished, either.

“They’d condemn you for being your mother’s daughter. For being a Howard. And that would reflect badly on Her Majesty.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Kat gave me no chance, instead pressing her point relentlessly. “You know it’s true that they would condemn you, Elizabeth. You know it. And you know it would reflect badly on Her Majesty. Today of all days, she does not need that. Today of all days, she needs you to be the perfect Princess of England, ready to support and admire her, whatever happens. Now, calm yourself, think over what I have said and have some breakfast. I’ll come and help you prepare in a moment. I just have to help Lady Bryan with Blanche first.” Kat dipped a stiff half-curtsy, and then departed my bedchamber, her back ramrod straight. I had truly irritated her.

With a pang of guilt, I turned to the bowl of oats and fruit that Lady Susanna had brought me, resolving to restrain myself better from now on, no matter how much my bastard brother or anyone else might try to rile me. Kat was right. The Howards would be on display from now on; particularly today. As their eldest Princess, it would be up to me to set an example.
“Make way for the Princesses! Make way!” Gowned in golden taffeta and looking the very picture of composure, I left my rooms, following my herald down to the Tower Courtyard, preparing to take my place in the lavish procession that would soon wind its way from the Tower through the streets of London all the way to Westminster Abbey, where Anne would be crowned and anointed Queen.

Blanche walked at my side, gloriously dressed in pale rose silk velvet. She was half bouncing as she walked, barely able to contain her excitement. Though I knew I ought to restrain my sister, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Firstly, it would be hypocritical, given how I myself had acted not long before and secondly, in a girl of her age, unabashed delight was all too often endearing to the common people. Instead of cautioning her, therefore, I merely let her go in front of me and seat herself in our ceremonial carriage.

For my own part, I paused, waiting nearby until the woman of the hour, Anne herself, entered the courtyard. Anne was absolutely stunning; resplendent in purple silk trimmed with silver ribbon and encrusted with tiny crystals that seemed to shimmer as she moved. Her beautiful ebony hair tumbled down her back in a cascade of curls. With my half-sister Mary, who was herself wearing a sumptuous gown of crimson velvet, carrying her train, my seventeen year old cousin looked every inch the Queen she had become only so recently.

As she reached me, I sank to the ground, spreading my skirts around me. “God Bless you, Your Majesty.”

Reaching out a hand to me with a smile, Anne accepted my obeisance gracefully. “Thank you, Princess Elizabeth. Enjoy the celebrations, won’t you?”

“Of course. Good day, Mary.” I forced a reluctant smile at Lady Mary for the sake of a show of unity and waited for Anne to be helped into her magnificent horse drawn litter before taking my own seat alongside Blanche.

The procession itself passed in a blur. The crowds pressed against the carriages, at times even dangerously close, though never dangerous, or not for Blanche and I at least, for the commoners loved us, their pretty Howard Princesses; loved us with the fierce loyalty that only Englishmen and Englishwomen can bestow.

They shouted for Mary too, I noticed. They were thrilled to see her taking part in a great Court spectacle such as this one. But they didn’t shout for the Duke of Richmond. My father’s other bastard, his precious son, rode by the multitude, an almost unnatural silence following in his wake. If there was any one thing that could have made this day even brighter for me, that was it. I revelled in the people’s attention, accepting so many of their tributes that, by the time we reached the Abbey, I had a posy of flowers in every buttonhole, sash and on either side of my head, tucked into my hood. Blanche was the same, but there were still dozens of sprays of flowers in our carriage.

I didn’t know what to do with them all until I saw Anne laughing and tossing them back into the crowd merrily, sharing a moment with the people who were now her people and who had come to see her on this special day. Blanche and I followed her example, eliciting wild cheers from the multitudes around us, before escaping into the relative peace of the Abbey.

Once there, we filed into the Royal pew, watching in hushed, awestruck silence as Anne took the Oath required of her and received the ritual anointing before being acclaimed as Queen of England, seated on the great golden throne and crowned with St. Edward’s Crown.
Archbishop Cranmer, my godfather, blessed her in the name of the Church of England before turning to his assistants, the Dukes of Suffolk and Richmond, in order to take the sceptre and orb to hand to Anne.

Charles Brandon handed the sceptre over without a murmur, but Edward clung stubbornly to the orb.

“Your Grace, I require the orb in order to finish the ceremony. Give it to me, please.” Cranmer held out his hand but Edward refused to surrender it.

“No! I will not give it to you! She doesn’t deserve to have it!”

“Your Grace…” Cranmer tried to interrupt, but Edward pressed on.

“She doesn’t deserve to have it! That harlot doesn’t deserve to sit on the Throne of England!”

There was a collective gasp at my half-brother’s words. Anne’s confident smile faltered as she realised what he had called her.

“Your Grace!” Charles Brandon’s hand clamped down on my half-brother’s shoulder as he spoke to him urgently. At last, Edward’s voice, which had risen to a scream, lowered to a snarl of malicious frustration.

“Take it then, if you must!” He thrust the orb at Archbishop Cranmer with as much force as he could muster.

The elder man fumbled the catch, not expecting the strength of the thrust. The crystal orb spun through the air, glittering in the candlelight.

Despite myself, I had to stifle a shriek as I watched the fragile sphere falling to the ground, turning over and over.

Blanche’s hand found its way into mine and even the Lady Mary caught my eye, her face frozen in shock. We were all thinking the same thing. If that sphere hit the ground… Everyone knew it was bad luck. How could it not be bad luck?

And then, all of a sudden, Brandon launched himself forward, flinging himself into the path of the falling orb. Catching it firmly in one hand, he rose, dusted off his grand robes and presented it to Cranmer with a slight bow.

The relief in the Abbey was tangible. Cranmer swiftly handed the orb to Anne before any more harm could come to it, almost gabbling the next speech as he tried to recover the situation.

“Here be the two sceptres of the sovereign. May you go forth and prosper and may you bear a new son of the King’s blood. Honour and Grace be to our Queen Anne!”

Anne tightened her hold on the two precious objects and managed another smile, though she still looked shaken.

As we all cheered her, I couldn’t help but steal a glance at Edward. Unlike the rest of us, he wasn’t cheering. In fact, he was barely restraining a scowl. His eyes, meanwhile, were blazing with a kind of disappointed triumph.

At that, I knew for certain that he had deliberately set out to spoil Anne’s coronation day. He had wanted to cause a scene; wanted to cause trouble on what ought to be the most golden day of all
days.

I wanted to strangle him; to take him and shake him until he apologised to Anne publicly for his behaviour, but I knew I couldn’t. If nothing else, this day had been marred enough without the Royal Family seeming any more at odds. Forcing myself to ignore the Duke of Richmond’s presence, I turned and swept out of the Abbey in the Queen’s wake, head held high.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's taken this long, but I forgot I hadn't finished cross-posting this... I'll try not to forget again!

Chapter 9

In the next day or two after my cousin's coronation, I became aware of whispers following me wherever I went, particularly when I went about with Anne and my half-sister Mary, as I often did, for Anne was determined to show the Court and England a contentedly united Royal Family.

She did all this despite the Duke of Richmond's rudeness towards her; despite the fact that he had to be banished that he had had to be banished from Court with immediate effect for the scene that he had created in the Abbey and, personally, I think it worked better because he was gone. Aside from the fact that he clearly hated Anne with a passion, my half-brother's arrogance had not made him many friends among the courtiers. They were more open to a Royal Family that didn't include him.

However, the rumours and whispers worried me. Were the Howards not measuring up now that we were centre stage once more, after three years in the shadow of treason and adultery? Who knew? In this court of wolves, one thing was for certain though. It was always best to be one step ahead. Forewarned was forearmed.

With this in mind, I sought out the only three ladies that I trusted to tell me the Court gossip truthfully; not to twist it in order to flatter either my father, my stepmother, my sister or myself in the hope of advancement. Kat, Lady Blanche and Lady Lucy Neville.

"What's going on? All I ever hear are half-stifled murmurs, rumours and unreliable suppositions. To have them in my wake, to this extent, worries me."

"Princess, it is nothing. Or nothing that you need worry about, at any rate." Lady Blanche tried to reassure me, but only succeeded in causing me more anxiety.

"So there is something. Tell me, Lady Blanche, please, for I have heard enough to know that it is something to do with the Queen. And everyone knows that Queens who do not please are insecure in this Court. If anything happened to Her Majesty…" I broke off, unable to finish. The three gentlewomen surrounding me exchanged a quick glance. Kat laid her hand on my arm.

"It really is nothing, My Lady Princess. They are only curious as to how you will react to Her Majesty's intervention on the Duke of Richmond's behalf."

"She intervened on his behalf?" My mouth fell open in shock. "Surely she doesn't want him back at Court, after what he said of her? On her own coronation day, no less?"

"No! No! He wouldn't come anyway, if the invitation came from her. You know that as well as I do. No, your father was so angry at the scene that His Grace caused in the Abbey that he threatened to strip him of his titles."
"And Anne talked him out of it?"

"She did indeed. She appealed to your father's sense of mercy, reminding him that the Duke was but a child, a child who had known much upheaval in his life already. She may also have implied that a coronation and the summer was a time for joy and unity, not for punishment and strife."

"Clever." I breathed, admiring Anne's skill at manipulating people despite myself.

It was no wonder Father could deny her almost nothing. Even I, who detested the Duke more than anyone, could see the sense in allowing him to keep his titles. In doing so, Anne reinforced her own image as a young, kind-hearted Queen who only wanted the best for her family and her people. Edward, on the other hand, came out of this looking like a sulky, arrogant brat who enjoyed nothing more than spurning kindness and biting the hand that fed him.

Yet again, I vowed to study Anne's interactions with the Court more closely. Though she was only a knight's daughter by birth, tact and diplomacy were far more in her nature than they were in mine. I could learn a lot from her.

Anne didn't just concentrate her efforts on helping Edward and the Lady Mary, either. Even in those early days of her Queenship, my other siblings were in her mind as well.

One night, Anne invited me to dine with her privately and, once we had exhausted the usual store of small talk and had our food in front of us, she said "Elizabeth, I've been thinking about your sisters."

Somehow instinctively knowing that she didn't mean Blanche or Lady Mary, I glanced up anxiously. "What about them?"

"Well, it's not fair on you to have to look after them. The care of your mother's…"

"Don't call them bastards." I warned, before Anne could finish. "They're not born in wedlock, true, but I hate hearing people call them bastards. They don't deserve that name."

"...Illegitimate children is a burden that you shouldn't have to bear." Anne finished calmly "It puts you under stress, no matter how much you love them. I've lived with you; served you. I've seen it, even if you don't realise it. Besides which, they're a drain on your household's finances."

"But if they don't live with me, then where will they go? You know the Culpeppers will have nothing to do with them?"

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I've been talking to my sister Mary and she's willing to make them her wards, if you agree to it. You know she's got a little girl about their age and, as my sister, she has access to the funds she'll need to bring them up as befits their station as natural daughters of the niece of the Duke of Norfolk." Anne laid the plan before me as convincingly as she could, but in truth, I needed little convincing. I always felt guilty about leaving Jess and Nora behind whenever I came to Court and their presence in my household caused undercurrents of tension whenever Father came to visit. Sending them to live with Lady Stafford would solve all of that in one fell swoop. And Mary was a kind woman. Unlike most of the other people I knew, she wouldn't hold the unfortunate circumstances of their birth against them. She'd treat them exactly the same way she treated her own little girl Katherine.

In fact, as long as Sir William Stafford raised no objections to taking the former Queen's bastards in to live under his roof, I could see only one major stumbling block to Anne's plan.
"You do realise how much this is going to unsettle Jess and Nora, don't you, Anne?"

"Yes. I had thought of that. But really, it's for the best. And they're resilient little girls. They'll cope."

"True…still, would you mind if I told them myself. I don't really trust my household with the news. Even Constance…sometimes I wonder if she resents the twins for her current position in my household." I confessed, hoping Anne would understand. Luckily she did, almost instantly, in fact.

"Of course. They're your sisters. It's only natural that you should want to tell them. That's why I've arranged for you and Blanche to leave Court for Hatfield in three days time. Mary will leave for Rochford the following week so that Jess and Nora can be established in her household by the end of the month."

I nodded, lapsing into silence as one of Anne's ladies placed our desserts in front of us.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough and, before long, I was rising, kissing Anne goodnight and curtsying politely to show respect for my Queen as I left to retire to bed.

Four days later, I was back at Hatfield and I knew I could put the unpleasant scene with the twins off no longer.

Therefore, I went into their rooms after lessons that morning, calling "Jess! Nora! How are you?"

"Beth!"

They sprang at me, clinging to me as though they never wanted to let go.

"How you've grown!" Clasping their warm young bodies close to mine, I kissed their dark hair, fighting back the memories it stirred, for they acted so much like I imagined Mother must have done at their age that it almost hurt sometimes.

"We're so happy you're home! No one else ever plays with us the way you and Blanche do!" Nora announced as I sent Constance and their other maids away, sitting down between the twins with an arm around each of them.

"I know, but you know I had to be away. I didn't want to leave you." I assured them, tightening my hold on them.

"Yes, but we still had no one to play with."

"Well, how would you like to have another little girl to play with? One who's the same age as you are?"

The twins exchanged eager glances. "Yes please, Beth!"

"Well, that's good, because while I was away, I spoke to the Queen and her sister would like to have you to live with her so that you can keep her little girl Katy company."

I kept it as simple as I possibly could, trying not to confuse my younger sisters too much, but they still looked stunned.

"What? But why don't you want us any more? Have we been naughty?" Nora's question stabbed my heart, but Jess's innocent plea "Don't you love us any more?" was even worse. It almost had me in tears.
"Of course I love you! You're my sisters!"

"But then, why do we have to leave?"

"Because it's easier; because I have to go away so often. If we had another little girl here, that would be harder. And besides, if Katy had to leave her Mama, she'd be too sad to play with you. You don't want that, do you?" I forced myself to sound cheerful.

"Why shouldn't she? We had to. And now we have to leave you too. It's not fair!" Nora burst into noisy tears, startling both myself and her sister. Jess was the sensitive one, not Nora. I'd expected her to break first, not Nora.

Mind you, one look at Jess told me that she wasn't far off tears either. Her little face was white and her eyes were dangerously bright, while an occasional tremor was already shaking her shoulders.

Still, Nora was my more immediate concern. I bent my head over her, murmuring "Hush, Nora, hush. It'll be all right. You'll see. You'll have lots of fun with Lady Stafford and Katy, I promise." I hugged my younger sister close, trying to calm her down. Then, keeping her on my lap, I reached for Jess's hand, squeezing it gently as I repeated to them what Mother had said to me so often "And I promise I will never stop loving you. I love you with all my heart and I bid you never forget it."

Suddenly, I remembered something that I used to do with Blanche when she was angry or upset. I'd never done it with the twins, because of the difference in our statuses, but today, I couldn't have cared less. Whatever the rest of the world thought, these harmless girls were just children. Children who were now sorely in need of comfort.

And since they were my sisters, comfort was what I would give them. Straightening up with Nora still in my embrace, I whispered to Jess "Wait here, I'll be right back" and carried her sister through my apartments to my own bedchamber.

Laying her gently on my bed, I went back for Jess, ignoring Kat's glances as I did so, though they were sharp with anxiety. As I reached Jess, I realised that she too had started crying, so I wasted no time in carrying her across to join Nora.

Shutting the three of us in my bedchamber, I lay down, wrapping them in my arms. As they cuddled close, I sang nonsense songs in a low voice, allowing myself the luxury of a smile when they reacted just like Blanche used to do.

Soothed by the heat of my body and the sound of my voice, they gradually calmed down, until their sobs had become nothing more than muffled whimpers.

Once they had eventually fallen asleep, I called Kat to help me carry them back into their own rooms and went in to do my sewing beside them.

Some people might have thought it unwise to spend time trying to console them, but I knew that it was the right thing to do. All Jess and Nora needed was reassurance that I loved them. It hadn't be so necessary before, but they were four now. The difference between the way people treated Blanche and I and the way they treated them was gradually becoming clearer to them. As it became clearer, they were becoming more insecure in themselves. That was partly why I was unsure about Anne's plan to send them to live with Lady Stafford. Moving house would not help them.

But Anne wasn't just my cousin anymore. She was the Queen. And what's more, I knew she meant well. I wasn't going to try and stop the plan she had put in motion. I would let it happen and just try to prepare my younger sisters as best I could.
Over the next week or so, I spent as much time as I could playing with Jess and Nora, getting them comfortable with the idea of moving away and making sure they trusted me when I told them that I loved them, no matter what, but the big day arrived before anyone was quite ready for it.

I had scarcely finished breakfast when Mary Norris came over to me. "A man called Nicholas Woodrow is here to see you, my Lady."

"Thank you, Mary. Let him in, please."

Rising, I extended my hand for the man who entered to kiss.

"Your Highness." I liked Nicholas Woodrow immediately. He was a sturdy, open-faced kind of man who had a sort of rugged charm about him. I instantly felt comfortable; he was the kind of man that I would trust to escort me somewhere, so I had few qualms about entrusting Jess and Nora to his care, especially since Constance was travelling with them.

Still, I wanted to make sure that he understood the situation completely.

"You're Sir William Stafford's steward?" I inquired, signing to Lady Lucy to bring a tumbler of wine.

"I am, Your Highness. I have served Sir William faithfully since I was a child and I have been lucky enough to be his steward these past five years."

"And you understand what's expected of you?"

"Yes. Lady Stafford made it clear to me that these children are to be treated with care."

"They are. They are young yet, Master Woodrow, but their lives so far have not been easy. They are – are not as skilled around other people as you might expect of children of their age of noble parentage." I explained succinctly, trying to keep my voice steady. Since he was collecting them, I had no doubt that Master Woodrow knew that Eleanor and Jessica were my half-sisters, but it was still always best to watch my words around strangers.

Master Woodrow nodded. "I understand, Princess. Mistress Eleanor and Mistress Jessica will be safe with me."

"I'm sure they will." I smiled at him before saying "Could you…I mean, would you mind stepping outside for a moment so that I might say goodbye to the girls privately?"

"Of course not, Princess. Good day."

Master Woodrow bowed, kissed my hand and then left, bowing to Blanche, who he passed in the doorway, as he did so.

"Can I say goodbye to them too, Bessie?" Blanche asked, almost timidly, I thought.

Suddenly, I realised that I had probably been shutting Blanche out by spending so much time with Jess and Nora. Resolving to begin remedying that immediately, I nodded, stretching a hand out to my younger sister, beckoning her over.

"Of course. They're your sisters just as much as they are mine."

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than Blanche was at my side. We stood side by side as Constance brought the twins in, dressed in soft grey travelling dresses. At the sight of the two of
us, they dropped into identical, adorable curtsies. "Your Highnesses."

"No. Not Your Highness. Beth. Beth and Blanche, both of you." I caught both their gazes and reached down to help them up, before kneeling to their height.

"You look pretty, girls. Do you know what you've got to do when you get to Lady Stafford's house?"

Nora nodded. "We do this" – she dropped into another curtsy – "and say "Pleased to meet you, Lady Stafford. We're very happy to be able to stay with you. Thank you for inviting us."

My heart clenched at the sight of her, utterly solemn, pronouncing those grown up words so carefully in a voice that belied just how young she still was. For a moment, I couldn't speak, so it was Blanche who answered.

"That's right, Nora. And Lady Stafford will be just as pleased to meet you. You'll see, she'll be very nice to you. And we'll write to you, we promise. But you'd better go now."

She pulled Jess into her arms and kissed her. I nodded.

"Yes. Blanche is right. You'd better go. It'll be a long day."

Embracing Nora as I spoke, I murmured "I promised I would never stop loving you, remember? I love you with all my heart and I bid you never forget it."

I felt her nod against my chest, pressed a feather light kiss to her temple and let Blanche take her to hug her as I reached for Jessica.

"I love you, Jess. You're my rosebud, whatever anyone else says. You're my rosebud of a sister and I adore you. Understand?"

"Yes Beth." she whispered. I brushed a strand of hair away from her face.

"Good. Then stay strong for me, Jessie, and one day, we will see each other again. I promise."

I kissed her and held her close for another few precious moments before releasing her so that Constance could take charge of her again. As Blanche did the same with Nora, I looked up at Constance.

"Goodbye, Constance. See them safe to Rochford, won't you?"

"Of course, My Lady Princess. Goodbye." Constance bobbed a curtsy and then led the twins from the room.

Blanche went straight to her lessons after they had gone, but I sat down in the window seat for a while, watching the carriage Lady Stafford had sent until it was no more than a speck in the distance.

I really hoped I was doing the right thing. Anne seemed to think so, but what if they didn't settle with Lady Stafford? What would we do then?
Chapter 10

To my relief, though, Jess and Nora seemed to settle in very well with Mary Stafford. Though I couldn't go to visit them, not straight away; not without a reason or an invitation, I did receive a letter from Mary within the week to say that they were well and, if not happy yet, well on the way to becoming happy.

Delighted, I carried the letter through to Blanche's bedroom, kissing her good morning and seating myself on her bed to watch as Lady Bryan brushed her hair.

"Blanche, I just had a letter from Lady Mary Stafford. You know, Anne's sister."

"Oh? How are the twins? Jess and Nora? Have they settled in with her?"

"I thought you might ask that." I smiled, glancing at my little sister in the mirror.

"Why wouldn't I? They're my sisters as much as yours, Bessie. So how are they?"

"Well, actually. Mary writes that they're well and that, although they miss us, they are opening up to her now. And to Katy. They're still somewhat shy around Sir William Stafford, it seems."

"Why? Is he not kind to them?" Blanche's voice rose with indignation and I knew that Jess and Nora's well-being was the most important thing in the world to her right now. If she thought that they weren't being well treated, she'd beg me to bring them back to Hatfield. I knew she would.

Therefore, reassuring her was of paramount importance right now. Crossing the room, I waved Lady Bryan aside and laid my hands on Blanche's shoulders for a moment.

"Of course he's kind to them, Blanche. Mary writes that her husband hasn't treated them any differently from Katy since the moment he met them. It's just that they've never lived around a man like him for any length of time before. You know that. Papa never wants to see them when he comes, remember? Of course Sir William's kind to them. Do you really think Mary wouldn't marry a kind man? Do you think she'd have taken them in, or that I'd have let them go to her, if I didn't trust her husband with them? Don't you trust me, Blanche?"

"Of course I do, Bessie. I'd trust you with my life. You know that. I'm just worried for the twins, that's all. They've been through so much already."

"I know they have and I know what you're saying. But trust me; they'll be fine with Lady Stafford. I know they will."

"Can we go and see them soon?" Blanche begged, her voice shaking with an indecipherable mixture of emotions.
"That's what else I wanted to talk to you about. It seems Mary's pregnant again. She wondered if you'd like to be the Godmother, since she knows that our mother was Katy's Godmother and that Anne will more than likely choose me to be Godmother if she has a child of her own. Would you like to? It would mean you'd have to go for the Christening in a few months and then you could see the twins as well."

Blanche didn't need to be asked twice. Her eyes lit up and she nodded vigorously. "Of course!"

"All right then. I'll write to Lady Stafford and tell her you've said yes while Lady Bryan helps you finish getting ready."

Leaning over my little sister, I hugged her briefly, before turning to leave the room and find some parchment so that I could write back to Lady Stafford.

One morning, not long after that, Lady Lucy came to me, her eyes sparkling.

"Have you heard, Princess?"

"Heard what, Lady Lucy?" I pushed away the translation that I had been working on and turned to face my maidservant, smiling as I saw the expression on her face.

"You have gossip in your eye, Lady Lucy. I know there is something that you wish to tell me. Well, go on. I have no objection to hearing it."

"I've just had a letter from my brother, Princess."

"And? What does he say?"

"Would you believe it if I told you that your royal father's been pushing for the Duke of Richmond's marriage to the Infanta Joanna?"

"What? Even after the disastrous banquet for the Tuscan Ambassadors?" I exclaimed, but the exclamation was more as a matter of course than anything else. I believed her. Of course I believed her. Father would do anything for that boy. He might have banished him for disrespecting the Queen on her own coronation day, but that didn't mean much. Edward, bastard or not, was Father's only son. His pride and joy. Of course he'd want to secure him the best marriage he could, even though no one else thought as highly of Edward as he did. He wanted to marry him to a Daughter of Spain, no less. The Emperor, naturally, was nowhere near as enthusiastic. "How did the Emperor react?"

Lady Lucy smiled merrily. "That's the best bit, My Lady Princess. It is said that the Emperor didn't even hear the Ambassador out before dismissing him, so infuriated was he by the affront of the renewed proposal. Apparently he also later told him that if King Henry of England was so keen on an Anglo-Spanish alliance, then he could have no qualms about betrothing the Princess Elizabeth to his heir, Don Felipe. What do you think of that, My Lady?"

It was just as well I was sitting down, for otherwise I might have collapsed. The Emperor was offering to make me Queen of Spain. In other words, over a decade after his aunt's marriage to my father had been annulled, he was finally openly acknowledging me to be my father's heiress.

The moment was sweet and I closed my eyes to savour it, barely hearing what Lady Lucy said next.

"Shall I fetch you some parchment, Princess, so that you can write to His Grace, commiserating
with him on the collapse of his would be betrothal?"

For a moment, revelling in my triumph, I almost said yes, but then common sense prevailed and I shook my head.

"No, Lady Lucy. Let it be. To do anything else would be seen as gloating and a true Queen to be would never gloat. There has been enough strife in this family already. Let us pretend that nothing at all has happened, at least until we know how my father reacted to the Spanish proposal."

I could tell Lady Lucy was surprised; she'd expected me to jump at the chance to best my half-brother for once, but she was an experienced courtier, skilled at hiding her emotions at the best of times, so she merely fell to the floor in a deep curtsy, deeper than any she had swept me for a long, long while and said "As you wish, Your Highness" before leaving me to attempt to finish my translation, mind whirling with possibilities.

But my father never did react to the Emperor's proposal. A week later, I received a letter from Anne; a letter which, when I opened it, sent me reeling and shrieking for Kat.

"My Lady! What is it? Elizabeth! What is it?" Kat let me clutch at her, desperately fighting tears, before she led me, trembling, to a chair. Unable to speak, I gestured to the letter.

Snatching it up, Kat skimmed the lines of bold penmanship, realising within seconds, as I had, that my father was dangerously ill and that Anne was summoning all the royal children to Court in order to present a strong united front to both the Court and the common people.

"We have to go." I passed a hand over my face, forcing myself to relax. I was Elizabeth Tudor, Princess of England. I would be Queen one day. I had to be able to remain outwardly calm, no matter what the circumstances.

Kat nodded. "I'll tell Lady Bryan. We'll start packing. You tell Blanche. She'll do better to hear this from her sister."

I nodded back as Kat left the room, but I didn't rise. I couldn't. Shock had dulled my legs, made it impossible for me to move. Though I knew I should go and find Blanche, I didn't. She found me instead.

"Bessie? What's going on? Why are Kat and Lady Bryan packing? Are we going back to Court?"

I shifted up on the stool I was sitting on silently, creating space for her to perch at my side, though, at nine, she preferred to stand at my shoulder.

"We are. I got a letter from Anne this morning."

"From Mama? But then why are you so sad? Why aren't you happy? You love visiting Court, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Blanche, of course I do. It's just...oh, Blanche...that letter...we're going back because Papa's ill. Really ill."

"You mean...you mean he might die?" Blanche asked, reading between the lines as she so often did so very well and picking up on what I did not want to say.

"I hope not." I replied, as I twisted on the stool and pulled her down on to my lap, seeking comfort as much as hoping to give it.
"But you think he might?"

"There is a possibility, yes."

"But what then? What will happen then? I don't want Papa to die!" Blanche cried, distressed as always by the thought of something happening to disturb our by now more or less peaceful family circle. I half-rocked her on my lap, trying to soothe her as I spoke in a fierce whisper.

"Let's pray he doesn't, then. But Blanche, I promise that, whatever happens, I'll look after you. I won't let anything happen to you. You have my word."

Kissing her forehead, I held her close for a little longer before nudging her off my lap and sending her to find Lady Bryan. We needed to leave. Fast.

No sooner had we rolled into the Courtyard at Richmond than Sir George Boleyn, Anne's brother, was at our carriage door, helping us down.

"Princess Elizabeth. Princess Blanche. Thank you for coming so quickly."

"It is no trouble at all, Lord Rochford. After all, it is our duty both as His Majesty's daughters and as his most loyal subjects. Should we go to wait on our Queen, your sister?" I asked, eager to appear the composed heiress, as I knew was so vital at this dark hour.

"She asks for you, Princess Elizabeth, but she wonders if the Princess Blanche might like to ride out hawking with me once you have changed from your travelling clothes."

"Blanche is my sister; the King's beloved daughter as much as I am. Surely she ought to be with the Queen at this terrible time?" I asked in a whisper as we headed for the doors of the palace.

"She is also only ten years old and sensitive. Sometimes, Princess, it is best to let girls of her age act their age, no matter what their rank. Princess or not, she does not need to be trapped in a place as gloomy as this right now." George murmured in reply, before he dropped back to ask Blanche again whether she would care to hawk with him as soon as we had changed and refreshed ourselves.

She agreed, so that, half an hour later, I was alone when I entered Anne's rooms and dropped to one knee before her.

"You may rise, Elizabeth. It is good to see you."

"And you, dear cousin." I responded as I rose to hug Anne, somehow knowing that today, of all days, was not a day for protocol. "How is my father?"

"I have just sent the Lady Mary to inquire after His Majesty's health." Anne replied, gesturing to me to take a seat.

"Then before she gets back I'd like to ask why you suggested Blanche should go hawking with your brother, if I may. As a Princess of England, she ought to be here, with us, not out hawking."

"As a Princess of England, perhaps. As a nine year old girl, she shouldn't. You know better than anyone how sensitive your sister is. The mood in the Palace would distress her terribly. I want to shield her from that as much as I can."

"But…"
"I'm also conscious of how much you two lean on one another for support. It's more than you may realise. That was all well and good when you were younger; when you'd just lost your mother, but now you are both growing up. You could be wed at any moment, Elizabeth, and Blanche is not far off legal womanhood either. It's time you stopped relying on each other quite so much. Let Blanche spend some time alone under the eye of my brother. He'll let no harm come to her and it'll do the both of you the world of good."

I might have argued further, but at that precise moment, the doors swung open and the herald announced "The Lady Mary Tudor!"

Anne and I both spoke at once, swinging around to face her.

"How is he? How's the King?"

"How's my father?"

Like me, Mary wasted no time on protocol or ceremony, locking eyes with Anne instantly.

"Dr. Linacre says they have managed to drain the pus off the old jousting wound, but his fever remains dangerously high."

Anne nodded. "Then I'd better make a public announcement to the Court. Will you come with me, both of you?"

Mary and I exchanged glances, shock making us civil to one another for once. The decision was clear, we both knew that. "Of course, Anne."

The two of us fell into step behind our Queen and we went out to try and keep the political ambitions of the courtiers at bay as best we could. Both for England and for ourselves.
That was how it continued for the next few days. Blanche would either be at her lessons or spending time with George Boleyn. She only rarely visited Anne's rooms, because that was where, apart from the sickrooms themselves, the tension was most prevalent. Lady Mary and I, on the other hand, spent most of our time there, either sewing or praying for our father's recovery. We were spending time together for the first time since Anne's marriage to our father, because not long after Anne's coronation, Mary had been removed from my household and welcomed to Court as a companion to our stepmother, while Blanche and I had gone back to Hatfield.

The arrangement suited us both just fine, for we had never got on very well; even as a child, I had picked up on my mother's discomfort around Mary, the child of my father's first, invalid marriage, and had hated her for it, while Mary had resented Blanche and I our titles and the fact that we'd kept them, even after our mother's adultery had been discovered.

Now, however, struck by the same tragedy, we were forced together once more and, while we never felt secure in each other's company, at least we were able to reach an accord for the sake of the people.

An accord which meant, keep out of each other's way for the most part though we tried our best to do, when we were required to pull together, as we were every evening when Anne made her public announcements about the state of our father's health, we could do it without much trouble.

Unlike our half-brother. While Mary and I acted decorously and played the part of the shaken daughters genuinely worried for their father's health, which wasn't in any way a lie, Edward used Father's illness as an excuse to play the great man at Court. He spent his days and nights frivolously and ordered people around as though he were King already. Not for him the hours of silent devotion in the Chapel Royal; he was too busy playing at being the Great Lord of England.

I set my teeth and endured for the sake of peace and harmony, but all the time, as well as praying for my father's recovery, I was inwardly praying for something to happen which might shock him into some humility.

It did. Eventually, it did. And it all began with our father's recovery.

I was sitting with Anne and Lady Mary in Anne's rooms when Sir Francis Knollys burst through the doors, beaming delightedly.

We knew. At once, we all knew.

"His Majesty?" At once, Anne was on her feet, almost forgetting who she was.

"Is awake and asking for you, My Lady Queen." Sir Francis responded.

Anne didn't need telling twice.

"Send word to my brother and the Princess Blanche of this happy news, immediately. Be sure to inform His Grace the Duke of Richmond as well. The Princess Elizabeth, the Lady Mary and I will go to see His Majesty this instant."
"Yes, Madam." Sir Francis nodded and then stood aside with a bow to let us out as we hurried to my father.

He greeted us warmly enough, kissing Anne with something like his usual passion and allowing Mary and I to embrace him as daughters to a father, rather than treating him as Princesses and Ladies would a King, before accepting our warmest wishes for his further recovery and dismissing us so that he could be alone with his young wife.

As soon as we left, Mary went to find Archbishop Cranmer to talk about a Thanksgiving Mass for the King's recovery, while I went to find someone who would ride out with me. My father's illness had kept me confined to the palace for long enough. It was time to shake off those jesses and, just for once, on this most joyous of days, forget who I really was.

We saw practically nothing of Anne over the next few days. She was closeted with my father and his ministers, discussing a most secret matter that no one knew anything about. Rumours abounded as to what it might be, but to be honest, the truth shocked us all.

They were drawing up a new Act of Succession.

Henceforth, the Succession was to be vested in the Princesses of England and their heirs. Myself and my heirs first, then Blanche and her heirs. It was only after us that the Succession was vested in "His Grace the Lord Edward FitzRoy, Duke of Richmond and Somerset and the heirs of his body." My half-sister Mary was also named, but only after Edward.

We were also all to receive new titles in honour of the occasion. I was to become Duchess of York and Pembroke, Blanche was to become Lady of Ireland, Edward would be named Earl of Nottingham and Mary was to be Countess of Salisbury and Buckingham.

When Charles Brandon told me, I could hardly believe my ears. It was not as though I didn't believe that I had a right to become Queen, it was the fact that Father was declaring me his heiress openly. He was finally saying that he didn't think he stood a chance of fathering a legitimate son with my cousin.

In a way, I pitied Anne; it had to be a bitter pill for her to swallow, to think that she might never have a child of her own, but on the other hand, she had been present when Father had drawn up the Act – I had no doubt that the fact that Blanche and I were ahead of our half-brother Edward, rather than behind him, was at her urging and not because Father had finally seen sense. After all, right now, she probably had more influence over Father than the entirety of his Council put together.

All of these thoughts flashed through my head even as I dropped to the floor in a deep curtsy, flushed with pleasure and relief and asked Charles Brandon to inform my father of my gratitude and to assure him of my everlasting loyalty, both to him and to England.

As soon as he had told me that he would and had gone, I flew through my rooms to find my little sister.

"Blanche! Blanche! You'll never guess what's happened!"

"What? Bessie, what is it?" Blanche, who had been sketching in the window seat of her bedchamber, jumped up as I ran into her room, alerted to the fact that something very important had happened by the happiness in my voice.

"Father's drawn up a new Act of Succession and he's named us his heiresses! He's made me
Duchess of York and Pembroke and you're going to be Lady of Ireland! He's finally accepted that Jane Seymour was naught but his harlot! It's official; I'm to be Queen after our father! Edward, however much he pretends to be worthy of the throne, will never be King!"

For a moment, Blanche stared at me as though I had gone mad. Then, suddenly, she swept down into a curtsy – a curtsy so low that her golden head, which was bent forward in respect, almost touched the floor. "Queen Elizabeth. Your Majesty." she murmured.

I watched my little sister pay homage to me as though in a dream before curtsying to her in return. "My Lady Blanche of Ireland."

I pulled her with me as I rose and the two of us looked at each other again, scarcely able to believe our good fortune. All of a sudden, we both burst into peals of laughter. Clutching each other, we began a sort of wild, triumphant dance around the room.

A month later, I was kneeling in front of the dais as my father invested me as Duchess of York and Pembroke.

The herald read the proclamation "It is the pleasure of our Sovereign Majesty, King Henry VIII, on this day, the First of September in the Thirty-Seventh year of his reign, to create thee, Princess Elizabeth Tudor, Duchess of York and Pembroke." and then I heard my father come down the steps towards me. Though I didn't dare look up and risk ruining the ceremony, I felt the weight of the golden ducal coronet settle on my coppery head; the warmth of the heavy robes of state envelop me as Father held out his hand and bade me rise.

"The patent of your nobility, Daughter." He handed me the precious scroll and I curtsied again, careful to keep my head perfectly erect.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." I exchanged the kiss of peace with him and then stepped, swapping a smile with my sister as she went forward to take my place and be invested as Lady of Ireland.

Afterwards, when Edward had another Earldom to his name and Mary was a Countess twice over and we had feasted in celebration, the dancing began. Within seconds, I found Edward Brandon standing before me, hand outstretched.

"William Paulet has claimed the hand of the Lady of Ireland, so I was wondering if I might have the honour of partnering Her Grace of York and Pembroke in a galliard. May I?"

"Why, certainly, My Lord Edward." I replied.

Our words were formal, but the warmth with which I took his hand was anything but. But then, this wasn't a time for formalities. That was over. My father and stepmother weren't here; they'd absented themselves in order to make my siblings and I the centre of attention, so this was a time for celebration. Celebration, joy and flirtation.

I danced off with Edward without a care in the world.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

One of these days I will remember that I haven't finished cross-posting this more regularly!! Sorry!

Chapter 12

The next morning, I was sitting with Blanche, playing cards, when there was a knock on the door and my herald announced "Lady Mary Tudor, Countess of Salisbury and Buckingham."

I rose to greet our half-sister as she entered. "Mary. What brings you here this morning?"

"Sister. Your Grace." For the first time I could remember, Mary smiled as she curtsied to me.

"I'm here because, well, after last night, I've realised that we Tudors need to work together. The Duke of Richmond; he's not going to take Father's new Act of Succession lying down. When Father dies, you can be sure that Edward will make a play for the throne. I want to stand with you and make sure he doesn't get it."

Sinking back into my chair, I gestured Mary to a seat to buy myself time as I thought over her words. She was right, insofar as our half-brother went. He wouldn't be happy about the new Line of Succession. I had no doubt that he'd thrown numerous tantrums in the brief time since it had become public knowledge; feeling as though he'd been cheated out of his birth right as the King's only son.

However, just because some Mary's words were true didn't mean I could trust her. We might be half-sisters, but she was fourth in line for the throne herself and there'd been bad blood between us practically since I was born. Who knew what her true motives were for this sudden olive branch?

"Forgive me, Lady Salisbury, but though your words ring true, I cannot help but question them, for they sing such a different tune to the ones you used to use, both to me and to my mother."

"Elizabeth! Bessie…" Hurt sparked in Mary's eyes as I treated her so formally and my childhood name, the name my full sister still called me, fell from her lips before my icy gaze stopped her in her tracks.

Regaining control of herself, she started again on a different tack.

"Sister, listen. I signed the Oath and declared myself a bastard three years ago. I served you in your household for almost five times that. I've never harmed a hair on either of your heads. I've never even thought about it. And I didn't lay a hand on the twins either. What more do I have to do to prove my loyalty to you?"

"Showing us some respect when you're not forced to do so would be nice," I retorted acidly. Blanche made as if to reach for my arm and I drew a shaky breath, willing myself to stay calm, even if it was only for her sake. She hated it when I fought with anyone.

Mary's eyes, too, flashed briefly, before she also took a breath and continued, "Look at the situation
through my eyes, Elizabeth. What could I gain from pushing myself ahead of you? Even my own cousin, the Emperor, clearly now accepts you as Father's heiress in my stead, since he proposed betrothing you to his son Phillip. I am alone in the world. There is no point in fighting for my old place any longer. No point in us fighting any longer. Besides, do you really think I relish the idea of being outranked by an insufferable…insufferable…” Mary struggled to find the words to describe our half-brother.

"Bastard of a Seymour brat?" I suggested wryly, hoping to relieve the tension a little.

"Yes! That." Mary chuckled despite herself and, for the briefest of moments, we laughed together as though we were truly sisters.

Then Mary got up, checked herself, and actually asked, "With Your Highnesses' permission?"

I glanced at Blanche, then nodded, pleased to see her observing protocol for once.

"You may go, Lady Salisbury."

She left and I picked up my cards once more.

"Three Kings, Blanche!" I laid some down, daring my little sister to challenge me.

"You're bluffing, Bessie! I've got the other Kings!" Blanche boasted gleefully, before realising her mistake and clapping a hand over her mouth.

Laughing, I nodded and turned my cards over to reveal two Kings and a Jack. Pushing a wooden counter, which we were using instead of real coins, towards my sister, I held out my hand for her remaining cards in order to shuffle again.

"Try not to tell me this time!" I teased as I dealt.

With that, we were off.

"Would you trust her, Anne? If you were in my shoes, would you trust her?" I pulled my needle through the sash I was embroidering for my sister as I glanced up at my stepmother.

I was spending the afternoon with her and as Mary was praying in the chapel, as she so often was, I had seized the opportunity to ask Anne's advice.

"I'd have no reason not to, Elizabeth. After all, she's certainly right about your brother," Anne admitted.

"I know, but…it's just such a sudden change of heart. After all these years…”I trailed off, concentrating instead on the finer details of my work.

"Maybe she's just shaken by your father's recent illness," Anne suggested, "Either way, your caution is commendable, Elizabeth, but I believe that Mary is genuine in her offer. Trust her. After all, she's serving well enough as my companion, isn't she?"

"She always liked you, though." I retorted, though my heart was truly lightened by Anne's assurances and eventually, I sighed.

"Very well. I'll trust her for now. After all, I suppose I can always banish her to a nunnery if it doesn't work out and she betrays me."
"Elizabeth!"

"What? Wouldn't that be well within my rights as Queen?"

"She's your sister!"

"So? Blanche is my sister too, but I often wish I could banish her when she's annoying me!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Elizabeth! Be serious!"

"I am being serious!"

At my vehement protestations, Anne collapsed into peals of laughter.

"I won't tell Blanche that!"

"Why not? I do!"

"Oh! Go on, you'd better go. You've got a dancing lesson to get to!"

"Yes, Cousin," Rising with a quick half-curtsy, I left Anne still wiping her eyes and hurried to meet my dancing master in the gallery.

Anne's assurances that she would trust Mary giving me confidence, I sought my elder half-sister out after Mass one morning.

"Mary? Lady Salisbury? A word, if you please?"

"Of course, Your Highness," Mary stepped aside at my voice to turn and follow me into the privacy of an alcove.

"I've been thinking about what you said and I agree. We ought to work together."

"Good. I'm glad." Mary's tentative smile widened as I reached up and unclasped one of the necklaces I was wearing, pressing it into her hand.

"I'd like you to take this as a token of our friendship and agreement."

"Of course." Mary slipped the necklace around her neck, then looped the rosary she usually wore at her belt around mine.

"As you give me your friendship and your sister's, so I give both of you mine, Princess," she murmured, using my title in private for the first time.

I gave her my hand and she squeezed it for the shortest instant and then the two of us left the alcove together, both of us our father's true-born daughters.

A few months later, news came from Buckinghamshire that Lady Mary Stafford had been delivered of another healthy daughter, this one named Anne after her younger sister. As promised, she asked Blanche to be the godmother, so Blanche travelled to see her and hold her new goddaughter at the baptismal font.

Ordinarily, I would have gone with Blanche, but what with Anne quite keen to see to it that Blanche and I learnt to manage without each other, I let her travel alone.
I didn't mind much, but not being able to see Mary's new wards, the twins, was painful. I sent gifts for them with Blanche, and a letter that told them that I loved them and was thinking of them and that I hoped they were happy with Lady Stafford.

And when Blanche came home, for once, it was me jumping up to greet her, and not the other way around.

"How are they? Nora, Jess, Mary, little Annie, all of them? How are they?"

"Let me sit down, Bessie!" Blanche teased, flinging her travelling cloak off as she spoke. I flushed.

"Sorry. I've just missed you. And the others. I just want to know they're all right. But Essex seems to have agreed with you, Blanche. You look happy; happier than you were when you left," I hugged my little sister to me, before letting her sit down and pouring her a glass of apple juice myself, "Here."

"Thanks. They're all well. Little Annie's really sweet. She's a true rose. She looks just like Lady Stafford."

"Maybe they should have named her after you, then. You're the other blonde in the family," I teased, and Blanche shook her head.

"I couldn't have asked that, Bessie. I'm so thrilled they chose me to be Godmother!"

"I know you are." I smiled at my little sister, before continuing, "How are the twins?"

"Jess and Nora are so happy, Bessie, really. They love Lady Stafford as if she was their own mother and they already call Katy their sister."

"Oh…" I drew in my breath, trying not to show how Blanche's words hurt. Even though I was thrilled to hear that Jess and Nora were happy, it hurt to think of them loving Lady Stafford as though she was their mother. I couldn't blame them; they'd never really known Mama, after all, but she was still their mother, just as much as she was mine. I couldn't help but feel that they were betraying her memory; just a little.

Shaking my head to clear it of such thoughts – it wasn't their fault and I couldn't blame them for it, I sat back and let my little sister tell me all about the Christening, the words washing over me as she went into storytelling mode.

"Oh, Bessie, Lady Stafford wanted me to give you this." Blanche suddenly broke off her story to hand me a folded piece of parchment. Taking it from her, I rose and went to the window to read it.

"Your Highness,

For the formality of the address, but I didn't know how else to start this letter, for it is a difficult letter for me to write. I'm writing to ask that neither you nor the Princess Blanche come to visit the twins any more here in Essex. I know that you only mean well by visiting; that you want to show that you care for them because they are your sisters, but honestly, it only unsettles them. They were both extremely upset last night because Blanche was due to leave early this morning. They didn't want her to leave and she didn't want to leave them either.

I'm not saying you can't write or send them gifts, but please, personal visits will be too hard on all of us here and on you both. Besides, wasn't the entire reason for sending them to live with me so that your father wouldn't find out how much you and Blanche love your little sisters? Visits to them would be too hard to conceal, Princess."
I'm begging you, for the sake of the girls' happiness and security, as well for your relationship with your father, stay away. When you are Queen, things will be different, but until that day, until you are God's anointed Queen, please don't come to visit us.

I apologise if this letter distresses you, but rest assured I only have your family's best interests at heart. I hope you will not think too harshly of me for it.

God Bless you, Princess, and the Princess Blanche too,

Yours truly,

Lady Mary Stafford.

I couldn't help myself. My knees buckled and I had to catch hold of the window frame to keep myself upright.

"What is it, Bessie?" Blanche was at my side in an instant. I handed her the letter, unable to speak.

She read less swiftly than I did, but when she had finished the missive, her eyes just filled with tears.

"So we can't see them, ever again?"

"Not until I'm Queen," I corrected, but my voice was hollow. I couldn't believe Mary Stafford would do this to me; keep me away from my own sisters. And the worst of it was that I could understand her logic. She did just have our best interests at heart. Because of it, I couldn't even appeal to Anne. She'd only back her sister up and I knew it.

"Are you going to appeal to Mama?" Blanche asked. I shook my head.

"There's no point, Blanche. If Lady Stafford's written this, then she must have Anne's approval. Anne will only say it's for the best. We'll just have to accept it; accept it and write to Jess and Nora as often as we can."

"But it's not fair!" Blanche startled me by screaming out loud in a way she hadn't done since Mama died. "They're our sisters! Why can't we see them if we want to?"

"Because they're not Papa's daughters! Because they're not Princesses! Surely you can understand that!"

I knew I was being harsh, but I was in shock myself. Blanche lashed out at me, suddenly uncharacteristically furious.

"And that makes it all right, does it? All right to lock them away as if they're not worthy of us? They're still our sisters! They're still our sisters and I love them even if you don't!"

Swiping tears from her eyes, she raced for the door. I chased after her, catching her round the waist from behind, spinning her to face me.

"That's not true! You know that's not true, Blanche! I love Jessie and Nora just as much as I love you."

"Then talk to Lady Stafford! Make her see that we have to see them!"

"I can't. I can't. You know what it used to be like when Papa came to see us. They were never allowed out of their rooms. They couldn't even make a noise, in case it reminded Papa they were
there. And we always had to be on our guard, all the time. With what we said, with what we did. We couldn't mention them once. Do you really want to have to go back to that? Because I don't. I'm happy now; now that Jess and Nora are being cared for. Just because we can't see them doesn't mean we can't love them. They're still our sisters, Blanche. Nothing, not even death, can change that. I promise. And when I'm Queen, I'll see to it that they come to Court. You can have them in your household if you want, as Maids of Honour. In private, we can be the four sisters we used to be."

"Promise?" Blanche's voice was small, raw with emotion. I rocked her gently, hugging her as she buried her face in my chest.

"I promise. Just hold on."

"How long, Bessie? How long do we have to wait to treat them like our true-born sisters?"

Rubbing my little sister's back soothingly, I kissed her golden hair and murmured, "Until I'm Queen. Blanche. Until I'm Queen."
I was sitting at the table in Kenilworth Palace, breakfasting with Blanche, when there was a sudden commotion outside and Anne, George, Mary and Edward Brandon suddenly burst in on us.

"Anne! Your Majesty! Lord Ormonde! Mary! Lord Edward! What's going on?"

I sprang up, startled at their abrupt, dishevelled appearance, wondering what on Earth the matter could be. I was not expecting Anne to drop to her knees before me.

"Your Majesty."

My eyes snapped to George Boleyn's face, then to Mary's.

"You mean…"

"Yes, Elizabeth. Your father's dead. The King is dead. Long Live the Queen!" George, too, dropped to one knee before me.

"Long Live Queen Elizabeth!" Edward knelt more slowly than the others, but the fervour that burned in his eyes and rang in his voice was enough to assure me of his loyalty to me a thousand times over.

Blanche looked from the kneeling adults to me and then half-rose.

"Bessie?" Her voice shook with grief and shock. As I had expected. The last two years had made her little better at controlling her emotions and her outer shell had hardly developed either.

I longed to fold her into my arms and hold her as she cried, but I wasn't just her older sister any more. I was her Queen.

In the end, it was the Lady Mary who gently took Blanche into her embrace and held her as she coaxed her into curtsying to me as befitted a Princess curtingy to her Queen.

I saw the respect my sister was paying me, as she had done once before, almost two years earlier, but this time, instead of pleasing me, it tore at my heart. The pain in her voice was so clear, it nearly brought me out in tears. I had to grit my teeth to keep myself together as I spoke to George Boleyn.

"How long ago?"

"Two days, My Lady Queen. We've ridden hard ever since."

"I don't doubt it, my Lord Ormonde and I thank you for it, but I think Blanche and I will retire to be alone for a while before we speak again."

I knew it was perhaps unwise to retire not knowing the full extent of the situation, but I was only sixteen. Sixteen and grieving for my father. And my sister was only eleven. She wouldn't even be twelve till June. She wasn't much more than a child. She needed comfort even more than I did. We needed each other. We needed to be together; to be sisters, to be the way we used to be, not Queen and subject.
And Anne understood that. When her brother, the new Earl of Ormonde since their father's death the previous autumn, made to protest she touched his arm with a quiet murmur.

"Let them be, George. They're only girls. Don't you remember what it was like when Papa died? When Mama died?"

He hesitated for a moment, then swept us a bow and went to open the door for us.

"As you wish, Your Majesty. Your Highness."

"All right, Lord Ormonde. Tell me what the current situation is."

That afternoon, still red-eyed from the morning of private grief that I had allowed myself in the company of my sister, I faced my step-uncle, ready to hear everything that he wanted to tell me.

"Your father's death was announced by Sir Anthony Denny two days ago and my sister, the Lady Mary, Lord Edward and myself rode here to Kenilworth almost immediately. We wanted to be the first to tell you."

"I see. Who else learned of my father's death?"

"The Duke of Richmond, of course. He is your half-brother and he was the closest to the palace of the three of you."

At George's words, I closed my eyes.

"Oh God. He'll make a play for the throne. We can be sure of that if nothing else."

"Yes, I'm afraid so. When we left Greenwich, less than a day after your father died, there was already talk at Court that he was planning to march on London."

"Then what do we do, George? He cannot be allowed to seize my throne! I am the rightful Queen, both by law and the will of the people. He is not the rightful King!"

"You need to gather your forces. Gather your forces, then march to meet him."

"But where do I go? If only I was near Hatfield…but up here, it is Mary who holds sway more than me. You know how conservative they are up here!" I groaned, silently cursing the day that Blanche and I had decided to come to Kenilworth.

"But we do have Warwick Castle, Madam. It is one of the greatest in England. Withdraw to Warwick Castle and raise your standard there. I should think every man, woman and child in England would rush to your side."

"I pray to God you're right, Lord Ormonde. But whatever else, I am my father's daughter. You can be sure that I will not let this throne go without a fight."

Just as I finished speaking, Edward Brandon looked in.

"We wait upon your orders, my Lady Queen." He exclaimed, saluting me with a respectful smile.

I sighed and pushed myself away from the table.

"Tell the servants and soldiers to prepare, Edward. We ride for Warwick within the hour. I want to get there before dark if at all possible. And send someone to watch my half-brother. I want to know
his movements."

"As you wish." Edward bowed, flashed me another, much warmer, more reassuring smile and then left the room.

We raised our standard at Warwick and, as George Boleyn had predicted, hundreds of men, women and children flocked to join us.

Fully aware that we might yet find ourselves in open warfare before I could claim my rightful throne, I turned away as many of the women and children as I could, with the promise that, if and when we got out of this safely, I would remember their loyalty to me and to England.

Nobles, too, began to come to me, pledging their allegiance to the trueborn daughter of Henry VIII more openly than they had ever done when he was alive. Among them, among the many nobles and members of the gentry who joined us were four men all from one family, a family which, though I didn't know it at the time, was to become inextricably linked with me and mine. The Dudleys.

They travelled up from Suffolk with Sir Charles Brandon and the five of them, Sir Charles, Sir John and his three eldest sons, knelt before me on the cold morning of the 3rd of February, swearing fealty.

Grateful to see them all, for they were all five strong healthy men who, young though Ambrose and Robert were, knew how to wield a sword, I smiled down upon them and waved my hand.

"Rise, my Lord Suffolk. And you, Sir John. I am most pleased to see you. We may yet have need of every sword we can lay our hands on before I am seated in my lawful place on the Throne of England."

"Then rest assured you have mine, My Lady. Mine and John's and Robert's and Ambrose's."

I nodded. "I accept them gratefully, Sir John and I swear to you here and now that I will see you recompensed for your loyalty."

"To see you safe on your throne is all I seek, Your Majesty. That in itself would be recompense enough."

"Still, you will be rewarded." I promised. I knew, as I was hoping my half-brother and his advisors did not, that it was no good merely forcing people to fight for you. Not if you omitted to promise them anything in return. They might not always say so outright, but soldiers always expected to be paid for their toil in one way or another. If you thought ahead and rewarded them before they asked, you could sometimes win their true and everlasting heartfelt loyalty; loyalty that lasted forever and not just the loyalty of pretty words and a common cause.

That was what I hoped to do with as many of the Lords who were currently flocking to my side as possible. Foreign alliances were all very well and good and I thanked God that I had two sisters and a cousin of marriageable age, or nearly so, at any rate, to help in that regard, but foreign alliances wouldn't help me rule the English people. There were too many precedents of things going sour for that.

No. To rule the English people, I needed the nobility. And for that, I also needed loyalty. I had Suffolk, I knew that, because of Charles and Edward Brandon, and Ireland, thanks to Blanche, while the North loved both Mary and myself, at least as long as we stood together. As long as we did, I held the North almost in the palm of my hand, but they truly followed Mary, not me. If she
broke from us, I'd lose them. Nor did I truly have the Midlands. Nor Wales, for all I was Duchess of Pembroke as well as of York. Nor even parts of the South like Richmond, where my brother Edward was lord and master.

I would have to win all those places over fully with justice, due rewards and time. Winning a family such as the Dudleys to my side was just the start of the battle.

Those thoughts in mind, I smiled down at the five men in front of me and dismissed them with another grateful wave of my hand, as befitted a Queen of England, Wales, France and Ireland.
Chapter 14

Not all the nobles were as loyal as the Dudleys, however. Barely a day more had passed before a messenger rode into the castle, saying that he brought news of my half-brother and requesting an audience with me.

Since I was already seated in the Great Chamber at Warwick with Anne, George, Mary, Blanche, Edward and his father Charles Brandon, planning my next move, I had him shown in to speak to all of us at once.

"Now, James. You have come from the camp of His Grace the Duke of Richmond, have you not? Tell us the latest news. What of his campaign to seize the throne?"

"When I left them, My Lady Queen, Sir Edward Seymour was talking of riding to seize Colchester."

"Colchester? Why Colchester?" I glanced at George, Charles and Anne and saw the same question in their eyes. Colchester, big city though it was, was the wrong side of London from Richmond. Why were they riding there?

James's next words answered my question, but they dealt us a heavy blow in the process.

"It seems that they have struck some sort of an alliance with Lord Henry Brandon."

There was a collective gasp in the room at his words.

Lord Henry Brandon was my cousin by my father's younger sister Princess Mary. He also happened to be my sweetheart Edward's older brother and his father's heir. To have him throw in his lot with my half-brother was a shock to all of us.

"I'll kill him!" Charles Brandon's roar exploded into the silence. "I swear to God that I will kill him for this!"

To my horror, I realised that I was shaking, shaking with emotions that I couldn't even name. Without another word, I sprang up and rushed out of the room.

"Elizabeth!" I heard Anne shout after me, but I ignored her. I had to ignore her. If I was to keep my sanity, then I had to be alone.

"Elizabeth? Your Majesty?"

I heard the voice behind me as I stood on the battlements of Warwick Castle and recognised it instantly.

"I can't do this, Edward! I can't be the Queen everyone wants me to be!"

"Yes you can. You're half-Howard, half-Tudor and the best half of both. There's no one more suited to ruling this country than you." Edward came up behind me, wanting to comfort me as he would have done before, but not quite daring to because of my new-found status. I leaned my copper head back against his shoulder, silently breaking protocol. He slipped his arms around my waist, holding me loosely. Even though I relaxed at his touch, however, I couldn't shake the sense of failure that had plagued me ever since the audience that morning.
"No, I'm not. Didn't you see how I fled the room this morning?"

"You'd had a shock. It was understandable. Besides, you're still grieving for your father. People will forgive you a lot for that. It shows that royals have emotions like the rest of us." Edward soothed in a whisper.

"Mary would never have done that. She would have known what to do. When the news came that your brother had defected, people looked to me and I didn't know what to do. I thought I had Suffolk; that I could rely on it. I didn't know what to do, Edward!"

"You still can. You have my father and you have me. You can still rely on Suffolk."

"Henry's the heir, though. He's the de facto ruler when your father's at Court."

"Not any more. Didn't you hear my father's outburst this morning, Elizabeth? He's disinherited Henry. I'm Earl of Lincoln now."

"So you'll be Duke of Suffolk." I turned in his hold to face him, almost reaching for his cheek, but not quite doing it. Edward nodded.

"I will. One day. And I can tell you now that, as long as I rule it, Suffolk will be loyal to you." Edward promised, brushing my lips with his in the faintest of kisses.

I exhaled slowly, feeling my racing heart change its tempo from agitation to thrilling bliss. And then a second, wildly horrible thought struck me.

"What if the people don't see me as the true Queen? They hate my mother and, anyway, that was a second marriage. What if people think that the Lady Mary should be Queen, not me?"

"Elizabeth Tudor. Are you not His Majesty's trueborn daughter? Weren't you his best girl Bessie? His Princess of Roses?"

"True…true, but still. Mary's the eldest. The pearl of his world, she once was. The girl who never cried."

"But the marriage was invalid. Legally, you're the eldest daughter. Everyone knows that, Elizabeth. And your father knew it too. He loved you as his trueborn daughter and heiress. Always. You were his Tudor Princess and now you are my Tudor Queen."

Edward looked as though he might kiss me again, but he didn't, instead tightening his hold on my waist. I sighed and pressed myself against him once more.

"I just want this over with. I just want to be Queen in truth as well as in name. I just want to rid myself of my half-brother once and for all."

"Then it's time we went south. Rode to London. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes." I breathed, glad Edward was able to give voice to the burning desire inside me. He unwound his arms from around my waist and stepped back.

"I'll go and tell my father and Lord Ormonde. They'll organise everything. Your wish is our command."

He half-bowed to me and made to move away, but I called him back.

"Lord Lincoln?"
"Yes, Your Grace?"

Leaning forward, I captured his lips with mine, kissing him firmly.

"Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You don't even have to consider that." With one last quick embrace and a bow, Edward left me turning everything we had said to one another over in my mind.

Little did I know that Mary had followed Edward up to find me and had therefore been witness to our entire exchange. I never did find out either, or not until later, at least, for she slipped away before I noticed her. However, alarmed at my obvious feelings for Edward, she went straight to Anne about it.

Of course, Anne already knew that Edward and I were fond of each other, so she wasn't surprised by Mary's news, or even the slightest bit worried.

In fact, she even managed to talk Mary into agreeing that, if I was to be an even more attractive prospect as a Queen Regnant for the commoners than I already was compared to my bastard half-brother, then it would probably be best if I already had a consort at my side as my husband.

It was an unprecedented move and a slight gamble, but even Mary could see the sense in it. Edward and I were both sixteen going on seventeen. Married, we stood a far better chance of providing the common people with the security that they so craved; security that my half-brother couldn't provide, no matter how hard he might try. If God smiled on us, we might even be able to give them the longed-for heir, the Prince or Princess of Wales that they wanted so desperately.

Knowing my half-sister approved of her decision to ask Edward and me if we would consider the sacrament of marriage, Anne rode up to me just as we were setting out for London.

"Elizabeth? Can I talk you for a moment?"

"Of course, Anne. What is it?"

"I wondered, if, well, if you'd ever considered marriage." Anne, uncharacteristically nervous, looked sideways at me as I nudged Sovereign into a walk.

"What kind of a question is that? I'm a Princess born and bound to wed. Of course I have." Startled by Anne's question, I answered her more snappishly than was perhaps necessary. Sovereign shied at my tone and Anne put out a hand to catch his rein and steady him as she continued to press me.

"Have you given any thought as to who you might marry?"

I shrugged. "A foreign Prince, I suppose. Or a Royal Duke. I can't say I look forward to it, but it is what's expected of me."

"Oh. So you've never considered marrying an Englishman? Not even in your wildest dreams? Not even, oh, I don't know, a certain future Duke?"

At that, my head snapped up and I looked Anne in the eyes for the first time since our conversation had begun. "Edward Brandon? Do you really think the nobles will accept him as my Consort? One of their own?"

"Why not? They accepted your mother and me as their Queens, didn't they? His birth's just as good
"But Father had married a Princess before he married you or Mama. It doesn't matter whether his
marriage was valid or not; he went through the motions. I haven't done that. Besides, Edward's
only my age. He's only sixteen. And England will need alliances in the years to come. Much as I'd
love to marry him, I'm not sure it's such a good idea."

"We need to get England under control before we look for alliances abroad, Elizabeth. You know
that as well as I do. And you know how much your father's people will do for the prospect of a
Prince. If you and Edward were married, you could offer them that possibility better than your
half-brother ever could. And as for the alliances, Mary's of marriageable age. Blanche isn't far off,
and I could marry again as well. I'm only 19, remember. I'll be twenty next month."

"Well, I'm not going to force Edward to marry me." I cut Anne off, unnerved by the fact that we
were already discussing the prospect of her remarriage, not even a month after my father's death. "I
love him too much for that, Cousin. You should know that by now. If he asks me, then I'll say yes,
both for my own happiness and for the good of England, but I'm not going to force him into the
role of King Consort, not if he doesn't want to play that role. That's my final word on the subject."

Spurring Sovereign on, I cantered away from Anne, riding to the head of the procession, where I
could better acknowledge the cheers of the common people as they began to line the streets of
Warwick as the word spread that I, Elizabeth Tudor, was marching south at the head of an army to
seize the throne that was rightfully mine.
We moved as quickly as we could after that, drawing up a plan as we went. Blanche and I were to seek sanctuary in Westminster Abbey if things got really nasty, while our army marched to secure the rest of London.

It was hoped that, by seeking sanctuary, like my Yorkist Great-Grandmother, Elizabeth Woodville, before me, I could secure public sympathy for my cause even more than I already had.

Meanwhile, nearly every messenger we passed on the road brought news of my half-brother, so that we knew his movements almost as well as he himself did.

True, the fact that the Seymours and their mercenary army had marched into Colchester and taken it was a blow, but key city though it was, it wasn't London. It wasn't England's capital.

"We can win Colchester back some other time." Edward promised me, holding me as I raged, railing against fate, against my half-brother, against everything. "As soon as we've won London, Colchester will follow, Elizabeth. I promise."

"How can you be so sure? If we've lost Colchester, who's to say that we won't lose London?"

"London is loyal to your family. We won't lose it. Particularly not if we offer them a sixteen year old woman as their Queen; a woman who has been trained to rule from childhood and might be able to produce an heir, rather than a twelve year old boy who won't be able to marry for another two years at least."

"Able to produce an heir?" I pounced on a fragment of Edward's speech instantly, leaning back against him carelessly, smiling that coquettish half-smile that came so naturally both to my mother and to me.

"Yes. Able to produce an heir." Pulling away from me, Edward dropped to one knee and stretched out his hand to me.

"Elizabeth Tudor. Your Majesty. Queen of England, Ireland and France and Queen of my heart. Will you marry me? I know I am naught but your humble subject, but will you marry me?"

My heart literally soared at his little speech and I smiled down at him.

"In a moment such as this, could any woman say no?"

"In a moment such as this, could a Queen say no?"

"Absolutely…" I hesitated for the merest fraction of a second, just to tease him, before exclaiming "Not!" and reaching out to help him up. "Of course I'll marry you, Edward. Of course I'll become Elizabeth Brandon-Tudor. I shall be Elizabeth Brandon-Tudor, Queen of England, Ireland and France and you shall be my husband. You shall be King, Edward. How do you like that, my love?"

"I like it very well indeed, Your Majesty."

"I'm glad, Lord Lincoln. You deserve nothing less."

With that, I pressed my lips to his, letting my inborn passion bubble up and melt between us in the
heat of the moment.

"Do you, Elizabeth Tudor, take this man, Lord Edward Brandon, Earl of Lincoln, to be your lawful wedded husband; to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer and for better or for worse, until death do you part? Do you vow to love him and cherish him and to forsake all other men for him, now and forever, as long as you both shall live?"

Glancing at Edward through the fine mesh of my silver veil, I nodded. "I do so solemnly swear."

Pleased with my answer, the officiating priest nodded and I felt Edward's hand squeeze mine, just briefly, as the priest turned to him.

"And do you, Lord Edward Brandon, Earl of Lincoln, take this woman, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth Tudor of England, France and Ireland, to be your lawfully wedded wife; to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer and for better or for worse, until death do you part? Do you swear to love her and cherish her and to forsake all other women for her, now and forever, as long as you both shall live?"

Edward didn't look at me as I had looked at him before responding, but his hand tightened on mine again and his voice rang the rafters of Oxford's St Mary Magdalene Church as he said "I do so solemnly swear."

At Edward's words, Blanche and Ambrose Dudley stepped forward, carrying our rings. Blanche beamed at me as I accepted the finely-wrought silver trinket from her and I chuckled under my breath at her obvious delight before turning to Edward and slipping it on to his hand.

"With this ring, I thee wed."

Edward inclined his head to Ambrose, silently thanking him, then gently enclosed my hand in his once more, looking me straight in the eyes as he murmured "Elizabeth Tudor, with this ring, I thee wed."

I couldn't wait any longer. Scorning propriety, I threw back my veil and the chaplain had to almost gable his permission for Edward to kiss me if he was to regain any control of the situation.

There was laughter and applause as our lips met and then, hand in hand, we left the church, ready to ride to London.

The common people went wild with joy when they heard of my marriage to Edward and they lined the streets of our route to London, cheering us. We were hailed as another Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville; another Edward III and Good Queen Phillippa; another Henry VII and Elizabeth of York.

And when my half-brother tried to march from Colchester to meet us in open warfare, half his army defected almost before he reached the battlefield.

My new husband confidently predicted that it would be the work of a morning to defeat him and his remaining rabble and he was right, in a way. However, it was a long and bitter morning. My army rode out under the guidance of my father in law and step-uncle just as dawn was breaking and rode back into our camp, grey and exhausted, while I was having lunch with Anne and my sisters.

Edward looked particularly shaken and I ran to him like a common woman as he dismounted.
"What happened? Edward, what happened?"

"We made them turn tail and captured your half-brother, but we lost Ambrose Dudley. He went down fighting in the thick of it. And that's not the worst of it. My father had to fight his own son in single hand to hand combat before he was able to drive Henry into exile. His own son, Elizabeth. And I watched him do it. I watched him do it."

Edward's voice shook with exhausted horror at the mere memory. I reached for him and led him inside without another word. I might be unchallenged Queen, but my crown had come at a heavy price. My own husband had lost his brother, or as good as lost him and my most trusted allies had lost a son and a brother. I would have to repay them at some point in the near future.

Right now, however, I had to play the devoted wife rather than the Queen and try to comfort my husband.
Chapter 16

The next morning, I called a Council of all my trusted allies, in order to be able to plan my first moves as Queen.

Of course, the vital matter of what to do with my half-brother was first on the agenda. His uncles might have been slain on the battlefield and his other general, the former Lord Henry Brandon forced into exile, but he was still the Duke of Richmond and Somerset. He was still a powerful force in his own right. And to make matters worse, he wasn't even thirteen. Unless I wanted to be known as a tyrannical monster, I couldn't order his death. Particularly not since he was my half-brother.

"Much as I hate to admit it, he is my brother. We share the same father; the same blood. I can't execute him. But he's a thorn in my side. I can't just let him roam free to do whatever he likes. He's too powerful for that."

"Well, strip him of some titles, then." Blanche spoke up suddenly. I glanced at her in surprise. "What? I understand politics better than you might think, Bessie. He'd be able to do us far less damage as the Earl of Nottingham than he would as the Duke of Richmond and Somerset."

"That's not enough, though. Father talked of doing that before, just for discourtesy towards our cousin the Queen Dowager, Blanche. Edward's an out and out traitor now. I'd be well within my rights to kill him if I wanted to."

"Your Majesty, no! Lord Edward is just a child!" Charles Brandon exclaimed. I rounded on him. "Lord Nottingham is twelve! He should know enough of the world by now to be able to be held accountable for his own actions! If it wasn't for the memory of my father, I would kill him!"

"Well, throw him in the Tower, then. An indefinite spell in confines such as those should cure Lord Edward of any royal pretensions that he may have."

"Your Grace, you do not know my brother as I know him. Nothing could quash that bastard's pride. Even if I left him in the Tower for the rest of his life, he would still be as arrogant as he was the day he was first incarcerated." I raised my eyebrows and Anne, sensing that my temper was hanging by a very fine thread, smoothly stepped in to compromise.

"I agree that, whatever we do with His Grace, he will need to be closely watched, but it wouldn't be wise to keep him too confined. He might attract more sympathy for his cause in the Tower than he might otherwise do. Than he has at the moment, for example. If we lowered him in rank to the Earl of Nottingham, confined him to the Tower for a while, say until Her Majesty's coronation, for example and then put him under house arrest, well, no one can say that we haven't been more than generous to him, given the circumstances."

"There's no way I'm ever receiving him at Court, understand? Sparing his life is about as merciful as I'll be."

"You wouldn't have to receive him. We could keep him buried in the countryside if that's what you want." Anne assured me.
"Fair enough. But who's willing to take him on? To watch over him? He won't be the easiest of house guests."

"I will, Your Majesty." John Dudley half-stood as he spoke, catching my eye for the briefest of instants. "Difficult though Lord Edward may be, I believe that his presence in our house will help my family come to terms with Ambrose's death."

"You shouldn't have to come to terms with it, Sir John." I murmured. "I am truly, deeply sorry."

"I appreciate your condolences, Madam, but Ambrose died fighting for Queen and country. There's no death more honourable than that."

"I'm glad that's how you feel. He will be buried as befits his station and you will be honoured for your loyalty." I promised yet again, before turning back to the others in the room.

"All right. We are decided. My half-brother will henceforth be known as the Earl of Nottingham and will spend the time up to my coronation residing in the Tower, before being released into house arrest under the care of Sir John Dudley. Yes?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." They all chorused agreement as I rose, half-smiling.

"Good. I'm glad that's settled. Now, I intend to ride out with my sister Blanche and my husband, but Sir John, would you see to it that he's waiting for me upon our return, please? I want to speak to him before he goes to the Tower."

"Yes, Madam." Sir John smiled as he bowed before me and then I swept from the room, Blanche and Edward arm in arm half a pace behind me.

An hour or two later, refreshed and calmed by my ride with my two closest family members, I returned to the chamber I had been in earlier, wearing my finest gown of cloth of silver trimmed with gold velvet ribbon. My hair, pinned up and woven with diamonds, gleamed under the regal tiara that Anne had leant me for the occasion, since we still hadn't ridden to London to reclaim my rightful jewels from the Treasury at the Tower.

I had promised myself that I would try to act the calm, collected Queen and not let my emotions get the better of me, but I still couldn't restrain the surge of triumph that swelled in my breast as Edward entered the room, hands tied behind his back and was forced to abase himself before me.

Dismissing the guard with a nod, I looked down at Edward and glared at him for a split-second before composing myself.

"Lord Nottingham. You know why you're here. You know what I've sentenced you to. Have you anything to say?"

"Nothing, sister, save that you are sitting on my throne and that one day, I shall win it back from you."

"I doubt that very much, Sir Edward. You are a bastard, born out of wedlock to a Seymour harlot, albeit one who was lucky enough to secure royal favour for herself. I, on the other hand, am a trueborn Princess of England."

"How do we know that? You say you are, but who knows? Given who your mother is…"

"Watch it. You're a convicted traitor as it is. Need I remind you that I have power of life or death
"But you won't use it." Edward taunted. "None of you Howards would. You're all talk and no action. That's why you won't make a good Queen. Why you don't deserve the throne. You, your mother, your cousin. You're all the same. Inconsistent, fickle, swayed by passions. If the time came when you had to choose between your love and your country, well, who's to say that you'd choose the country like I would?"

Crack! My hand contacted with Edward's cheek as hard as it possibly could. He reeled back, half-dazed by the force of the blow. Poisoning him with my gaze, I hissed "I've wanted to do that for a very long time."

My voice quite literally throbbed with anger. Calling for the guards to take my bastard brother away to the Tower; seeing the merest hint of fear behind his arrogant bravado was the most satisfying thing that I'd ever done. My heart almost sang and I nearly laughed out loud in triumph as he was hustled out of my life for the last time.

The awkward matter of my half-brother settled to everyone's satisfaction, we prepared to ride into London.

Determined to make a favourable impression on my people, I wore a tight riding habit of sumptuous emerald velvet with a matching hood. Meanwhile, Edward dressed in white satin so that, together, we made up the Tudor colours of green and white. With Blanche in sky blue and Anne and Mary both in lavish scarlet, escorted by George Boleyn and my father in law, who were both were wearing smart navy damask, we made up a glittering party as we trotted towards the gates of the city, Edward and I both making use of our prowess on horseback to ride hand in hand, controlling our horses one handed and presenting our people with the sign of a new start and the hope of a joyful, peaceful union.

Even as we mounted up and clattered out of the palace gates, however, I knew Edward was keeping something from me. He kept glancing around far too much for him not to be. Besides, his eyes didn't light up as much as usual, not even when he smiled, as he was doing for the sake of the people.

I was half worried about him; worried that I was pushing him into the role of England's King Consort too quickly, before he was ready for it, but upon reaching London's gates, I saw the true reason for his agitation.

As we rode up, a woman in her mid to late twenties and three little girls stepped forward from the crowd to curtsy to us. The oldest of the girls presented me with a wreath of flowers for my hair, so I took my hood off and fitted the clumsily woven circlet on to my head, blowing the child a kiss by way of a thank you.

Then the other two girls, identical twins, dropped to the ground in second curtsies, their childish voices ringing as they said in perfect unison "God Bless You, Queen Elizabeth. We thank God that you have succeeded where others unfit to be named have failed and we are both pleased and honoured to present to you the keys of London."

They had clearly been coached in the words; they sounded far too grown up for their age, but their charming, impish smiles disarmed me, particularly when, as they rose and I leaned down from the saddle to take the keys in my hand, our eyes met and recognition sparked.

"Sister." I gasped, knowing all of a sudden that it was Nora who stood before me. Two years older,
it was true, but nonetheless, still Nora. I gazed at her, silently drinking in her brown eyes, her dark hair, her pale creamy skin. Tears pricked at my eyelids, but I fought them back. I was Queen of England. I couldn't break down. Not here, not now.

"God Bless You, Beth." Jess's soft whisper as she went to rejoin Mary Boleyn and her daughter Katy by the gates galvanised me into action. To Hell with propriety! These were my sisters! My beloved little sisters who'd been torn from me far too long ago!

Tumbling from the saddle, I threw the keys to Edward and held out my arms to the twins.

"Jess! Nora! Come here."

They were hesitant at first, but another, half-pleading smile won them over. They were still my little sisters. Queen or not, I was still their Beth.

Falling to my knees, I clutched the twins to me as they flew into my arms. Laughing and crying all at once, raining kisses down upon their dark hair, I forgot everything but their presence; the warmth of their proximity. We weren't Queen and subjects, we were simply three sisters; sisters joyfully reunited after far too long a separation.

"If this is how Elizabeth greets all her subjects, then England is indeed in safe hands." Edward's voice broke into the joy of the moment.

Only then did I realise that everyone around us was cheering and applauding, enraptured by the open display of affection between me and my beloved little sisters.

Rising, I kissed them both yet again, murmuring "Did I not promise you that we'd see each other again?" into Jess's ear as I held out my hands to them and led them back the few paces to the horses.

"Do you want to ride into London with us?" I asked, noting with a pang how much taller they were against me now than they used to be.

The light that sprang into their eyes at the question, however, was still the same light as the one that I had cherished all those years ago.

"Yes please, Beth!"

"Come on then." Smiling, I wrapped my arms around Nora's waist and boosted her up on to Edward's saddle, silently thanking him for arranging this as I did so.

It was slightly more challenging getting Jess into my own saddle, because, without a rider to hold him steady, Sovereign sidestepped at the unexpected weight, but he calmed down quickly enough as I soothed him in a whisper.

One of the watching men was quick to offer me a hand back into the saddle, which I gratefully accepted. Settling myself behind my younger sister, I gathered my reins, enclosing her in my hold as I did so.

"Smile, Jessie. All Princesses have to smile at their people, no matter how they feel. You're like a Princess today, so smile. Smile your happiest smile."

As Jess nodded and did as I bid her, I flashed a glance at Blanche and Mary to tell them to fall into line behind us, so that, when I pushed Sovereign forward into a walk, my husband and Nora perfectly beside myself and Jess, I rode into London surrounded by my sisters.
Chapter 18

I was sitting in my bedchamber; Kat brushing my hair to prepare me for my first Privy Council meeting, when there was a knock at the door and Anne entered, dropping a swift curtsy to me.

"Your Majesty."

"Cousin." I nodded, treating her the way I always had, warmly and informally.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Of course."

"I know you've got your first Privy Council meeting this morning and I wanted to warn you to make any moves that favour Eleanor and Jessica Culpepper too much."

"And why not? They are my little sisters."

"Yes, but listen. I know you love them dearly, but in the eyes of the world, they are nothing but the unlawful offspring of a Howard -," Anne caught herself before she could call my mother a whore or a slut, instead hurrying on to the next part of her point, "Unlike your half-brother, they don't even have royal blood in their veins. Your mother may have been Queen when she gave birth to them, but that power came from her marriage to your father, not her blood. Eleanor and Jessica haven't inherited it. If they had, it might redeem them from the taint of illegitimacy, but as it is, you can't treat them as your sisters, as you would Blanche, for example, or even the Lady Mary."

"That's not fair! Why should they have to be punished for our mother's sins?"

"It's just the way it is, Elizabeth. There's nothing we can do. Even the way you greeted them yesterday and let you ride into London with you was dangerous. You shouldn't have done it. The nobles forgave you because you were young and victorious; in the first flush of your triumph. It also happened to make a fine show for the common people, which helped, but they'll resent it if you continue to show Jess and Nora such favour."

I opened my mouth to protest, then closed it again. Inwardly, I knew Anne was right. I couldn't fawn over the twins the way my father had fawned over his bastard in his lifetime. Queen I might be, but my power didn't stretch that far. Not yet, at any rate. Still…

"I want to be able to treat them well, Anne. Invite them to Court, at least. I lost them once, I'm not losing them again."

"I've thought of that." Anne assured me, "My sister is to take a new house in London, now that her husband is my Master of Horse. She won't live without the children, so Katy, Anne, Jess and Nora will be joining her. As will her youngest, Henry. If they're in London, you can either see them by paying a visit to my sister, or they can come to Court with her. When you're alone, in private, then you can be sisters, the three of you. Four, including Blanche. And as the wards of the Queen Dowager's sister, who is also the Queen's cousin, you'd expect them to marry well. Not to mention young. Choose noble men to be their husbands and then receive them at Court with all the honour due their rank by marriage. Will that satisfy you, Elizabeth?"

Exhaling slowly, I stood up. "For now. We'll talk more about it later. As for now, I have a council meeting to attend. Wish me luck, Cousin."
"Good luck, Your Majesty." Anne half-curtsied as I rose. Placing both hands on her shoulders, I kissed her briefly. After that, I left the room, hoping against hope that this would go well.

"Your Majesty!"

My Privy Councillors rose as one, bowing as I swept the length of the hall to take my seat at the head of the long table. I greeted them all cordially.

"My Lords. What have we to discuss this morning?"

"Madam, there are a number of things that we need to cover, but the most urgent include sending envoys to the Courts of Europe to announce your accession to England's throne." The Duke of Norfolk, my mother and Anne's uncle, sprang to his feet almost before I had finished asking the question. I nodded, glancing around at the men in front of me in turn.

"I see. Thank you, Your Grace. Then…Master Parker, I'd like you to go to France. As my mother's old chaplain, I'm sure you'll make a fine job of it."

"Thank you, Madam. I would be honoured," Master Parker bowed deeply as I smiled at him, then turned away, searching for my next envoy.

"Bishop Latimer, I'd like you to see about going to the Imperial Court in Spain. Heaven knows that the Imperial Courts like to deal with Churchmen."

There was a ripple of laughter before I held up my hand for silence.

"We will deal with who is to go everywhere else another time. I am also well aware, my Lords, that the currency may need reforming, but first, I would like to talk about my coronation. I'm sure that my cousin, the Queen Dowager, has her plans and I am more than happy to go along with them, but there are one or two people that I would like to see honoured on my coronation day."

"Yes, My Lady?" This time, it was my father in law who spoke first.

"Sir John Dudley, for one. I want to make you Earl of Warwick and Baron Sudeley."

"My Lady Queen, I…" Sir John gasped, clearly unable to believe his good fortune. I smiled.

"You deserve it, Sir John. For services rendered to me and mine. Nothing would make me happier than to see you honoured alongside me on my coronation day."

A flush crept into the older man's cheeks as I spoke and I waved away his effusive thanks before letting my eyes wander to take in the whole group of men seated in front of me.

"I also wish to have Lord Lincoln crowned at my side as King Consort. As my most devoted husband, he has earned that right."

There was the merest hint of hesitation before my Councillors bowed before the steel in my voice.

"As you wish, Madam."

"Then, gentlemen, if that is all for now, I shall leave you. I must still arrange both my sister's household and my own."
So saying, I rose and the Privy Councillors rose with me.

"Lord Suffolk? Will you walk with me a moment?"

"Of course."

My father in law fell into step beside me, following me down the hall and into an antechamber, where I shut the door and turned to him.

"I wasn't sure how the other councillors would take this, having just heard that I plan to crown your son at my side, but I need an Acting Chancellor until my coronation and I'd be both pleased and relieved if you would consider taking the position, at least for a while."

"My Lady, it would not only be an honour, it would be a pleasure." He brushed my hand with his lips as he sank to one knee before me.

"Come, Lord Suffolk!" I protested, trying to pull him up again, "I would not have you be so formal with me; not in private, at least. I may be your Queen, but I am also, by virtue of my marriage to Edward, your daughter. Elizabeth will be fine. And I will call you Charles or Father, if I may."

"Either, Elizabeth," my father in law assured me, finally accepting the hand I offered him and rising to kiss me, albeit briefly, on the cheek, as any father would do to his daughter.

I let him, enjoying the momentary respite from protocol, before we looked at each other, sighed and then opened the door, slipping back into our assigned roles of Queen and subject the second we did.

Young as I was, I assumed confidently that, as Queen, my word was law. I didn't think that I might have to assert myself more fiercely over my Councillors than I already had until Sir William Stafford, Anne's Master of Horse, caught me after dinner the day Edward and I dined with him and his family to welcome Mary and the children to London. The news he told me; that he had overheard rumours that some of my councillors were trying to find a pretext to stop me crowning Edward at my side as King Consort, nearly had me throwing something at him in rage. However, realising that would be too much like my father's behaviour, I merely clenched my jaw and my hands as I asked, "Are you sure, William?"

"Absolutely. I know what I heard, my Lady. There may not be certain fact in the rumours, but every rumour has some kernel of truth to it."

"That it does. I know that, perhaps better than most." I growled, before taking a deep breath and forcing myself to calm down.

"Very well, Sir William. Thank you for telling me. But let us not worry about it tonight. Tonight is Mary's night. Mary's and the children's. Put the worries aside and I will deal with them on the morrow."

"As you wish, Madam." Sir William turned back, meaning to rejoin our family in the chamber off the dining hall, but I called out to him, delaying him.

"William?"

"Yes, my Lady?"

"Firstly, Elizabeth, please. And Blanche to my sister. You're our cousin's husband and our sisters'
guardian. You shouldn't be using our titles. And secondly, not a word of this to my husband."

Glancing towards the half-open door to where Edward sat, his arm around Blanche's waist as he talked cheerfully to Mary, who had Nora on her lap and Jess curled at her feet, I lowered my voice.

"We're both young, William, but whereas I have been trained for this from infancy, Edward has not. He is insecure enough without knowing that our nobles resent him enough to try to deny him his crown. So not a word. Please."

"Of course not." Smiling, William took my arm and led me back into the sitting room, scooping his oldest daughter up into his arms as she clamoured for his attention.

I sank down beside Edward and rested my head on his shoulder, watching as he took little Anne off Blanche's lap and bounced her lightly on his knee, making her giggle.

For the first time, I caught a glimpse of what Edward might be like as a father. Tender and playful, or so I thought. Yet, as little Anne caught at his jewelled sleeve and pulled at it, causing him to have to dissuade her, I saw the lovingly firm side of him too.

"Yes," I thought, "I could see Edward as, not just my husband and consort, but also as the father of my children."

The next morning, I stormed into the Privy Council meeting, determined to confirm Edward's role in my life once and for all.

"My Lords, I heard some disturbing news last night. I was told that you were considering refusing Lord Lincoln the right to be crowned at my side as King Consort."

I had hardly finished speaking before Bishop Gardiner rose, clearly glad to have a chance to say his piece.

"Madam, it is not that we doubt your affection for Lord Lincoln, or even his for you. It is that we doubt his capability for ruling England at your side. He is not a Prince. He has not been trained to rule from childhood. He is not even his father's first son. He is a second son; a second son of a Duke. Though we understand that it will pain you, we honestly believe that it will be in England's best interests for you to annul your marriage to him, which everyone knows was made under the pressures of wartime, and to contract a more politically sensible union with either France or Spain."

Suddenly, at the suggestion that I annul my marriage to Edward, I saw red. My famous Tudor temper snapped and I found myself on my feet, roaring as furiously as only my father could.

"You are hardly the man to lecture me on annulments, Your Grace! As a Bishop, you of all people should understand the sanctity of marriage! I made a promise to Edward that I would love and cherish him until one of us died; that I would forsake all other men for him. I will not go back on that. My God, I am not the fickle-minded, infatuated maid you make me out to be. I am the Queen of England and I will be obeyed! Lord Lincoln will be crowned at my side!"

"To be fair, Madam, His Grace Bishop Gardiner made a worthy point." Cranmer, my own Godfather, now rose to his feet. "What of the alliances that our good country will so desperately need in times to come? If you yourself are married, then who will make those?"

"Do you forget, My Lord of Canterbury, that I have two sisters and a cousin? Any one of them will make a worthy bride for any of the Kings in Christendom. No, my Lords. Lord Lincoln will stay my husband. Archbishop Cranmer, I would like you to draft letters to the Courts of Europe,
officially informing them of our marriage. Lord Surrey and Lord Percy, you will help Lord Ormonde and Lord Suffolk organise a double coronation for St George’s Day, though be sure to consult the Queen Dowager as well. Is that clear?"

"Yes, My Lady Queen."

My Councillors bowed; Anne, who had been seated behind me, watching the whole exchange, stood and curtsied, partly in acknowledgement of me, partly in acknowledgement of the Councillors and then the two of us, Anne and I, left the room together. However, where Anne was silent and pensive, I was flushed and exulting with the success of my first triumph over the Privy Council.
Chapter 18

Edward came to dine with me that night, walking in carelessly without much ceremony. As I saw him, I moved to put my lute away, but he shook his head.

"I love hearing you play."

"And I love playing for you." I laughed, brushing my fingers over the strings so that the first notes of our song, the song he had written for me back when we were just fourteen, hovered in the air between us.

"Anne tells me that you were quite the lioness defending me in the Privy Council meeting this morning." His hands found my shoulders and he rested his chin briefly on the crown of my head.

"Aye. You deserve it," I leaned back against him as I spoke.

"Oh Elizabeth," Edward sighed, "You're fighting your own people over me. You don't have to, you know. I don't have to become King Consort. I'm your husband, that's enough for me."

"But not for me. You will have a title, Edward, if it is the last thing I do. You've been loyal ever since we met and it's time I rewarded you."

Tipping my head back, I offered him my mouth for a kiss, effectively silencing the rest of his protests.

However, just because the matter of his future title was closed, it didn't mean that Edward and I didn't discuss our future. When, after the meal, I took up my lute again, he glanced across at me.

"I hope our daughters are as beautiful and as musical as you are, Elizabeth."

"Daughters? Planning our family already, are you?" I asked, hiding my surprise by teasing him. Edward leaned back in his chair nonchalantly, cupping his hands behind his head. "Somewhat."

"All right. Tell me," Rising, I handed Lady Lucy my lute and then dismissed her with a wave of my hand, waiting for the door to shut behind her before I slipped down to sit on Edward's lap, my legs stretched out over the arm of the chair. Edward took my hood off, unpinned my hair and sat with one arm around my waist, the other hand toying with my hair.

"Well, I know we'll have to have a boy, preferably two, but I could see us with a few daughters too. Two or three, I think. What do you say?"

"Katherine. We're calling our first daughter Katherine. I always wanted to name my first daughter Katherine after my mother."

"And mine," Edward reminded me.

"Then we're agreed. Princess Katherine of England."

"Yes. But one girl we're naming for her mother," Edward replied firmly, squeezing me gently, "Princess Elizabeth."

"If we must. It's just that there are so many Elizabeths. And I'm England's first Queen Regnant. The poor girl would have so much to live up to. Can't we name her Blanche for my sister?"
"Blanche-Elizabeth. Princess Blanche-Elizabeth of England. Or do you have any other ideas?"

"Well…there is one name…it's rather French, but I've always liked it."

"What is it?"


"What's the inspiration?"

"James V's first wife. The Queen of Scotland who married for love but died just months after her wedding. I was seven at the time and I just thought it was so sad that she never got to have a family with the man who loved her. I had considered honouring her memory by naming my daughter for her."

"There," Edward murmured, after a brief pause, kissing my cheek lightly as he spoke, "We have our daughters then. Katherine, Madeline and Blanche-Elizabeth."

Edward's voice was suddenly thick. I could sense the desire mounting between us and, all of a sudden, it made me uncomfortable. Edward and I had sort of fallen into love and marriage. We'd been so young when we were first attracted to one another than sexual arousal had scarcely come into it. And now we were married. Everyone expected us to produce an heir for England. What if we couldn't? What if we weren't ready for it?

Struggling to keep my voice light and carefree, I toyed with Edward's hair, running a hand through it as I spoke.

"And our boys, Lord Lincoln? Have you thought of them? England needs her Prince of Wales far more than she needs her Princesses, yet we have still to name our sons."

"A strong name, definitely," Edward replied easily, capturing my wandering hand in his.

"Edward," I answered decidedly, touching my lips lightly to his. Edward smiled into our kiss, but then shook his head.

"Not for our Prince of Wales, Elizabeth."

"Why not? What better name could there be for him than his father's?" I asked, knowing my voice was coloured with disappointment.

"Our reign's a new age, Elizabeth. Even your motto signifies that. According to that, love and justice conquer everything. Don't give our son a Tudor name – a name he'll have to live up to. Choose another one for him."

"So I suppose Arthur's out of the question, then?"

"Absolutely. Look further afield. What about Robert, for instance? Or John, for John of Gaunt?"

"William, maybe. Or David?"

"Christopher?"

"Mark?"

"Saul! Herod!"
"Solomon!"

At Edward's last suggestion, I collapsed into peals of laughter, shaking my head, "We are never naming a Prince of ours Solomon!"

"Nor Herod or Saul!" Edward retorted, tipping me playfully off his lap. Catching my hand as I sprang aside, he breathed into my ear.

"If we're going to have that many Princes, we'd better get started."

At his words, I felt a tremor go through me. Edward looked up.

"Do you consent?" His voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Both for myself and for England."

With that, I led him, for the first time, into my own bedchamber.

The way I had reacted to the Bishops' proposal that I annul my marriage to Edward may have silenced them, but it hadn't been in accordance with the justice part of my motto.

I knew it hadn't and so, when Anne asked to see me, I had no qualms about going straight to her rooms. We needed to discuss it.

"Anne." No longer obliged to curtsy to my cousin, now that I was Queen and she just Queen Dowager, I strode straight over to her and clasped her tight in my arms.

"Elizabeth." She warmed to my embrace, clearly slightly surprised at first. "I wanted to talk you about your coronation. Have you any plans for it? Other than ennobling John Dudley, of course?"

"Well, I'm leaving a great deal of it up to you, but I know that I want to enter London on horseback, just like I did the first time. And I'd like Lady Mary to hold the sceptre before Cranmer hands it to me. Like my father's other bastard did with you."

My voice hardened with disgust at the necessary mention of the Earl of Nottingham. Anne nodded.

"All right. And we'll dress you in cloth of silver trimmed with gold velvet for the procession. You'll accept the robes of state from the Dean at Westminster, won't you?"

"Of course. It's tradition." I smiled, before asking "What of the pageants? Will I be required to do anything in particular?"

"No. Just watch them and thank the players afterwards. To let you know roughly what we've gone planned, there will be one depicting you as the Saviour of England, delivering her from the possibility of tyranny under your half-brother. There will be another playing on your family – both sides, including how you'll be England's jewel of womanhood, being descended both from the Peacemaker marriage of Henry Tudor and Elizabeth of York and the Rosa Sine Spina."

"The Rose Without A Thorn." I murmured, remembering my father's old endearment for my mother.

"Exactly."

"But what of Edward, Anne? I told you that I wanted him crowned at my side. Where are the pageants celebrating him? His ancestry?"
"I thought you might ask that. Don't worry. We've got one pageant planned that will compare you both to Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville and another comparing you to Edward III and Phillippa of Hainault. And there's the St. Anne pageant at Cheapside too. But as for crowning him, I'm not sure that's such a good idea. It might cause too much resentment among the nobles. So I've been talking to Lady Mary and Cranmer and the other Privy Councillors and we think we've come up with a compromise. What would you say to creating Edward the Great Lord of England and Wales?"

"Instead of King Consort?"

"Instead of that, yes." Sensing my disappointment, Anne put her hand over mine. "I know it's not what you wanted, Elizabeth, but it's the closest the other nobles would accept. They fought for Queen Elizabeth, not for King Edward. In fact, they fought against a would-be King Edward for you. They don't want, nor will they ever accept, a King Edward. But they will accept a Lord. A Great Lord of England and Wales. He'd be addressed as "Your Grace" or "Your Highness" in public."

"Like a Prince, basically." It was more of a statement than a question, though I was still struggling to adjust to the idea in my head. Anne nodded again.

"That's it. And, since I know you wanted a double coronation, we'll do the next best thing we can. I'll commission a special coronet for Edward. Gold, like a Duke's, but set with rubies and emeralds. For passion and fidelity. We can invest him at the same time as you're anointed, if you like. Or you can ennoble him from the dais. Whichever you'd prefer."

"I'll have to think about it. It all sounds perfectly well and good," I admitted, "but…"

"Yes?"

"Will Edward really be deemed worthy of me? If he's just a Lord, even a Great Lord, while I'm a Queen…I intend for us to be equal partners in our marriage, Anne, or as near equal as we can get. I wouldn't want people to get the wrong idea."

"Don't forget, Edward's Earl of Lincoln in his own right, Elizabeth. He'll be Duke of Suffolk one day. No one can take that from him. Ever. It'll be fine. As long as you don't alienate your supporters over him, it'll be fine."

"You don't blame me for the other day, do you?" I couldn't help the question. Anne's face, which had been ever so slightly tense throughout our whole conversation, softened.

"No. I know you were upset and that you had to prove to your Councillors that, though you're only sixteen, they couldn't overrule you. So no, I don't blame you. But it can't happen too often, Elizabeth. Which is why I'm asking you to please accept the compromise and go to your coronation smiling."

"I will," I promised, before, tired of politics and wanting to relax for a while, seized upon Anne's chess board and challenged her to a game.

__________________________

Upon leaving Anne's rooms, I went in search of my younger sister. I wanted to talk to her about the future.

However, when I found her in her rooms, she was with the twins, who had been permitted to accompany Mary Stafford, who was spending the day at Court, as a special treat. They looked up
"Bessie. This is a pleasant surprise. I was beginning to think our Queen was too grand to spend time with her little sisters." Blanche teased.

"Never. It's just been a bit of a busy time."

Leaning down, I kissed her head, catching sight of the cards in her hand. "What are you doing?"

"We're playing Pass the Lady," Nora informed me grandly. I smiled at her vanity.

"I haven't played that in a while. Can I play?"

"I don't know. Can she, Jessie? Nora?" Blanche enquired of the twins. They glanced at each other, then nodded.

"Give me your cards, then. I'll have to redeal."

As the twins did as they were told, I sat down between them. Despite themselves, they nestled against me, delighted to have me back with them. I put an arm around each of them, hugging them close as Blanche dealt out seven cards to each of us.

"All right, Jess. You start."

Our youngest sister did as she was told, but, excited as they were to be back in our company, it wasn't long before we gave up even the pretence of the game and just settled back into some chairs, chattering like sparrows; without a care in the world.

Nora climbed into my lap, happily confident that I would receive her there, which I did, though not without a twinge of guilt at the flicker of disappointment that crossed Jess's face as she realised that there was no longer room for both of them on my lap.

Thankfully, Blanche, ever sensitive to the emotions of her close relations, said quickly, "Come here, Jessie. I'll brush your hair, if you like."

Jess's eyes lit up and she sprang over to sit cross-legged in front of Blanche, who called for a brush and then dismissed her maid again.

Potential trouble averted, I had no qualms about asking Nora, "So you're happy with Lady Stafford, then?"

"Oh yes, Beth! Mama's wonderful! She bought us both ponies for our last birthday and Papa taught us to ride them. I called mine Starlight."

"That's a lovely name. What did you call yours, Jess?"

"Daisy," Jess refused to meet my eyes as she whispered her pony's name.

"But she never rides her. Katy and I ride all the time, but Jess never does. She just stays with Mama. She's a scaredy-cat!" Nora said scornfully.

"I don't like it, Nora! And Mama says I'll be a better wife than you one day, because I've learnt more about the household affairs!" Jess snapped back.

"All right! All right! That's enough! Nora, just because Jess doesn't like horse riding doesn't make her a scaredy-cat. Blanche prefers singing or drawing, but I don't call her a scaredy-cat for it. I'm
pleased you like riding, though. We'll have to go together some time."

"Oh yes!" Nora's eyes gleamed at the thought. I stroked her hair.

"It's a deal then. But what do you like to do, Jess?"

Jess met my gaze for a brief instant, then blushed and slid hers away.

"Jessie?" Blanche put down the brush and cupped our younger sister's chin in her hand. "What's wrong? You can tell us. We're your sisters. Whatever you enjoy, we'll understand."

"Nora doesn't." The little voice was thin, petulant. Blanche smiled.

"Nora's only seven, like you are. We're older. We've seen a lot more of the world than Nora. We won't laugh, I promise."

"Hey!" Nora was indignant; I clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Well...I like embroidery. And Mama's teaching me to do the household accounts. She says I'm good at it!" Jess cried out her last sentence defensively.

"I'm sure you are." Blanche soothed, plaiting Jess's dark hair with swift gentle movements.

"Have you got some of your sewing with you, Jess? I'd like to see it." I assured my younger sister. She hesitated for a moment, but then pulled a handkerchief out of the pocket of her skirts. She handed it to Blanche.

"I did it myself."

Blanche smoothed the fabric out with the flat of her hand.

I knew from the way her mouth fell open that we had something pretty special on our hands. And when she passed it to me wordlessly, my guess was verified.

The design was a fairly simple one of Jess's initials, J.C., surrounded by birds and flowers, but the strength and confidence of the tiny stitches far surpassed any I remembered making at that age. If I was right, then our little sister had the makings of a master seamstress.

"This is beautiful, Jess."

"Really?"

"Really, Jessie. In fact -" I used Blanche's nickname for Jess, as I always did when I was trying to be especially tender with our youngest sister. I also nudged Nora off my lap and got up, walking over to my other sisters and kneeling down to Jess's height as I continued, "Will you embroider me a ribbon that I can hang a jewel from? One with roses on? I'd wear it round my neck at my coronation."

"At your coronation? And you want me to make it for you?" Jess sounded almost disbelieving. Blanche secured Jess's braid as I nodded.

"If you would. Please. I can think of no one better."

"Yes! Oh, Beth, yes! Yes! Yes!"

Jess jumped into my arms, shrieking with delight. Staggering slightly, I adjusted to her weight and
began to spin her in circles, relishing the way she giggled.

We spent the rest of the afternoon together, only parting at suppertime, when Lady Stafford came to Blanche's rooms to fetch the twins and take them back with her to their London home.

Blanche and I went to the window as they left, preparing to watch them out of sight. Blanche leaned against me as we stood together.

"I'm missed them."

"Me too. It was nice to spend some time with them for once," I agreed.

"When can I have them in my household, Bessie? You promised I could when you were Queen, but you've been Queen nearly two months and I still haven't been allowed to have them in my household."

"I know, I know," I sighed, knowing it was futile trying to persuade Blanche that the rest of our courtiers wouldn't accept her wishes. This might be one of the rare occasions I would have to foist my, or rather my sister's, wishes on to them and face the consequences. "I've just been a bit busy, Blanche."

Before my sister could protest, I hurried on: "Anyway, I need to talk to you. You know Papa made you Lady of Ireland before he died?"

"Of course." Blanche raised her eyebrows at me, as if to say "How could I forget a thing like that?"

"Well, how would you like to go to Dublin for me and rule it as my Lady Lieutenant?"

"Now? Before your coronation? I wanted to be here for that." Blanche pouted and for the briefest instant, I was reminded of the adorable little girl she had once been. Waving to the twins as they got into Lady Stafford's carriage, I wrapped my arm around her waist.

"Of course not. I wouldn't dream of sending you away before my coronation. You're my sister; I need you at my side for that. I meant afterwards. You're almost twelve, after all, and, until I have a child of my own, you're my heiress. It might be wise to give you some practical experience at ruling so that you're not quite as thrown in at the deep end as I was; whatever country you end up ruling."

"Hmm...Would I be able to take the twins with me?"

"I don't see why not."

Blanche fell silent, considering. Glancing towards the window, I saw her reflection bite her lip and knew that she was torn. We'd never been separated for more than a few days at a time before. The child in Blanche wanted to stay at my side for as long as she possibly could.

Yet, at the same time, I was no longer just her sister. I was now also her Queen. I was her Queen and she wanted to be useful to me. Now that I had suggested her going to Ireland, she was wondering if she could serve me better there. Not to mention that even Blanche liked a certain measure of independence. Being away in Ireland would give her that.

"You don't have to make a decision now," I reassured her. "Just think about it and let me know."

At my words, Blanche slumped, clearly relieved that I wasn't going to push her. I hugged her again.
"And for Heaven's sake, don't worry. I'm not going to force you to do anything you don't want to do. I promise. I'd never do that, my darling. My darling, darling sister."

Blanche suddenly turned and buried her face in my shoulder, trembling. I held her silently for a few moments, letting her relax in the warmth of my embrace, before I tipped her head up so that she was looking me in the eye.

"Now, do you want to come and have supper with Edward and me? I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"Sounds like a good idea." Blanche nodded and let me link our arms as I led her out of the room.

We talked easily as we went, for once not Queen and Princess, but sisters, pure and simple.

Just the way we used to be.
Chapter 19

And the bit we've all been waiting for, Elizabeth's Coronation!

Six weeks later, the day had come. It was St George's Day in the Year of Our Lord 1547 and I was to be crowned. Crowned and hailed as Queen Elizabeth of England, Wales, France and Ireland.

The palace had been in a fever of preparation for weeks now, particularly in my own apartments, where fittings and trimmings seemed to take place on an almost daily basis, but now time had run out. I had overseen the final details, stayed the traditional night in the Tower. In a matter of hours, I would formally be God's anointed Queen. As I had always believed I would be.

So why, rather than rejoicing, was I drifting around as though I was in a daze?

I couldn't tell, yet I was. I couldn't get my mind to focus on anything. There was nothing for it but to let my body take me where it would.

In the end, I found myself in my bedchamber window seat, an ebony box beside me. Its' contents – a miniature of a lone sitter, a small family portrait, two lockets and a string of emeralds, besides the cloth I held in my hand – lay scattered across my lap.

Smoothing the cloth with the flat of my hand, I placed it back in the box, though not before kissing both the emblem and the monogram tenderly.

My hand hovered for a moment, unable to decide between the two paintings. Suddenly, releasing a breath that I didn't even realise I had been holding, I opted for the family portrait.

I am standing at Father's side, clearly delighted by the honour, though the book I am holding and the cross around my neck lend a serious note to the picture. On Father's other side sits a smiling woman with dark golden-brown hair, a golden haired baby on her lap. All four of us look happy, secure in each other's love and in the knowledge that we four, we four and no one else, are England's future.

None of us, not even the woman at Father's side, give any indication of the tragedy that, little more than four years later, will tear us apart.

"Mama." I whispered, running a fingertip over her delicate painted features. "Why, Mama? Why? You could have been Queen Dowager. I would never have stopped you marrying again. Jess and Nora could have been born legitimate. If you'd only waited…"

I broke off. Crying now was not an option. The people expected a joyous face from me and that was what I would give them.

However, the portrait remained in my hand as I lapsed into a fit of brooding, which was only broken by Kat's knock on the door.

Startled, I snatched up the larger of the lockets – mother of pearl set with a large black pearl – and swept the rest of the objects back into the box, only calling out to let my old governess back into
the room when I had done so.

I let Kat dress me in near silence, but when she turned to find me a necklace, I handed her the locket.

"Thread this on to the ribbon Lady Stafford's ward made me, please, Kat, and tie it round my neck."

I spoke formally, half-hoping that to do so might avoid debate, but I was wrong. Kat frowned as she picked up the ribbon.

"Are you sure, Elizabeth? Not only is the locket too simple for a coronation, the ribbon you choose for it is decorated by -"

"No one need know where it came from. I'm sure, Kat," I cut my governess off, voice hard.

Knowing better than to argue with me when I was in this mood, Kat tied the locket around my neck. Not a moment too soon either, as it turned out, for a second later, the door opened and the Lady Mary walked in.

"Mary," I rose to my feet as she entered, but I barely noticed her curtsy.

"Your Majesty."

I dismissed Kat without another word and Mary took over, putting the final touches to my hair and gown with gentle hands. As I stood before her, I found myself wishing, not for the first time, that my mother was here to see me all grown up.

"Do you think they're proud of me?"

"Excuse me, Madam?" Mary asked, for once formal when I didn't want her to be.

"Do you think they're proud of me, Mary? Father? My mother?"

Mary's hands froze in my hair as I mentioned my mother. Yet, as I glanced at her in the mirror, her eyes suddenly softened. It was as though she had suddenly remembered that, Queen or not, I was still only sixteen.

"Oh Bessie. Of course they are. They always will be. I'm sure they've made their peace in Heaven and are watching you together today. I'm sure they're both proud of you."

I could see that it cost Mary to say that my mother, her worst enemy and an adulteress into the bargain, was in Heaven and had made her peace with my father, which only made me doubly grateful to her.

"Thank you, Mary. You don't know what that means."

Impulsively, I embraced my elder sister and then, as yet another pair of footsteps sounded outside my room, released her.

"I suppose it's time."

"Yes."

Mary went across to open the door for me and then fell into step behind me as I sailed past her.
Edward was already mounted when I reached the courtyard, holding his own grey on a tight rein. Sovereign stood beside him, half-prancing with excitement.

My husband smiled at me as Sir John Dudley helped me into the saddle.

"Ready, Queen Elizabeth?" he inquired.

"Ready, My Lord of England," I responded, arranging my skirts and then reaching out to take his hand in mine.

There was nothing more to be said. Hand in hand, we rode out to make our way to the Tower. As we did so, a group of choristers began to sing and I knew the first pageant wasn't far off.

I was right.

Scarcely ten minutes later, already half-deafened by the cheers of the crowd, we drew rein by a glittering makeshift stage, on top of which a choir was singing. By listening closely, I managed to make out the words of the song.

"God Bless our Good Queen Bess,

Come to save our country from distress"

With a smile, I turned to Edward and let them all see, by the look in my eyes, just how much I loved him, so that I hinted at peace and stability. Then we watched the scene together, which was charming enough, though the boy playing my half-brother was too honoured by his part to really act arrogant enough.

Nevertheless, the sweet voices and obvious pride the children took in their little tableau touched me and I took pains to reward them as they bowed and curtsied before me. I spoke personally to each of the boys and handed posies of flowers out to the girls.

Blowing them all a final kiss, I spurred Sovereign forward and the procession moved off again.

It went on like that until we reached Westminster. I kept a smile on my lips throughout, bestowing regal favour wherever I looked. None except those close to me; who knew me best, could tell that, as the crowds grew thicker and noisier, I was beginning to lose control of my horse.

Sovereign was a hunter rather than a palfrey and, today, that was causing a problem. The crowds were making him nervous. He couldn't understand why I wouldn't simply give him his head and let him run. He was sidestepping, arching his back, tossing his head. Once or twice, he even broke stride and it took all my skill as a horsewoman to get him back on the bit one handed without anyone noticing.

Much as I loved him, it was a relief to dismount at Westminster and kneel for the Dean's blessing.

"In nomine Patri et Filli et Spiritus Sanctus."

"In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost."

The blessing was repeated once in Latin and once in English before I intoned the requisite,"Amen", rising to exchange the kiss of peace as the heavy Robes of State settled on my shoulders.

And then it was time. The lengthy weight of my train trailing behind me, I proceeded up the aisle to kneel once again in order to swear the Oath of Allegiance to my country.
"I, Elizabeth Tudor, by the Grace of God Queen of England, France and Ireland, swear before God and all these witnesses, as well as St. George, our beloved patron saint, always to rule my realm as well as I can. I vow to uphold justice and to always put the interests of my country and people before mine own. From this day forth, I shall love the crowns and countries of England, France and Ireland as though they were my spouse and their people as though they were my children. I do so solemnly swear."

"Amen. May the Almighty guide you in all your endeavours."

I heard Cranmer's response and crossed myself quickly. After that, I felt the warm moisture and smelt the aromatic scent of the chrism oil as I was anointed. Keeping my eyes shut until I felt the cold metal of my coronation ring meet the warmth of my skin was another tradition; one which I observed. Only after that occurrence had taken place did I open my eyes to reach for my Godfather's hand, in order that he might help me to my new throne.

"With this, St. Edward's Crown, I crown thee, Elizabeth, Queen of England, France and Ireland."

Raising the crown high for the benefit of the congregated nobles, Cranmer settled it on my head. Prepared for the weight, I kept my head erect and beamed down upon my people joyfully. This was my day and I fully intended to enjoy it.

A commotion at the door told me Edward was now entering the Abbey to be invested as Great Lord of England and Wales, so I turned to watch him come up the aisle.

All of a sudden, the scent of roses filled the air and I thought I saw a flash of golden-brown hair and a dark blue silk gown behind him. I strained my eyes along the nave, desperate to see more. A pair of sapphire blue eyes, moist yet sparkling, met mine. Blanche's eyes. The eyes my little sister had inherited from…

"Mama!" Half-stifling a cry, I made to leap from my throne, but the apparition vanished almost as quickly as it had come.

However, it wasn't gone without first throwing me a smile and blowing me a kiss. Those actions, small though they were, were worth more than a thousand words would have been.

Mama was telling me she loved me, one final time. She was telling me she was proud of me. Because, Prince or not, I was hers. I was her daughter and she knew that I would make a wonderful Queen.

Nodding, I mouthed "I love you" in her direction as she disappeared.

Luckily, most people thought I was only encouraging Edward as he knelt before the dais and bent his head in supplication to his Queen, though no one could explain the scent of roses that lingered in the air.

Edward reached out to me and I clasped his hands in mine, clearing my throat so that my voice rang out pure and clear as a bell.

"By the power vested in me by the Father Almighty and all that is holy, it pleases me, Queen Elizabeth, to create thee, Lord Edward Brandon, Earl of Lincoln, Great Lord of England and Wales."

"Amen." Edward replied.
"Arise, My Lord of England." I bade my husband, which, once Cranmer had placed the special coronet – pure gold and set with emeralds and rubies and wrought with the arms of England – on his head, he did.

He made his way to the throne at my side, accepting a smaller, less ornate, silver version of the sceptre Cranmer had taken from my elder sister and placed in my hand.

As I wrapped my fingers around the orb, balancing its crystal weight in my palm, Cranmer stepped back with the deepest bow he had yet favoured me with.

"I have just given you the two sceptres of the sovereign. May the both of you go forth and prosper and rule well and justly until the stars rain down from the heavens. Honour and Grace be to our Queen Elizabeth and to our Lord Edward. God Save and God Bless Her Majesty and His Highness!"

"God Save and God Bless!" The crowd roared it back and Edward and I exchanged delighted glances. We'd done it. We'd fought my half-brother and won. We'd won and now we could rule England any way we chose.
Edward and I had barely been crowned a fortnight when the foreign Ambassadors began to flock to pay their respects to us.

The Tuscan Ambassadors were among the first and, remembering the horror of the last I had hosted a Banquet for them, I was doubly mindful of ensuring that they were accorded every respect.

However, when they suggested that Blanche be formally betrothed to their master's little son, Prince Francesco, I had to politely dissuade them.

"I thank you for your kind words, Your Excellency, but I fear that to betroth Blanche so soon after my coronation might destroy England's sense of peace. The commoners have only just been granted their wish of a united Royal Family, after my father's tragic death back in January. It might be best to have the Princess Blanche stay here as long as possible."

"Of course, Madam, but…forgive me; were you not thinking of sending Her Highness to Dublin? We heard something along those lines."

"You are quite right, Excellencies. My sister is indeed to go to Dublin. However, only to her own estates. She is, after all, the Lady of Ireland. It is the practice here in England for the Sovereign to send their heir away from Court in order to give them practice in ruling of their own accord. Since I have no children of my own, needs must that I prepare my sister to rule after me."

"Ah, but Your Majesty, you and Lord Edward are young. You will surely soon be the proud parents of a whole nursery full of Princes and Princesses." The Ambassadors flattered me to my face and I smiled, taking Edward's hand in mine as I answered.

"Pray God you are right, Excellencies. We certainly have every hope of it."

"As we do of maintaining a friendship with your master." Edward broke in smoothly, knowing that we had to bring this interview to an end, for the Imperial Ambassador, Ruy Gomez da Silva, was also waiting for an audience.

Recognising the note of dismissal in my husband's voice, the Ambassadors bowed. "Majesty. Your Highness."

They left us alone and I lost no time in turning to Mistress Robsart, one of my new Maids of Honour, who was standing nearby.

"Amy, fetch Lady Salisbury for me, would you?"

"Of course, My Lady Queen."

Dipping a curtsy, Amy spun on her heel and was gone. I watched her out of sight before greeting the new Ambassador, who Edward had summoned in the meantime, with a winning smile.

"Excellency. It is a pleasure to welcome you to the English Court."

"And it is a pleasure to be here, Excellency. May I congratulate both you and His Highness on your accession to the throne?"
"Of course. Thank you. Now, I am sure you are tired after your long journey -"

"Quite refreshed after seeing you, Madam." His Excellency assured me. I giggled despite myself.

"Nevertheless," Edward broke in, discomforted by the compliments being paid to me, "Arrangements have been made for you. You are to lodge with our half-sister, Lady Salisbury, at her London home. You should find her both an accomplished and gracious hostess. She also, thanks to her mother, the late Dowager Princess Katherine, speaks Spanish, so communicating with her shouldn't be a problem."

"Don't concern yourself, Your Highness. I speak fluent Latin and French as well as Spanish and Portuguese." Ruy Gomez assured my husband, who smiled slightly.

"We still wish to make things as easy as possible for you during your stay, Excellency. Lady Salisbury?"

Edward turned his head to look for our sister as he spoke. She materialised at his side as though by magic. "I am here, Your Highness."

"This is the new Imperial Ambassador, Don Ruy Gomez da Silva, Lady Salisbury. We would like you to take him and lodge him with you for now. Excellency, this is our sister, Lady Mary Tudor, Countess of Salisbury and Buckingham."

"Estoy encantado, Doña Maria." Ruy Gomez bowed over our older sister's hand and kissed it as she sketched him a brief curtsy.

"Es también para mí un honor, Señor Gomez."

For a second, I fancied I saw a hint of a blush tint Mary's cheeks under the new Ambassador's gaze, then dismissed it. Mary was thirty-one and as steady a woman as I had ever seen. No man would ever make her blush.

Ambassadors all greeted and feted as befitted their rank, I turned my attention, once again, to preparing Blanche for her departure to Ireland.

I had arranged for a council of trusted Knights and Barons to travel with Blanche and be her advisors, but there were still three more people that I would be more than happy to see go with her.

To this end, I sought out George Boleyn after one of the Privy Council meetings.

"Lord Ormonde? Might I have a word?"

"Of course you can." My cousin fell into step beside me with his usual easy grace.

"Blanche is due to leave for Ireland next month and I was wondering; since you're Earl of Ormonde, would you go with her? Act as her chief advisor? It's not that I don't trust her, but she is only eleven. I'd feel more comfortable if someone was there to keep an eye on her, someone we both know, like and trust. You have lands in Ireland and Blanche likes you as much as I do. She trusts you. If you would only agree to accompany and help her, I think we'd both be much happier."

"Elizabeth, you and Blanche are as both as dear to me as my own sisters. You needn't ask. I was planning to get your permission to do just that at the next opportunity anyway."
"Does that mean you will?"

"With all my heart." George stooped to kiss me on the forehead and I let him, feeling as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"There is one more question I want to ask you, George."

"Anything, Elizabeth."

"Blanche is eager to – to take Jess and Nora with her when she goes to Ireland. Personally, I am more than happy to let her do so, but I wondered whether you thought Mary; your Mary, that is, would agree to the idea."

George sighed. "I thought you might ask that."

"If you've already thought about it, what's the answer?"

"Honestly? That I don't know. She'll be thrilled at the honour of you choosing them, that's for sure, but whether she'll want to lose them is another matter. I think you'd be better off talking to her yourself."

"I see."

"I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

"No, no. You've done more than enough, George. Thank you."

"A pleasure, Your Majesty." George bowed then dropped back to speak to one of the other councillors as I strode on ahead of him.

Following George's advice, I decided to call on Mary Stafford to discuss the twins' future. I would ordinarily have summoned her to Court to talk to her, but with such a delicate matter under consideration, I deemed it best to avoid all the protocol that I possibly could.

My older cousin greeted me pleasantly, calling the children down to pay their respects and letting me spend a few minutes with my sisters before sending them back to their lessons. The twins protested at this, pouting, but an assurance that I would come up to hear them sing later and then out to the stables to see Nora ride her pony soon restored their good humour and I watched them hurry away to the schoolroom with a half-indulgent smile playing about my lips.

"You should be proud of them, Elizabeth. They're lovely girls."

Mary Stafford's soft voice brought me out of my reverie. I turned to her with a wry chuckle.

"It's down to you, Lady Stafford. No, forgive me, I meant Mary. They've changed so much since they came to live with you. Changed for the better. When I think of the shy little girls they once were…"

My voice trailed off, almost horrified by the difference. They had been so shy. Not around me, but everybody else. Even Kat had scared them. And they'd been so sensitive. Particularly Jess. I couldn't have helped either, come to that. Love them though I did, duty to England had always come first with me. If my father wanted me at Court, to Court I went. To the girls, it must have seemed as though I was abandoning them. Time and time again.

"You couldn't have done any more for them, Elizabeth." Mary Stafford murmured, as though she
could read my thoughts. "You were hardly more than a child yourself. Anyway, they idolise you, both of them."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. No one can say a word against you in their hearing."

"Well. I do my best by them. I like to think that Mama would have been pleased to see us so close; all four of us."

"Of course she would."

My hand was enfolded in my cousin's as she reached out to reassure me. No one but the Boleyns – Mary, George and Anne and their families – had the privilege of being allowed to treat me so informally, even in private, except my sisters and my husband's family. Some would say that I shouldn't even let them treat me informally, but I was only sixteen. I needed people I could trust; let my guard down around. Especially since I was Queen.

But musing on that wasn't going to give Blanche her heart's desire. Sighing, I sat up and withdrew my hand.

"It's Blanche who really rails against the cards Fate dealt the twins, though. She adores them. She wants to take them to Ireland with her as Maids of Honour."

"What? Jess and Nora? They're only seven."

"They're only a year younger than my great-grandmother was when she joined Court." I pointed out, before switching tack. "Please, Mary. Blanche is absolutely desperate. I promised her I'd talk to you about it. I know they're young, but you know Lady Bryan wouldn't let any harm come to them if they were under her care. She's fierce at times, yes, but she would never hurt a child. Can't they go with her?"

"That's not what I'm worried about. I know they'd be well cared for. It's just – sending them away is one thing, though I love those girls dearly. It's the insecurity it might bring them. And have you thought what the other nobles will say? They'll expect their daughters to go with Blanche, not your sisters."

"My sisters are the great-nieces of the Duke of Norfolk and the wards of the Queen Dowager's sister; the Queen's cousin. That makes them as good as any Knight's daughter, at the very least. Besides, I plan to marry them to Earls, at the very least. They'll be Lady Eleanor and Lady Jessica someday. They'll be expected to go to Court then. They might as well start now. Unless you're absolutely certain that it would destroy them, which I hope it wouldn't, please don't tell me that you're going to refuse outright."

"Well…"

"If it's a case of treating all your children equally, I promise I'll take Katy and Annie into my own household as soon as Annie's old enough. And Henry too. Or they can be companions or servants to my children!" The words tumbled out in a great impulsive rush, making Mary laugh in spite of herself.

"With all your pleading, I might think that you've promised Blanche that she can have my girls whether or not I agree!" she warned teasingly. However, her next words positively thrilled me.

"I'll have to talk to my husband and to the girls themselves – and even then, I'm not promising
anything – but I'll think about it."

"Oh, thank you, Mary! Blanche will be delighted!"

Leaping up, I flung my arms around my cousin and then, at the first strains of a virginal being played, raced out of the room so as not to disappoint my little sisters.

After a great deal of thought, Lady Stafford finally agreed to allow Blanche to take Jess and Nora with her to Ireland, so when, on our last night in Bristol before she sailed, I went to spend some time with her, I found them in her rooms as well.

"Blanche, Jess, Nora." Dismissing my sister's ladies with a silent wave of my hand before I greeted them, I bent to kiss them each in turn, then took the real purpose of the visit from my skirts. "Look what I've got for you."

I handed them each a silver locket set with a jewel: a ruby for Nora, an emerald for Blanche and a sapphire for Jess, letting them examine them closely.

The moment she opened hers, Blanche understood.

"Bessie…"

"I had the portrait copied. It's only fair. We're all her daughters. We should all be wearing them."

Instinctively touching my hand to my own mother of pearl locket, this one set with a gleaming black pearl, I said no more, but waited for the twins to speak.

"Who is she? The lady in the painting?"

"She looks like us." Jess added to Nora's questions, begging me for an explanation.

"That's because she's your Mama. Your real Mama."

The words almost stuck in my throat, so choked up was I by now. I'd waited so long to give the twins a keepsake of our mother and now; now that the moment had come, it was as though I was in a dream. Tears pricked my eyelids and I didn't even try to restrain them as I answered Jess's whispered question, "The one who went away?"

"Yes. Yes, Jess. That is your Mama, the one who went away."

"She was so beautiful." Blanche murmured.

"I know. And she loved us all so much. So, so much."

"But then why go away? Didn't she want to stay with us?" Nora asked, unwittingly driving a stake through my heart with her words.

"She did, Nora, she did. She wanted to stay, oh, so very, very much. But there were lots of people who didn't like her, so they decided to take her away from us. And then, later, God took her to live with him and the angels. That's why she's not back, even though the horrible people who took her away from us are gone. But it doesn't change how much she loves us. Nothing will ever change that. I promise."

I met each of my sisters' eyes for one long moment before I continued, "So we have to make her proud. She's watching us from Heaven now and we have to make her proud. Will you do that? All
of you? Will you wear the lockets and do your best to make her proud? For me? For her? For our mother; Her Majesty Queen Katherine Howard?"

My voice rang with determined pride as I said the last words; called my mother by her former title for what was almost the first time since she died.

Glancing at each of my sisters in turn, I silently held out my arms to them.

All three of them – Blanche included, for all she was almost a young woman – sprinted forward and fell into my waiting embrace.

"Of course we will, Bessie! Of course we will!"

Unable to speak, I clutched them close to me, all four of us weeping, until I could no longer tell where my tears ended and the others' began.

The next morning, Edward and I accompanied Blanche and her retinue to her ship.

Most of the formalities had already been taken care of; all that remained was for me to remind her household of the great honour that had been done to them in my choosing them to accompany my sister to her estates and bid them to conduct themselves with propriety during their stay in Ireland.

This I did, in a ringing voice, and then Blanche, George Boleyn beside her, as befitted her escort, curtsied to me and Edward.

"Farewell, Your Majesty. Your Highness. May God keep you until we meet again."

I curtsied back, then pulled her up and kissed her on both cheeks, enfolding her into my arms.

"Take care, sweetheart. I love you."

"I love you too, Bessie. I'll see you soon."

"Of course. Christmas. Now go, Blanche. You need to catch the tide."

Nodding, Blanche moved to say her goodbyes to Edward whilst I took my leave of George Boleyn.

"I leave my sister in your care, Lord Ormonde. Watch over her for me."

"I swear on both my life and the Cross of St. George that I will do so, Your Majesty." George promised, kissing my hand as protocol required. I inclined my head briefly in acknowledgement.

"Then I am relieved. I hold you to that Oath, My Lord. For now, farewell."

"Farewell, My Lady Queen." George bowed, and then offered his arm to my sister. They went up the gangplank and, barely a minute later, the ropes were loosened, allowing the ship to drift away.

Edward and I watched them out of sight, noting how Blanche, unable to bear the sight of the ever widening stretch of water between us, had buried her head in George's chest. His arm was around her shoulders, holding her tenderly, as an older brother might do to his favourite younger sister.

"She's in good hands." Edward whispered.

I nodded. Nevertheless, I still didn't leave the harbour until her ship was well and truly gone. Even when I did, it was only to go to Bristol Church to pray for Blanche's safe arrival in Dublin.
She was my only full sister; my greatest earthly treasure. I couldn't bear the thought of losing her.
"Your Majesty, I am pleased to announce that you are indeed with child." Mistress Greenwood nodded sagely, a smile softening her otherwise severe features as, examination complete, she straightened up to look me directly in the eye.

Protocol forbade it, but, given the circumstances, I let her conduct slide.

"When do you think I can expect the child, Mistress Greenwood?"

"It's not an exact science, Madam, but I should say that your babe will greet the world around May Day."

"Thank you." Passing the older woman a gold sovereign, I waved her away and called Mary Norris over, who hurried to my side in seconds.

"Yes, Madam?"

"Will you fetch my husband for me? I have some news that I wish to share with him."

"Gladly, My Lady."

With a quick curtsy, Mary turned and left my apartments.

A few minutes later, she was back and Edward's distinctive quick step was sounding in the passage outside.

I rose immediately, greeting him with a great beam of a smile. "Edward."

"Elizabeth. Mistress Norris said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes. I have some news for you."

"Good news or bad?"

"Well, for our people and the security of our throne, it's probably the best news I could give you."

Gently, I took my husband's hand and guided it to my belly, letting him explore the new contours of my body. He looked up at me, wonder shining in his eyes.

"Are you? Elizabeth, are you? Are you with child?"

"Praise God." I nodded.

"Elizabeth..." Edward collapsed to his knees beside me, unable to say another word. His hand lingered on my belly and I closed my eyes in bliss, content to be sharing such a momentous occasion with the man I loved.

At length, however, Edward's sudden and prolonged silence began to worry me. What if he wasn't ready to be a father? Princes and Princesses often married before they were truly out of childhood,
yes, but not so the nobility. Or at least not their sons. Girls often married before they were my age –
were sometimes mothers at my age – but there wasn't such pressure on men. Why, I could think of
several of my father's courtiers who hadn't married before they were in their twenties at least. So
Edward, at just seventeen, was still fairly young for his role. The role of Great Lord and Father of
England. I only hoped he was comfortable with it.

"You are pleased, aren't you, Edward?" I glanced down as I spoke, unable to keep a slight tremor
out of my voice. He started out of what seemed to be a trance and raised his head.

"Of course, Elizabeth. How could you think otherwise? It's just a shock, that's all. We're both still
so young."

"Old enough." I retorted, sharpness creeping into my tone.

"That's not what I meant! It's just…the responsibility…"

"We're Queen and Lord of England! Do you really think we can escape responsibility?"

Perhaps I was a little harsher than I needed to be, but then I was only just coming to terms with the
revelation of being a mother-to-be myself.

Edward rose abruptly. Striding to the door, he called "I'll see you at dinner," over his shoulder and
then walked out, slamming the door behind him.

The new tension between Edward and me continued, unsettling me greatly. It was at times like this
that I missed my sister desperately. She had always been the calmer one; the one who listened as I
poured out all my dreams, hopes and fears.

Public life demanded my attention almost constantly, but whenever I could, I sought solace in
writing to Blanche, telling her everything, as though she was still here at my side.

"We've made no public announcement of the fact, Blanche, but I'm sure people are beginning to
guess. Even if they've missed the fact that I'm eating a lot more pork than usual, they can hardly
fail to notice that Edward and I are barely speaking. People will wonder and then rumours will
start flying, sister. I know that, perhaps better than anyone.

It hurts so much to see him walk past me with little more than a bow. I know he's young and
insecure; that he'll come round in time, but it still hurts.

What would you do, darling? If you were here and Queen of England in my place, what would you
do? I wish you would write and tell me. Anne does what she can, but she's neither my sister nor my
mother. There are times when simply no one else will do. This is one of those times.

Anyway, I hope that everything is going as you would wish in Dublin and that you are all well.
Give my love to Jess and Nora and may God keep you, little sister. Write soon and remember,
Omnia vincit Amor et Justitia.

Thy beloved sister,

Elizabeth.

Laying down my pen, I scattered sand on the page to dry the ink and then heated some scarlet wax
in order to seal it with my usual stamp of a rose.
Folding it over, I sealed the missive and then summoned a page, firmly instructing him to make sure that the letter reached my sister's eyes untouched; reached her eyes only.

Then I called my ladies to ready me for bed, knowing with a desperate bitter ache deep inside me that Edward would not be coming to visit me tonight. I had hurt him too deeply for that.

One morning that November, I was woken by Lady Lucy shaking me.

"Your Majesty! You're needed in the Council Chamber for a matter of urgency."

"Very well, Lady Lucy, I'm coming."

Swinging out of bed despite the swell of my belly, I pulled on a thick fur wrap against the November chill and allowed Lady Lucy to braid up my hair in order to lend me at least a veneer of respectability.

"Has anyone told my husband yet?"

Yes, Madam. His Highness knows. He is in fact the one who persuaded the Privy Councillors to send for you at all. He said that, carrying his child or not, you would wish to know."

My jaw clenched at the thought of Edward finding anything out before me, but then I shook my head to clear it of such thoughts. His finding out first was proof, in a way, that the nobles fully accepted him as Great Lord of England; as my consort. Wasn't that what I had always wanted? Angry and hurt because of the way he had treated me recently or not, if I truly loved him, I would still rejoice in what this meant. But I had no time to think about that now.

Hurrying from the room, I swept all the bowing and curtsying servants aside to ensure that I entered the Privy Council Chamber alone.

As Lady Lucy had said he would be, Edward was already there. I nodded at him as I sat down in the specially crafted cushioned carved chair at his side and he offered me a tentative smile in return.

"What's going on?"

"We've just received an urgent missive from our envoy at the French Court. It seems Queen Catherine has died of childbed fever."

Edward's voice was low and, despite himself, he couldn't help glancing at the gentle contours of my rapidly swelling belly. I was three months pregnant by now and every man and woman in the room was fully aware of that.

I wanted to reach out and reassure Edward that I would be fine, but between the fact that we were in public and that I didn't know how he would react, I settled instead for resting a hand on my belly as I murmured "God rest her soul."

Because I was genuinely curious, I then asked "Forgive me, but does that not leave King Henri a widower with two young children?"

"As a matter of fact, he has three, Your Majesty. Though Her Majesty Queen Catherine fell prey to the perils of childbirth, her infant daughter, the Princess Claude, still lives."

"Thanks be to God. It gladdens my heart to hear that at least." I crossed myself quickly, then,
trying desperately to get my sleep-clogged brain to work, turned to my father in law and Chancellor, hoping I could think of the best thing to do.

"You'll convey our condolences to King Henri and assure him of our friendship throughout this difficult time, is that clear?"

"Very good, Madam." My father in law bowed and I, suddenly unable to face a full Council meeting now, waved the others away. As they left, Edward glanced at me.

"Elizabeth. May I have a word?"

"Of course." I rose from my throne as he offered me his arm and led me from the room.

We only made as far as the nearest window embrasure, however, before he stopped in his tracks, though he made no move to remove my hand from his arm, inadvertently thrilling me with the warmth of his skin.

"Elizabeth, I owe you an apology."

"What for?"

Drawing back from him, I determinedly kept my voice cool. I was no fool. I knew full well why Edward owed me an apology. I just wanted to hear it from his lips and not mine.

"I've been behaving like a brat. I've let you cope with the demands of the country and your own current condition on your own. I shouldn't have done that. Nor should I have been so cool towards you recently. You haven't said anything, but I know I've hurt you by it. I've hurt you when I should be protecting you from harm and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it and I'm sorry."

"It's taken you a while to admit it," I retorted, voice acidic even to my own ears.

"I know. Mary took me to task over my behaviour weeks ago, when she first realised you were with child, but I just didn't know how to make it up to you. Then, when this news came from France…"

"They came to you first." A note of resentment crept into my voice. I couldn't help it. I might be a woman, but I was a Queen and a Tudor Queen of England at that. I was the daughter of Great Harry of England and his perfect jewel of womanhood. Surely I deserved to know of such momentous news at least at the same time as my husband?

"Yes. They did." Edward confessed. "But no more, Elizabeth. I swear it. I'll tell them that they must always come to us both from now on. Both of us. Never one before the other. No matter what condition you're in."

Edward reached out to place his hands on my shoulders and, if I didn't relax under his touch, neither did I pull away.

Which is how we actually came to be in each other's presence when I felt the first flutter of movement from my child. A flutter as delicate as a butterfly's wings.

My lips parted in a joyful gasp and a slow beam of a smile spread over my lips as the full realisation of what had just happened began to sink in.

"What is it? Elizabeth, what is it?"
"He moved! Edward, our Prince just moved! He's alive! He's alive in me!"

"Are you sure you're not just imagining things? Three months is awfully early to feel him."

"I know what I felt!" I retorted. "Here."

Taking Edward's hand, I rested it on my belly. It lingered there for a few moments and Edward was about to pull away disbelievingly, when it happened again. My child, as though determined to prove its existence to its father, kicked again.

From the look on Edward's face, I knew he had felt it. Our eyes met, both pairs blazing with sheer naked joy.

"He's early!" I breathed, scarcely able to speak.

"He's strong. A strong Tudor Prince."

"Tudor-Brandon." I corrected. It was the first time I had spoken our future child's surname aloud and the expression on Edward's face as the true implications of my words sank in was more than worth it.

"Elizabeth..." he started, before realising that mere words weren't enough.

Catching me around the waist, he pulled me to him and swept me up into his arms, crushing his lips to mine in a deeply passionate kiss.

I straddled his hips with my legs and let him bear me away, giggling as though I was a little girl again. I couldn't help it. Our reconciliation was just so perfect.
"Dearest Bessie,

By the time you read this, I will be making my way to Dublin port to come back to you for Christmas. I can scarcely wait! It'll be so good to be together again. The Tudor-Howard Princesses, like we used to be. We'll dance in the masques this year, won't we? Like we always wanted to when Papa was alive.

And you and Edward! Oh please! You'll be the best dancers on the floor, I'll bet you anything! You have to dance this year! I've told Jessie and Nora so many stories and they're dying to see you in your role as Queen!

Don't worry, they're both well. In fact, they've quite charmed the Irish gentry. They've learnt the local language better than I have. If it wasn't for how young they were, I'd use them as my translators.

Anyway, I could go on forever, but since it's getting late and I'll see you in a couple of days anyway, I'll stop here. Love you forever, my Queen Elizabeth.

Blanche"

Scanning the lines of my sister's best calligraphy for what seemed like the thousandth time in the brief few days since they had reached me, I felt a thrill of joy go through me at the thought of seeing her again. Seven months was a long time to go without seeing your beloved sister.

But now there were just hours to go. Blanche, along with her retinue was joining us for the Christmas Season this very night. I was in a fever of excitement and could turn my hand to nothing because of it.

I had even tried music, which was my usual solace, but when the string on my lute broke, I could not be bothered to mend it, or even to call for a new lute. It was even worse waiting than I had anticipated, particularly since, being pregnant, I couldn't ride out to meet my sister on the road.

The only person able to calm me was Edward, my wonderful Edward. When Kat, scared I would endanger the child if I wasn't soothed at once, sent a page running for him, he came immediately.

His hand came up, dismissing my maids, as he caught me into his arms.

"Shh, Elizabeth. You need to relax. You can't risk making yourself sick. Think of the child."

"But…Blanche…"

"Will not get here any faster for you fretting for her. She's perfectly safe with Lord Ormonde." Seeing from my face that I wasn't convinced by his words, Edward offered to ride out himself to meet Blanche on the road with an armed escort, but I shook my head.

"Kat would never let you go. She thinks I need you here. And she's right. I do."

"Well, then, what would you have me do?"

"Tell me. Tell me of the England we're creating for our son. An England where love and justice
rule above all things."

"Come here then." Edward settled himself in an armchair by the fire and held out his arms to me. Sinking to the floor in front of him with a groan, I tipped my head back into his lap, having first removed my hood so that he could play with my coppery hair as he spoke, soothing me not just with his whispers, but also with his touch.

We sat like that until it was time for us both to prepare for the banquet in my sister's honour.

"Make way for Her Majesty and His Highness! Make way!"

The herald cried out, his voice shrill over the heads of the crowds, parting them for us like Moses did the Red Sea. Hand in hand, Edward and I swept the length of the Great Hall, bestowing a smile here; a nod there.

We seated ourselves at the High Table; Mary on Edward's other side, an empty seat beside me for Blanche, while other favoured courtiers, such as Anne and Edward's father, were arranged in other seats around the table.

At last, at long, long last, it was time. Safely ensconced, Edward and I glanced expectantly towards the door. The herald blew on his trumpet and announced "Her Royal Highness, the Princess Blanche, Lady of Ireland!" and there she was, gliding towards us, resplendently regal in cloth of silver trimmed with purple velvet. My beloved little sister.

"Your Majesty. Your Highness." Blanche curtsied to each of us in turn, formal as protocol required. However, I could tell by the way that she was quivering that she was desperate to fling herself into my arms, so I wasted no time in waving a hand to raise her from her curtsy and coming round the table to clasp her close.

"It's good to see you, Blanche. You look well, sweetheart."

"As do you, Bessie. Both of you."

Blanche couldn't help the way her eyes widened at my bulging stomach and I laughed.

"Come and sit down and tell me all about Ireland. Where are the twins? I thought they'd be with you."

"No, they're with Lady Stafford. They were exhausted after the journey." Blanche explained, leaning to kiss Edward on the cheek. It was such a mature gesture that I had to check myself. Blanche had definitely grown up in the last few months. She wasn't the little girl who had left Bristol seven months earlier. She was much more a young woman than I remembered.

To my relief, however, some things still hadn't changed. For instance, she still enjoyed a party as much as she ever had. She laughed and clapped eagerly at the tumbler's antics and, when we had finished feasting and the dancing began, she still looked impatiently at me, begging me with her eyes to partner Edward in the first dance.

"I can't. It's not good for the child." Resting a palm on the swell of my belly, I shook my head.

Sensing Blanche's disappointment and keen to head it off before it really began, I suggested that she open the dancing by dancing with Edward in my place.
The sight of her sapphire eyes lighting up gave me the purest jolt of pleasure I had experienced in a long time. Knowing what I wanted from him, Edward called out for a galliard to be played, took my little sister's hand and led her out on to the floor. Settling back into my carved cushioned chair, I watched them together as they exchanged the customary formalities, delight and pride mingling within me to create a pleasantly warm sensation that I hoped I would experience time and time again.

"Do you not think that Blanche is blossoming into quite a beauty?"

Determined to keep the conversation casual, I barely glanced at either Edward or Anne as I spoke.

"Yes. What of it?"

Edward, not having quite the education in statecraft that Anne and I did, didn't realise where this was leading, but Anne did. She shot me a warning glance.

"She's only twelve, Elizabeth."

"Now. By the time anything was formally arranged, she'd be fourteen at least. After all, we'll have to wait for France to officially come out of mourning for Queen Catherine."

With a gracious incline of her head, Anne conceded the point. Edward looked from one to the other of us in puzzlement. "What do you mean? What's going on?"

"I'm thinking of our future," I informed him, continuing "Now that the French King Henri is a widower, his ministers will be looking for a new bride for him. Particularly with the Dauphin, Prince Francis, being so young and sickly. Remember, girls can never inherit in France, so the Princesses are no use to him. Anyway, I was thinking of offering them Blanche. It might help improve relations between our two countries."

"You'll never get it through. Blanche is barely more than a child, Elizabeth. Besides which, everyone knows what a passion King Henri has for his mistress Madame de Poitiers. Who's to say that he won't just marry her now that he's a free man?"

"She's not free to marry him. And although French marriages have been annulled in the past, they've always been royal marriages, not marriages between courtiers or the populace. And even if there were a precedent for such a thing happening, everyone knows that mistresses have more freedom than Queens, especially if they have long lasting influence over their lover. Madame de Poitiers doesn't strike me as the kind of woman who would easily sacrifice that type of influence. I doubt she'd accept the crown of France, even if King Henri begged her on bended knee to take it," Anne explained calmly, beating me to it.

"There's also the matter of Scotland. Queen Mary of Scots might just be a little girl of five, but if the rumours are true, her mother already plans to wed her to the Dauphin. If we don't want both our nearest neighbours against us, then England needs to be in on this alliance. Prince Francis is too young for Blanche, even if he wasn't already as good as promised to the Scots Queen, and the child in my belly is no good to us yet. Blanche is our only hope of an alliance with France in the reasonably near future."

"That's not strictly true. There's your other sister, Mary." Edward reminded me.

"Mary was declared a bastard by the Pope himself. A nobleman might marry her, if the dowry was right, but never a King. I know I said the opposite to my council a few months ago, but it is actually the truth." I sighed, wishing I knew how to explain my eldest sister's situation fully. It was
just such a complicated one.

"The Lady Mary is also into her thirties. By royal standards, that's incredibly late for a first marriage, Your Grace. No, I share your misgivings, but Elizabeth is right. The only bride we can conceivably offer King Henri is the Princess Blanche."

I glanced at Anne in gratitude for her help and then reached across the table to Edward.

"I'm not saying any of this is set in stone, by any means. I only wanted to broach the idea, Edward. Will you at least think about it? For my sake?"

"Since I know you only want the best for your sister, of course I will. Don't fret yourself, darling," Edward assured me, before he rose from the table where we three had been lunching together.

"If you ladies will excuse me, I must go. My father wished to speak to me about matters in Suffolk."

"Of course. Go."

I waved my husband away with a nod, before once more turning to Anne; changing the conversation completely.

As if the world somehow knew that I was now open to discussing matrimonial prospects for my sisters, I had barely put my plans for Blanche's future aside for future consideration when Ruy Gomez da Silva came to me, asking for a private audience.

Since I was not actually busy at the time, I nodded. "Very well, Excellency. Come with me." I led him into my Privy Chamber and dismissed all the other petitioners and courtiers who were crowding it.

As soon as the doors shut behind them, I turned back to Ruy.

"What is it you wish to speak to me about?"

"Madam, I wish to – I wish to discuss some matters of – of a personal nature."

The Imperial Ambassador seemed unnaturally nervous. Smiling, I sought to put him at his ease.

"Come, Señor Gomez. Speak. Whatever it is that is clearly troubling you, I swear that I will not judge you."

"I thank you, Madam, but I am not troubled…I am merely…" Finally, twisting his hat between his hands, the Ambassador screwed up his courage enough to blurt, "I have come to petition you for the honour of pressing my suit with Your Majesty's sister, Lady Salisbury."

His words took my breath away. Despite all the training I had ever had in royal behaviour, I could only gape at Ruy in open-mouthed astonishment.

"You wish to press a suit with my sister? With Lady Salisbury? With a view to making her your bride?"

"Yes, My Lady Queen, it is so. Lady Salisbury and I have lived together under one roof since my arrival upon these shores. By now, we know each other well. I have increasingly come to admire her spirit and generosity as well as her beauty, her intellect and…"
"Enough." Still in shock, I held up a hand to stop the older man in his tracks. "Have you spoken to Lady Salisbury of this, Señor Gomez? Of your intentions towards her?"

The embarrassed silence that followed my words enabled me to guess at the answer. "You have not, have you?"

"No, Madam," Señor Gomez eventually confessed, before hurrying on "However, Lady Salisbury has never once failed to give me a reason to hope that, were I to do so, I would not be looked upon with disfavour."

Thinking over his words for a few moments, I reached a decision.

"Then, Excellency, I will say that I personally see no impediments to your union. Once you have told me that you have spoken to Lady Salisbury and she has not refused your suit or proposal, I will speak to her myself. If, after that, I am satisfied that she will receive you favourably as her husband, I will have a message sent to your master seeking his approval of the match. What say you?"

"Majesty, you are most gracious. A thousand heartfelt thanks." Señor Gomez kissed my hand, bowed and retreated, leaving me to stare after him, mind whirling.

In the seventeen years of my life, I had never once seen a sibling of mine wed. Now the idea of two prospective unions had presented themselves within a week of each other. Was the world going mad?
Chapter 23

Blanche might be safely back at Court, none the worse for wear for her months in Ireland, but she wasn't the only sister I'd been missing. There were two other little girls, both just eight years old, which I hadn't seen since before their departure. It was high time I rectified that, so the morning after I had spoken to Señor Gomez, knowing that their week with Sir William and Lady Mary Stafford would be over and they would be back at their duties in my sister's rooms, I paid them a visit.

Not wanting to overburden them with protocol, I swept in unannounced and startled the flock of ladies tremendously.

"Oh, Your Majesty!"

Lady Anne Stanhope, my sister's new Lady of the Bedchamber, was the first to see me. She dropped into a curtsy and the rest followed suit. Including two dark-haired young girls who bent before me, chirruping "Dia duit, Your Majesty".

"Eleanor, Jessica, I want you to stay here. The rest of you may go." Glancing around, I realised fully that my sister wasn't there, even though her ladies were. "Why don't you go and wait on your mistress?"

My voice was sharp. As well it might be. The number of women in the outer chamber made it clear to me that, wherever my sister was, she must be almost unattended. I couldn't allow that, particularly not now that she was of marriageable age. Ireland, where she was ruler, was one thing. Here, where she was under my protection, was quite another.

"Her Highness is hawking in the gardens with Lord Ormonde," Lady Stanhope tried to assure me that my sister would come to no harm, but I was taking no chances.

"I don't care. Go."

My tone was not one that anyone cared to argue with. With a rustle of silk and satin, the ladies rose and filed out, leaving my little sisters curtsying before me.

"Nora, Jess, look at me." I held out a hand to each of them, raising them up. They kept their gazes down demurely until I cupped my hand over their chins and tilted their heads up. "What's wrong?"

"Are you angry with us?"

"No! Why would I be?"

"You sounded so angry just now."

"Oh! But not with you! I could never be angry with you, darlings. No, it's the others. They should know not to leave Blanche alone. She's too old for that."

"But can't she look after herself?"

Nora's innocent question made me chuckle. "It's not quite that simple, darling. But never mind that. Tell me what Ireland's like. I've never been, you see."

"Green!" was the first word out of Jess's mouth. I laughed.
"Well, they do call it the Emerald Isle. But what do you do all day?"

"We have our lessons in the morning and then, if it's raining, we stay with Blanche, but if it's not, we ride out with Aoife."

"Aoife?" I asked, curious as to who my little sisters were associating with.

"She's a local chieftain's daughter. Lord Ormonde arranged for her to teach us Irish. She teaches Blanche too."

"Oh?"

"Yes. She's wonderful! She's got wild black curls and blue-grey eyes. She's almost as pretty as you are. And she's got Jess over her fear of riding."

"I was never scared, Nora! I just didn't like riding on a saddle! Now that I can ride bareback…"

"What else do you study?" I interjected, hiding the fact that I was unsure whether I wanted my little sisters to be riding bareback over the wilds of Ireland and determined to avoid a sibling dispute if I could at all help it. "Irish, riding and what else?"

"Music, dancing, Latin and French. And needlework, of course," Jess smiled as she said the last of their subjects, and I smiled with her, reaching out to stroke her hair.

"Of course. We couldn't let all that talent go to waste, could we?"

"I can dance a salladre! And a bass dance!" Nora cried, suddenly jealous of the extra attention I was paying Jess. Rising, I went to the virginals in the corner.

"Come and show me, then. Blanche said you'd danced a salladre for the Earl of Kildare. Show me that one."

Running my hands through a scale first to check the instrument was in tune, I began to play a gay salladre, feeling a rush of pride fill me as Nora, thrilled at being the centre of attention for once, started to dance with all the skill that she could muster.

The next day was Christmas Day and Edward and I were expected to receive gifts from all our courtiers, as well as giving and exchanging our own.

He commissioned a necklace of white gold set with garnets and opals carved into tiny flowers, with three larger Tudor Roses – Rubies surrounding pearls – hanging from a silver ship in the centre of the rope of jewels, for me. Now that I had more time on my hands, because I couldn't ride out to follow the hounds as I so loved to do, I embroidered him a scabbard and sword belt, entwining our initials and family emblems in lover's knots.

He loved it and wore it beneath his green velvet doublet, cinched tight about his waist, when we went in to dine before the Court and accept our gifts from them. For my part, though I had meant to wear green and silver satin, I changed my mind, clothing myself instead in a low-necked gown of burgundy damask, determined to show my new necklace off to its full effect.

Thus attired, we went out to join Anne and my sister on the dais and accept our Court's best wishes for the season.

As Mary knelt before us, entreatling me to accept a crystal comb for my hair and Edward a little
wolfhound puppy, I thought I saw the gleam of a gold ring hanging on a chain around her neck. However, I ignored it and said nothing until the Imperial Ambassador came to us.

He presented us with his master's gifts – an ivory-inlaid mirror for me and a set of the finest Spanish lances for my husband – and was about to be dismissed by Edward when he turned to me and murmured, "With your permission, Madam, I have spoken to Lady Salisbury."

"So soon? Is she willing?"

"She accepted my ring."

"Really? Then I must certainly speak to her at the next opportunity. God, Emperor and Lady Salisbury willing, we could have the service performed in the spring. What say you, Excellency?"

"If that is what pleases Your Majesty. Merry Christmas." Ruy retreated with a bow, presumably hoping to be able to find Mary, while Edward turned to me, "There's something I'm missing. Why is His Excellency talking about Mary and a ring?"

"Señor Gomez wants to marry Mary," I replied, laying a hand over his reassuringly. "It's nothing serious. Don't worry, I haven't sent us to war with Spain without telling you!"

"Nothing serious? This is your sister's future we're talking about! Our sister's."

"Well, I will talk to Mary about it before I write to the Emperor, but if she's accepted his ring, then we shouldn't have to worry about her. She's old enough and noble enough to look after herself, after all."

"I'll talk to her with you. As soon as the festivities are over next week," Edward decided, in a tone that brooked no argument. Not that I was arguing. The fact that Edward cared for my sisters as much as he did for his own family was part of the reason I loved him.

"Of course you will. We'll go to Buckingham House next week. Together."

I squeezed his hand gently, before withdrawing mine from his grasp. "Now come on. Call the French Ambassador up, or we'll be at these gifts all night."

Stifling a laugh at my dry whisper, Edward did as I asked of him, waving the French Ambassador forward without further delay.

Mary welcomed us to Buckingham House with her usual grace and poise, instructing her maid, Susan, to fetch us some ale and helping Edward arrange me before the fire, even though I insisted I wasn't cold.

"You shouldn't have come out in this weather, Sister," she chided, tucking an extra blanket around me for safety's sake, "What if you should be taken ill? Think of the child."

"Don't fuss so, Mary, for Heaven's sake. I'm seventeen. Old enough to know my own mind," I protested.

"You're still my little sister. My little sister Bessie. You know, I used to treat you like my little girl; as if you were my daughter. This was before...before..."

"Before Mama turned me against you," I finished abruptly, trying to control the tears that burned behind my eyelids as I spoke. I loved my mother dearly. Contemplating the fact that she hadn't
been as sweet as I remembered her was never pleasant. But in this case, I knew it was true. Mama had turned me against Mary.

In my mother's defence, she had been insecure and vulnerable. Worried about Jane Seymour's son, Father's new bastard son, and about the English people possibly rallying around their former Princess, despite the Blackfriars verdict. Because I was their Princess Elizabeth, because I was "Great Harry's" daughter, the commoners had loved me far more than they had ever loved my mother, the one they blamed for the King ever deciding to investigate the validity of his marriage to the Dowager Princess Katherine at all, Mama had decided to use that to her advantage. She had turned me against Mary, whom I adored at the time, telling me how rude and insolent Mary had been towards her, her rightful Queen. Being only four, I had believed a woman as beautiful and gentle as my mother would never tell a lie and swallowed everything she told me almost instantly.

Mama had hoped that, if I didn't care for Mary, neither would the commoners. That hadn't worked – they still clung to the old ways and loved her as much as ever, even if they no longer called her Princess Mary – but it had destroyed my relationship with my elder sister forever.

The rift between us had only worsened when Jess and Nora had been born and I'd been taught to regard them as my sisters more than I regarded Mary or Lord Nottingham as my siblings, and my mother's death for adultery had been the final straw. Mary, who'd viewed her as a whore and a traitoress, believed she had received her just desserts. In fact, since Blanche and I had remained legitimate through the use of the good faith clause, which was more than she had when her mother's marriage had been annulled, she felt that my mother had been treated more generously than she ought to have been. She'd forgotten that, Princess or not, I was just a shocked, grieving little girl, who was desperately trying to come to terms with what had happened and the implications of it, as well as comfort her own little sisters. She had treated me far too harshly and, in retaliation, I had withdrawn from her completely, instead clinging to Kat and Anne, the latter of whom had very quickly become the older sister figure that I so craved.

"Never mind how you used to treat Elizabeth, Mary. I hear we may soon be congratulating you on a happy event of your own."

Edward, knowing how volatile my emotions were at the moment, interrupted my musings. "Is it true that the Imperial Ambassador has asked for your hand?"

At the mention of Ruy Gomez, my older sister blushed furiously. She would look neither Edward nor I in the eye. Leaning forward, I took her hand "Mary? Maria?"

"He has, Your Grace," she finally admitted, in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper. "And I've accepted."

"Are you sure, Mary? Are you sure it's what you want? We'll give our permission in a heartbeat, but only if you're sure, because I want to see you happy. You're my sister and I want to see you happy."

My hand tightened on my sister's and I had the gratifying relief of seeing her smile as she nodded.

"I'm sure, Elizabeth. Ruy's a good man. He'll treat me well. I know he will. And he can take me to Spain. I can live where my mother lived in her girlhood. I've always wanted to do that."

Mary raised her head to include Edward in her steady gaze as she continued, "We're not you two, we never will be, but we're fond enough of each other in our own way. I want to be more than his hostess. I want to be his wife. I want to bear his children while I still can. I've thought about this long and hard, even before he asked me. I'm sure. I want to be Doña Maria Gomez de la Silva."
Edward and I glanced at each other.

"She's sure," he mouthed and I nodded. Taking a deep breath, my husband spoke again, to my sister this time.

"Then, Mary, I suggest you start wearing that ring, rather than having it on a chain around your neck. I'll write to the Emperor and seek his approval of the match."

"Do it now."

I looked sideways at Edward, willing him to hear how earnest I was. If Mary was sure she'd be happy as Ruy Gomez's wife, then who was I, who'd also married for love, to gainsay her?

Edward nodded. "Of course I will. Shall I see you back at Whitehall?"

"Yes. I'll dine with Mary. Fortify myself for the arduous journey home," I replied, layering my voice heavily with sarcasm.

However, Edward didn't notice my tone, or if he did, he pretended not to, as he got up to kiss me on the forehead.

"You do that, darling. Take care of yourself."

Then he kissed Mary on both cheeks as she rose to her feet, calling a servant to see him out.

"I'll do my best for you, Mary, I promise."

"I know you will, My Lord. Thank you."

"Just make sure she gets home in one piece."

"I will," Mary assured him and then he was gone, braving the cold, preparing to try to arrange my sister's future.

After a few minutes of watching her pace the room nervously, I laughed "Come here, Mary! Forget my husband for a while."

"How can I do that?" she retorted waspishly. "He holds my future in his hands."

"No, the Emperor does." I reminded her. "He's the one who has to say yes now, remember. And anyway, we're not going to know for weeks. You've got to stop worrying about this."

"But what can I do?"

"Treat me like a little sister. Treat me like you used to do. Tell me what it was like when I was a child, when I adored you, before my mother broke us apart," I suggested, seizing on the first topic that came into my head.

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

Curtsying briefly, as though to make up for her earlier sharpness, Mary came to stand behind me, facing the fire, which crackled merrily, soothing us both with its heat as we tried to make up for lost time and salvage something of our former relationship; a relationship that I, for one, scarcely remembered.
A month later, Edward came running into my bedroom as my ladies were dressing me, brandishing a letter. "Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

"What is it?" I turned from where I was sitting at my dressing table and, handing me the letter, he took the rope of pearls that Lady Lucy was about to loop around my neck from her and did it himself.

"It's from Prince Phillip, the Emperor's son. Seeing as he's Regent of Spain, His Majesty passed the decision on Mary's marriage on to him."

"What did he say?"

"Read it for yourself," Edward chuckled, playing with my hair gently as I unrolled the letter and began to read.

As I finished, I glanced up into the mirror, a wide smile slowly spreading over my face.

"He said yes. He'll let them marry. And he's creating Ruy Prince of Eboli. My sister's going to be a Princess again."

"The title she always believed was hers," Edward smiled, and I nodded.

"She's going to be delighted."

Then why wait to tell her? Let's go and find her and Ruy now."

"Sounds like a plan," I agreed, quickly pulling on my hood and rising from my chair. Edward was beside me in an instant. "Careful, darling."

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Thank you, though."

"I just…I don't want anything to go wrong."

"It won't. My mother gave birth to four healthy daughters, the last two of which were twins, and survived, remember. And her father fathered ten children in total. I'm made of stronger stuff than you sometimes seem to think, My Lord of England."

"I know you are. You're my Tudor Queen. My Tudor Queen of Roses."

"Then act like you believe it. Please. For me?"

Raising my eyebrows, I stroked Edward's cheek, and then slid my hand down to entwine my fingers with his. He pulled me closer and dropped a feather-light kiss on my skin at the corner of my temple, just where it disappeared into my hood. Exchanging a quick smile, we went out among our Court hand in hand, bestowing regal greetings upon any of the nobles who greeted us as they parted before us.

As we turned the corner of the corridor leading to our Privy Chamber, I turned to Lady Lucy, one of the bevy of ladies who had followed us from my apartments, "Lady Lucy, fetch my sister Mary and Señor Gomez for me, would you?"

"Of course, Madam."
I sensed her fall away from my shoulder as she turned to do my bidding. Meanwhile, Edward and I went to hear the rest of the petitioners.

However, I was distant and distracted, barely taking in a word they said until our herald cleared his throat and announced, "The Countess of Salisbury and Buckingham and His Excellency the Imperial Ambassador."

Straightening instantly, I watched my sister and her fiance pay their respects before rising, gripping the Prince Regent's letter tight in my hand.

"Lady Salisbury, Your Excellency. I have here a missive from the Prince Regent of Spain."

"Yes?" Mary's tone was light and respectful, as befitted any good courtier, but, looking at her, I could read the hints of tension in her body. Catching her eye, I smiled encouragingly, continuing hastily, "He says he can think of no serious impediments to the marriage and gives his blessing for your union."

Mary's face broke into a smile and Ruy Gomez's cheeks coloured slightly with pleasure. As she turned to him, he clasped her hand tightly and touched her cheek briefly yet tenderly. Knowing as I did that Ruy was a born Ambassador and therefore not a man prone to showing his emotions in public, I was grateful for the gesture on Mary's behalf. He was making an effort for something that didn't come naturally to him.

"That is not all, either." Edward interjected, coming down from his throne to stand beside me. "His Highness also writes that he has plans to create you Prince of Eboli, Ruy. He wants to do so on this, the occasion of your marriage, in recognition of all your services to him over these past years."

Mary gasped and Ruy – I mentally refused to call him anything else, now that he was going to be my brother – inclined his head.

"Your Highness. Please convey my most fervent and humble thanks to my master."

"Of course," My husband promised, before saying, "Now, we'll let you go, for I'm sure you'll have plenty to discuss, now that your marriage can go ahead."

Nodding, Mary curtsied to us arm in arm with Ruy, her future husband, who sank into the deepest of bows.

"Your Majesty. Your Highness."

"Your Highness." I replied, nodding to Ruy before gripping Edward's arm for support and sinking into an awkward half-curtsy to my eldest sister. "My Lady Princess."

Hampered by my rapidly swelling belly, the movement caused me pain, but the tears of joy in Mary's eyes as I honoured her more than made up for it.

I stayed in that position until the great doors had swung shut behind the couple and Edward had to help me up.

"You didn't have to do that, you know," he chuckled.

"I know. But she deserved it. After everything my mother and I put her through, Mary deserved to hear me call her "Princess" again."

Edward's eyes softened at my words and he captured my lips with his in a tender, cherishing kiss.
"I do love you, Elizabeth Tudor."

"And I you, My Lord of England," I whispered throatily, as we both forgot that there were petitioners outside waiting to speak to us, instead letting our passion take us over.

Wanting me to be able to be present at the ceremony, Mary decided to have a March wedding, which gave us just over a month to prepare.

She also chose to wear a gown of ivory silk encrusted with seed pearls; a gown in the Spanish fashion, highly reminiscent of the one her mother, the Dowager Princess, had worn when she married my uncle Prince Arthur as a girl of sixteen.

Ruy's older brother sailed over from Portugal as soon as the sailing season began so that he could act as best man, while Mary asked Blanche and Mary Clarendieux, her dearest friend's eldest daughter, to be her bridesmaids and Katy Stafford to be her flower girl.

They were all to be gowned in Lancaster red satin, so that, together with the bride, they made up the colours of the Tudor Rose.

It was also a good colour choice in terms of their complexions, for dark red suited them all perfectly, particularly Blanche, the fairest of the three. She looked stunning when her maids had laced her into her new gown, brushed her hair until it shone and woven the strings of emeralds she had begged to be allowed to wear into her hair.

I was with her when they dressed her and I couldn't help but catch my breath when she straightened up and I caught sight of her full regalia.

"Do you like it, Bessie?" she asked, as she twirled slowly for me; still, at that moment, very much the young girl seeking her older sister's approval. I nodded.

"You look so pretty, one might even think that you were the bride," I teased, stopping short at the utter shock on Blanche's face. "Don't look at me like that. It'll be your turn next, don't think it won't. You're thirteen in June, don't forget."

"But you were sixteen when you married Edward. And you wanted to. I don't want to marry. Not yet. Please, not yet." Blanche pleaded, voice shaking. Alarmed by her tone, I suddenly looked at her hard, realising as I did so just exactly how worried she was.

"Good God, Blanche! Did you think I'd brought you back from Ireland to marry you off?"

At my horrified gasp, she shook her head, causing waves of relief to wash over me. Unfortunately, they were only short-lived, as, a moment later, she continued "Not married, exactly. I was thinking betrothed, maybe."

"No! Of course I haven't!"

Realising that my adamant denial might cause my little sister to believe that I was planning on never making her marry anyone or into any country, I quickly clarified "I'm not saying the day won't come, Blanche, but it hasn't come yet. I promise it hasn't. So go out there and meet Mary and the others with a smile on your face, all right?"

"But Mary's moving to Portugal. To Spain. How am I supposed to be happy about that?"

I was about to laugh and say, "Because you're half-Tudor, half Howard and a Princess to boot,"
when I became conscious of the fact that my sister was in fact desperately serious. She didn't need to be laughed at; she needed to be comforted.

"Oh, sweetheart." Pulling her against me as best I could, I wrapped one arm around her and stroked her beautiful golden hair with the other hand. "You never did like change, did you? But honestly, Mary will be fine. Of course we'll miss her. And she'll miss us. It's natural. But Ruy's a good man, and she's so happy to be marrying him. She can't wait to go to Spain and see where her mother lived as a child. Anyway, it's not like she won't be coming back. Even if Ruy wasn't the Spanish Envoy to our Court, he's Earl of Salisbury and Buckingham *jure uxoris* just as much as he is Prince of Eboli. Of course he'll need to come back to administer to his lands. I'm sure Mary will come with him. So today isn't the last time we'll see her. Seeing as that's the case, can't you find it in your heart to smile for her? Just for today if you can't bring yourself to do it any other time?"

Gradually, Blanche's trembling ceased and she eventually pushed herself away from me.

"I'm ready."

"Good. Then go and find Mary and tell her I'll see her in the chapel."

Even as my younger sister turned for the door, however, I called her back. "Hang on. Take this with you."

I pulled a pearl rosary out of my skirt pocket, one hung on silver thread and made into a necklace by adding a garnet clasp on to the head of the chain. A garnet clasp in the shape of a pomegranate.

"It was her mother's. I found it in a jewel casket the other day; one of the ones I haven't looked at for years. I'm sure she'd like to have it."

"I'll give it to her," Blanche promised, closing her slim hand over the beads of the rosary and heading for the door. I watched her go, unable to deny that I was secretly relieved at the fact that she had almost broken down in my arms. It showed that, despite everything, she was still my younger sister. Still my precious pearl of a younger sister.

I waited a few minutes to let her get ahead of me and then slipped out of the side door to go down and meet Edward by the door to the Chapel Royal.

"I, Ruy Gomez de la Silva, Prince of Eboli, take thee, Lady Mary Tudor, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part and thereto I plight my troth."

Ruy took my sister's hand as he finished his speech, squeezing it gently and slipping a heavy silver ring on to her finger. Eyes downcast, she smiled shyly in response and then it was her turn.

Reaching for his hand, she raised her head to look up at him, sapphire eyes gleaming through the ivory gauze of her veil. She cleared her throat and then began, her voice ringing out clear and pure as a silver bell.

"I, Lady Mary Tudor, Countess of Salisbury and Buckingham, take thee, Señor Ruy Gomez de la Silva, to my lawfully wedded husband. I vow to have and to hold thee and to be bonny and buxom at bed and at board from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part and thereto I plight my troth."

Finishing her speech, Mary took her own ring from Thomas Percy, the Earl of Northumberland, who was acting as ring bearer, and slipped it on to Ruy's finger.
"I now proclaim you man and wife."

Bishop Gardiner, who was conducting the service, intoned, before raising his gaze to include the congregation as he continued, "Whom God hath joined in holy matrimony, let no man tear asunder. Your Highness, you may kiss the bride."

Ruy quickly lifted Mary's veil and complied, kissing her determinedly to seal their union and then they joined hands. With the herald striding before them, proclaiming "His Highness, Prince Ruy of Eboli, Earl of Salisbury and Buckingham" and "Her Highness the Princess Mary of Eboli, Countess of Salisbury and Buckingham", they went into the Great Hall to preside over their wedding feast.

My sister, Lady Mary Tudor, Countess of Salisbury and Buckingham, had become Infanta Maria Gomez de la Silva de Eboli.
May 1548

I woke suddenly, gripped by an agonising pain. "Ah!"

"My Lady Queen!" Lady Lucy, who had been sleeping on a pallet at the foot of my bed, sprang up, alerted by my cry. As she reached me, however, the pain eased and I slumped back on the pillows with a watery smile.

"It's nothing, Lucy. Just another false alarm, most likely."

"Not another one, Madam! That's three in the past week! If we tell His Highness again, he'll begin to think you're making up the child in your womb!" she laughed.

"More fool him! He hasn't had to carry – AH!"

My sharp retort was cut off by another screech of pain. I arched suddenly, feeling as I did so something break inside me and a torrent of liquid gush out from between my legs. Lady Lucy took advantage of my momentary position to snatch a brief glimpse of the sheets. It was enough to enable her to ascertain that they were soaked through.

"On second thoughts, Your Majesty, perhaps I'd better fetch Mistress Greenwood." Lucy flashed me a smile and was gone, without even waiting for my nod of approval. Not that I was complaining.

I barely would have had time to do so anyway, for a minute later, she was back, Kat and Mistress Greenwood scurrying in her wake.

The former almost went into hysterics upon seeing me in pain. To her, even though I was Queen of England and a mother to be, I was still just as much her little Princess, the girl she had taken under her wing when my sister Blanche had been born the year I turned five. To see me writhing in the throes of childbirth affected her severely.

"Oh, Elizabeth!"

Falling to her knees beside me, she gripped my hand tightly, trying not to cry at the sight of my anguish.

I tried to offer her a smile of reassurance, but couldn't help being relieved when Mistress Greenwood snapped, "Well, Mistress Ashley, if you want to help me, then I need you to pull yourself together. Go and send someone to tell the Great Lord Edward that his wife has gone into labour. Tell him I'll send someone to get him when it's over. And fetch some hot water. We'll need plenty of it before we're done here."

Though, at the time, I didn't believe her, an hour later, when I was sweaty and bloodstained, cursing Edward for putting me in this position with every other breath, I certainly did.

It was no easy birth, that much was certain. The child was a stubborn one; I had known that from the very first time I had felt it kick; when it had been so determined to prove its presence to its father. Even though I felt that it was time to push it out into the world, the child itself. It took me a full day of hard, laboured struggle to push England's newest Royal child out into the world.
But she was worth it. Of course she was worth it. She was my Princess; Edward's Princess. Our Princess Katherine Tudor-Brandon. How could she not be worth it?

From the second I held her, freshly swaddled, I loved her with such a passion that I scarcely wanted to let her go.

"Oh, Katherine. My darling. You're so, so loved, Princess. You're England's little Rose. The Thornless Rose, just like your Grandmother. I pray you never forget that. May you stay bonny and blithe and grow into a perfect jewel of womanhood. Just like I'm sure you will."

Crooning into the whorls of her tiny ear, I cradled her close, barely paying attention even as Kat sent a maid, Mistress Amy Robsart, scuttling to Edward's apartments to fetch him.

The first time I looked up from Katherine's downy head was when Edward, tousled with drowsiness and worry, but his eyes blazing with love, came sprinting into the room, crying out my name.

"Elizabeth! Oh, thank God! Elizabeth!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" Rocking Katherine quickly to prevent her from startling at her father's voice, I offered him a tired smile. Edward fell to his knees beside me, cupping my face between his hands and staring deep into my eyes.

"I thought I was going to lose you. It took so long… I didn't know if I was ever going to see you again."

"But you haven't. I'm still here. I'm still your Elizabeth. I'm still Queen of England. As I promised you I would be. And they say that first babies are always the hardest. The next one will be easier, I'm sure. Anyway, she's worth it. Look at her. Isn't she just perfect?"

"She is," Edward agreed, taking Katherine from me and dandling her in his arms. "Our perfect Princess Katherine."

"I want Anne to be her Godmother. Anne and Maria," I announced decidedly, using the Spanish version of our older sister's name, as I often did when I was trying to keep her separate from Lady Stafford, and especially since she had married a Portuguese noble. Edward nodded.

"I thought you might. I was going to suggest Blanche, but if you want Maria to be Godmother instead…"

"I do. I want Blanche to be Godmother to the Prince of Wales whenever we have a boy, so I'd rather she wasn't…"

"Of course," Edward said smoothly, understanding perfectly, as I had known he would. "For Katherine's Godfather, I was thinking of Robert King, Bishop of Oxford. I don't know about you, but I've not forgotten that we got married in Oxford. I thought it might be a nice gesture. Bring things full circle."

As Edward spoke, I realised that he was right. If I was honest, I hadn't considered the Bishop of Oxford as a possible godfather, not even as a second one, had it been a boy, but now that Edward had planted the idea in my head, I couldn't get rid of it. I nodded.

"As you wish, Edward. Robert King it is."
A week later, wearing the tiny gown of silver and ivory lace that I had designed and sewn for her, the one embroidered with roses and dragons, our little daughter was christened "Her Highness Katherine Tudor-Brandon, Princess of England!"

Edward and I had debated giving her a title in her own right, as my sisters and I had one, but decided against it. She was still so young. We still had every hope of a Prince of Wales. If, in the future, Katherine turned out to be our only heir, then we would invest her with a title of her own beyond that of Princess, but not yet.

Given that I had only given birth a week earlier, I couldn't attend the ceremony, but Anne, who had held her at the font, assured to me that Katherine had behaved just as one might expect of a child barely a week old.

To my relief it was a view corroborated by all three of my younger sisters when they paid me a visit the next day.

"She looked beautiful, Bessie. And so quiet. With you for a mother and all the incense and crowds and what have you, I thought she might be shrieking her head off, but she didn't. She acted the part of an angel just as much as she looked like one."

"No, she didn't, Blanche. She cried when the water went over her head," Nora contradicted and I laughed, laughed a breathy sigh of relief. "Oh, that's all right, Nora. Babies are supposed to do that."

"Why? Doesn't crying mean that they're unhappy?"

"In most cases, yes. But at the christening, their crying means that they've been blessed; that God has expelled their demons."

"Demons?" Nora, who had been fussing over Katherine, who lay cradled in Jess's arms, glanced up in alarm, but thankfully, Katherine started crying a moment later. I glanced over at the three of them.

"She's probably hungry, Jess. Will you take her to her wet nurse for me?"

"Of course, Beth."

Jess slipped from her seat on the bed, Katherine balanced awkwardly in her arms. Not to be outdone, Nora leaped to her feet. "Wait for me!"

Watching them go, I chuckled. "They're adorable."

"All three of them," Blanche agreed, before switching the subject back to Katherine. "Have you chosen a governess for her yet?"

"Well, Kat will no doubt be disappointed that I haven't chosen her, but I think she's getting a little old to meet the demands of an infant. I was thinking of Lady Mary Dudley."

"Lord Warwick's daughter?" Blanche sounded stunned, and I hastened to reassure her.

"Yes. With the Dowager Lady Latimer to help her, of course. I've not forgotten that Mary's still young."

"Elizabeth...I hate to say it, but you really favour the Dudleys. If you don't watch out, people are going to get jealous."
"They've earned it. After everything they've done for me, for us, they've earned it," I retorted, trying not to glance at the door that the twins had just disappeared through. Marriage was still a touchy subject for Blanche. Telling her that I had recently been toying with the idea of marrying one of the twins off to John Dudley, the future Earl of Warwick, would do nothing to help that.

"Anyway," I said cheerfully, "I refuse to debate that now. Anne tells me you're planning to renovate Dublin Castle when you go back to Ireland. What do you mean to do to it?"

It was the right thing to say. Blanche had always been a keen artist and the idea of having an entire castle to arrange as she liked was simply wonderful for her. She talked so fast and for so long that, to be honest, I was surprised that she didn't drop down in a dead faint for lack of oxygen. My head spun from all the details she tried to cram into it, but nonetheless, it was a pleasure to have my little sister near me, talking as animatedly as she used to.

Much as I loved Katherine and my sisters, however, I couldn't shirk my duties as Queen forever. Six weeks was far too long to leave England without a monarch, however capable a Regent Edward might be.

So, when King Henri of France's message congratulating me on the birth of my new daughter arrived, I lost no time in writing back to him.

The message I entrusted to William Stanley, Baron Mounteagle, who was my new envoy to the French Court, also contained the suggestion that Edward, Anne and I had agreed on all those months ago.

That, if King Henri would agree to marry my younger sister Blanche when she turned sixteen and cede the Pas-Du-Calais to me until that date in the year of our Lord 1551, then, provided he honoured his agreement to marry her, I would ensure that the Pas-Du-Calais made up part of her dowry when the time came and give up all my claims to it from then on.

Message signed, sealed and sent in both Edward's name and mine, I turned my attention back to domestic matters such as arranging Katherine's household at Eltham. After all, I had done all I could, offered the best terms I could reasonably accept. It was up to the French now.
We didn't hear from the French for over a month, but even before we had heard from them, Anne made it plain that she was having misgivings about the way that I was going about organising Blanche's betrothal.

She caught me coming back from hawking with Edward one morning and, as I dismounted from Rosette, the dapple-grey hunter Edward had presented me with on the occasion of our first wedding anniversary, made her half-curtsy to me.

"Cousin," I greeted teasingly, yet with a note of warning in my voice. I hated it when she treated me too formally and she knew it.

With an absent nod, she rose, "May I speak to you about Blanche's betrothal, Elizabeth?"

"Of course. Walk with me."

I offered Anne the place at my side with a slight gesture. She stepped into it and my ladies fell back a pace or two to give us at least the illusion of privacy.

I could tell Anne was struggling to put her emotions into words, so patiently waited out her silence; waited until she finally burst out, "Have you even told Blanche that you're seeking to organise her betrothal?"

I bit my lip almost imperceptibly. This was the one topic that I had hoped to avoid. I would eagerly discuss any detail of, or indeed anything to do with, Blanche's betrothal, except whether or not I had actually told the bride to be.

Avoiding Anne's keen gaze, I refused to say anything, but even so, she read between the lines of my silence.

"Elizabeth! You have to tell her!"

"Not until it's signed and sealed!" I pleaded. Suddenly desperate, I turned to Anne and grabbed both her wrists, begging her as her younger cousin rather than as her Queen.

"Please, Anne, not until it's signed and sealed! You know how much Blanche hates change. Telling her of this before everything's finalised will only unsettle her. I'm trying to protect her. Honestly."

"It's not that I don't believe that you mean well, but she'll never forgive you. Elizabeth, think about what you're doing. You're giving her in marriage to a widower who's more than twice her age. And you haven't even warned her. She'll never forgive you."

"But she'll do it. She'll do it for me and for England. Because she loves us both. And I'm trying to secure her the most glittering future I possibly can. How many girls get to be titular Queen of France from the age of thirteen? Blanche will understand. I'm only trying to do my best for her. She'll understand," I repeated forcefully, but the words rang hollow, partly because I was unsure if I was trying to convince Anne or myself.

Anne shook her head. "I'm not so sure. Have you forgotten about your aunt, Princess Mary? She married a man older than her and ended up childless. She came back less than a year later and married for love. You married for love. Are you not going to give Blanche that chance, at least? And what about Diane de Poitiers? You're going to make Blanche fight her for King Henri's
affections? You know she'll never win."

"I'm not so sure about that, you know. Blanche can be a charming little vixen when she wants to be. Besides, you yourself said that Diane would never want to be Queen. And she knows better than anyone that King Henri needs another son to secure the succession. She'll let Blanche have her rights as a wife, I'm sure of it."

"And that's really what you want for your sister? A practically loveless marriage? I don't believe it of you, Elizabeth."

"It's what England needs," I retorted. "It's not like it doesn't hurt, but I know I'm doing what's best for my country. It's what I've been taught to do. You know that."

In the face of my certainty, Anne shook her head despairingly. "I still think you're doing the wrong thing by not telling her. If you won't tell her, then I will."

"Not until everything's finalised," I insisted, "I give you permission to tell her, but not until everything's finalised. That's my final word on the subject."

With that, I picked up my skirts and swept away to join my husband in our little daughter's nursery. Katherine was a complete treasure. I could forget everything else when I was with her, and that's what I wanted to do right now.

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A few weeks later, the French envoy arrived at Court and I made sure to hold a banquet to welcome him to England. My father in law, the Duke of Suffolk, acted as his host during his stay, but, to my relief, even though Edward and I were still young, it was to us that the envoy turned.

The very first night after the banquet, His Excellency made sure to ask after my health, now that I had returned to Court from my confinement – and that of our infant daughter.

"Forgive me if this is imprudent, Your Majesty, but I have heard that Her Highness the Princess Katherine is a bonny child. Might I be permitted to see her?"

Laughing gaily at the compliment, I answered "How could something which is true be imprudent, Count Montgomery? Katherine is indeed a beauty and of course you may see her. I'll send a woman to the nursery."

"No, don't do that. I'll go," Edward interjected, rising to his feet as he spoke. Count Montgomery stared after him as he descended the steps of the dais and strode out of the Dining Hall.

"Your husband fetches the Princess himself? Does he not trust the women in her household?"

"Of course he does. We trust Lady Dudley and Lady Latimer implicitly. But Edward dotes on Katherine."

"As, in fact, do we all, Your Excellency," my father in law interrupted, "She may only be two months old, but Her Highness is already known as the Thornless Rose of England."

As my father in law spoke, I watched the French Ambassador closely to see his reaction to the nickname. After all, England's last "Rosa sine Spina" had been my mother, Queen Katherine Howard, and we all knew how her story ended.

However, if His Excellency had any misgivings, he concealed them admirably, beckoning a
servant to pour him more wine and lapsing into silence until my herald announced, "His Highness the Great Lord of England and Her Highness the Princess Katherine!"

My husband came down the length of the Hall, our daughter cradled in his arms. Despite myself, I melted at the sight of her and held out my arms to take her into my embrace.

"Come here, Katherine darling. Come to Mama."

As I perched her on my lap, I smoothed down her soft dark hair. For all she bore her maternal grandmother's name, she was promising to look a lot more like her father than me or my mother.

Katherine let out a soft coo of delight at my caresses and the Ambassador smiled.

"She is charming, Your Majesty. Your Highness. Might I be permitted to hold her?"

"Of course. Have you ever seen a prettier girl?" I yielded my daughter over to His Excellency, placing a warning hand on Edward's sleeve to prevent him from hovering over them too protectively. I didn't think the Ambassador would dare hurt Katherine, not in front of both of us and almost our entire court.

And anyway, Katherine was enjoying the attention. She gurgled happily, flailing her little arms around excitedly. When she caught the Ambassador's emerald chain with a hand, however, I thought it would be prudent to intervene. Untangling the two of them, I tapped Katherine's hand in a gentle scolding and then scooped her back into my arms.

"No, Katherine. You can't do that. Come here."

Rocking her gently, I basked in the adoring glances we were garnering from those courtiers who were sitting close enough to realise how much I loved my daughter and, partly for their benefit, dropped a light kiss on to her tiny forehead.

Katherine stayed with us for a few more minutes, but the crowds soon began to unsettle her and she began to fuss and squirm in my arms.

Coincidentally, that was just when Count Montgomery had begun to talk about Blanche's betrothal, so I made a joke of it, saying "Her Highness knows we're not talking about her any more. She doesn't like it when she's not the centre of attention."

Count Montgomery smiled politely and Edward took Katherine from me to try to soothe her, but it soon became clear that that would be impossible and I shook my head at him.

"She's probably over-tired. Just give her to Kat. She can take her back to Lady Dudley."

"I'll take her."

"No, Edward. Stay. It's what people expect of you."

With that hissed piece of advice, I turned back to Count Montgomery, my diplomat's smile fixed firmly in place.

"Forgive me, Your Excellency. A mother's concern. Pray, tell me again, what does your master say about the possibility of my sister the Princess Blanche becoming his bride?"

"My master is honoured by the proposal and he hopes to be able to agree once certain matters have been sorted out. For example, he is worried about the loss of land this agreement would cause him,
"Of course he is," I said smoothly, glancing quickly at Edward. We had discussed this before. Knowing what I wanted from him, he replied easily in my stead.

"We realise that this would be an inconvenience for your master, but we hope that our allowing merchants who trade under the protection of a French Charter to trade in English ports free of charge whilst we have control of the Pas-du-Calais will ease his concerns over this particular matter. The agreement would of course remain exactly the same once Blanche weds His Majesty, except that it would be implemented in Irish ports, rather than English ones."

"I see. I will convey Your Highness's words to my master and give you his response as quickly as possible."

"We look forward to it," Edward answered, nodding. "But for now, let us eat. Shall I call in the jesters, Elizabeth?"

"Please. If you would," I agreed, turning my attention to the plate of venison that was rapidly growing cold before me.

Within a fortnight, King Henri had agreed to the new terms Edward and I had suggested and promised to betroth himself to my sister. The moment I had his agreement to our proposal in my hands, I snapped into action. Calling for pen and ink, I wrote to Anne.

"Anne,

It's done. King Henri has agreed. I'm looking for the ceremony to take place at Michelmas. I leave it to you to tell Blanche.

Elizabeth"

Giving that to a page, I sat back in my chair, determined to forget all about the matter for the moment. Dismissing the matter from my mind might have seemed callous, but Michelmas was months away. I couldn't afford to worry about it now.

Anne never told me exactly when she told Blanche that I was planning to marry the latter off to the French King, but I guessed. I guessed from the sudden lack of letters that I got from Ireland. Only something this momentous could ever cause Blanche to stop writing to me.

And when she returned from Ireland and came flying into my rooms in a temper, without even bothering to change first, well, then I knew I was in trouble. I knew that I would have to unleash the famous Tudor temper, the one I had inherited from my father, if I was ever to make Blanche bend to my will.

"How could you? Elizabeth, how could you?"

The fact that she had called me Elizabeth did not go unnoticed. It stung bitterly, goading me to my feet even sooner than I had intended.

"Is that any way to speak to your Queen?"

"You promised me that you'd never do this! You promised!"
"I never promised you anything! You knew this day would come. You're thirteen; you knew you'd have to marry someday!"

"Not to an old... Not to a man more than twice my age, I didn't!"

"That "old man" as I know you're thinking, is the King of France! There's barely a more glittering match in Europe!"

"I don't care! I'll not go through with it!"

"Yes you will! By God, you will, Blanche! I am your Queen and you are my subject! You'll do as I tell you!"

"I'm no ordinary subject, Elizabeth! I'm your sister! I'm a Tudor just as much as you are! George said you'd remember that! He said you'd never -"

"George? What has George to do with this? He might be Earl of Ormonde, but he knows nothing of State politics! Nothing! If I say that you're to marry the King of France, then by all the saints, you will marry the King of France! Some Englishwoman has to!"

"Well, find another bride for him then! One of our cousins or something! Because I certainly won't!" Blanche screamed, about to spin on her heel and run from the room.

"And Mama's memory? Our Howard blood? Don't you care for that, Blanche? Don't you want to prove that our mother, Katherine Howard was just as good as any other Queen of England? Don't you want to show the rest of the world that you're proud to be the daughter of England's Rose Without A Thorn?"

Blanche froze halfway to the door and I knew I had her.

"That's what I'm trying to do, Blanche," I urged gently. "I'm trying to prove that Mama's blood isn't a deficit to me. I'm trying to prove that her blood is just as good as anyone else's; even any other Queen's. Don't you want to help me do that? Don't you want to become Queen of France and help me prove it?"

Blanche hesitated a moment longer, before she spat, "Fine. Fine! I'll do it! For her memory, I'll do it. For her. But not for anyone else."

Then she stormed from the room, leaving me to sink into a chair with relief.

To Blanche's credit, she didn't break her word. She arrived in the chapel on the appointed morning and even managed to force some kind of a smile to her lips as she pledged her troth to King Henri of France.

With that done, I was too relieved even to care that she spent hours closeted with George Boleyn, often scarcely attended except for our sisters the twins, or that she danced with him half a dozen times on the very night of her betrothal feast.

After all, she was still young and her world was changing around her. I let it pass.

I let it pass because she was Blanche, Queen of France by courtesy now and that was all that mattered. That was all that mattered.
Chapter 27

June 1551

Three years later, Blanche was about to turn 16. She travelled up from Ireland for the celebrations, for I was determined to fete her on this, the last birthday before she left for France.

"We'll have a masque. She loves those." I decided, looking around at the ladies who clustered around me. They nodded.

"Why don't you have a tableau as well? One that hails her as being as fair as Blanche of Lancaster? That's who she's named for, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's right." Glancing up in surprise, I caught the eyes of my younger half-sister, Eleanor Culpepper. "I didn't know that you knew that, Nora."

"I'm not a child any more, My Lady. I notice things, you know. I saw you translating Chaucer's Book of the Duchess for her during your last confinement. There had to be a reason that you'd chosen that poem over any other."

"Good God. You never cease to surprise me, Nora." I chuckled, watching my eleven, almost twelve year old sister closely as she laid aside her sewing in favour of going over to the virginals in the corner of the room.

Her future and Jessica's were another reason to celebrate. Just this last month, I had managed to find husbands for the both of them. Before the year was out, Nora would be Lady Eleanor Dudley, Baroness Sudeley and the future Countess of Warwick, for she was to wed John Dudley, the current Earl's eldest son and heir at Christmas, just before Blanche left for France at the start of the next sailing season.

In fact, we were having a double wedding, for Jess was marrying Henry Percy, seventh Earl of Northumberland in the same ceremony. She was to become Lady Jessica Percy, Countess of Northumberland.

Of course, they wouldn't be wives in truth yet, not the way I was to Edward. They were too young for that. But the marriages would raise their status in a way that being my sister's maids, or even mine, never could. We always had to be careful; careful not to show them too much favour. The taint of bastardy still blighted them. But not for much longer.

Once they were Countesses, that care could stop. I would be free to treat them with the honour that their rank demanded. I would be able to treat them almost the same way as I used to treat me eldest half-sister, Mary. I would truly be able to say that I had done my best by them. I would be able to breathe again; to stop feeling oppressed by the sense of responsibility that I had felt both towards them and towards Blanche ever since I was eleven; since Mama had died.

Or, at least, I hoped I would. I had carried the burden for so long that I was unsure what life would be like without it.

But I was more than ready to find out.

I smiled at the sight of my younger sister at the instrument. If there was one thing Nora was good at, it was music. Music and horsewomanship. Just like me.
"Play my mother's old song for me, would you, Nora?" I called out, turning back to planning the masque and the tableau in my sister's honour as she did as she was told.

"Will Your Majesty be giving the Princess Katherine a part in the celebrations?" Lady Susanna asked.

"Probably. She's extremely young for such a thing, but she is our Princess and the current heiress to the throne. Besides, I know my husband Lord Edward would like to see her perform." I exhaled slowly and Lady Susanna, sensing what I did not say, nodded in understanding.

"You need not worry, Madam. Lady Dudley will teach Katherine her duty. You may be sure of that."

"She'll not give up easily, I know."

"Nor will Lady Latimer."

"No," I agreed, trying not to show how I worried about my eldest daughter's behaviour. She was only three, but she was already pretty, precocious and pampered.

Lady Dudley and Lady Latimer tried to put a positive spin on my daughter's conduct, I knew, but not even they had been able to conceal some of Katherine's fits of temper when her younger sister, Princess Madeline had joined her household at Eltham a few months earlier. I only dreaded how bad the reality would be.

The worst of it was that I knew Edward shouldered quite a lot of the responsibility for our daughter's behaviour. He doted on her. Nothing was too good for his Thornless Rose Princess. Nothing.

Suddenly, hoof beats in the courtyard below broke into my concentration and Jessica Culpepper, who, like her sister Eleanor, had joined my ladies this summer to accustom her to England again after a childhood spent largely in Ireland, in order to make it easier for her to become an English Countess, came in from the next room.

"Their Highnesses have arrived, My Lady."

"Thank you, Jess. Tell Lady Amy that I want her to go and inform my husband of their arrival, please." I said crisply, knowing even as I spoke, that despite my use of her nickname, hurt would be flaring in my youngest sister's eyes at the formality that I was treating her with. As she turned to do my bidding, I reached for her arm.

"Jess. Dismiss the others. You and Nora can stay. We'll talk of your wedding dresses until they get here. How does that sound? Does it sound like a plan?"

With a brief flash of a smile, Jess nodded and was gone. I sighed after her. If only she wasn't so sensitive.

It wasn't that I had concerns that Henry Percy would hurt her. Quite the opposite. I knew him to be an upright, honest young man. It was just that, as Countess of Northumberland, rumours and scandals would attach themselves to her much more easily than they had when she had merely been some obscure baseborn Culpepper. Nora was in precisely the same boat, of course, but she was made of sterner stuff. I had every hope of her being able to withstand the rumours and gossip. I just prayed that I would be able to protect Jess from the worst of it until she could learn to do the same.
An hour later, Edward and I were sitting together, Jess and Nora seated nearby, waiting to do our bidding, or, as the case may be, be treated like part of the family, when my herald announced, "Their Highnesses the Princess Katherine and the Princess Madeline!" and the doors swung wide to reveal my daughters by Edward, one holding tight to Lady Latimer's hand; the other nestled carefully in Lady Dudley's tight hold.

Lady Latimer managed to coax Katherine to sketch something of a curtsy to us, but Edward sprang up not a moment later and held out his arms to her.

"Reina."

"Papa!" Wrenching her hand out of Lady Latimer's, Katherine whirled away from her and sprang up into Edward's arms, laughing delightedly as he spun her in circles.

I caught hold of them just long enough to drop a quick kiss on to Katherine's forehead before crossing the room and beckoning Lady Dudley to place little Madeline, my six month old daughter, into my arms.

Once I had the placid child in my embrace, the first thing I did was to try to accept how much she'd grown since Edward and I had waved the two girls off to Eltham at the end of the Easter Season. Even just a few weeks made such a difference at this age.

In Madeline's case, she had almost doubled in size and it was now clear to see whom she resembled most. Though her sister, Katherine, bore my mother's name, it was Madeline who took after her in terms of looks. If I wasn't mistaken, my newest daughter would grow up to be the spitting image of my own mother, Queen Katherine Howard.

"How is she? How are they both, Lady Dudley?" I asked, glancing up towards the young woman who stood beside me.

"The Princess Madeline is a credit to you, Madam. Lady Latimer says she's never seen an easier child." Mary Dudley smiled, and it was clear to see that she spoke the truth.

"And Katherine? How is she?"

Mary Dudley hesitated. At the same time, I realised how tired she looked. Shifting Madeline in my hold, I stretched out my hand to her.

"You may speak frankly, Lady Dudley."

"She is…Katherine…Her Highness is…she has inherited her parents' spirit, to say the least. In some ways, she's very conscious of her rank, but in others…I have to say that, at times, she is a challenge to handle."

I knew Mary had been reluctant to say even this much, particularly with Edward and Katherine in the room, so I nodded and waved her away, resolving to speak to Lady Latimer as soon as I could.

Just then, Katherine's high bell-like voice reached my ears.

"Can I come to the banquet tonight, Papa? Can I sit in your lap? Please?"

"Your Highness! You know you're too young for the banquet. And your father couldn't take you on his lap. Not at your aunt's banquet." Lady Latimer reproved her charge, but Katherine rounded on her.
"I didn't ask you! I asked Papa!"

"Katherine!" I gasped, meaning to chastise her for her conduct, but Edward was already laughing and pulling her closer. Swallowing a sigh, I waved Lady Latimer away and nodded to Jess and Nora, who instantly came across to us, smiling despite themselves as Edward patted Katherine's cheek and continued to speak to her.

"We might be able to find you a seat between Mama and me, Reina, but I don't know if I could take you on my lap. Aren't you getting a bit heavy for that?"

"I'm on your lap now." Katherine pointed out, pouting. "Please? I'll be good. Promise. I won't wriggle. I only want to see Auntie Blanche when she comes home."

"I think we all want that, Katherine." Nora laughed, ruffling her little niece's hair.

At this point, Madeline murmured sleepily. Instinctively, Jess reached for her. At a nod from me, she took Madeline into her own arms for a moment, and the two of us rose.

"We're going to see this little one into bed. Edward, I'll see you at the banquet. Nora, you've got the night off."

The two of them nodded and I leaned down to kiss Katherine fondly.

"All right, darling. If Papa says you may, then I'll see you tonight. But behave, all right?"

"Yes, Mama," Katherine replied, blue eyes wide with innocence.

As the door closed behind us, I turned to my youngest sister and groaned.

"Jess, promise me that you'll never let Henry Percy spoil your children as much as Edward spoils our Katherine."

"We wouldn't have the money to, Beth."

"Good point. Here, give me Madeline. At least I've still got one easy-going daughter." With a soft, half-sighing, chuckle, I took Madeline's warm, sleepy presence back into my own arms. The two of us smiled at each other over her head and then walked Madeline back to the nursery suite in companionable silence.

As I had suspected he would, Edward did let Katherine attend the banquet. He did have her on his lap as our herald announced, "Her Majesty, Blanche, Queen of France and Lady of Ireland!" and my younger sister strode down the length of the Hall, her head held high.

Her pale blue cloak swirled out behind her as, eyes locked, we sank into brief half-curtsies to one another.

"Blanche," I greeted her warmly, kissing her fondly. "How was the journey?"

"Fine, thank you. It usually is at this time of year. And how are you, sister? How are Jess and Nora?"

"They're fine. Planning their weddings for Christmas."

At the way Blanche's eyes suddenly darkened, I knew I had made a mistake. Weddings still weren't a comfortable subject, it seemed. Hastily, I continued reassuringly, "They're really excited to see
you. They won't admit it, but they are."

Clasping her hands for a moment longer, I let her turn to my husband and daughter, spinning myself to face George Boleyn, who had escorted her over as usual.

"Lord Ormonde."

"Majesty."

"You're looking well. As is my sister. She does you credit, George. You've done a wonderful job with her these last few years."

"I only do my best, Madam, as always."

"And as always, the Boleyn best could not be better," I complimented, taking his arm and leading him back to the High Table.

He exchanged a quick look with Blanche as he took his seat and I, catching sight of it, wasn't quite comfortable with the undercurrents that it carried. However, I decided to ignore it for now. After all, they'd been working closely together in Ireland since Blanche was eleven. Undercurrents didn't necessarily mean anything.

Turning to the courtiers, I took my sister's hand and rested my other arm over the back of Edward's chair, just above his shoulders.

"Je suis en famille!" I cried, basking happily in their cheers, claps and full-throated roars of approval. Yes. I was with my family.

I was with my family and there was nowhere else I would rather be.
Chapter 28

Blanche's birthday was the following week and we had three huge days of festivities to celebrate.

The pageant was first and little Katherine, who had learnt her lines perfectly, hailed her aunt as being as fair as "that gracious Duchess, Blanche of Lancaster" and handed her a finely braided belt of silver leather studded with tiny Lancaster red chips of rubies. As Blanche exclaimed with delight over the gift, I leaned towards her.

"Blanche?"

"Yes?"

"You're sixteen tomorrow. You know what that means."

"I have to prepare for France."

"Yes. And you can't sail for France under the Tudor Rose. You need an emblem of your own, sweetheart. Have you thought of what you'd like it to be?"

"Yes," Blanche turned towards me, already nodding, "In fact, I've even taken the liberty of sketching it out. May I show you?"

"Not now," I whispered. "Tomorrow. Before the joust, all right?"

Blanche nodded again, turning her attention back to the players. I waved for them to go on and the two of us lost ourselves in the mirth of the jesters' antics.

The following morning, I slipped out of my own rooms and down to Blanche's apartments early, far earlier than anyone might have expected. Jess and Nora were already waiting in my antechamber and fell into step behind me as we ran through the palace corridors to the doors of her rooms. As we reached them, I turned to the twins.

"Wait in the antechamber for a minute. I'll just check she's up."

They nodded and fell back as I crossed the room and flung wide the door to Blanche's private bedchamber, leaving both doors open so that the twins could see me as I did so.

Luckily, Blanche was already up and dressed; as excited about her birthday as she'd been as a little girl of six and not a young woman of sixteen. Waving away the courtesies, I kissed her.

"Happy Birthday, sister."

"Thank you."

"I can't give you my gifts now; it has to be a formal presentation before the Court, but I brought some other people with me who'd like to give you theirs."

Smiling, I half-turned towards the door that I had come through and beckoned the twins forward.

"Nora! Jessie!" Blanche sprang up, embracing our younger sisters before they had a chance to curtsy to her. "How are you?"
"Well, thank you, Blanche. How are you?"

"Not bad, not bad. I hear you're both to be Baronesses and Countesses before the year is out. Lady Sudeley and Lady Northumberland, am I right?"

"Yes. But why are we discussing that when it's your day? Your sixteenth?" Nora asked, surprising Blanche with her confidence. The latter glanced at me. I shrugged.

"They've grown up. What more can I say?"

Sinking into a seat, Blanche gave a faint nod and then laughed.

"Very well, Nora. What do you want to talk about?"

"First, we're going to give you your gifts, Jess and I, and then you're going to show us what device you've chosen. Then all three of us will help you change and the four of us will go down to the Hall for the formal presentation of your gifts," Nora said decidedly, a hint of arrogance present in her young voice.

Jess nudged her. "Nora! Blanche is a Princess, a Queen! You can't dictate to her!"

"Not today, she's not. For today, she's our sister, or at the very least, she is for now," Nora retorted and Blanche laughed again, the sound merry and joyful.

"Very well, my Lady Sudeley. I'll do as you say."

"Good," Nora beamed, for an instant seeming like her old childhood self again. She reached out for a wicker basket that stood in the corner of the room.

Pulling it close to her and kneeling beside it, she gathered up a squirming armful of fur and presented it to our sister with a smile. "Happy Birthday."

"A puppy! Oh Nora, you are a darling!"

"He's not just any puppy. He's the finest puppy John could find in Warwickshire. He's a St John Water dog. He'll remind you of us and of England when you've gone to France," Nora explained, earning herself a spontaneous one-armed hug from Blanche.

"He's beautiful, Nora. I shall call him George, after our patron saint," Blanche promised, rubbing the wriggling puppy's head one more time before setting him free to roam over the floor as she turned to our other sister.

"And you, Lady Northumberland? What do you wish to gift me on my birthday?"

"Nothing so fine as Nora's puppy, I'm afraid," Jess chuckled, warming to Blanche's free and easy use of her future title.

"That doesn't matter. I'm sure I'll still like it. After all, you're my sister just as much as Bessie and Nora are. No one knows me better than you three do."

Standing to one side, I felt a smile begin to spread over my face as I watched Blanche interacting with our youngest sister. Jess had always been most like Blanche. Even though I had been the one to favour her over Nora when they were little, Blanche was still the one she responded to best.

"Happy Birthday," she murmured, passing Blanche a carefully folded piece of fabric, which when Blanche shook it out, turned out to be a lovely damask underskirt embroidered with tiny roses.
"Did you do this yourself, Jessie?" Blanche questioned, startled despite herself at the fineness of the stitches. Jess nodded.

"Good God! It's gorgeous! Honestly, darling. Thank you. Thank you so much!"

Blanche laid the underskirt aside and crushed Jess to her in a warmly grateful hug.

"I'm glad you like it," Jess smiled, drinking in the praise before flushing and diverting the attention away from her and back on to the birthday girl herself by asking, "So what emblem were you thinking of?"

"Ah yes. Come here." Rising, Blanche led us over to the table, where several drawings, one almost full size, lay waiting.

Bending over me, I pulled one towards me.

It was of a dove; a crowned dove flying up from a bed of roses and fleur-de-lys. Beneath it were the words, "Son Bonheur est le mien."

"His happiness is my happiness," I whispered. Nodding, Blanche came to stand at my shoulder.

"I want the dove to be silver, but I can't decide what colour the background should be."

"Let me see," Nora demanded. Taking it from me, she ran her fingertips over the drawing, wondering aloud.

"The roses will be red, won't they? And the fleur-de-lys white?"

"Yes. They're traditionally gold, but I wanted the Tudor colours."

"Then what about making the background dark blue or purple? It would show everything else off."

"Yes. Yes. I like the way you think, Nora. Purple, I think. Or indigo. Indigo," Blanche agreed and I nodded, beckoning Anne Stanhope over as she slipped into the room.

"You heard what she said, Mistress Stanhope?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Then take the drawing to the seamstresses and see to it that they transfer it to a banner as soon as possible. And make sure the motto's in gold."

"Of course," Mistress Stanhope curtsied, picked up the full-size drawing and was gone. Meanwhile, Nora, Jess and I transformed ourselves into Blanche's handmaidens, dressing her in her new underskirt and an over-gown of fine rose-coloured watered silk; weaving strings of rose pearls into her gorgeous golden hair, before I took her hand and led her from the room, smiling in approval at the vision of beauty that we had created.

"Their Majesties Queen Elizabeth and Queen Blanche!"

Side by side, my sister and I swept down the Hall towards the dais, acknowledging the respect that we were being paid by my courtiers as we passed them.

As soon as we had greeted my husband and taken our seats, my herald stepped forward, "Queen Blanche, a gift from Her Majesty."
Blanche nodded, beckoning for the heavy volume to be placed in her arms. Opening it to the title page, she read first the dedication and then the title, "The Book of the Duchess", which, because it was not only the English version, but also a translation, was repeated in all three of the other languages, French, Latin and Italian. When, opening it to the French translation, she recognised my handwriting, her sapphire eyes gleamed.

"Thank you, Bessie."

"You're welcome, Blanche," I replied, before settling back in my throne to watch my younger sister receive her gifts from the courtiers.

Once the presentation was over, I nodded to her and the two of us led the Court outside to the Tiltyard to watch the joust that was being held in her honour.

As was traditional, Blanche opened the joust, and then the two of us, surrounded by our ladies, settled back to watch. The first few rounds weren't that interesting, but before long, the older men were coming out to take their turn. As soon as the announcement, "His Grace the Lord of England challenges the Earl of Ormonde!" was over, Edward rode up to the stands and held out his lance to me.

"My Lady Queen."

"My Lord of England."

It was all that needed to pass between us. I handed him my pale golden handkerchief and he tucked it into his breastplate as I tied the accompanying ribbon around his lance, before he inclined his head to me and saluting as he rode away.

A moment later, George Boleyn was before us, looking past me to my sister. "Queen Blanche, might I have the honour?"

"Certainly, Lord Ormonde," my sister replied, rising to stand beside me and bestow her favour upon her chosen champion.

If I hadn't known better, I might have thought that a hint of a blush came to Blanche's cheeks as their skin touched; that George sought her eyes with a particularly tender expression on his face as he saluted her. Since I did know better, however; since I knew that Blanche was already betrothed, I ignored it.

I even ignored the fact that she slipped away before the end of the joust. It wasn't until the champions came out, preparing to ride their lap of honour, that I realised she wasn't at my side.

Signing to Edward to keep things running smoothly, I hurried from the Royal Box in search of my sister. I could have sent a maid, but suddenly, I wanted to get away from the eager eyes of the crowd myself.

Hearing voices not far away, I followed them, completely unprepared for what was awaiting me around the corner of the stands.

Blanche stood in George Boleyn's arms, her head tilted back against his chest. Her voice was low, but, as I approached them from behind, I heard her say "I can't do this anymore, George. I can't go on pretending that I'm happy to be marrying the King of France when I'm not. I can't."

"Yes, you can, Blanche. I know you can. You're half-Howard and a Princess. If anyone can do it, you can. I know you can."
George's voice was gentle and he played with her hair soothingly, just like I always did. Just like Edward did with me.

"But…"

"No buts, darling. It's not for much longer. Just long enough. Please. Give Elizabeth these days, at least. Let her fete you as the Queen of France for just a little longer. If she thinks you're happy to do what she wants, she might give you a little longer in England. She might postpone your departure."

"Do you think so, George?"

"I don't think. I know. She might be Queen, but she's your sister too. And she adores you. She'd do anything for you."

"Promise?" Blanche's tone quavered. She was pleading, desperate for reassurance. George bent his head and I didn't have to be able to see them properly to know that he was kissing her.

"I promise. Now go. You need to be back in the Royal Box and I should have mounted up for the lap of honour ages ago."

Pushing away from him, my sister nodded, hurrying past me without a backwards glance as I ducked breathlessly back behind the stands.

Unable to believe what I had just heard, I followed her back to the Royal Box.

"I don't see what you're worrying about."

"Don't you see what this means? She clearly doesn't want to marry King Henri. I dread to think what she'll do if we don't force her into the marriage quickly," I blurted as I ran a hand through my hair tiredly, exasperated beyond words by Edward's seeming indifference.

"I don't see why one kiss with George Boleyn is such a problem. Has Blanche actually said that she won't marry King Henri?"

"No, but she clearly wants extra time here. And you should have seen the way George was treating her, Edward. I'm worried, I really am. We need this alliance and unless we do something…"

"Elizabeth, stop." Edward took my hand and rested his other hand on my cheek. "Think for a minute. Blanche hasn't refused to honour her betrothal yet. I don't think she will, either. She's a Princess; she knows her duty. What does one summer flirtation mean? She's sixteen years old."

"I was sixteen when I married you," I retorted.

"Yes, but the circumstances were different. You had a country to get under control. And you were far more mature for your age than she is. Let her be, Elizabeth. Nothing's going to come of this."

"You don't know Blanche the way I know her. She can be so determined. Once she sets her heart on something…"

"I know her better than you think. I know she knows her duty, both to you and to England. So what if she wants another six months here? Or even a year? King Henri's waited three years, he can wait another. Now stop worrying."

As I made to protest, Edward stopped my mouth with a heated kiss.
What are you doing?” I chuckled.

"Getting you a Prince," he whispered throatily, pulling me close.

Instantly, I melted into his arms and let him sweep me away on the crest of his desire.

A week later, the formal ceremony that we'd all been waiting for took place. Blanche, resplendent in a gown of pale blue Venetian silk, knelt to me and paid me homage for her lands in Ireland.

I accepted her homage and confirmed that her revenues from them would continue to be paid to her even after her marriage, for they made up the central part of her dowry.

Throughout the ceremony, I kept a close eye on Blanche, trying to read her body language. However, though her eyes flashed briefly when I mentioned her upcoming marriage and her dowry, she kept herself under control, never once hinting at her inner turmoil. And when I said, "Lady Blanche of Ireland, I grant you permission to use your new device when you go to take up the reins of your new Kingdom," and she rose to stand before me, her new banner unfurling on the wall behind her, she actually smiled as though she meant it.

If I hadn't known better, she might have fooled me. I might have relaxed.

As it was, however, I merely went through the motions of the ceremony and played along with her whilst I waited for the next time we were going to have a discussion over her marriage. As it happened, that was the very next day.

"Elizabeth? Bessie? Can I have a word?"

"Of course, sister."

Smiling, I turned towards her, only to be alarmed when she practically threw herself at my feet.

"Elizabeth. Please, I'm begging you. Don't make me leave for France. Not yet. I'm not ready."

"How can you not be ready? You've known this was coming for years."

"I'm just not. I swear I'll do it; I'll marry him, I promise. But not yet. Let me stay for Christmas. Let me see the twins married before I go. Please."

"They were your ladies first, I suppose," I sighed, glancing away from her. Knowing she had me, Blanche pressed forward.

"Exactly. And you promised me you’d never make me do anything I didn't want to do. You promised, Bessie. So let me stay. Just another year. Just until I'm seventeen. Please."

All of a sudden, I realised that I was unwilling to fight her on this anymore. I sighed again.

"All right, Blanche, all right. I'll write to King Henri. I'll get you another year if I possibly can. But once you're seventeen, you have to go, all right? Seventeen is the latest I can let you get away with. Understand?"

"Yes. Thank you, Bessie!"

Blanche kissed me, suddenly radiant with happiness. As she practically skipped from the room, I watched her go, hoping I wasn't making a huge mistake in following Edward's advice and letting
her stay with us for another twelve months.
Chapter 29

December 1551

Six months later, it was the Christmas season again; my fifth as Queen of England. I always enjoyed Christmas, but this year it was doubly special, for not only was it Christmas, but we were celebrating the double marriage of my younger twin sisters, Eleanor and Jessica Culpepper, as well.

Their sisters, Katy and Annie Stafford were to act as their bridesmaids, since, due to the fact that they lacked royal blood, I couldn't allow them to have royal bridesmaids the way Mary had had in our sister Blanche. Nevertheless, I did my level best to show them marks of favour despite their bastard status.

I ennobled their surrogate father, Sir William Stafford, creating him Earl of Lancaster, which meant, although they weren't Lady Eleanor and Lady Jessica, the way their sisters were Lady Katherine and Lady Anne and their brother Henry was Lord Stafford, their dowries were now able to be fully worthy of future Countesses. Edward also convinced me to bestow another manor upon each of their prospective husbands, so Henry Percy formally gained Callay Castle, situated deep within his own county and John Dudley, the future Earl of Warwick, was granted Syon House for his own use, so that he and Nora could have a home of their own in London, as well as Maxstoke Castle for the same purpose in Warwickshire.

For the girls themselves, I commissioned silver tiaras set with tiny garnet chips carved into the shape of roses. The roses were my own private way of honouring Jess and Nora; of hinting to the world that I viewed them as my sisters; as being every inch as much daughters of England's Rose Without A Thorn as I was myself.

On the day of their wedding, I was shaken awake by Lady Lucy, as I had asked her to do.

"Madam! Madam! Come, you must awaken. Or would you have Nora and Jess going to their weddings without even a blessing from their older sister?"

At that, I was awake instantly.

Waving away the Court gown Lady Lucy was pressing on me, I beckoned instead for a wrap of saffron yellow velvet and flung it around my shoulders as I headed for the door.

I would have to change later, but right now, I just wanted to see my sisters.

Knocking briefly, but refusing any other kind of announcement, I slipped into the small chamber where they were being prepared for their weddings. Lady Lucy and Lady Susanna had come with me, but they politely waited unobtrusively in the next room, for they knew that I would want to be alone with my sisters.

Nora was already bathed and in her shift when I entered, but Jess was still being rubbed down with pumice stones and cream of rose oil. Leaving her in peace, I went over to Nora, bending to brush my lips against her brow in a silent greeting, before dismissing her maid with a look and taking over the task of brushing out her dark hair over the fire myself.

The tension was radiating off her young body, so I said nothing, only swept the bristles of the
brush through her hair in soft soothing strokes, feeling her begin to relax as I did so.

"Good girl," I whispered at last, brushing a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. "You're going to be beautiful today. As beautiful as any Queen."

"As beautiful as Mama?" she asked, her young voice barely audible even in this small a room. Pulling her into my arms briefly, I nodded, "Prettier."

Blanche came in just then, so I gestured to her to brush out Jess's hair as I helped the maids lay out my little sisters' wedding dresses.

They were both to be gowned in pale blue silk; pale blue silk with ruby red trimmings. Their veils were made of the finest blue wire; a blue so pale that, in a certain light, it could almost have been mistaken for ivory.

Once we were done, I called in Lady Susanna and Lady Lucy, dismissing all the other maids and the four of us went to work, transforming Jess and Nora into the visions of beauty appropriate for the day.

Jess wore sapphire earrings and the locket I had given her when she was just a child hung around her neck. I would have given her the tiara that I had had commissioned for her, but she looked such a picture in her sapphires that I couldn't bring myself to spoil it. Turning to Lady Susanna, I sent her running back to my apartment for my sapphire-studded clip instead, fixing it in place over the top of the veil and whispering, "Keep it, Jess. Think of it as another wedding present," as I did so.

Then, turning to Nora, I presented her with the garnet tiara, saying "I had it made especially, My Lady Sudeley."

She was too breathless with delight to thank me, but the light in her eyes was thanks enough. I beamed at her and squeezed her hand, while Blanche, taking the tiara from me, Blanche fitted it over Nora's hair, securing her veil in place.

I stepped back, admiring the picture the two of them made, standing there side by side with their hands clasped.

"You look beautiful, girls."

Leaning down, I kissed each of them in turn, before saying "Right. I'd better go and get changed myself. I'll see you in the chapel."

Jess nodded silently, reaching for Blanche's hand to reassure herself, but Nora, face suddenly white, picked up her skirts and ran after me as I began to exit the room.

"Beth! Beth, wait. Please."

"Nora, what is it? You look terrified," I wanted to tease her, but the horrified expression on her face put paid to that and instead, I murmured the words half-matter-of-factly, half-soothingly.

"I have to know. You and Edward…the wedding night…Did it hurt?"

A reassuring denial sprang to my lips, but I knew Nora would know I was lying. She'd never accept it. And even if she did accept it, I'd never forgive myself for lying to her, especially today and especially about this. Reaching out for her, I took her by the shoulders and made her look at me, "Nora."
She raised her head and her cheeks were flushing red. I gave her a reassuring squeeze as I answered, "The first time, yes. It does. I'm not going to lie to you about that. But John knows that and he knows how young you are. He'll be gentle with you. I promise."

"Will we...will we be expected to...you know, do it? Tonight?"

"No!" I cried, shocked beyond words that they hadn't realised that already.

"No, no, of course not! Yes, I know it's traditional to do it tonight and it is true that Edward and I did have our wedding night the night after we married, but we were sixteen, not twelve. The younger you are, the more it hurts. That's a proven fact and I don't want you hurt, either of you. So don't worry about that. You and Jess won't be consummating your marriages for a year or two, at least. You'll have time to get to know your husbands first, just like I know my Edward."

"Promise?" Nora's voice shook and I cupped her cheek in my hand as I nodded, "I promise. I'll have your husbands flayed alive if they touch you in that way before you're ready. Besides, believe me, it might seem painful at first, but if you care for your partner in the way that Edward and I care for each other, or in the way that Mary and Ruy care for each other, then it can actually be quite pleasurable. So please, darling. Let that problem go. Enjoy the wedding for what it is. A glorious ceremony and a chance for you to be the centre of attention for once."

Nora smiled obediently and, as she chuckled, "I'm not as vain as I once was, you know!" I was pleased to see some true light sparkling in her eyes once more.

Pausing for just a moment longer, I straightened her tiara and then pressed a feather-light kiss to her temple.

"I love you, Nora. You look gorgeous," I assured her, before slipping away from her to go and change for the wedding.

Edward and Katherine were already seated in the front pew when I reached the Chapel Royal. I kissed Edward's cheek and scooped Katherine into my arms.

"Hello, darling. Are you excited?"

"Yes Mama. But I wanted to be bridesmaid? Why couldn't I?"

I sighed. Explaining their status to Katherine was not how I wanted to spend Jess and Nora's wedding day. Thankfully, the wedding march struck up just then, so I was able to put a finger to my lips, "Ssh. Here they come. I'll tell you later."

Nora sailed up the aisle on William Stafford's arm, while George escorted Jess. The younger Stafford girl, Anne, was carrying Jess's train, just as her older sister, Katy, carried Nora's.

As they reached the altar, their husbands turned, one after another, to take them by the hand and kneel before the altar with them.

Matthew Parker, my mother's old chaplain, was conducting the service, and, at the appropriate moment, he turned to Nora, asking "Do you, Eleanor Culpepper, consent to this union with John Dudley, Baron Sudeley?"

Nora nodded confidently, "I do."

"Good. Then repeat after me, "I, Eleanor Culpepper, take thee John Dudley, to my lawfully
wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. I also vow to be bonny and buxom in bed and at board. Therefore to these two promises do I plight my troth."

Nora dutifully repeated the long speech and then Matthew Parker, having witnessed the exchange of rings between the new partners, addressed himself to my youngest sister.

"Do you, Jessica Culpepper, consent to this union with Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland?"

"I – I do," Jess's voice wavered and she sounded by no means as sure as Nora, but the words were said and that was enough. Henry Percy pledged his troth to her in a strong, steady voice and then, as she stole a glance at him, squeezed her hand gently, the way Blanche or I would do, if we wanted to reassure her. He spoke to her and, though his voice was too low for me to hear, I could read his lips, "There's no rush, Jessica. Just tell me when you're ready. We've got all the time in the world. When you're ready, my sweet."

Seeming to draw resolve from the touch of his hand on hers, Jess cleared her throat and began to speak softly, "I, Jessica Culpepper, take thee, Henry Percy, to my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

There was a beat of silence and the rest of us held our breath, praying that she, my shy little sister, would manage to finish the speech. Henry Percy's hand tightened on hers, clearly longing to reach out and reassure his young bride as her cheeks turned crimson.

Suddenly, as though she knew that there was no getting away from it, Jess gabbled, "I also vow to be bonny and buxom in bed and at board. Therefore to these two promises do I plight my troth," clearly rushing the part of the Mass that was making her uncomfortable.

Matthew Parker glanced at me over her head and I glared at him. Rushing a Mass might well be construed as an ill omen, but there was no way I was ever going to make my younger sister go through the ordeal of repeating those sentences.

Bowing his head before the determination in my face, he turned again so that he was including Nora and John Dudley in his gaze too as he intoned, "I now proclaim you man and wife. Those whom God hath joined in holy matrimony, let no man tear asunder. My good Sirs, you may kiss the brides."

There was laughter and applause as the two young men bent, lifted their bride's veils and pressed their lips lightly to those of my sisters'.

They came down off the altar, Jess, by virtue of her new rank as Countess of Northumberland, taking precedence over Nora for the first time in her life.

Katherine jumped to her feet in delight and, as they reached the front pew, Edward and I rose with her. Henry bowed and Jess curtsied. Locking my gaze with my youngest sister's, I sank into a brief half-curtsy, "My Lady Northumberland."

Beside me, Edward inclined his head and then Jess was proceeding down the aisle and Nora and John Dudley were standing before us instead. Again, I abased myself before my younger sister, "My Lady Sudeley."

Nora nodded in acknowledgement, "Your Majesty. Your Highnesses."

John bowed wordlessly and then they too were past us. Edward helped me up, whispering "You've
done it, darling. You've done it, Elizabeth."

Nodding, I relaxed into his arms, letting him hold me as I swiped at my eyes, trying to control the tears of delighted relief that sprang to my eyes as, for the first time in my life, I paid my younger sisters public respect. Sensing that I needed a minute, Edward waved for our courtiers to follow the newly-wedded couples out of the Chapel, so that we were alone when, through the shimmering haze of tears, I suddenly saw a woman coming down from the wings of the church to stand by the altar where my sisters had stood only moments earlier. A dark-haired woman who was beckoning to me.

Gently disengaging myself from Edward's hold, I moved towards her as though I were in a dream. Edward half-called to me, but I ignored him, continuing to move forward until I could kneel before the altar as though I was getting married myself, or perhaps receiving the sacrament.

"Mama," I breathed, hardly daring to hope that her spirit wouldn't disappear.

But it didn't. This time, it didn't. Rather, she stretched out a hand, resting her palm on the crown of my head as I knelt before her, giving me her blessing as she had done so often when I was but a child.


"Mama…Nora…Jessie..." I stumbled over the words. There was so much that I wanted to say to her. She nodded.

"I know. I know you love them. I know you've done the best you can by them. Thank you, my Rose. You can't know what it's meant to me; to watch you look after them as well as you have. And now they're both practically grown up. Jessie's a Countess already and Nora will be the same one day."

Her voice trailed off and I knew that she was remembering the last time she had seen them during her lifetime; her last visit to Hatfield, over ten years ago.

I tipped my head up, watching my beloved mother's face intently, straining to commit its every detail of it to memory. As if suddenly remembering that I was there, she helped me up as she continued, "And you and Blanche. You're both such wonderful young women. Blanche Lady of Ireland and you Queen of England. Queen of England and married to such a caring husband. Married with children of your own."

"I named Katherine for you," I murmured, glancing back over my shoulder to where Edward and Katherine still stood, watching me curiously. Mama smiled wistfully.

"Thank you. I only wish I could know her."

"Oh, she'll know you, Mama," I vowed forcefully, "She'll know you. All my children will. I'll tell them so many stories about you that they'll be sick of the sound of your name."

Mama put her hands on my shoulders. "You're so loyal, Elizabeth. It's one of the qualities that makes you such a good Queen. I always knew you would be. Promise me you'll always be that way. Promise me; no matter what happens, you'll always stay this loyal. You'll always put your family first. Promise me."

"I promise, Mama," I whispered. Mama smiled one last time; one last, lingering smile and then embraced me.
"Go and find your sisters. Bless them in my name, darling. Bless them in the Howard name. And God Bless you too. God Bless you and be with you, all of you. Always."

"And with you, Mama," I choked out, as she pressed a last, lingering kiss to my forehead and then turned and vanished.

I sank to my knees, whispering her name, and it was a long time before I could find the strength to rise, take Edward's arm and follow my younger sisters; follow the Lady of Ireland and the new Countess of Northumberland and the new Baroness Sudeley, out of the Chapel Royal.
March 1552

Edward and I were spending a few days with the children at Eltham to celebrate the start of spring and the return of easier travel, when I decided that the time had come to break some news to my husband and children. Some news that I knew Edward would adore.

We were sitting in the Nursery, Katherine cradled in Edward's lap, when I glanced across at her, "Katherine, come here a moment, darling. Madeline, why don't you go to Papa?"

I gently kissed my youngest daughter and then placed her on the floor, watching with pride as she toddled unsteadily towards her father, closing half the distance between them. She stumbled then, but already knowing that she was going to fall, Edward was at her side, sweeping her protectively into his arms.

"Well done, Maddie. Good girl. You're getting so big, aren't you? Who's Papa's big girl? You are, aren't you? Yes, you are."

Edward tickled Madeline's nose as he spoke and she giggled, snuggling back into his warm, strong embrace. Knowing Katherine hated it when Edward did anything that suggested she wasn't his big girl; his Reina, I scooped her quickly on to my lap, averting the possibility of a tantrum.

"Now then, Katherine. You know you're our Princess, don't you? Our Lady Princess?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Do you know what that means?"

"Yes Mama. It means that I'm to be Queen after you," Katherine informed me grandly. Chuckling at her vanity, I smoothed down her hair, "Yes. But you'll have to get married first, of course."

"Ugh!" Katherine's horror was typical of a girl of her age, "I don't want to get married! I hate boys! Why would I have to marry to be Queen?"

"Because the people expect it, Katherine. They wouldn't let Mama be Queen until she married Papa, you know."

"But that's just silly!" Katherine protested.

"It's tradition. A girl can't rule without a husband beside her," I murmured, hoping I was right in what she would say next. Luckily, I was.

"I hate tradition! I don't want to be Queen if I have to get married!"

Though I knew she didn't really mean it, I took her words literally, "You'd better pray that this baby in Mama's belly is a boy then. Then he can be Prince of Wales and be King instead of you having to be Queen and get married."

As I spoke, I raised my head to look Edward in the eye. I had the satisfaction of hearing him gasp before he called for Katherine's governesses to come and take the girls and pulled me out of the room.

"You're with child?"
There was no point in trying to deny it. I nodded.

"About a month along. The midwife confirmed it last week."

"You should have said! I could have taken better care of you! What if the travel -"

Sighing inwardly, I stopped Edward's exclamations with a gentle kiss.

"Hush, sweetheart. I appreciate your concern, I really do. But honestly, Edward, am I not a Tudor? Am I not a Howard? Do I not have strong blood coursing in my veins? I am England's first Queen Regnant, England's own Isabella of Castile. Like her, I feel I could ride a thousand miles before my child could come to any harm."

"You will not be doing that. I won't have you risking it," Edward snapped. I conceded the point.

"No, husband. Of course not. But I'll be able to get home to Richmond. I'm sure of it. It's early days yet, remember?"

Edward looked less sure, but knowing there was no other choice, he reluctantly yielded, though only once he had stipulated, "We'll take it slowly. And if you feel even the slightest bit out of sorts, you'll call a physician. Promise me."

"I promise," I assured him, before we kissed again and then parted to go our separate ways.

That evening, Edward and I were dining before the courtiers and the common people, as we made a point of doing every fortnight or so, even when we didn't have distinguished visitors paying court to us, when Edward suddenly leaped to his feet, raising his goblet.

"My Lords and Ladies, People of England, I'd like to propose a toast. A toast to my most beautiful wife and Queen, Elizabeth, who has recently told me that England has every chance of a lusty Prince in the autumn. God Save and God Bless the Queen and the future Prince!"

"The Queen and the Prince!"

The full-throated roar caught me slightly unawares. I hadn't expected Edward to announce my pregnancy so soon. But as he turned to me and held out his hand, inviting me to rise to stand beside him, I felt a surge of wild joy swell inside me.

Beaming down at the cheering crowds, I basked in the glorious glow of my own fertility.

Though I didn't know it at the time, that night was in fact the last joyful night I would have for quite some time.

We left Eltham the next day, so not only was I suffering the pain of parting with my two beloved daughters, the days and nights were also filled with the worry of whether or not the travels would do our growing child any damage.

And, the very night we returned to Richmond, there was an urgent message waiting for us, the contents of which sent us reeling and had far-reaching consequences for all the plans I had laid so carefully over the past three years.

I hadn't even changed my gown from the one I had worn to ride into Richmond, when Edward came rushing into my chamber.
"Elizabeth! Elizabeth! You'd better come quickly!"

"Edward, I was hoping to -" 

"Whatever it is, there's no time for it. This is an emergency!"

Edward's voice was fiercer than I had ever heard it. It was enough. Picking up my skirts, I gave him my hand and let him pull me through the secret passages to our Privy Council Chamber at a run.

It was only as we neared the doors that I insisted on slowing down and that was only because I wanted to enter the room with at least some slight semblance of dignity.

To my surprise, however, the room was almost empty. Only my father in law and our Secretary of State, William Cecil, stood near the dais.

Seeing a space this large so empty, when it was usually so busy and vital, sent eerie shivers down my spine. Instinctively, I tightened my hold on Edward's arm.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

"I don't know, Elizabeth, darling," he admitted, but that was all we had time to exchange before we were spotted by his father, our Chancellor.

"Ah, Your Majesty. Your Highness. Forgive the intrusion, but a messenger has just arrived from the North and he bears news that I felt you ought to know immediately."

Edward and I exchanged glances. Blanche had left Court after New Year, intending to go North and progress through my lands in Yorkshire and the rest of the North before sailing for Ireland once more. If something had happened to her…

Jaw set, Edward nodded at his father, "Show him in."

Cecil opened the side door and a young man, who couldn't have been much older than Blanche, half-fell into the room. Flushing beetroot red, he slid into a bow, clearly not realising that we were both too wound up to care much about the formalities.

"Queen Elizabeth. Your Highness."

"Well?" I snapped. "Who are you? What news do you bring from the North? What of my sisters, Queen Blanche and Lady Northumberland?"

He snapped to attention. "I am James FitzMarsh, My Lady Queen. I have ridden from the North without stopping; I have let no one else handle this missive; I -"

Sensing I was gritting my teeth on a wave of impatience, Charles Brandon intervened, "Cut to the chase, FitzMarsh. Tell Their Graces what you told us."

"Then…I regret to have to tell you this, Your Majesty, but the Princess Blanche has married."

"What? Impossible! She's betrothed! She isn't Princess Blanche anymore; she's Blanche, Queen of France!"

My first reaction was a swift, harsh denial of James's words. Holding up a hand, Edward spoke next. As always, he played the role of reason to my passion.
"Is this true? Whom has she wed herself to? And how did we not hear of it?"

James looked relieved that one of us, at least, was being fairly reasonable and addressed himself to my husband as he continued, "Her Highness has married Lord Ormonde. They eloped to Gretna Green at the end of Her Highness's tour of the North and were married there. As Your Grace knows, even though Gretna Green is in Scotland, it is not actually under either English or Scottish jurisdiction, so no one thought to inform us of their union. The first we heard of it was when the Princess Blanche refused to sail under the Royal Standard, choosing instead to fly the Ormonde colours, as befitted her rank as a Countess."

"She sailed from Whitby?" My husband's response was half statement, half question. James nodded.

"Aye, Your Grace. The Princess did indeed sail from Whitby. Lord Ormonde accompanied her. He encouraged her to leave a message behind at the barracks for Her Majesty. Upon receiving it, my commander ordered me to ride for London immediately.

"But this must be at least a week hence," Edward deduced. "Whitby's a fair ride from London."

"Aye. I set off six days ago, My Lord."

"They'll be across the Irish Sea by now. And Ireland is loyal to the both of them. Pursuit is fruitless," Edward murmured, before raising his voice, "Very well, James. Have you the Princess Blanche's letter there. Give it to Her Majesty."

"No. I'll not accept it. Not until you bring me news that she has accepted that she is Queen of France and therefore cannot be lawfully married to George Boleyn, Earl of Ormonde."

My voice was hollow; like the rest of me, it was hollow with anger. Edward laid his hand over mine.

"Elizabeth. We have to at least look at it. We have to check for ourselves whether the letter is genuine. Whether she really has married him."

"Then you do it."

"The letter's for you, love."

"And I give you full permission to examine it."

So saying, I jerked my head at James and he moved forward, placing the letter in Edward's outstretched hand.

As he did so, I averted my eyes, though that did nothing to block out the crisp rustle of parchment as Edward turned the missive over, carefully studying its every inch. At last, I couldn't help myself any longer. I had to know.

"Well? Does he speak true? Is it from Blanche?"

"It has her seal on it and it appears to be unbroken."

It was enough. Withdrawing my hand from under his, I rose to my feet.

"You let her stay. I would have sent her to France eight months ago, but you pleaded with me to let her stay. You let her stay and now look what we have to deal with."
I turned on my heel and stalked out of the room, leaving Edward staring after my retreating back, Blanche's letter resting in his lap.
For a heartbeat as I woke, I thought everything was golden again. I thought I was England's darling Queen Elizabeth; Edward's Tudor Rose and beloved mother to the heiresses to the throne. I thought England was secure; allied to the Emperor through Mary's marriage to his Ambassador, the Prince of Eboli, and France, thanks to Blanche's betrothal and impending marriage to King Henri.

And then the terrible knowledge of Blanche's betrayal crashed over me anew.

I lay there, seething. How could she? How could she do this to me? Was I not her Bessie, her beloved older sister?

More than that, was I not her Queen? Had she not sworn fealty to me, both in the North when we first heard of our father's death and then again after my joint coronation with Edward? Did she not have a duty to obey me?

God only knew she wouldn't have done this if Father had still been alive. If he'd still been alive; if he'd betrothed her to the French King, rather than my doing it, she would have taken her fate and resigned herself to it…as befitted a true Princess.

As my mind swirled, my thoughts gaining in strength and cohesion every second, my eyes roved over the room, eventually coming to rest on the full-length portrait of my father that hung against one wall.

"What would you do, Papa?" I asked it, pushing back my covers and sliding out of bed to kneel before it as though I was praying, "What would you do? If Blanche had done this to you; if she'd betrayed you like this, then what would you do?"

I stayed frozen in that position, too preoccupied even to think about moving. When I finally rose to my feet, I had my answer.

"Get me Cecil," I growled at Lady Amy.

"Yes, Madam," Lady Amy curtsied and was gone. During her absence, I called for parchment, quills and ink to be laid out on the table in my Privy Chamber.

A minute or two later, Amy returned, Cecil bustling into the room in her wake.

"You called for me, Your Majesty?"

"Yes. Thank you, Lady Amy. You may go. And the rest of you," Having dismissed my ladies, I waited for them to leave before gesturing for Cecil to join me at the table, "Come here. I want you to draw up a new Act of Succession for me."

"Madam?"

"You heard me. An Act of Succession. Now."

Cecil looked both shocked and puzzled, but he didn't dare argue with the determined light in my eye. He turned to the already-prepared table, "Whom does Your Majesty wish to invest with the Succession?"
"Make it clear that I am the one and only true Queen of England and that my daughters by the Lord Edward, the Princesses Katherine and Madeline, are the only true heiresses to the throne. Those and any other children that God sees fit to bless us with," I amended, my hand straying to my still flat belly. Pausing both for breath and to let my Secretary catch up, I then continued, "Anyone who dares suggest otherwise or who, since the death of my father King Henry, God rest his soul, has even once acted as though they do not consider me to be England's true Queen and therefore my daughters to be the true and legitimate Princesses, are henceforth to be considered traitors and are therefore sentenced to die a traitor's death."

"Your Majesty is not including the Princess Blanche in the Succession?"

"Lady Ormonde has forfeited her right to the throne through her marriage, Cecil. Pray do not mention her again," I snapped, reducing Cecil to a servile silence by turning the full force of my burning gaze upon him. He drew up the Act of Succession without any further protest.

"Here it is, exactly as you wished, Madam."

The words were barely out of his mouth before I had pulled the document towards me and was scanning it quickly.

"It will suffice, Sir William. You may go."

In the back of my mind, I knew that I ought to get at least Edward's consent for this measure, but I was far too tense. I just wanted this over with.

In fact, I was so keen to get the next few documents drawn up and see the whole thing done that I didn't even wait for Cecil to bow and leave the room before scattering sand on the still-glistening ink and signing the document, stamping it with my seal a second later.

Pushing that aside, I took a new piece of parchment and began to write, my fresh quill flying across the vellum in my boldest scrawl.

Slowly, the document began to take shape.

By Order of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth,

Edward FitzTudor, Earl of Nottingham is hereby sentenced to be taken from his house arrest under the guardianship of John Dudley, Earl of Warwick, and incarcerated in the Tower. The aforementioned Lord Nottingham is also promptly to be executed on the triple charges of Rebellion, Treason and Sedition.

Lord Warwick is to receive an annual pension of 150 Marks as a show of our gratitude for his diligent care and attention towards Lord Nottingham for all these years.

Written in this, the second month of the fifth year of our reign, Anno Domini 1551,

Elizabeth R

When I was finally satisfied, I signed and sealed the document and then, knowing the Dudleys were currently in London, and Edward with them, called for a page to take it directly to Sir John Gage, the Constable of the Tower. Lord Nottingham had been a thorn in my side for long enough. It was time to get rid of him.

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth, stop!"
I looked up at Edward's voice. He was dashing towards me, Anne hurrying along behind him. They both looked drawn with worry. Edward caught hold of me.

"Elizabeth, please! You've not slept in two days. You've barely eaten. All this stress cannot be good for the child."

"I have a country to take care of. I have to keep England safe," I shook him off and pulled yet another sheet of parchment towards me, beginning to draw up a list of prospective companions for our daughters.

"No, you have a child to keep safe," Edward retorted, even as Anne sorted through the piles of papers spread out before me.

"Elizabeth, what is this?" she exclaimed suddenly. She had my new Act of Succession in her hand.


"You should have discussed it with us!"

"It's too late. It's already in place."

"But by this, Lord Nottingham is a traitor! He's done nothing to you for years! You're not going to execute him, are you? You're not going to have him die a traitor's death?"

My silence was enough. "Elizabeth!"

"I have every right to do it! He's already rebelled once! You know he thinks of himself as the rightful King! He has to die!"

"He's under house arrest! How much harm can he do?"

"More than you think, Anne! I cannot afford to run that risk! Not while I do not have a healthy Prince in the cradle!"

"Anne. It gets worse."

Edward's voice was suddenly hard. I glanced down towards what he was looking at.

It was my sister's death warrant.

In truth, I scarcely remembered drawing that up. The first few hours that I had spent locked in this room had become quite a frenzied blur.

To my relief, I realised that I hadn't yet signed it. However, somehow I didn't think that minor detail would matter to my husband. All he could see that I was prepared to kill my own baby sister.

"Edward…" I started.

"No! You're mad, Elizabeth! Mad! You can't kill your own sister! You can't!"

"She's ruined everything! I don't have a bride to offer the French; she's proved the world right; proved the Howards are hot-headed and impetuous! She knew I didn't want that! She knew!"

"And what will it look like if you kill her! You'll only be reinforcing that view! You can't kill her! You've no reason to!"
"It's betrayal, pure and simple! She's as much of a traitor as Lord Nottingham!"

"No she is not! If you think she is, then he doesn't deserve to die either!"

"I've signed his warrant. I have to sign hers."

"No, you don't. I can get him back. I can pardon him. I can save him. Let me save him, darling. Let me save him."

"It's too late." I said dully, my voice beginning to shake as the full horror of what I had almost done began to sink in.

"It's not. Leave this to me. Leave everything to me."

Suddenly, relieved beyond words, I slumped forward into Edward's outstretched arms, a cascade of tears finally breaking through my defences.

"You promised me she'd do her duty! You promised me it was nothing but a spring flirtation. You promised!" I wept, unable to hide my feelings any longer.

"I know, I know," Edward soothed, stroking my wild red hair.

All of a sudden, as I stood there in his embrace, a wave of dizziness swept over me. At exactly the same time, I felt the skirts of my gown begin to grow sodden. Sodden with something warm and wet.

"Lord Edward! Anne cried, noticing me stumble. In two strides, she was at our side, "Go for a Physician, quickly!"

"But…"

"Give me Elizabeth and go!"

Anne's tone brooked no argument. I felt Edward's strong arms relinquish my waist; sensed Anne's hands encircle me in their place; heard Edward's footsteps fading away as he turned and ran.

Then the world went black.
I came to on my own bed, staring up at my own velvet hangings. I lay there, gathering my thoughts as I waited for the world to stop spinning.

The last thing I remembered was Edward running from the room as I collapsed into Anne's arms, stomach turning over as my third child threatened to expel itself from my womb months before its time. Had we managed to save the child? I had to know.

And before that. Edward had promised to pardon my half-brother, Lord Nottingham, after I had signed his death warrant. He'd promised to ride for the Tower and see what he could do. Had he managed it? I wanted to know that too.

Stifling a groan, I struggled into a sitting position.

"Your Majesty! Elizabeth!"

The curtains of my four-poster bed flew open and I found myself staring into the worried eyes of my younger sister, Lady Eleanor Dudley, Baroness Sudeley.

"Nora," I croaked, "What are you doing here?"

"John and I were in London. When I heard you were sick, wild horses couldn't have kept me from you," Nora explained, pushing a couple of extra silken pillows behind my back to support me.

The door opened and I heard footsteps before Nora disappeared, "She's awake, Mama."

"Praise the Lord! Have you told her the good news yet?"

"No."

"Then I'll do it. I was actually here, after all."

Mary Stafford nudged Nora out of the way, sinking to her knees beside me, "God be praised, my Lady Queen! God be praised! We thought we'd lost you!"

"Mary, please. Call me Elizabeth," I waved her courtesy aside distractedly, "This isn't the time for protocol. The baby…"

"Lives strong and well inside you, Thank God. Dr Owen was able to save His Highness's life."

I closed my eyes in relief. If I hadn't been sitting down, I would have sunk to my knees in thanksgiving.

"This is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes," I murmured, clasping my hands over my belly, trying to envision my little boy nestling inside, as he gained in size and strength. Mary Stafford nodded.

Yes. However, Dr Owen has forbidden you to exert yourself. It would not be good for the child. Or for you. You've been unconscious for almost three days, Elizabeth."

"Three days!" I exclaimed. Nora sprang to my side to reassure me as I fought to free myself of the bedcovers.
"It's all right, Beth. It's all right. Edward's been taking care of things. Anne's been helping him. He's been doing a good job. England hasn't been abandoned. I promise."

"Where is Edward, come to that?" I asked, glancing around in search of my husband.

"In a Privy Council meeting, but trust me, he'll be here as soon as it's over. He's spent every minute he can afford in here with you."

I smiled. I had never thought of myself as vain, but Edward's undying devotion to me would have been enough to turn any girl's head.

Looking past Nora towards Lady Susanna, I waved her over, "Help me change, would you, Susanna? You and Nora? I want to look my best for Edward."

"He won't care," Nora protested. "He'll be too happy to see you awake."

Nonetheless, when I fixed her with a death glare, she helped me, dressing me in cream velvet trimmed with red satin and looping strings of rubies and moonstones over my head, so that, when Edward's footstep sounded in the antechamber, I was able to turn towards the door, resplendent in the Tudor colours.

At the sight of me smiling up at him, Edward gasped audibly, "Elizabeth! Oh, Elizabeth! Oh, my darling!"

"Yes, Edward. It's all right. I'm all right."

I allowed him to smother me in affection for a while, then asked my sister, cousin and other ladies to leave the room before turning back to him and turning serious, "Edward, I need you to tell me. Did you manage to save my brother?"

Edward's face clouded over and he sighed, "I'm afraid not, Elizabeth. I rode for the Tower as hard as I could, but he was already on the scaffold when I got there. There was nothing I could do."

I winced, "Was it at least a clean job?"

Edward hesitated, then shook his head, "The first shot failed to sever his neck, though it went deep, deep enough to make him gasp in pain. In fact, blood squirted from his mouth and the wound on his neck until the axe came whooshing down again and sliced through his neck. Don't worry, he didn't suffer any more. The job was finished second time around."

"Oh, God." My hand clamped itself over my mouth as I struggled against a wave of nausea. Edward caught my other hand, rubbing it tenderly in a vain attempt to soothe me, "It had to be done, Elizabeth. You were right, Elizabeth. I rode for the Tower as hard as I could, but he was already on the scaffold when I got there. There was nothing I could do."

I nodded, inhaling shakily, "What did he say? Tell me exactly what he said."

Edward demurred at first, but I kept on at him until he told me.

"He said, "My Lords, I, the rightful King of England, stand here before you and proclaim my innocence. For I, the rightful King of England, have been sentenced to death by a Bastard Queen because of the elopement of a Bastard Princess. But know this, with my death, I do die a true and faithful King of England, and, when Your Queen falls, you will all see that! I, Edward VI, King of England, Ireland and France, do hereby willingly die for my beliefs. I do not atone for my actions, for I am King, and was right, true and proper in my actions." That's when he knelt, darling, after
he'd said that. The axe came down, but not before he'd cried out, "'God damn The Bastard Elizabeth!'"

I clenched my jaw in anger. How dare he? How dare he cast a slur on my legitimacy? My brother had been the bastard, not me. Father had undergone a rite of marriage with my mother, not his. Even through my rush of anger, however, I noticed that Edward had gone eerily quiet. I reached for his hand, "Edward? What's wrong?"

"That wasn't the worst of it," my husband said hollowly, blanching at some other, even more horrifying memory "He'd gone bald, Elizabeth. After all these years, he'd gone bald. When the executioner held his head up, the wig fell off. It – the head – rolled off the scaffold. It – it landed – landed at my feet. It was like – I've been in battle, Elizabeth, but this was something else – it was as if – as if – He was staring right up at me – as if – as if – as if he was cursing me."

The dreadful words finally spoken, Edward buried his head in my bedclothes, visibly trembling. I stroked his dark hair, murmuring comforting platitudes, as though Edward was just a child.

"Edward. Edward, listen to me. He can't. He can't curse you. He's not a sorcerer. He's not. He's just a normal young man. And our child is safe. Our Prince. He's safe. He's safe and he's strong. He's growing strong and healthy. Just like his father. He'll be the finest Prince of Wales England has ever seen. There's nothing Lord Nottingham or any of our other detractors can do about it. Nothing. Just hold on, my love, and the final triumph will be ours. I promise."

At last, Edward raised his head. His eyes locked with mine and, to my horror, his eyes were burning fiercely. In that instant, I knew the last vestiges of his boyhood gaiety were gone. Gone forever.

His voice rang hollow with exhaustion as he said, "We have to get the family together. We have to show the common people that we're still strong, despite what's happened."

I nodded in approval as he echoed my very thoughts. After five years in the role, Edward was at last learning to think like a King. "You're right. Maria's in the country, isn't she?"

"Yes. Ruy isn't, but she is."

"Then bring her to Court. Bring her and our daughters to Court. They are our future, Edward. Your Reina is a future Queen. We have to show the people that. As you said, we have to show the people that. You, me, Maria, Anne, Katherine and Madeline. We have to show them they can rely on us."

Gripping my hands as though they were a lifeline, Edward nodded yet again. After that, the two of us just sat together for a while, each lost in our own thoughts, drawing solace from the companionable silence that stretched between us.

Anne came to see me the next day, dropping a brief half-curtsy before rising to kiss me on the forehead tenderly, as befitted an older cousin.

"Elizabeth. It's good to see you awake. How are you feeling?"

"A great deal better than I was, thank you, Anne."

"Well enough to deal with matters of State?"

"Of course. I have to be. I am a Queen," I forced a smile, gesturing her to seat herself beside me.
She looked uncharacteristically tense, twisting her hands together and pleating the skirts of her gown with her fingers.

"Anne?" I leaned forward, trying to catch her eye, "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I've been thinking. The French alliance. We need it, really."

"What? You mean the one my sister's just left in ruins? I know we do. But when the news of her elopement reaches France, we're done for. King Henri still needs a bride and he won't be looking on English shores again. We've messed him around too much already, what with Blanche pleading to have an extra year here. Now we haven't got a bride to offer him at all."

"Not necessarily," Anne said smoothly.

About to launch into another rant about my sister's disobedience, I stared at her, "What do you mean? Blanche has just thrown herself away on your brother. Unless we can find a way of annulling that marriage before Henri finds out, we're done for."

"Not necessarily," Anne repeated, "I could marry him."

I gaped at her, "What? No! We need you here! England needs you!"

"England needs me to do my duty, nothing more. Think, Elizabeth. I'll be the one to break the news to Henri anyway, at least officially. I'm still only twenty-five. I'm young, strong and healthy. All right, I'm not a virgin, but no one would expect that, not after my having been married to your father for two and half years. No widow is expected to be pure, especially not a Queen Dowager. If the dowry was right, Henri would be a fool not to accept me. I could marry him in Blanche's stead. I could marry him in Blanche's stead and we could still salvage the alliance."

"And you'd do it? After everything my sister's done, you'd do it? For her sake?"

"No. Not for her," Anne admitted, "But I would do it for yours. Yours and England's. We need this alliance, Elizabeth, and I would gladly do it for the sake of that."

Anne fell silent for a few moments, letting me process what she had just said, before gently urging, "So do I have your permission, Elizabeth? Shall I write to Henri, officially informing him that Blanche is now unable to fulfil her betrothal to him and proposing a union between the two of us instead?"

I waved a hand. I was still too stunned to speak.

A week later, my sister Maria and my daughters by Edward were safely ensconced at Court and we were preparing for our public appearance.

I gave orders for our daughters, three year old Katherine and fifteen month old Madeline, to be gowned in white satin, a colour which served both to emphasise their purity and innocence and to ensure that, when Edward and I stood with them, clothed in ruby velvet, we made up the colours of the Tudor Rose.

Edward refused to let me carry either of the girls, given my condition, so, much though I hated it, I had had to yield Madeline to Maria.

In the end, Edward and I compromised; rather than Katherine being in his arms, as she usually was, if she wasn't in mine, neither of us held our daughters this time. Instead, Anne and Maria, both
dressed in pale green taffeta, balanced them on their hips as they stood at our shoulders.

With everything prepared, I went to rise out of bed to dress for the public appearance.

However, because I had barely left my bed since my near-miscarriage, my legs were still weak and I stumbled as I made my way to my dressing table, where Lady Lucy and Lady Susanna stood ready. Edward, who was in the room, eyed me worriedly, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"It's not a case of what I want to do. It's a case of what the people need me to do," I retorted, though I did make a concession and ask Lady Lucy not to lace me as tightly as she usually did.

Once I was dressed, I reached out for Edward and took his arm, leaning on him. He caressed my cheek.

"You look beautiful, my darling."

"Will they like me? The people?"

"Like you? They'll love you! You're their Queen Elizabeth. They'll love you," Edward assured me, briefly pressing my hand where it lay on his sleeve. Then, glancing over his shoulders, he blew our daughters a kiss and glanced at Anne and Maria, wordlessly telling them to fall into step behind us, which, scooping the girls into their arms, they did.

A second later, the guards flung open the doors of our balcony.

We stepped out and the crowds beneath erupted, shouting, stamping, clapping and cheering.

My heart swelled with pride and delight. They adored us. They adored us; their love for us made me feel proud to be their Queen.

"God Bless Your Majesty!" The shout was loud, heartfelt and spontaneous. As it was followed by another of, "God Be with His Grace!" I linked my hand with Edward's and we raised them, acknowledging the crowd, before signing for our daughters to be brought forward.

"In return for your loyalty, good people, we present to you England's future!" Edward shouted, "We present to you England's Thornless Roses: the Princess Katherine and the Princess Madeline!"

"God Save and God Bless Their Highnesses!"

It was roared back at us, so that we were very nearly deafened. Edward and I exchanged delighted glances. This public appearance could not have gone better!
Edward might have made sure that he and I presented a united front for the people, but that didn't mean that he was incapable of doing something behind my back.

When he didn't come to visit me again in the days following our public appearance, I knew something was up. He had been so attentive during the course of my illness; something had to have distracted him now.

What it was both stunned and infuriated me, particularly since he didn't even have the nerve to tell me himself. I had to find out from Kat.

"Lady Lucy?"

Yes, Madam?" Lucy murmured, laying her embroidery aside and lifting her head at my question.

"Do you know where Lord Edward is? He hasn't been to see me in days, not even when the Princesses are here. It's most unlike him. Is he ill?"

"No, Madam. Not that I am aware."

"Well, then. Where is he?"

Lucy hesitated. She glanced awkwardly at Kat and, in that instant, I knew that, whatever it was that my ladies were helping Edward conceal from me, I wasn't going to like it.

"Where is he?"

"Your Majesty. Come with me," Kat rose, clearly intending to take me into the privacy of the next room, as though I were a child. I rounded on her, "No! Just tell me, Goddamnit! Edward is my husband; I deserve to know where he is!"

"Elizabeth!"

In her determination to make me listen to her, Kat actually took me by the shoulders and shook me in a way that she hadn't done since I ceased to be a Princess. I stared at her in shock and this time, when she said, "Come with me," I didn't argue, but instead followed her into the next room.

Shutting the door firmly behind us, Kat took my hand and led me over to a chair.

"You need to stay calm, Elizabeth. What I'm about to tell you won't be pleasant, but just think of the Prince."

"Go on," I hissed warningly, already feeling my patience beginning to wane.

"His Highness Lord Edward hasn't been to visit you recently because he isn't actually present at Court."

"Where is he, then? Is he in Suffolk?" I asked, my mind automatically leaping to the natural conclusion. Edward's father was getting on in years. He'd just retired from Court, pleading ill-health. Perhaps he'd taken a turn for the worse. Perhaps Edward had gone to visit him. Though why he wouldn't have told me he was going was beyond me.

Kat shook her head, "His Grace is not in Suffolk. He has gone to Ireland to visit your sister and her
husband Lord Ormonde."

"What?" As the full import of Kat's words sank in, I found myself on my feet, shrieking in horror, "He can't! People will think I approve!"

"The Queen Dowager asked him to go. She wanted to make sure that Blanche is happy in her chosen union," Kat explained, "If Blanche isn't happy with Lord Ormonde, Anne will find some pretext to annul the marriage on, don't worry about that."

"She should have done that first! She should have done that first!" I screamed, practically beside myself with rage, "She should never have sent Edward to Dublin and particularly not behind my back! Doesn't she know what this will look like? Edward's as good as condoning Blanche's marriage. People will think I approve of the match! People will think I approve!

Kat watched my temper burn itself out, coolly impassive.

"You've changed, Elizabeth," she said eventually and her voice was heavy, "You've changed. The Princess I brought up would never have held a grudge like this."

Then she turned on her heel and swept gracefully from the room, letting the doors swing shut behind her.

I stayed alone in that little room until I could feel my anger subsiding; until I was at least no longer trembling; until I could muster a somewhat natural smile.

Only then did I slip from the room and go, unattended, to visit my daughters in their nursery.

"Katherine, Maddie," I called softly as I pushed open the door, declining any other sort of announcement. The girls were so precious and I so rarely got to see them without protocol surrounding us that, for the moment, at least, the sight of their little faces lighting up as I entered was ceremony enough.

"Mama!" Katherine sprang up and flew across the room to me. I hugged her gently, mindful of my swelling belly and then held out a hand to my younger daughter as she toddled over too.

"Maddie," Caressing her hair, I whispered her name and stooped to kiss her brow, trying hard to ignore the stab of pain that tormented me as she raised large, wistful blue eyes to mine. She looked like my mother. Just like my mother. And Blanche had inherited Mama's eyes. Meeting my daughter's gaze was like staring into a mirror image of my little sister's. The little sister who had betrayed me.

Luckily, Katherine interrupted my musings before they could get any more painful, "Mama, where's Papa? Why hasn't he come with you?"

"Papa's gone away for a bit," I explained, forcing a smile, "He had to take care of some business for Mama."

"Where Papa go?" Maddie asked, clearly crestfallen at not seeing Edward. I reached out and pulled her lightly on to my lap, hoping the warmth of her young body would be enough to steady me as I answered, "Papa's gone to Ireland."

"Has he gone to see Auntie Blanche?" Katherine interrupted eagerly, "Can we go with him?"

"I'm afraid not, darling. He's already gone," I murmured, silently thanking God that this was the
case. I wasn't sure I would have been able to deal with Katherine pleading to go and see Blanche, not under the present circumstances. She pouted.

"That's not fair. I miss Auntie Blanche."

"I know. But this visit was to do with business. It would have been boring for you."

"But when will we see Auntie Blanche? We haven't seen her for ages!"

"I don't know, Katherine. It depends on her, not me!" I snapped, tiring of my daughter's protestations. Couldn't she see that I didn't want to discuss it?

A second later, however, I realised that I shouldn't be taking my anger out on a little girl. She didn't deserve it. She was just curious. I stroked her cheek.

"I don't know. Perhaps she'll come back with Papa. For the Easter Celebrations. Would you like that?"

Katherine nodded and I smiled, "In the meantime, shall we go and see if there are any ducklings on the pond?"

Thank Heaven little girls are easy to distract. The moment I mentioned the ducklings, Katherine clapped her hands with joy and ran off, shouting for Lady Latimer, while Maddie looked up at me trustingly, "Feed them? Maddie feed ducks?"

"If you'd like to," I assured her and she bobbed her head eagerly, "I want feed!"

"Very well," I promised, turning to young Catherine Grey, "Send a maid down to the kitchens for some stale bread, would you? And fetch the Princess's wrap for me, please?"

"Of course, Madam," Catherine murmured, curtsying and hurrying to do my bidding.

A few moments later, she returned, Katherine reappeared in a fur-trimmed cloak and, Madeline firmly wrapped up against the biting April chill, we headed outside into the gardens.

A few days later, I was with the girls again when the door suddenly opened and my youngest sister, Lady Jessica Percy, Countess of Northumberland, came in, "My Lady?"

"Jess! What are you doing here?" I sprang up, calling to Katherine and Madeline to come and greet her, "I didn't know you were at Court!"

"Anne sent for me. She said you might like to see me."

"Of course! You look well," I said encouragingly, kissing her warmly, "I think married life agrees with you, My Lady Northumberland."

"Beth! Stop it!" she blushed furiously, then grew serious again. "Anne sent me to tell you..."

"Yes?"

"Edward's written from Ireland."

At her words, I clenched my jaw. Edward's current trip was still not a matter that I could discuss particularly calmly. Sensing my tension, Jess hurried on, "It seems Blanche and Lord Ormonde really are happily married. They really do care for one another, Beth."
"I don't care," I growled, "They should never have married in the first place."

"I think you do care," Jess retorted, "The mere fact that you're still angry at Blanche proves that you care. But you have to forgive her some time. You have to let her come back to Court."

"Why? She betrayed me! Why should I forgive her?"

"She married for love! How can you say that's a betrayal? How can you stand there and say it, Beth, when you yourself married for love?"

"I wasn't promised to a King at the time! And that was in wartime. The rules were different, Jessica."

"Not this different, Beth. Not this different," Jess persisted, "After all, you never annulled your marriage to Edward, did you? No. You fought like a lioness to stay at his side. Don't deny it – I've heard the stories."

"That's different. Edward is loyal to me," I protested.

"And George isn't? He's both your cousin and your uncle by marriage, for God's sake! How much more loyal do you want? And don't even try the "he's not good enough for her" card. George is an Earl. He was born of better blood than your Edward."

"Edward is Great Lord of England and Wales and a future Duke!"

"He's only a future Duke because his older brother got disinherited! He's only Lord of England through his marriage to you! In reality, he's nothing more than a second son and well you know it!" Jess snarled, momentarily heedless of the fact that we were in the nursery suite. I gaped at her. I had never known Jess this angry. I knew Blanche was her favourite, but I'd never dreamed that Jess, my sweet little rosebud of a sister, would go this far in defending her.

Seizing upon my hesitation, Jess pressed her advantage, "And Mama, Beth? What about Mama, whom you profess to love so much? Would she want you to do this? Would she want you to estrange yourself from Blanche for this? Would she want you to banish her; to cut off all contact with her," Jess lowered her voice and glanced towards my daughters, who played, happily oblivious to our heated argument, as she continued, "Would she want you to stop your girls from knowing their Aunt? I don't think she would."

"What would you know of Mama?" I objected, though my voice rang hollow and weary, "You were little more than a baby when she died. What would you know of her?"

"You've told me stories, Beth. Countless stories. So has Anne, so has my second mother, Mary Stafford. I many not have known her personally, but I do know this; she wouldn't want you to turn your back on Blanche. She'd want you to forgive her. She'd want Blanche back here; back at Court, as befits a true daughter of England's Rosa Sine Spina; England's Rose Without A Thorn."

I fell silent, abruptly turning away from my sister. She came up behind me and reached up to lay a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"And you know it too. You know it too, don't you, Beth?"

It was her touch that did it. All of a sudden, I could fight her no longer. I gave in, "Yes."

"Then do it. For our Mama's sake, even if you won't do it for anyone else's. Forgive Blanche. Bring her back to Court. Honour her as your sister and George as your brother. Please."
I took a long shaky breath. I removed my hood and ran a hand through my hair distractedly. And then, at last, at long, long last, I said the words that Jess had been so desperate to hear.

"All right. All right. If the French accept Anne, I'll do it. If they agree to take Anne to be their Queen in my sister's stead, then I'll forgive Blanche. I'll bring her back to Court."
It was the height of Midsummer - the hottest Midsummer in over a decade and I was suffering in the heat. I was especially suffering because of my pregnancy. I was in my fifth month by now and the extra weight of my child taxed my body and made me even hotter than I already was.

Small wonder, then, that I was irritable and unwilling to receive Ambassadors. The heavy gowns that protocol demanded I wear on such occasions only served to compound my misery, particularly in such an enclosed space as our Privy Chamber.

Edward's news, therefore, that an Ambassador was outside and requesting an urgent audience, was hardly very welcome.

"Edward, can't you see to them, please?" I groaned, "It's far too hot for me to be doing such a thing. I do not have the head for Matters of State; not today, not in this heat. You'll be far better at it."

Edward chuckled, coming up behind me to rub my shoulders, "I could see to him, Elizabeth, but it's the French envoy, Count Montgomery. I suspect you'll want to hear what he has to say for yourself."

Despite myself, I twisted abruptly in my seat, "Do you think?"

"It could be, couldn't it? We could know, once and for all, whether Anne is to be Queen in your sister's stead."

Edward was too tactful to add, "Whether you'll let Blanche come home," but we both knew he meant it. The words hung awkwardly in the air between us until I turned away and struggled to my feet.

"Well, come on, then. We won't find out by waiting around here."

Edward gallantly withdrew for a few minutes while my ladies helped me change into a more respectful gown than the cool silken wrap I had been wearing. After that, he returned, took me on his arm, and the two of us sailed out of my chambers to take our places in our Presence Chamber.

We had scarcely done so when Count Montgomery was bowing before us.

"Your Majesty. Your Highness."

"Count Montgomery," I smiled, extending my hand to him. He took it, brushed it with his lips and breathed, "Your Majesty grows ever more beautiful."

Before I could respond, he stepped back, allowing a careful degree of distance to come between us. Edward clenched his hand on the arm of his chair. He often did when he was hearing audiences at my side. Even after six years, he could never quite feel comfortable with having to listen to all the Ambassadors try to flatter me.

"Excellency," He cut Count Montgomery's flowery speech off before it had even begun, "You have your master's response to our proposal of a union between His Majesty and Her Majesty Queen Anne?"
The Ambassador looked somewhat startled at Edward's impatience, but recovered his composure quickly enough, "I do, Your Highness."

"And? What does His Majesty King Henri say?"

"My master first wishes me to convey his horror and deepest condolences over this entire delicate matter…"

"Yes, Yes!" I waved Count Montgomery's platitudes aside, biting down hard on a surge of impatience. Good God! Would he never cut to the chase?

"He also wishes to affirm that the terms of the contract will stay the same, even though it is the Queen Dowager that he will be marrying and not the Princess Blanche."

His Excellency's voice held the slightest note of question and Edward hastened to reassure him.

"It is true that we can no longer assure His Majesty of the revenues from the Irish ports. They are, after all, loyal to Lady Ormonde. However, the Pas-du-Calais will be handed over just as was originally planned and agreed and Her Majesty Queen Anne will be dowered with the ports of Deal, Southampton and Tilbury instead of Dublin and Cork."

The Ambassador nodded, "That all sounds most satisfactory, Your Grace. I will have to double-check, of course, but if the Lady herself is agreeable, then I see no reason why the union between our countries should not be hastened."

Edward didn't miss a beat. He half-turned his head and spoke to Lady Lucy, "Lucy. See if Her Majesty is within the Palace walls. Ask her if she would be so kind as to attend upon us in the Presence Chamber."

"As you wish, My Lord," Lucy replied, dropping down into a curtsy and then picking up her skirts in order to run from the room.

To my relief, Anne wasn't at her dower property at Richmond. She was within the Palace and, only a few minutes later, she answered Edward's summons, striding through the double doors with her skirts swishing and a train of ladies scurrying along in her wake.

"You asked to see me, Your Majesty? Your Highness?"

"Yes," I rose from my throne, descended the steps of the dais and clasped her hands, before turning her to face the French Ambassador, "His Excellency Count Montgomery has just brought us the news that, provided the final details of your dowry can be worked out, King Henri will be glad to take you as his second wife. Would you, in your turn, be willing to accept His Majesty as your husband?"

Anne knew, better than anyone, what response was expected of her. Pulling her hands from mine, she gave one to the French Ambassador. Keeping her eyes modestly lowered, she sank to the floor in a subservient curtsy, breathing, "I would be honoured."

It was a masterstroke. Count Montgomery could hardly keep his voice from trembling as he responded, "Madame," and grazed my cousin's knuckles with his lips.

Everything moved very quickly after that. King Henri accepted Anne's proposed dowry of 70,000 crowns and the revenues from the ports of Southampton, Deal and Tilbury. He sent his trusted courtier, the Duc de Guise, to act as his proxy at the wedding.
Anne kept her badge of the falcon, but changed the flowers from roses to golden fleur-de-lys and her motto from "The Most Happy" to "Veritas Semper Aurea Est": "Truth Is Always Golden".

I made sure all her gowns were either of deep Tudor Green, cloth of gold, cloth of silver, scarlet or royal blue, as well as being in all the latest French fashions. If she was going to go to France, then she was going to go as a true Howard-Tudor Queen.

And then the day itself came. Anne, glittering with grandeur in a gown of the deepest green satin with ropes of diamonds sparkling around her neck, laid her hand in that of the Duc de Guise and pledged her troth to King Henri of France, stating that "I, the Lady Anne Boleyn, by the Grace of God, Queen Dowager of England, Ireland and France and cousin to Her Majesty Elizabeth, by the Grace of God Queen of England, Ireland and Lady of Calais and His Highness Edward, Great Lord of the same, consciously and of my own free will, hereby take Henri, by the Grace of God King of France, to my lawfully wedded husband. I swear to be true, obedient and loyal to him and his interests and to faithfully renounce all other men for him until the day when death do us part. I also vow to love and to cherish the said Henri, King of France for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer and to be bonny and blithe and buxom both in bed and at board as long as we both shall live. Thereto, I give myself to Your Grace, the Duc de Guise, in your role as proxy and thus do I plight my troth."

Since the Duc de Guise, by virtue of his playing the King of France, had gone first, Anne's words marked the end of the ceremony. My own chaplain, Richard Huxley, pronounced Anne the wife of the King of France and the heralds blared a Royal salute as she stepped down off the dais.

It was done. My cousin, Her Majesty Anne Boleyn, Queen Dowager of England, had become Her Majesty Queen Anne of France.
Chapter 35

Since it was June, the sailing was good. Because of this, Anne resolved to set sail for her new country within the month.

Of course, we couldn't let her go without marking the occasion, so we had a full fortnight of festivities in her honour. Jousts were ridden, feasts were thrown and balls and masquerades were held by the dozen. It was while I was presiding over one of these – a masked ball proclaiming Anne to be the Queen of Peace – that it happened.

The great doors swung open and a young woman clad in the palest rose silk came in. She looked neither left nor right, but merely advanced upon the dais, head held high.

The crowd parted for her like the Red Sea had before Moses, for, though her face was obscured by a mask of rosy silk velvet, her eyes were burning with a determination that would not be gainsaid.

When she was within half a dozen paces of the dais, the young woman reached up, undid both her mask and her hood and cast them aside.

The courtiers gasped as my younger sister, their beautiful Princess Blanche, flung herself on her knees before me.

"Your Majesty. Queen Elizabeth. I have come before you to crave your forgiveness. I know now that I should never have married Lord Ormonde without first seeking permission. I can only offer Your Majesty my humblest and most abject apologies and pray that Your Grace will look kindly upon what was an action caused by the heated passions of youth."

Faced with such a sincere apology, I had little choice. She was my sister, after all. I could keep her on her knees no longer.

Cutting off the rest of her craven speech, I stood up and held out my hands to her, calling out in a ringing tone, "Rise, Lady Ormonde. All is forgiven now."

Looking immensely relieved, Blanche scrambled up from her knees and placed her hands in mine. Glancing at Anne and Edward, both of whom wore great beaming smiles, I leaned in and bestowed the kiss of peace upon my younger sister.

I said nothing more; too many emotions were swirling around in me for that, but when Edward gestured to the servers to lay another place for her at the High Table, I nodded in approval. Why not? Let her take her customary place beside me. It was how Mama would have wanted it.

"Blanche cannot stay merely the Lady Ormonde. At the moment, she is equal in rank to the Lady Northumberland; lower in rank than our other bastard sister, the Princess of Eboli. That isn't fitting for a trueborn daughter of our late father, King Henry, God Rest his soul. Yet, though she is my full sister, I cannot make her a Princess again. She has disgraced herself too shamefully for that."

I threw the words at my Secretary in one great running breath, pacing up and down as I did so.

To Cecil's credit, he didn't flinch at the urgency in my voice, merely inclined his head and made a note on his sheaf of papers.

"Might I make a suggestion, Madam?"
"By all means, Cecil," I waved permission for him to speak.

"Though Your Majesty now refers to your sister as Lady Ormonde, Your Grace never officially stripped her of her title as Lady of Ireland. If you were to grant her permission to continue using the title Lady of Ireland, would she not be more worthy of being Your Majesty's trueborn sister?"

"Yes, yes, that is true," I conceded, pleased with the idea, "However, that leaves George Boleyn in the uncomfortable position of being inferior to his wife, does it not? I admit that he is Earl of Ormonde in his own right and will Lord of Ireland *jure uxoris*, but, as my brother, he really ought to have a higher rank than that of Earl in his own right."

"You could make him Marquess of Wiltshire," Edward, who had been listening to our conversation, suggested. As I turned to him, he continued, "Marquesses rank higher than Earls, after all and, if I remember correctly, Wiltshire was the Earldom that your father bestowed upon your grandfather Lord Edmund Howard before -"

"Before he married my mother," I finished for him, "But it never passed to my uncle because of my mother's adultery, which means it lies vacant," My thoughts had run on ahead of his and now I turned to him, smiling triumphantly, "Edward, you have it. You have it, my love. We shall welcome George into the family by creating him a Marquess twice over; Marquess of Ormonde and Wiltshire. We shall also grant him the right to style himself Lord of Ireland."

Almost laughing as it all fell into place so easily, I squeezed his hand and ordered Cecil to draw up the letters patent immediately.

Once he had finished, I sent Lady Susanna running to fetch my sister and her husband.

They came at once, George sinking into a deep bow, Blanche falling towards the floor in what was very nearly the deepest obeisance I had ever seen. Both of them were visibly trembling.

I could have eased their fears in an instant, but as I enjoyed having the power that the suspense gave me, I didn't. Instead, leaving them on their knees before Edward, I rose and went to the small table where the newly-written patents lay scattered.

"Do you know what these are?" I asked, lifting the scarcely-dried parchments up so that they could see them. Scarcely knowing what to do or say, George shook his head tentatively, "No, Your Majesty."

"One is a patent for a Sir George Boleyn to henceforth bear the title Marquess of Ormonde and Wiltshire. The other grants a certain Blanche Boleyn *nee* Tudor the right to style herself Lady of Ireland," I announced grandly, thrilling despite myself at the slow, stunned beam of a smile that spread over George's face as he realised what I was telling him. A split-second later, I saw his hand tighten on my sister's. He whispered in her ear and her face lit up.

"Your Majesty!" she gasped, half-springing up before she remembered where she was and who she was talking to. Laughing, I gestured to her to rise.

"Sister will do, Blanche! Sister will do!" I exclaimed, opening my arms to her and folding her into the kind of embrace that we hadn't shared since I had become Queen and she had left Court to take up her role of my Deputy in Ireland.

With Blanche restored to favour, we were able, once again, to concentrate on Anne and her departure for France.
Though I was now six months pregnant and loath to take any more risks with my unborn child, given that I had already suffered one near miscarriage and therefore did not accompany Anne to Dover, Blanche did. She was my representative in this most vital of duties.

She was the one who ordered Anne's household to comport themselves with the decorum befitting English girls of good birth; girls worthy of being maids to a woman who was a Queen twice over. She was the one who said fond farewells to Anne in my name, as well in her own; kissed her warmly, sealing the farewells with the universal sign of peace and she was the one who warned Anne's escort, our cousin, the Earl of Surrey that there would be Hell to pay if harm came to a single hair on Anne's head before she reached the safety of King Henri's palace of Fontainebleu. That's how much I trusted her.

And when she came home; came back to Court, it was with Anne's prized Boleyn necklace; her rose gold B and pearl choker clasped around her neck. It appeared that our cousin had given it to her as a wedding present.

"After all, she's going to be part of the Valois family now," Blanche explained, "She'll not have the chance to wear it again, so she gave it to me."

"Hmm," I muttered sceptically. I doubted very much if Anne had given Blanche the necklace just because she was becoming a Valois by marriage. After all, she'd worn the pendant throughout her marriage to Father; throughout her reign as a Tudor Queen. She'd even worn it throughout her widowhood. The idea of her giving it up just because she was marrying again...well, I found it too unlikely to give it any credence, More likely, she'd given it to Blanche as a token of her affection for a young lady who was all at once not just her cousin or her stepdaughter, but also her sister.

I shook my head in disbelief. Anne was so kind-hearted. No wonder she made such a good Queen. I could never match her for kindness. I could only stand back and watch her actions in admiration.

I might not be able to match Anne's impulsive kindness, but now that I was Queen, I could out-do her in terms of grandeur.

A fortnight after Anne sailed from Dover, I hosted a lavish ceremony, one which ennobled George Boleyn as Marquess of Ormonde and Wiltshire and my sister as Lady of Ireland.

I wore cloth of gold trimmed with ruby velvet, Blanche was resplendent in cornflower blue silk and George, trying to complement her, dressed in dark blue satin shot through with silver.

My sister came forward first, kneeling before me as I placed her usual silver diadem back upon her head, bidding her, "Rise, My Lady Blanche of Ireland."

She curtsied to me, then came up to join Edward and me on the dais, standing beside me to watch as her new husband sank gracefully to one knee before me, waiting for the herald to unroll the patent and proclaim, "George Boleyn, it is the pleasure of our Sovereign Queen, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and His Highness, Edward, Great Lord of England and Wales, to create thee, on this, the first day of August in the sixth year of their reign, anno domini 1552, Marquess of Ormonde and Wiltshire."

I glanced at Edward. He nodded agreement and came down from his throne to place the ermine-trimmed mantle around George's shoulders at the same time as I fitted the Marquess's coronet in place on our new brother's head.

"The patent of your nobility," Edward informed George, handing him the now rolled-up scroll as I
ordered him, "Arise, My Lord Marquess."

I put my hands on George's shoulders and drew him to me in order to exchange the kiss of peace with him.

As I did so, I whispered, "Welcome to the family, George."
Epilogue

October 1552

The day was here. My time had come. My Prince was fighting his way out into the world and, yet again, I was writhing in the throes of childbirth. Yet again, I was cursing Edward; swearing that I would never take him to my bed again; that he would never be allowed to risk putting me in this position again.

Yet again, Mistress Greenwood was chuckling at my words.

"Your Majesty said that with the Princess Katherine, yet you still had the Princess Madeline. And now we're doing it again. Your Grace vowed never to have another child when you gave birth to Her Highness Princess Madeline, but you're still having this one. These are the words of any birthing mother. I'll wager we'll be here again in a year or two."

"We won't!" I screamed, clenching my jaw on another wave of pain, "I am the Queen! If I -"

I broke off as the pain became unbearable. A guttural howl escaped my clamped lips and echoed around the tiny chamber.

It seemed an eternity before Mistress Greenwood, whom, I was sure by now, was merely prolonging my agony in order to incense me, gave me leave to push. I bore down with all my might and, to my great relief, felt the great weight inside me shift ever so slightly.

The process repeated itself over and over in a seemingly endless cycle, but at last, Mistress Greenwood was shouting, "I see the head crowning! One more push, My Lady Queen! One more push!", I was thrusting one last time as a feral snarl tore itself from my throat, my sheets were soaking up a great rush of blood and other fluids and a new-born's piercing cry was filling the air.

"Praise be to God!" The murmur slipped from my lips even as I slumped back on to the pillows, exhausted.

In fact, I was so tired that it was Lady Amy who asked the vital question.

"What is it, Mistress Greenwood? Is it a boy? Does England have her Prince?"

"Aye!" My midwife's tired face creased into an exultant smile, "Aye, that she does, Lady Amy. Her Majesty has given birth to a lusty baby boy. God Save and God Bless His Highness!"

"God Save him," Amy breathed, almost falling to her knees in fervent thanksgiving. I closed my eyes on a surge of golden joy. Golden joy, relief and pride. I had done it. I had done my duty. I had done my duty and England had her Prince.

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England had her Prince at last. She had her Prince and he was perfect. From the very first time I held him, kicking and squirming within the tight bonds of his swaddling clothes, I knew that his strength was what England needed. His vitality would be the country's focal point for years to come. He would be the finest King that England had ever known.

I glanced up at the bevy of Ladies clustered around my bed, "One of you go for the Lord Edward, one for the Princesses and one for the Lady of Ireland, please."
"Yes, Madam," they chorused, dipping to the floor and then hurrying out, three of their number peeling away. Mistress Greenwood clucked her tongue irritably.

"You shouldn't call so many people to you at once, Madam. You don't want to over-exert yourself."

"Nonsense, Mistress Greenwood. I feel absolutely fine. Besides, the only boisterous ones are the girls and they have a perfect right to see their brother," I retorted, reasserting my superiority over the older woman, now that I was washed, dressed and the proud, triumphant mother of a Prince of Wales.

She pursed her lips, but said nothing, only lowered herself into a curtsy and retreated from the room in stony silence, even as Edward came rushing in through the other door. Our eyes met and I saw in one quick glance that he too was flushed with triumph.

"Elizabeth! I hear we have a Prince! A Prince!" he cried jubilantly.

"Yes," I beamed, "Come and meet your son, My Lord of England. Come and meet your son."

Edward needed no second urging. He knelt by the bed, cupping one hand gently over our son's head, drinking in his minute features greedily, just the same way I was.

"I prayed for a son this time," he confessed in a whisper, "I prayed for a son."

"As did we all, Edward. As did we all," I replied, scarcely daring to raise my voice for fear of disturbing our wonderful little boy. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

"May we join the party, Bessie?"

My sister's soft question came as a shock. Subconsciously afraid that someone might, even now, try to take my son from me, I momentarily tightened my arms around my precious boy. He whimpered at the extra pressure and I laughed, releasing him again as I realised who it was.

Blanche was standing in the doorway, holding my daughters by the hand. It was a picture to be treasured, all the more so because my sister was two months pregnant herself. Her belly was just beginning to curve and her gown was straining ever so slightly at the seams.

I beamed up at her and Edward laughed, "Of course. We wouldn't keep the Prince's Godmother and sisters out, would we now?"

"You want me to be Godmother?" Blanche sounded disbelieving. I nodded, "I can think of no one better. You, King Henri of France and the Archbishop of York. Here, hold him."

I reached out, leaning over Edward, to place my child into his aunt's arms as she seated herself on the end of the bed. Katherine and Madeline crowded around, clamouring to see their new brother.

"I want a baby sister," Maddie pouted, but Edward just ruffled her hair, chuckling, "Maybe next time, Maddie. Mama and Papa wanted a boy this time."

"Because that's what the country needs, isn't it, Papa? A boy to be King after Mama?" Katherine informed her sister grandly, looking to Edward for confirmation. Now that she was five, Katherine had finally started official lessons with Lady Latimer. It was a fact she was very proud of, especially since her sister was still too young to start.

Edward nodded, "That's right, Reina. Clever girl."
"But what's his name, Mama? What's my brother's name?" Katherine pressed.

Normally, she would have preened under Edward's praise, but today she had more important things on her mind. At her words, I glanced once more at my new-born son, who lay as though stunned in Blanche's arms, and tried the name out silently. Yes. It suited him. Just as I had known it would.

"Alexander. He'll be Alexander Tudor-Brandon, Prince of Wales."

"Alexander," Katherine repeated, leaning over to kiss her little brother, "Hello, Alexander."

"Sander," Maddie managed, stumbling over the long, unfamiliar, name.

Edward looked just as uncertain as our little girl.

"Are you sure, Elizabeth? You know what pictures that name conjures up. Do you really want to saddle our son with that name? What if he doesn't live up to it?"

"Oh, Edward," I laughed, taking his hand between both of mine and leaning in to press my lips to his, "How could he not?"

The girls shuddered and exclaimed in horror at our display of affection, which startled Alexander into crying. He raised his voice in a roar of protest; a roar so loud that I had to raise my voice in order to be heard as I pulled away and repeated, "How could he not? Listen to those lungs. He's Tudor on one side and Brandon on the other. He's got Howard blood in him too. How could he not live up to the name Alexander? Alexander Tudor-Brandon, Prince of Wales?"

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