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*Beheaded: An Alternate Look into the Life of England's Most Notorious Queen*  
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Departmental Honors Thesis  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
English  
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## Beheaded: A Craft Analysis of Dialogue in Historical Fiction

Dialogue is one of the most important elements of fiction. But in historical fiction, dialogue plays an even more important role as it not only does character work but also orients the reader within the period. Without dialogue true to the period, a historical novel can feel inauthentic and disorienting for readers instead of connecting them to the historical narrative.

Dialogue is key to characterization. Without the right dialogue, characters can feel flat and inauthentic which makes it harder for readers to connect with them. In Janet Burroway's craft book "Writing Fiction" dialogue use is classed as one of the key points of characterization. It is "an effort, mainly voluntary, to externalize the internal and to manifest not merely taste or preference but also deliberated thought" (Burroway 86). This is essential in historical fiction because it is one of the biggest ways that writers can develop historical figures into their own characters. Instead of creating their own characters and worlds, writers of historical fiction use established characters, settings, and timelines. Therefore, their character's thoughts and words are how historical fiction authors make the characters theirs, while also being memorable and connectable for readers.

In addition to the usual character work that dialogue does, it can also be used to set the time period. Burroway also notes this, stating "in addition to revealing character, dialogue can *set the scene*" (89). While building character, writers also establish setting and a feeling of authenticity. Bryony D. Stocker, a professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, attributes the need for authenticity as "a prerequisite for readers to take these fictions seriously" (Stocker 309). This is because of how influenced historical fiction

novels are by established information. If the dialogue does not match with the historical context, the reader will lose confidence.

Historical fiction can be accurate by historical standards but still feel inauthentic. Laura Saxon, a faculty member at the Australian Catholic University School of the Arts, describes the difference between authenticity and accuracy in her article “A True Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction” with authenticity described as “the experiencing of consuming an historical text and the audience’s impression of whether it captures the past” (128). Dialogue is a key factor in this distinction. Accuracy is determined by how true to the chosen time period a piece is. This is based on many factors, including characters, setting, clothing, etc. For a piece to feel authentic is subjective to the reader and is determined the same way.

Stocker points to three ways writers use dialogue to establish a feeling of authenticity: immersion, hybridization, and reader guidance. Hybridization uses contractions alongside more antiquated actions, such as attending a tourney, and objects, like stays or corsets, to make the past more accessible to readers. Hybridization can also include words such as ‘tis,’ which gives the feel of the past, alongside contractions in the same conversation or even line of speech. This form of dialogue “is one that is consciously inauthentic, focusing on effect rather than accuracy” as Stocker explains in his article (313). It instead blends the familiar with the antiquated to produce a fiction that is both true to the period and inviting for readers, making it the most popular form of historical dialogue. It is the method authors such as Hilary Mantel in *Wolf Hall* and Philippa Gregory in *The Other Boleyn Girl* use. Though this style sacrifices accuracy, it makes texts much more popular and accessible.

Mantel's novel follows the progression of Thomas Cromwell from a simple tradesman to one of Henry VIII's most powerful advisors. Mantel uses hybridization throughout the book, making it easy to read and entertaining. One of the most stunning examples of this can be found in a conversation Cromwell has with Mary Boleyn, the soon-to-be queen's sister:

'I'll talk to the cardinal,' he says.

'Do.' She waits.

He needs to go. He has things to do.

'I no longer want to be a Boleyn,' she says. "Or a Howard. If the king would recognize my boy, it would be different, but as it is I don't want any more masques and parties and dressing up as Virtues. They have no virtues. It's all show. If they don't want to know me, I don't want to know them. I'd rather be a beggar.'

'Really...it doesn't have to come to that, Lady Carey.'

'Do you know what I want? I want a husband who upsets them. I want to marry a man who frightens them.'

There is a sudden light in her blue eyes. An idea had dawned. She rests one delicate finger on the gray velvet she admires, and says softly, 'Don't ask, don't get.'

Thomas Howard for an uncle? Thomas Boleyn for a father? The king, in time, for a brother?

'They'd kill you,' he says.

He thinks he shouldn't enlarge on the statement: just let it stand as fact. (Mantel 128)

This moment not only provides characterization for Mary as being more than Anne's unwitting sister, but it shows the cunning and analytical nature of Cromwell and what he is willing to be involved in. Their tone is informal despite the formal nature of Henry VIII's court and the titles they use for one another, such as when Cromwell calls Mary 'Lady Carey,' the name of her late husband. The conversation is easy to understand, and even though important names for the period are mentioned, Mantel keeps the informal tone by making the titles seem commonplace. She uses contractions throughout to keep a modern style familiar to readers. By replacing common phrases such as 'anymore' with 'no longer' she keeps the formal phrasing as well as indicates the past setting with more antiquated words. By bringing in troubles accurate to the time, like Mary's anger for the king's failure to recognize her son, worries of the past are styled words and structures that do not feel out of place in today's speech patterns, making them easier to accept as common.

Despite the work Mantel does with dialogue to convince readers of the period and character, a very early line of dialogue does the opposite. When in conversation with her husband regarding Thomas' beating at the opening of the novel, his sister remarks "'Shame was left out when God made my dad'" (Mantel 8). Earlier in the same chapter, Kate refers to the same character as 'father' instead which feels much more in line with the dialogue of the rest of the novel. It took a good deal of time for me as a reader to reorient myself within the world Mantel is writing in. Though the term 'dad' originated during the period, it was not popularly used or is associated with this period and thus feels jarring (etymology.com). Its use here could be a way for the author to establish the low status of the characters of the moment though the effect of this term draws readers out of the period and feels inauthentic to the time in which Cromwell existed.

Philippa Gregory's popular novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* has earned much praise and was even made into a film. Her novel follows Mary Boleyn, Anne's sister, through her life and love affair she had with Henry VIII prior to her sister's historical encounter with the king. Like Mantel, Gregory also uses hybridization in her dialogue. An early scene with the Boleyn siblings together exemplifies this:

'Just sitting together,' I said. I had a strong feeling that I did not want to describe the scene to Anne.

'She won't get a son that way,' Anne said crudely.

'Hush,' George and I said at once. The three of us drew a little closer and lowered our voices.

'She must be losing hope of it,' George said. 'What is she now? Thirty-eight? Thirty-nine?'

'Only thirty-seven,' I said indignantly.

'Does she still have her monthly courses?'

'Oh, George!'

'Yes, she does,' Anne said, matter-of-factly. 'But little good they do her. It's her fault. It can't be laid at the king's door with his bastard from Bessie Blount learning to ride his pony.'

'There's still plenty of time,' I said defensively.

'Time for her to die and him to remarry?' Anne said thoughtfully. 'Yes. And she's not strong, is she?'

‘Anne!’ For once my recoil from her was genuine. ‘That’s vile’ (Gregory 10).

Though the topic of conversation between the siblings regarding the queen and her inability to produce an heir may be foreign to today’s readers, the dialogue is presented in a modern way. The tone is more formal than the conversation between Mary and Cromwell in Mantel’s novel, but the contractions keep the conversation feeling less formal and more approachable. Swapping words like ‘period’ for ‘monthly courses’ keeps the time feeling more accurate. The ages presented are not old by today’s standards, but by the tone, it is clear in this period it is a significant age to be. Anne’s final line regarding Catherine seems horrid not just to her sister but would be shocking to modern readers. Gregory’s use of hybridization in her dialogue makes her material much more accessible, which accounts for the immense audience she has been able to reach.

Another author, Candace Fleming uses hybridization in her chapter “Katharine of Aragon” within the novel *Fatal Throne*. Here, Fleming follows the other authors mentioned previously and uses contractions for a less formal approach to courtly conversations. In an exchange between Katharine and her now brother-in-law Henry, the two speak mostly Latin is transcribed by Fleming into English phrases with contractions throughout, making it much easier to read for her audience.

‘You look pretty,’ Henry said in Latin, the one language we both understood.

Unlike his brother, the ten-year-old Henry had the appearance of a boy who embraced life. His handsome face was round and pink-cheeked, his hair gleamed reddish gold, and his blue eyes sparked with wit and mischief. Although he was six years my junior, the Prince stood as tall as I, and radiated life in a way Arthur did not.



I bowed my head at his compliment. 'I am glad you think so.'

'It makes no difference if I think you're pretty,' he retorted. 'You are meant to please Arthur.'" He looked suddenly sullen. "It is *his* wedding day.'

'Someday you will have a wedding, too.'

'I shan't have one as magnificent as this, with feasts and tourneys and pageants.' He pouted. 'I am only a second son.'

'You are still a prince,' I reminded him.

He said something in English before catching himself. 'Will we always have to speak to you in Latin?'

I shook my head. 'Already, I am learning my new language.' I recited in stumbling English, 'Good day...please...thank you.' (Fleming 7)

With the way that Fleming uses hybridization, as well as how the language divide plays out, the conversation is digestible and approachable for the characters and for readers. The emphasis on the standard use of Latin makes it feel further set in the past since this is not a commonly used language. Notably, only the established younger Henry is the only one of the two characters to use contractions in this exchange. This also solidifies the age divide between them, which is later a point of contention when the two are married. This use of contractions in Henry's dialogue makes him not only appear younger but less involved in the ways of the court, which Katharine is still attempting to learn. The grand events of court life, such as tourneys and pageants, remain unexplained by the writer but have enough emphasis to be important events within their lives. The scene not only sets up the varied nature of Katharine and Henry's relationship, with its often

on and off again tendencies, but it also shows the power dynamic that the foreign princess faces and makes it feel more connected to readers by the way the two speak so freely.

Other novels bypass hybridization and instead use immersion to orient their reader in the past. Immersion is when authors use speech patterns and sentence structure to make the dialogue feel more antiquated. This is the most authentic feeling of the dialogue styles; however, it can turn readers off since it can be confusing or come across as pretentious. One example of immersion is found in Carolyn Meyer's novel *Loving Will Shakespeare*, a retelling of the love between the famous playwright and his wife, Anne Hathaway. The book follows Anne through her childhood and the developing attraction she has for the younger boy, Will. Regarding Will's absences at the close of the book, the brief exchange goes:

'Can you not come oftener?' I had pleaded when the children were young. 'Or stay longer?'

'But sweetheart,' he'd explained, too many times, 'tis but a two-day hard ride by fastest horse, and I have my obligations to the theater. Know that you and the children are never far from my thoughts.' (Meyer 261)

To capture the living style of these characters, Meyer uses phrases more in the vernacular of the time, like 'oftener' and more notably ''tis' which has not been used by any of the authors previously discussed. Another exchange earlier in the novel does the same:

'Your sweetheart?' Kit teased me later.

'Mayhap,' I replied with a playful smile, 'when he grows up.' (Meyer 65)

Throughout her work, Meyer uses contractions like in the other novels. Her use of terms such as “mayhap” and “’tis” once again make the piece feel more accurate to the period and less modern. These terms are used in the writings of Shakespeare, so it makes sense for them to be included here. Meyer’s novel is closer to immersion than to hybridization because of this choice, but the dialogue is still easy to follow because of some of the choices made.

Another author who deploys immersion in dialogue is Allison Weir. In her novel *Anne Boleyn: A King’s Obsession*, her sentence structure follows what readers would expect from the period. In a heated exchange between Henry and Anne, Weir writes:

‘She said that, for every doctor or lawyer of mine, she could find a thousand to hold our marriage good.’

Anne shook her head. ‘Did I not tell you that whenever you argue with the Queen, she is sure to have the upper hand?’ She sighed bitterly. ‘I see that some fine morning you will succumb to her reasoning and cast me off! And alas! Farewell to my time and youth, spent to no purpose at all!’

‘By God, Anne, you are cruel!’ Henry protested. ‘You know I will never forsake you. You are my whole life! And you should know that I will keep my promises!’

He got up and strode to the door. Raised as royalty, and with two decades of kingship behind him, he would never understand how insecure she felt.

‘Farewell,’ he said, and he did not even try to kiss her. ‘I’m going back to Greenwich to seek some peace and quiet.’ (Weir 280-281)

Despite her use of contractions in some parts of the novel, Weir's sentence structure feels more antiquated than other novels set in the same period. Anne's cry of 'Farewell to my time and youth, spent to no purpose at all!' is structured in a way that feels true to the period but distantly of that time. It makes the novel feel even more antiquated to readers when they remember that Anne is only in her twenties during this time. Exclamations of 'By God' and terms like 'forsake' make the speech and scene feel much farther away from the current day. This makes the novel more immersive but may turn away readers who cannot connect with the characters as well as they could if the dialogue was written in a different style more familiar to them.

For my novel *Beheaded*, I chose to use hybridization rather than immersion to make the dialogue easy to read for the audience and so did not include often-used terms like 'tis' to invoke a feeling of the past. An example of this can be seen in this exchange between Anne and King Henry at the conclusion of the piece:

'Answer my question, Mistress Boleyn.'

'Then allow me to speak freely.'

He observed me, taking in my seated position and the way I folded my hands in my lap. I was still the submissive subject. 'Speak.'

'I know what you are,' I said. I met his gaze finally, but his eyes weren't full of anger as I expected; they were instead sad and confused. 'You are a scoundrel. You take women and you use them for your gain and when they bore you, you give them assurances and you send them off. I will not be cast off. I will either be treated as your wife, or I will not be treated at all.'

'You know I can't make those promises.'

‘Then I won’t take any of them. I have laid out my terms. I will not be trod upon.’

This exchange keeps a formal tone that is upheld throughout the rest of the work. The use of words such as ‘scoundrel’ by Anne keeps the feel of the past. Even in their private moment, the two maintain a formality between them that slowly slips away. Henry’s defeat is noted with his use of contractions first which makes him the one to break their formal tone. Anne’s reply also uses contractions but is still formal in its structure. This version of courtly conversation keeps to a formal structure but is modern rather than of the past.

The way that historical fiction writers use dialogue can vary depending on the levels of accuracy and immersion they want to achieve for their audience. Some lean more toward a modern style of writing to attract readers while others choose a style more common for the period instead. Dialogue is one of the most important factors in the genre in order to capture the era of the piece as well as the characters the writer is portraying. This careful balance is difficult but can achieve a connection between readers and the historical narrative that is invaluable.

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## Beheaded

*Prologue*

*Tower of London*

*19 May 1536*

I would rather be anywhere than here, staring down my own death across the courtyard on a cool morning.

I always considered the sword to be the most elegant choice of weaponry. Henry allowed me to hold one of his over our first Christmas, though I had no idea how heavy they could be until then, and he laughed when I could not lift it. His hands folded over mine on the silver hilt. He stood behind me and carefully guided the point of the blade up from the floor. I recognized the crafted metal as the same sword my uncle had gifted to the king years before.

I did not recognize the sword now in the executioner's hands. It glinted in the light and was made of polished silver. Hands reached out to brush my shoulders, words were whispered on my behalf in my ears. All I could focus on was the beautiful sword my love had crafted as a final gift to me. The great silver broadsword would only add to the spectacle of the morning. A sword was not the weapon of choice for executions; an axe was the far more common method of dispatching enemies of the state and those who angered Henry far beyond repair, like my father and my own dear brother. On this day, though, he would execute his queen and make history for an act of murder. This was his moment to pen his finale to this narrative, one where he would be the hero and I would be the villain, his adoring wife no longer.

Now, as I climbed the steps of the scaffold, I could see ever clearer the sword my love had crafted to be used upon me now, even if he was too much of a coward to lift it and strike me down with it himself.

## *Chapter 1*

### *Satin Ribbons in the Sun*

*France 1520*

France was beautiful throughout the year and there was nowhere in the world I rather have found myself. The summer sun was warm. The sky was clear, only the faintest white clouds were present. I gazed up at them, studying the wispy shapes, though they formed nothing. All of us, the queen's trusted ladies-in-waiting, lay strewn about the grass in varying relaxed positions. The blue ribbons on Bridget's sleeve tickled my nose as they fluttered past my face, caught in the wind as she ran her fingers lazily through my hair. I lay with my head in her lap, stretched across the cut grass. Tessa's laugh was a piercing shriek that erupted into the quiet of the garden and disrupted those that idled past. Only my sister Mary remained completely upright, seated with her back stiff as she read a book aloud. Her voice grated my nerves as she read aloud and even the other girls only seemed to be half-listening and were instead concentrating on braiding one another's hair or muttering in soft whispers.

My sister read on; the worn book held between her fingers. I could hardly recall the last time I opened it. It had been a gift from our father when he last visited. My sister was diligent in her reading, memorizing the poems she liked most, while I had hardly given the book another thought.

“And you? Tell us about your husband-to-be, Anne,” Teresa demanded.



Her voice broke the hushed whispers. My sister glanced up from her book and her eyes met mine. She pursed her lips in a sour-looking way, which only spurred me on to answer their questions. If anyone was to be judged among us, it certainly was not me. My sister had been the mistress of the French king. In the coming days, she was to be whisked out of France so that she could marry another.

“I know nothing of him,” I said. I sat up, dismissing the idea of sleep entirely. “Surely he is a respected man at the very least.” That was the only thing I was entirely sure of about my wedding. My father’s mention of him had been brief. He assured me that I would be returning to England within the coming year after negotiations for my marriage had been successful. My father would have no son-in-law that was not of high standing and regard. Mary’s husband would no doubt be the same.

“You could charm any man. A husband will be no different,” Beatrice interrupted. Her hair whipped about her head as she sat up too. Her eyes met mine; there was a rather mischievous glint in them. “We could help you.”

“I’ll hear no more of this,” my sister said. Her voice was firm. The book lay pressed between her palms. “You would toss yourself into damnation for nothing more than a few parlor tricks. He may not love you but whomever father has chosen for you will suit you just fine.”

I ground my teeth together, trying to hold my snide remark back. Mary was already an embarrassment; there was no need to drag me further into her dramas.

Beatrice only laughed, and the other girls joined her. The sound rose, a shining cacophony that spread out across the palace green. “Our offer was not for you, Mary. You’re beyond our help.”

Mary's cheeks flushed a deep pink. So often she was ridiculed and laughed at as she passed through the halls. My sister was a fool. I often wondered how I could be so blessed and so cursed with such a foolish sister. She was all too happy to follow the rules laid out for her until she made a mess of things. She never seized opportunity. Instead, she waited for them to come happening by. The king had been a chance encounter, and it was because she looked at it so wantonly that it had ended so terribly. Had she been smarter, my sister could have lived as the king's mistress forever, instead of facing a quiet marriage and public banishment. "My sister does not need your help."

"Perhaps not," I admitted, giving a tense nod to my sister. I laughed with the others, and I could not hide the smile that had begun to take shape as I dwelled more on the matter. I relaxed once more, sinking back into the blades of emerald grass. "But I intend to use it all the same."

My sister rose, her book tucked under her arm. "Would anyone else like to escape this nonsense?"

No one stirred at Mary's words. All the girls remained still, gazing up at her with varying levels of amusement twinkling in their eyes. They were a band of hungry lions, and my sister was looking increasingly like prey as her departure drew nearer. She ostracized herself the moment she had taken to the French king's bed and betrayed the trust of his queen, the lovely Claude, who we were meant to serve. She had to know this battle was lost because she gathered her cream skirt in her other hand and scurried off toward the palace alone. I turned my head to watch as she disappeared around the hedge. The girls erupted into laughter once more, but I did not join them this time.

My sister needed no spell or aid to get herself a comfortable position in King Francis' bed, however fleeting it was. My sister, who always wore her hair exactly as she was told, who had sweet honey-colored eyes, and who thought that good came to those who were gifted it by God, could have been the most powerful woman in France only because she broke the rules. I hated her for it. I hated it most because it was her that managed it and was now scolding me. To me, it was unfathomable. She would wait the rest of her life for another opportunity; I could not.

Teresa reached out for my hand, giving it a squeeze. She was always the most empathetic of the lot. "We were only playing, Anne."

"I know," I said. I looked up and met her smile with another of my own. "My sister is mine to handle."

Beatrice met my eyes and nodded in agreement. The other girls began to clear the dishes we had used for tea earlier in the afternoon and placed them on the silver tray that lay on the grass. One of the servants drew near to retrieve it but Tessa swatted them away. All the girls were listening to us, waiting to see if Beatrice would say anything more on the subject. I watched the way her lips pursed for a moment as a response formed, but then quickly formed into a smile instead. "Let's see what we can do for you and that new husband of yours."

The girls all crowded closer to form a tight circle. On the expanse of the grass, it seemed impossible to have a conversation and keep it private. I turned to observe the garden behind us but found no one there. It didn't mean no one was lurking, because anywhere in court there were always ears listening. Servants talked and though they dwelled at a good distance it did not mean they were not listening.

Beatrice pulled me out of my thoughts as she laid her hand over the top of mine. “We are safe,” she said. I nodded in response before she turned to address the others. All of them quieted their chattering as she spoke. “We’ll meet tonight.”

Teresa smiled happily, even clapping her hands in an excited way. Meetings, especially for spellcasting, were dangerous and thus quite rare. I had heard Teresa speak of them. She told me excitedly over breakfast one morning how they had all met at the edge of the grounds. I had only been half-listening as she spoke of the hex she had placed on Lady Sylvie over tea. It was all so easy for them. Any slight could be fixed by a few herbs, more cumbersome issues were handled by the group.

I never had an interest in their affairs. I had managed my problems on my own quite well, but the idea of an easy marriage was enticing. I smiled along with them, listening to their detailed plans as I let the warmth of the afternoon ease my worries. My sister had warned me of damnation, but I had no worries about the state of my soul. She could languish in whatever state her marriage fell into. I would ensure my success before I ever set foot in England again.

## *Chapter 2*

### *A Piece of String*

Mary stirred beside me as I sat up in our bed. I waited to see if she would move then hurried out of bed. I threw a plain dress over my chemise and did the buttons myself. The row of buttons was uneven, so I had to redo them before I tied a cloak around my shoulders. The trip from our room was long, the hallways dark and eerie. I passed guards, who noted I was a queen’s maid and said nothing. Queen Claude could call us at any time, and often did. I rushed on. With the mess of dressing myself, I was late.

A tug on my arm drew me around a corner, and I braced myself for a fight. A giggle halted my assault. It was Tessa, with her hood flared dramatically overhead.

“I did not mean to cause you a fright,” she said. “But it was quite entertaining.”

“Until I cried out, and we both were caught,” I answered. I tried to be firm with her, but I knew my reaction was amusing to her. Despite the danger, this was all fun for them, and I wanted to join in on it all.

“This way.”

The gardens were beautiful at night. They were vast and even in the day, one could lose themselves without a knowledgeable guide. I had Beatrice and followed her down the path before we stepped off into the grass. I lost my footing at the sudden change in surface and rolled my ankle in my heeled slippers.

“Slow down,” I hissed as I caught my balance.

“The others are waiting,” Beatrice said. “What makes you so apprehensive?” Had I not known it was her, I would have suspected she was just a maiden. She wore a dark riding cloak to hide her gown. I wore one as well, the wide hood offering a cover from the chill while also allowing us to remain unsuspected should anyone find us here.

“I twisted my ankle,” I responded. I could feel it throbbing as I reached down to touch it. It would certainly need to be tended to but could be passed off as nothing more than a dancing injury gifted to me by an untrained partner. “Your shortcuts are proving to be more harm than good.”

“This way will hasten our journey. For a girl so known for her graces, you have the worst balance.”

She helped me across the open expanse of grass that sprawled out behind the gardens. After the pain in my ankle had quieted, I allowed her to move ahead once more. In the darkness, I could only see the flow of her cape in front of me. The palace disappeared behind us as we made our way across the field. At its edge, I saw the beacon of a burning fire. Laughter echoed out across the green.

“I thought you’d gotten lost,” said Beatrice as she took in the sight of us. The hood on her cape had been drawn back to reveal her normally pleasant face, but with only the light of the fire dancing on her features, she looked sinister.

As I took in all my friends who stood around me, I was struck by how menacing they appeared. It was no game like I had previously thought it was going to be. It was something serious and even dangerous.

I knew the danger. I understood the potential cost. This was an offense of the highest degree. It would not only put us at odds with king and country but with God. I was happy without forgiveness. I had never been given anything, none of us had. The things we were given were never quite what was wanted. If we wanted anything of real value, then it would have to be taken. The consequence of this trade I was willing to accept, even if my life and immortal soul were the cost.

The fire was warm against my face as I inched closer. Tessa gripped my arm as the chattering of the other girls began to die down. Despite her own giddiness, she commanded them with an air of confidence I had seen only in her when men approached. It was only then that the

giggling girl became a stiff-backed lady, but this was something else, something I did not recognize but wanted to be a part of. The other girls looked the same. In the light of the flames, with the shadows dancing wildly on their faces, they looked foreign to me.

“Tonight, we welcome Anne into our circle, as we take revenge against one who has slighted our sister.”

They had asked me to join them, but I did not understand them. How I yearned to stand the way Tessa did, with so much confidence I was just a Boleyn girl, promised to a fiancé I had never met.

There were shouts, joyous cries, a chorus of them that ascended into the night air as they each produced small pouches from the folds of their gowns. They each tossed them into the fire, and they burst in spectacular fashion, with the smell of herbs drifting out on the smoke that blew into my face.

“What are they doing?”

“They are hexes,” Tessa said. A wide smile spread across her face. To her left, Bridget clapped enthusiastically as the last of the pouches crackled in the flames. “Madame Silvia stole away Bridget’s beau, so we are teaching her a lesson.”

“And you can do that with something so simple?”

“The earth gives us what we need,” Bridget replied. She turned to look at me, the fire lighting up her eyes with the same fervor as her glee.

“And what will happen to Silvia?” I asked. I was not worried about her. Silvia was a nuisance since the moment I had taken a place among the queen’s ladies. Rumor swirled she had

once been a queen's lady until she had been outed for her blabbering mouth. "If this is all for revenge, then surely you know."

"Boils, wrinkles," Bridget said. "Her nails will fall off." Her voice was so passive as if this was normal, like we were still out on the lawn listening to Mary's dull poetry. "All that she deserves. You're one of us now, Anne. You can learn how to do all of this yourself."

It was risky, and I was unsure what I could accomplish. This worked because every one of these girls, my friends, worked toward something greater. They assisted one another in all things and did well with the knowledge they had been gifted. I was gifted with knowledge of the classics, poetry, and art. This was something foreign and unknown to me, but I suddenly found myself craving this knowledge too.

"Then teach me."

I walked between Bridget and Tessa back toward the palace, our arms linked together. The other girls had slowly filtered back toward the palace, and as the warmth of the fire died, we made our way back as well. I listened with joy as they explained their craft to me. I found myself yearning for all the information they could give me, to access this newfound power.

### *Chapter 3*

#### *An Understanding of the Soul*

The sun had just begun to leak through the windows when I was able to quiet my mind and slip into a blissful sleep until Mary scurried inside. She was dressed for the day, her honey-colored hair hidden beneath her French hood. It sat around her head and was fashion like a tiara



made of fabric, and I recognized the freshwater pearls that hung from her ears as the ones my mother had given to her.

“Still sleeping?”

“It’s hardly light,” I said.

“It is mid-morning,” she said. She swept through the room toward the curtains and wrenched them open. The light spilled in, and I lifted a hand to block my eyes. I moved to slide out of bed and put my feet down on some kind of fabric. It was a nightgown, an exact copy of the one I wore. The hem was littered with strands of grass and stained brown. I paid no mind as I stood and stretched my arms before I made my way over to her.

“You are late,” she said. “The queen sent me to make sure you were not ill.” My sister walked past me and lifted the discarded gown from the floor. Blades of grass fell from the hem and littered the floor. “And now I know why. You went out with the others. I told you that business was dangerous Anne!”

“It is only dangerous if you make it more than it is.”

“Do you understand what you are tangling yourself up in? You’re signing your soul away.”

“Tangling myself?” I dropped the dress I had chosen onto the chair in front of me. It crumpled lifelessly. “Let’s not forget what you got yourself involved in.”

“I had no choice.”

“You had a better prospect than any girl in France or in England, and you let it go.” My sister rushed toward the door; my nightgown clutched between her fingers.

“The king’s affections come and go,” she said. She kept her back to me, but I could imagine the look on her face--shame and sadness.

“You could have kept them.”

“I cannot force a king to do my will.” I made a noise of derision and Mary turned to face me. The emotions on her face were not what I expected. Sadness was there but also longing”  
“The only thing I regret,” she said. “Is how the queen looks at me now. And yet, she still treats me with grace. I cannot bear to sit in this court blessed by that grace I do not deserve.”

I understood my sister then. Her final act of service to the queen was to spare her more pain. My sister gripped the gown in her hand tighter. She wrung it between her fingers as if it was moving to escape. Mary turned on her heel and swept out of the room, chin up even as her lip quivered. Perhaps she too wanted to escape. I let her go, having no intention of running after her without being properly dressed.

As I joined the rest of the ladies in the queen’s rooms, I sat next to her. She was reading again. I watched her eyes trace the letters again and again, but she never turned the page. I let the silence wash over me as I considered it all again and realized if it had been me, I would not have given up so easily.

## *Chapter 7*

### *A Ruined Return*

#### *Hever Castle*

*1522*

The halls of Hever Castle stood the same way I left them a decade ago. The pale brown

stones were weathered, but the sun gleamed off its windows. My family home was permanent. The structure had been a gift to my father and had stood long before we had dwelled within its walls. It would stand long after the Boleyn name died.

My mother lingered outside, and I stepped out to greet her. She was a thin woman with dark hair like mine. The features on her face were sharpened lines that had begun to form at the corners of her mouth. I was hardly surprised to find as we embraced that I had grown taller than her. I was hardly seven when I had last seen her.

She held me at arm's length so she could look me over before she turned and walked briskly inside. I followed obediently.

“You are taller than I thought you would be.”

“I never wrote you about my height.”

“All you wrote about was what you learned from that fussy Frenchwoman or your numerous grievances with your sister.”

“My sister is the fussy one,” I said.

My mother paused in the hall just outside my father’s study and turned to face me. I met her sharp eyes. “Your sister is well married and a member of society again. You would do best to learn from her.”

“Did you convince father to allow her the better husband? I will be at the bottom of court’s ladder for sure if you had any hand in this.”

“Your place in society is yours to make, girl. my mother said Your father made his as I did mine, and now it is your turn.” She paused and turned to look at me once more. . “Whoever

you marry will be fraught with grief but that is no concern of mine. Your husband is no better or no worse than your sister's and should you behave perhaps you can prosper yourself."

I had never encountered a room so silent. Everyone was standing. My uncle was by the window while my father stood perusing the bookshelf on the far wall of his study. I stood patiently in the doorway, waiting for one of them to bid me in or even to acknowledge my presence. Finally, my brother, who stood looking over my father's desk, caught my eye and waved me in with a nod. I stepped inside and made my way over to him.

"The door," my uncle finally spoke to address me.

I turned and closed the door before I continued over to the desk and took a seat. George was the only one to meet my gaze again. This time he gave me a small smile and knelt so I could embrace him.

"What is this?" I muttered to him as I pulled away.

My father still had not stopped his drumming hands. He always wrapped his fingers when he was tense; I had forgotten how grating it could be.

My uncle finally broke the silence. "James Butler has rejected you."

There was no contract. There would be no titles. "Rejected? For what possible reason?"

"The Earl does not believe you are worthy," my father said. He shoved a book back onto the shelf, and I could hear his boots as he strode over. My brother rose from his place in front of me and backed away as the two of them descended on me like crows.

I should have stayed in France. I had been a part of something there. Now I had no marriage prospects and, therefore, my family had no use for me.

“Your sister is well off and married, and yet you continue to be an issue.”

“And what did I do?” I asked as I met my uncle’s hard gaze. He was the leader, my father his follower. I never let him intimidate me the way my father did. “I returned to Hever as was requested of me and remained here as a cloistered nun until you could arrange my wedding.”

“Your reputation...”

“My reputation is clear.”

My uncle’s face twisted. He did not believe me. How could he? Mary’s mess had cast me in her shadow. I had to be watched, lest I repeat her mistakes.

“You will join your sister at court,” my father said. “Your brother will escort you there. I have managed to convince the queen to allow you a position among her ladies.”

I scoffed at the idea. I had heard about the queen in France. She was old and old-fashioned. “I will not serve that old prude.”

My uncle closed the already small space between the two of us. He gripped my arms and pulled me in. His breath was hot, fanning across my face as he exhaled. “You will do what you are told.”

My brother surged forward suddenly and inserted himself between us. “Uncle,” George said, pulling him away from me. I took a step back. “Perhaps I can discuss this with my sister.”

“I do not know what power you thought you had overseas, but you have none here.”

Our father laid a hand on my uncle’s shoulder, and though it did little to calm Norfolk, he followed my father as he left the study.

“You should come with me to court,” my brother said as he turned to me. “You will be with Mary and I. She still is in service to the queen, and I am close in the king’s council.”

I walked over to the large windows that covered the corner of the room. It was not the idea of court that bothered me so. I had adored my time under Queen Claude and had thought of her as a good friend. The Spanish queen, though, I had heard enough about to make my decision. She was perfect company for the likes of my sister and any other dull-headed girl, but not for me.

“I will not.”

“They are not asking, but I am. Please, Anne, come to court with us. The three of us have not been together in one place since you left us all those years ago.”

“I refuse to sit around and listen to everyone sing Mary’s praises,” I muttered as I sat on the window ledge. It was just wide enough for me to rest on and gave a view of the side of the estate. Cold air seeped in through the glass. It was nothing but green, rolling grass beyond that fed into the darkness of the forest. It was tranquil, and I knew then it would be one thing I missed most when I left. The perfect nature beyond these walls was forbidden of course, far too expansive for us to be able to explore when we had been young, but I realized how much I had missed it in my absence and how much I would again.

“Unworthy, is that what they truly said? Mary is allowed to bed a king, and yet she is the one who is wed.”

“Carey is a simple man. He respects Mary. The match is good.” My brother made his way toward me and stood over my shoulder, watching the same view. A bird landed among the tall grasses at the edge of the forests then flew off back into the trees.

“Think of it like this then. The match was not good and therefore it is you, dear sister, who has no use for them. Father only wanted their land. Perhaps he can manage to add it to his holdings another way.”

I was not meant for a simple husband. My brother was touching on something important with that. “You have become quite the negotiator,” I said as I turned to look at him. “I suppose I have no choice but to join your boring court lives.”

My brother smiled at me in return as he offered me a hand. “Boring? Truly, sister, it would never be so, especially now that we will be together under one roof.”

I took his hand and allowed him to help me up. The two of us left the study, and though both my uncle and our father dwelled just inside the hall, neither one met my gaze as we strode past. I packed my things that evening, bidding Hever goodbye once again. I tucked away the gifts Teresa had given me into the drawer of vanity. The little box fit perfectly in the corner and looked nondescript enough to go unnoticed should any snoops decide to root through my things.

My brother came to fetch me early the next morning, and we rode together into London. There were people everywhere, milling about in the cold, and I suddenly realized that even though this was my home, I was a foreigner. I had never been allowed to set foot into my own country’s court. All my knowledge and tricks could do me no good until I found my place. Our sister was waiting for us, dressed in an ivory gown that was closer to yellow than white. Her face was rounder, her cheeks more full, but she looked happier.

“Your journeys have been safe?” she asked, pulling me into an embrace as soon as I had exited the carriage.

“Of course,” I said. “I had the most wonderful company this time.”

“I am always happy to serve my beautiful sisters,” George said. He kissed the top of Mary’s head and stood at her side. Both observed me, George in fondness, Mary in appraisal. “You will have to tell her everything. Keep her well informed, though I suspect she’d have no trouble with that on her own.”

“Of course not,” I said. If I wanted to be a part of this court as seamlessly as possible, I would need Mary’s help. “How is your husband? I regret we have not had the chance of meeting yet.”

“He’s a kind man. I told him you were coming, and he is quite excited to meet you,” my sister said as she offered me her arm. I linked mine with hers and walked with her inside, our brother following swiftly behind. The three of us, the Boleyn children, all entered the palace together. “The queen is also happy to meet you.”

“Is she now?” my brother said, and I turned to meet his wide smile with a simpering look. “She is a good woman, sister. Whatever your reservations are, perhaps withhold them until you’ve met.”

“I told her how great you are at music,” my sister added “None of her girls have such talent so she will be happy to hear you play. Indulge her.”

I said nothing. I could make the crone like me if necessary. I might not enjoy her company, but both my siblings did, and that was enough for me lay my anger about my current situation to rest and allow some of the excitement to seep in. People we passed nodded in greeting as we passed, some men even bowed, allowing themselves more time to gaze upon us all. The ones that were bold enough to meet my eye muttered to their friends the moment my back was turned.



“Already making an impression,” my brother congratulated.

A small huff came from my sister as we turned the corner. The hall was open and lined with archways and there were tailored gardens on either side of us. “She is good at that.”

I did not miss the ruefulness. No matter how excited she appeared to be, my sister was upset that I had come here.

“I have no intention of ruining the good you have done for yourself,” I said. I pulled her to a stop next to one of the stone pillars and reached for my sister’s hand, though she pulled away. “I have no marriage prospects until this mess with Butler is good and forgotten. I only came at the request of our father, Mary. Had the choice been to return to France, I would have gladly taken it instead.” She let me take her hand, though it hung loosely in my own. “I need your help, Mary. I cannot navigate this alone, but we had so many triumphs before. Perhaps we can again.”

It was the best apology I could make. I had been, at the center of it all, a terrible sister. If I had to admit my shortcomings so that she would aid me, then so be it.

“Perhaps we can,” my sister said with a small smile. She allowed my hand to remain in hers as she ushered us on. I spared a glance over my shoulder at George, who gave me a pleased nod and a smile as we departed.

*Chapter 10*

*Perseverance*

*Green Castle*

*March 4 1522*

I rose early the next morning. My sister still slept in her bed across the room. I heard her stir as I opened the wardrobe door, but she settled once more. Her dreams must have been blissful. What did she have to concern herself with? She was married. She had a family. I would have nothing if I did not start taking things out of my father's hands.

I had just finished my own hair when my sister finally woke. She met my eyes through the mirror as I pushed the last pin into my hair. Each pin had a pearl at the end, the largest of which was the size of my thumb. They were my sister's favorite and a gift we were meant to share.

"You left some for me?"

"No," I said. I stood from the stool and moved over to my gown, which I had laid among my crumpled sheets. My sister rose from her bed and smoothed the sheets back into place before she made her way over to the dressing table. Her eyes roamed over the surface. I watched her as I held my white gown pressed against my form. My nails caught on the embroidery over the bodice, creating a popping noise that filled the room as my sister took the seat I had just left.

"Then what am I to wear?" Her hands searched for the jewels and pins that lay scattered on the tabletop. "We're both going to appear in the pageant, there is nothing you can do about that. We were both requested."

The pageant itself was to play out in the afternoon as part of the Shrovetide celebrations, with the ladies playing virtues and the lords acting as their arduous saviors. My sister held the part of Kindness; I was to play Perseverance.

"Why is that my concern?" I asked as I strode across the room, stopping before the mirror to observe the dress once more before I slid behind the partition to change. I would not be able to

keep my sister from participating, but I could certainly make the day challenging for her. “You look dreadful in them. I am doing you a favor.”

“Mother said they look nice.”

“She must tell you that. She is our mother. They make your hair look like dull straw.”

She pursed her lips. My dress hung off my frame, waiting for the laces to be sinched. The straps of my stays hung visible. I would need my sister’s aid to finish my preparation for the day. She twisted her hair back into a tight bun, using the silver flower pins she got for Christmas to secure it. The style paired well with her pinched features. She rose without another word and retrieved her own gown from the wardrobe before she disappeared to change. I observed myself once again in the mirror while I waited. She stepped out and made her way over to me, wordlessly sinching up the back of my dress before she turned her back to me. I did the same for her, pulling the strings until her dress fit as it should.

“Does my hair truly look like straw?” she asked. I knew I had hurt her. She would think about it the rest of the day and was most likely happy to wear her hood now so that no one would see her hair.

I shrugged as I dabbed perfume onto my collarbone. “Sometimes.”

The words had the intended effect. My sister sat silently by the window, looking over the script for the play again and again before she finally rose and donned her mask. I retrieved my own and followed her down the hall toward the waiting guests.

I could hear the chatter from the hall before we had stepped inside. The Cardinal had invited Henry’s court to stay with him alongside the Spanish ambassadors. This was all a show

for them, a great revelry of the power that England held so that the foreigners could report as such to their emperor.

I waited until my sister had blended into the crowd before I followed. I pushed my way through, sliding between bodies and conversations to take my place at the set-piece that had been constructed at the corner of the room alongside the windows. I climbed the unpolished wooden stairs into the sideless tower which would act as my prison for the play. My sister dwelled below me alongside one of the Howard girls. She looked my way but turned away just as quickly, refusing to meet my gaze.

The crowd fell silent as a shout came from the doors. Young men rushed in. All of them were masked just as we were. They rushed about, fighting their staged opponents before they jumped into the set. I could pick my brother from among them as he made his way toward me. I smiled as I met him, allowing him to take my arm.

“The king is among us,” he muttered to me. Had it not been such important information I would have suspected he had never learned his lines. “And you are safe, Lady Perseverance.”

“Thank you, my lord. I am thankful for your aide,” I answered with my own line.

Conversations continued, with line after line recited by the rest of the actors. The audience cheered. I gazed over the crowd and found the queen. She was seated at a long table beside an empty chair. Two men were seated to her side. Both wore large plumes in their hats. The largest of the chairs was empty. I smiled once again at my brother as he walked with me back down the stairs to the floor. The queen rose and applauded; the ambassadors followed like dogs. I bowed with the rest of the players, but I could not stop my eyes from roving over the

group of us. I met my sister's gaze, but she was smiling as one of the knight players led her across the empty space to lead the first dance.

George took my arm and pulled me along as the musicians began to strike up a jig. I watched as a tall man leaned in to mutter in my sister's ear. She giggled in response, and I could not hide the repulsion I felt well in me at the sound.

"You look like you are about to retch," my brother muttered as he rose from a bow. He took my hands and pulled me along in the steps.

"Who is that talking to Mary? I know it isn't her husband. He's too short."

"Not all men are meant to have affections for you."

"You think I could be jealous of Mary?" I whispered before we were forced into the middle of the group. I smiled my most dazzling smile and twirled my skirt the way Beatrice had taught me. There were shouts and cries of joy before my brother and I retreated and stood at the edge of them to watch another pair copy the same steps.

"I think you are jealous of everyone who has something you want," my brother said before he was drawn into the cheering himself.

I stood next to him, still sure to keep a pretty smile on my face. The dance came to an end and the crowd turned to applaud the musicians. Cardinal Wolsey's broad smile made me uneasy as he made his first appearance, at least to me, the entire performance. "Unmask."

I pulled at the ribbon that held my golden mask up and it dropped into my hand. I observed the faces of those around us just as everyone else. My sister was quick to fall into a deep curtsy, a blush rising to her cheeks. I focused on the man before her, only to meet a pair of

dazzling hazel eyes. Those that stood around my sister also dropped into bows and curtsies too, all the players lowering to pay respect to this man. Suddenly my brother dropped at my side, and I did the same.

“Thank you, Cardinal,” the king said. I rose as my brother did. This time the king did not meet my eyes. He had turned to address the far table where his queen still stood. “And for honoring our dear friends with such a treat. I am sure they are delighted. Now, let us all partake in the fine meal you’ve prepared, Wolsey.”

The Cardinal made his exit and the crowd followed. My brother took my arm again and walked be toward the door, and I followed until I laid eyes on my sister. She was smiling and gossiping with one of the Seymour girls I had yet to learn the name of. I shoved my brother away and went over to join her. I grabbed my sister’s arm and pulled her close. The Seymour girl did not even meet my eyes before she rushed along.

“What did he say to you?” I hissed in her ear as we walked. I knew we could not be noticeably late to join everyone, but I knew the King of England had spoken to her. My sister, my married sister, had earned the attention of King Henry too.

My sister looked like a frightened doe. “He just talked.”

“What did he want with you, Mary?” I dug my heels into the tiles and forced her to stop. My nails dug into her forearm which was left uncovered by the short sleeves of her dress.

“He asked about William and then he just wanted to talk.”

“About what? What was so important that he had to speak to you?”

“The play, and then he wanted to know about the queen, how we are all getting along. I did not know it was him, but his voice was so sweet and kind. He asked what I thought of him.”

The shock I could not keep from my face. He wanted to know what my lowly sister thought of him? I could not believe that was all that went on between them. I knew the reputation of the king and my sister’s reputation had been quieted with her marriage but not forgotten.

“What other questions did he ask you? What did you think?”

“I think he just wants to be among us, that was why he decided to participate.”

All I could feel was anger. Whatever the king had said to her, my sister kept to herself. We shared everything so I had thought. I could only suspect my sister was lying to me as I dragged her along. He had to have asked more of her. He did not look at women like that for their opinions on himself.

George was waiting for us at the doors. “There you both are...”

“Our sister has some precious notions about the king,” I said. I shoved Mary at him, and while my sister stumbled, she did not fall like I had hoped she might.

“And what are those, sweet sister. Perhaps you have information to share with us.”

George reached out a hand to steady her but she pushed him aside and moved to join the revelry that had begun in the hall.

“I would curse her if it would do good and loosen her lips.”

“What the king said to her is only yours to know if Mary decides to share it,” my brother said. What had gone on that I did not know of? My brother had always been privy to more information than I had. He was close to the king and my father’s boy. He was aware of all the

family affairs. “Now, we should join everyone, before the only thing you are known for is your tardiness.”

*Chapter 612*

*The King of Hearts*

1523

The Boleyn apartments had been gifted to my father by the previous king, a fact he still relished. It was where he took up residence when he returned from overseas, and it was where I knew I would also be able to find George. My brother had taken up permanent residence there since he had been assigned to Henry’s group of attendants. When things got too tense with Mary, I knew I could seek refuge there.

“I told her to go back to Carey’s room,” I told him. “She insisted on staying with me.”

The queen of diamonds was slick in my hand as I played it and took up another. The spring sun warmed the room as it poured in through the windows. My brother did the same with one of his cards in his seat across the table. His face was scrunched in dismay realizing his loss, and he threw his hand down on the table. “Father asked her to. Mary will stay with you until he finds it suitable for you be on your own.”

“I do not need a chaperone.”

“It is not just about you,” my brother said. He leaned forward and laid his forearms down on the tabletop. “The king has begun to ask questions about Mary. If we play the cards right, then she could replace Lady Blount as his mistress.”

“Lady Blount was left with the king’s bastard son and nothing more,” I said. I discarded another card and chose another even though my brother had abandoned the game now. There



was a new game to be played and a game of cards was not going to keep his attention. “What is his interest in our sister? She is wed.”

My brother roared across the table as if there was a joke I had missed. “And you are not, is your point?” he said after he had finally found his composure.

“If you are going to be amused at my expense then I will leave you to it,” I said, rising from my chair. I tossed my hand at him, a true winning hand, and watched as the cards fluttered around him for a moment before I turned to go.

“Anne, I did not mean to upset you.”

“No, only to enjoy yourself and laugh at jokes I have not made.”

“Sister, wait.” I pulled open the main door of the apartments and stepped out into the hall only to be met by a figure already there. “Ah, Lord Percy, I do apologize but it seems my sister no longer intends to join us today,” my brother said from behind me.

“A shame, the more players the better for a game of French Ruff, I think.”

“Only for the Boleyn coin you can win.”

Lord Percy’s laugh was deep but clear as it resounded down the hall. The sound died out to a chuckle at my brother before he finally addressed me. “Perhaps you could stay on my account, Lady Anne?”

I smiled as I met his challenging gaze, “It would be my pleasure, Lord Percy.”

As we settled back at the table, Lord Percy took the seat next to me. I stole a glance at him as my brother gathered the previously discarded cards and shuffled them again. He had a

strong profile accented with dark hair. He smiled as he lifted his cards off the table and then gave me a sidelong glance. I met his eyes for a moment before turning my own attention to the cards.

“I hope you are a better sport than your brother,” he said. “He loses most spectacularly.”

“I can assure you; I am a better opponent than him by some margin.”

That afternoon, I won as many hands as I lost. Henry was good, a challenge I welcomed. He had a strategy that was required in games such as this and luck to go along with it. His eyes lit up when he drew the winning ace that matched the suit required. It was a sign of victory my brother did not notice, but I did in my admiration.

“How do you enjoy England, Lady Boleyn?”

“I find the people at court to be quite dull,” I said, discarding an unnecessary three of clubs before drawing. I slid the ace of spades into my hand, ready to play at my next turn. “The queen keeps the drabbest company.”

“The Cardinal keeps many men at hand from different backgrounds. There is never a dull moment at Wolf Hall,” Percy answered. “I find the peace here to be necessary. Though perhaps with the news of her divorce the queen will be much more entertaining for you.”

“She has not mentioned a divorce.”

Percy smiled as he gazed up from his hand. He knew something I did not. “The king is once again asking Wolsey for a divorce. Perhaps it will be awarded this time.”

The king had pushed for divorce twice already. Wolsey had run to Rome to placate him and had been swiftly rejected. A triumph was not out of reach this time; Percy knew this. Or he wanted to appear as if he did. I could not discern.

“I’ve had quite enough losing today,” George said. He threw his cards down before he stood, adjusting his doublet. Percy did the same. I laid down the winning ace to end the game properly. “We will settle our scores tomorrow evening, Lord Percy. I have supper with Norfolk.”

I generally avoided meals with my uncle, but our father insisted upon my attendance. I rose when my brother extended a hand, an invitation, and confirmation that our enjoyable evening had concluded. I accepted and stood too, then Percy.

Percy smiled before he turned to me. “You are the exceptional player, Lady Boleyn. Join us again, it was a delight.”

“I had no idea the Cardinal’s pages had such vices. Perhaps if he knew, he would select better card players,” I answered with a wry smile. My brother chuckled. Percy’s face brightened more with his own smile; the sun as it set behind him cast a glow around him of bright orange. He was a handsome man indeed. I could sit and listen to him talk for hours more if we had the time.

“I will confess my sins at once.”

“He would be most pleased,” I said. I gave a low curtsy. The deep red fabric of my gown ballooned around me, pooling on the floor for a moment before I rose again. It was Mary’s gown; one I had commandeered as my own upon arrival. The color had made her shine with her fairer skin, and I wanted it for myself. If she could shine so brightly in it, then I could just as well. “Another game would be lovely, Lord Percy.”

As we stepped into the hall, Percy bid my brother another farewell before he turned and went back in the direction he had come from. As my brother led me off toward our uncle’s apartment I glanced back. The hall stretched on before finally curving off to the left. The orange

glow from the sun seeped in here too, illuminating the still figure of Henry Percy as he stood watching our retreat. Our eyes met and I felt my cheeks warm, and my heart quickened. I turned sharply around again. George just babbled on about his current streak of losses, cast upon him no doubt by his recent betrothal. All I could think of was how the light made Henry look like heaven and exactly where I wanted to find myself tomorrow and every day after.

## *Chapter 16*

### *Wolsey Hatred*

1524

Spring arrived with little fanfare. The sun warmed the chapel as we joined Catherine for her morning prayers. She knelt as she prayed. At the end of her line of ladies, I knelt too, muttering my prayers though I recited only from memory and with no devotion behind them. The sound of the queen's sleeve as she formed the sign of the cross was the only indication our time was finally ending. The Cardinal approached as she rose, bowing to her before he fell into step beside her. I rose to follow, watching some of the girls stumble as they did the same.

"They do not have Beatrice's grace," Mary said as she looped her arm through mine. She gave Sarah Howard a tight smile which the younger girl returned with contempt.

"It really is no wonder she has no husband."

"Our cousin is quite unremarkable," she continued as she walked beside me. "She is still upset at your return. When the queen announced you would be joining us, she had quite the fit."

"I only just met her."

“And she thinks you will steal her admirers, of which I have seen none, I might add,” Mary said with a laugh.

I could not help but laugh as we stepped out into the gardens. The Cardinal’s pages remained there, waiting for his excellence to emerge.

Lord Percy approached with great haste. I had not seen a look like the one he had now. I reminisced about our moments together in the previous six months and never once had he looked as distraught. My sister no longer grinned or even smiled as he stopped before us. She gave a curtsy before she spoke to him, “A pleasure, Lord Percy.”

“Lady Carey,” he said bowing slightly to Mary. He turned to me. His expression cleared, and for a moment he looked the same as he had the day we’d met. “Lady Boleyn, I have been sent to see what all the laughter is about.”

“Does the Cardinal often send you to investigate what ladies are speaking about?”

“Only the ones who present worries,” Lord Percy admitted in a low voice. “The gardens are lovely today. I hope the Cardinal takes more advantage of it. He needs the air.”

I met his stare and his soft smile with one of my own. “Is His Excellence unwell?” I asked.

“Simply strained,” Henry said. His voice was distant in the presence of my sister as she lingered. “May we speak, Lady Boleyn?”

“If it is about His Excellency, I would prefer to stay with Mary.”

“I think the queen requires me,” Mary said softly. She took a step back to distance herself. “I should attend to her. Good day, Lord Percy.” My sister strolled away in the direction of the Queen, though she was still speaking to Wolsey.

I noted the way the Queen’s usually stoic face was set in anger as I watched her go. It astounded me how tolerant the Queen had become of her, but I knew Catherine had no say in the matter. I gave Lord Percy a smile and took his outstretched arm. The Queen would not notice my absence. I was too far down on her list of favorites.

The green would fill with people as the day drew on, but so early in the morning, there were only sparse groups scattered about. I allowed my arm to unhook from his to take his hand.

“No, Anne,” he said. He halted suddenly and stopped the leisurely pace we had set.

“No one will see.”

“They have.” His voice was firm as he took a step back. He folded his hands behind his back as if to keep the distance between us firm. In the months we had spent together since that innocent game of cards, I had never seen this side of him. Our time and been spent so enamored with one another that amidst passionate kisses and talks of our plans there was never a moment to be angry. “Wolsey has been informed. He has spies everywhere, and he knows everything. I petitioned to marry you.”

“Then we’ll marry. I want nothing more than to be yours,” I answered. It had even been a topic of conversation on occasion when the evenings turned dark, and cards had grown tiring. “I want to be your wife, Henry.”

He took another step away. His eyes were downcast, and I watched as his face contorted in thought first, then anguish, before finally settling into resolve. “Wolsey will not allow it. The king will not allow it.”

“Neither one of us could do no better.”

“They refused, as did your uncle and your father.”

I suddenly felt as if we were in France again, when I had been told I had no choice but to marry James Butler. The idea struck me suddenly and I surged forward. My fingers grabbed his upper arm as I spoke, “We could elope.”

“I won’t.” He unfolded his hands and removed them from behind his back. Without a word, he lifted my hand from off his shoulder before he took a step back once more toward the tree that stood behind him and cast us both in shadow. “I am to wed and return to my family home. I am required there.” His eyes met mine, and their usual depths that were alight with vigor and mischief were dull. “I am sorry, my dear. Perhaps there is someone else in mind for you as well.”

“Wed whom?” I asked, and my voice frightened me. It was so soft yet cold, and even Henry seemed to be ill at ease. “Who is she?”

“She does not matter. She’ll never compare to you, but we will be outcast and exiled if we go against their wishes,” he said as he offered me his arm again. “The Cardinal gave me enough grace to allow me to tell you myself, but that grace runs thin. We should return.”

I hesitated as I reached for his arm. It would be our last moment together, but I could feel my anger as it bubbled up. I stepped away and turned back the way we had come. He did not

follow and instead stayed under the shade of the tree. In the short walk back toward the queen's entourage, I realized I would never again see the life in his eyes up close or feel his thumb as it ran over the top of my hand or the press of his soft lips against my temple.

As I neared the Cardinal drew away from the queen with a stiff bow. He walked in my direction, and I met his gaze for a moment. He smiled as if victorious. I remembered myself suddenly and dropped into a curtsy. He did not pause and passed quickly, and I rose once more to rejoin the queen.

“Are you well, Lady Anne?” Catherine asked.

Her thick accent made the question much more irritating, yet I met her question with a soft smile as I settled next to my sister. “Of course, Your Majesty.”

## *Chapter 22*

### *A Royal Babe*

#### *March 1526*

The king swaggered into the room, accompanied by Charles Brandon at his right. The two of them were loud, laughing boisterously as the crowd parted for them. The rest of Henry's hunting party followed him, all of them in the same mood. It was a successful hunt. We heard that news the previous day, but now the king had returned, still in a fantastic mood. Catherine rose to greet him, with Wolsey trailing after her. They both intercepted Henry, shielding him from me. George reached for Mary's arm, lifting her limp figure out from her chair. On unsteady feet, she rose, and I watched as my sister walked to meet the king.



“He knows about Mary’s baby,” George said. He lifted his glass to Henry as the two met eyes. Henry gave a gracious nod in reply before he focused on my sister. He had triumphed in his hunt, and now perhaps, in his journey for a son after his two-year affair with my sister.

“Did you write him?”

“Father asked her to do it herself. Her hand never stopped shaking.”

I lifted my glass to my lips to stall my response. Mary had her own husband. Surely the king’s babe would damage those ties. Though I was certain my father had assured Carey of his position as Mary’s husband, would that matter now? My sister had talked on and on about how wonderful she thought her sweet William to be and how their marriage had been nothing more than bliss. It had kept her up late into the night, until I had to beg her to let me rest. I only wished now that my sister had taken her husband and left court. This was the rise that we needed. My father was sure that this babe would put us ahead of the Howards and the Seymours, and I knew that it would. The king had expressed nothing but his want for a son, and if my sister could deliver, then we would ride on her success for generations.

“I am sure she’s just frightened by the idea. The king could just as easily make that child another Blount bastard as he could a prince, and then we would all be damned,” I said. My brother gave me a disparaging look, but I paid him little mind. This success would gain him just as much as my father would. They had not entertained a possible outcome of failure. “You know as well as I do Mary does not handle pressure with the same grace I can.”

“Yet she is currently carrying the king’s babe, while you crab about your misfortune.”

“I could carry us just as well as she.”

“You are reckless Anne,” my brother said. “Had it come to a vote, I would have still chosen Mary with far more confidence.”

My brother knew his words struck true, his mouth opening to apologize before it spread into a grin at the approach of Brandon. The Lord gave me a curt nod before he conversed happily with my brother about the king’s success. My sister was married yet she had been chosen to sit and wait like a duck in the king’s path. Perhaps they had discredited my patience, but I knew better. My sister was already the matter of rumor in France. Was it much of a surprise that she had been entangled in the same affairs as she had been there? It made her more desirable, and in return, perhaps it did the same for me, but I did not need my sister’s sins to help ascend.

I stood from my seat, my hand braced against my middle as I curtsied to Lord Brandon and my brother before making my exit. I heard my brother mutter an apology to Brandon for my behavior, though the rest of their conversation faded as I slid out of the side door and back toward our rooms.

I had nothing to destroy that I would not miss. She was still flirting with the king, carrying a baby that would have royal blood. Her life, no matter the turns it took, could be assured. I was unwed, a girl growing closer and closer to spinsterhood. I was sinking, from the glorious new prize to a background prop.

I locked the door and left the key in the lock. I crossed the room; the rug was rough beneath my knees as I knelt next to my trunk. It was still full of linens, simple day dresses, and stays. I tossed a stray pair of shoes out of sight, one of them sliding across the floor and disappearing beneath my bed. I unfolded one of the heavy gowns, which hid the sleek wooden box Beatrice had given me. I ran my fingers over the simple line of stars carved into the lid

before opening it. I had never looked at the contents inside, only ever listened to the glass jars that rattled within as it was moved around.

Tucked in the corner was a small piece of paper, which I held in one hand while I looked through the box with the other. There were leaves and herbs all without labels. I picked up one of the vials, but at the sight of the dried grey worms within, I slammed the lid closed once more. The sight of the horrid things, living or dead, made a sour taste rise in my mouth.

I threw the box down next to me and ran over to the pitcher of water near the window. I filled the basin and splashed some onto my face, hoping to relieve nausea that had overtaken me just moments before. In my hurry, the note I had set on the edge of the basin became dotted with water, turning it transparent in places and causing the ink to run. I picked it up again and unfolded it. I recognized the handwriting as Tessa's. It was a simple list, numbered off in a straight column down the center of the page. Anyone who happened upon it would have thought nothing of such a simple thing. Had my sister made this discovery before I had, she might have even dismissed it. I, however, could not. If I could not find love myself, then I had the tools to create it.

In the bottom corner was a note, written by a different hand and signed with a simple letter. *'Though you might be the most charming of us, we all need help on our bad days. Perhaps this will be of use. -B'*

The box sat open by my trunk; its contents spilled out onto the rug. The vials had rolled everywhere, all coming to rest in different places. I stooped down to collect them and locked them away again before folding the box back up within my gown and tucking it away. I sat down on the edge of the window and folded my hands in my lap. I gazed down at them as my mind

wandered to the future. My palms were clear and smooth, with only faint lines running over them. I had seen the hands of servants, how cracked and brittle they could look, how calloused and worn. Mine would never look like that. I smiled faintly as I lifted my sleeve, revealing the woven blue string that was still tied around my wrist. I ran my thumb over the strands. The ends had started to unravel, but the rest of the bracelet remained intact. I was not without my coven. They had given me all the tools I would need.

## *Chapter 25*

### *You Best Prepare*

*December 1526*

My sister collected her things and packed them away without a word. By nightfall, she would be back in the apartment the king had gifted to Carey. I would be alone without the spy my father had planted to watch me and no longer with the burden of guiding Mary at every turn. I sat by the window wrapped in a blanket. Snow had just begun to fall and stick to the grass beyond the leaded panes.

“He asked about you,” she said.

Her voice broke the ambient noise of the crackling fire and her fluttering gown. The hall outside had fallen silent, free of the people who had passed by in droves as they headed off early to the Cardinal’s holiday feast. The princess was rumored to be arriving that evening, and the queen had made a fuss to accommodate her. I lifted my head to look at her and met her sad eyes. They quickly shifted down to the chemise in her hands as she folded it.

“I have no interest in taking William from you, Mary,” I tried to assure her. I knew who she meant, and it had nothing to do with her husband. Her terse expression told me all I needed

to know. It did not anger her that the king had moved on, only that he had chosen me as his next object of pursuit.

“Not William. I told him you are quite exceptional.”

“Why would you do that?” I knew what she meant. My chest tightened at the idea of the only person she could be talking about. I had been a bit skeptical that the spell could work after these nine months, but my doubts gently pulled away. After waiting in anguish, it had finally proved itself.

“You are. I would not lie to him.”

I stared at my sister and considered. If anyone were to ask me about Mary, I knew I would not be as courteous as she. Instead of digging in and attempting to keep the king, she had sung nothing but my praises. From the look on her face, with her set jaw and pursed lips, it occurred to me that she was considering our situation as well. “I know that but why would you do it? You owe me nothing.”

I could see a level of understanding on my sister’s face that I had never seen her possess before. “He is obsessed with woman after woman, so if he’s turned to you, you best prepare. He may look for you this evening.”

My sister had come to collect her things. She was already dressed for the evening’s festivities. Her gown had a floral print, and the pale blue color made her blonde hair shine. Her hood sat on what had been her dressing table. I thought it suddenly a shame that no one else would see her as I did in the confines of our room. My insufferable sister had shed the sallow appearance she had adopted and become the girl I envied in France once more.

The blanket lay draped across my lap as I sat and pinned up my hair. My sister softly hummed a tune as she finished her packing. She continued as she laced my gown for me. Her soft voice was right at my ear. She had always been a better musician than I. Even now, with no accompaniment, the notes she sang softly were perfect.

“Is he terrifying?”

“He is a king,” she answered as she stepped back.

I turned to view my profile in the mirror. My gown was a deep green with gold trim. I reached down and picked up my pearl necklace off the dressing table. The weight of the gold letter ‘B’ was heavy in my hand as I clasped it around my neck before placing my own hood atop my head. It all seemed heavier than before, and I found myself unable to draw quite enough air into my lungs.

“Then we best not keep him waiting.”

## *Chapter 28*

### *The Fair Lady Catherine*

*August 1527*

The queen sat rigidly in her seat. I took note of my sister just behind her. Mary was seated on a stool, her own sewing in her lap. She was speaking to one of the Seymour girls in a hushed voice, though the room fell into shocking silence as I stepped further into the interior. My sister was the only one who did not spare a glance in my direction. Her sewing now seemed to be of even greater interest.

“Mistress Boleyn, sit,” the queen said. She lifted a hand, which pulled the thread of her embroidery taut as she gestured to the chair across from her.

The high-backed seat had clearly been left for me. I gave her a smile as I sat in the indicated chair. She went back to her sewing and said nothing else. The chatter that usually filled the space was absent and there was nothing to replace it. I watched her hands as they worked, moving slowly as she pulled the needle back and forth to make her stitches. Her rhythm was steady and did not slow as she spoke to address me, breaking the thick silence. All breaths were held, seeming to wait for her to put things into motion once again.

“My husband seems to be quite infatuated with you. Even more, than he was with Mistress Carey so many months ago.” The subtle jab at both my sister and I was surely meant to keep me off balance. Her needle paused again, this time with the end still stuck into the fabric as she looked at me as if she wanted to see for herself what was so worthy of Henry’s adoration. “Since he believes you to be such good company, I only wanted to see for myself the reason.”

Catherine must have been beautiful ages ago. I could see the draw of her round face, though there were wrinkles now that had formed at the edges of her lips and at the corners of her eyes. I had heard time and time again how she was the most beautiful woman in the world, but that world had been when I was a babe, and times had changed. The two of us sat there, studying each other as we plotted our next moves.

“I am honored the king thinks of me in such a way,” I said. “Though I am afraid I am just as good of company as your other ladies.”

“Mistress Boleyn, in the years I have known you, I have never known you for your humility,” Catherine said, her words muddled by her accent. Her hands began motion again,

pulling the needle once again through the fabric. The heavy sleeves of her gown fell back, falling over the arms of her chair and hanging freely, the wide trumpet shapes like swollen feathers falling to the ground. Her fingers were long and withered though the knuckles were wide from swelling, and I knew of the trouble she had when removing her rings.

“Are you wed, Mistress Boleyn?”

“I still find myself without a husband, as you are most aware, your majesty.”

Another stab, this one deeper than before. I could not marry without her permission, and most certainly not without Henry’s, which I knew would not come now.

“Then you have no idea what it is like to have a husband,” she said. I could not draw my eyes from her working hands. Her nails were thin and nearly broken in some places. With her hair hidden beneath the large house-shaped monstrosity of her hood, she looked even older than I knew she was. “You must honor him, treasure him, keep him. You must serve him, give him children, sacrifice yourself for them to succeed.” Her voice was grating to my ears. My jaw tightened; my teeth clenched together with great force. Every word she said was irritating. Her accent grated every nerve I had. “You must pray that he honors you in the same ways.”

“The king holds dear a great many things.”

Mary caught my eye and gave a gentle shake of her head. My sister’s face was still swollen from the weight of the babe she had delivered. Her eyes were sunken and hollow. I had received one letter from her, in which she only expressed her want to see her son. I could not stand it. If I had a child, there was nothing that anyone could do to take them from me. My sister had not fought, had instead surrendered her son to Henry’s whims, and that was for her to bear.



She set her sewing in her lap, the needle tucked away so that it would not cause her harm. Her hands folded in her lap, almost as in prayer or confessional. The golden cross that hung from her neck glimmered in the rays of sun that peeked in through the windows, and I considered then that this was exactly that: a confessional. Catherine perhaps intended for me to admit my wrongs and to ask for forgiveness from her. “I know my husband does not honor me, but I know that he respects me.”

I leaned forward in my seat and laid a hand atop her clasped ones. She remained still. Her back straightened at the uninvited contact. I wanted to recoil myself. Her skin was dry, and I could feel now the cracks I had observed earlier. I did not draw away. “The king is a kind and gracious man, an honorable one too. I know he has tried to give to you what you deserve for all you have done for him,” I said. I drew my hand back, desperate to be rid of the sandpaper feeling of her skin against my own.

As I did, her hands unfolded, and she reached to stop me. Her fingers closed against my wrist this time, holding me still, sure I could do nothing but listen to her. The reading that had been going on behind Catherine quieted for a moment as all the ladies stilled. The sewing I knew was just idle work lay forgotten in their laps as they observed the two of us, all except for Mary, who worked just as diligently as ever to complete the task she had been assigned.

“My husband is indeed an honorable man, but he is just that, a man,” Catherine said before she released my hand. I drew away from her sharply, and I could see the beginnings of an amused smile at my reaction to her. The queen lifted her sewing once more, her battered hands taking up the needle again. She pulled up on the thread, so hard it looked like it would snap. It was a deep blue, I realized, the king’s favorite color. I could make out the shirt’s collar in the heap of fabric she had in her lap, “They are fickle things, especially kings. They find out so early

that they are chosen by God that they forget the rules he has set before us so that we may walk in his path. What you or I may hold as sacred hold no meaning for them, Mistress Boleyn.” Her hand drove downward, plunging the needle into the fabric before pulling it back out. “One thing that is truly sacred in this world: marriage, when two people become one before the eyes of God. You may be of interest to my husband, Mistress Boleyn, but you are only that, interesting. The vows I took with my husband are sacred as is our life together and it does not involve you.”

I did not fear her nor the power that she still held. Not when I had the upper hand. “My husband is my husband. For the sake of his soul and the daughter we share, I ask you to reject his advances. We need no more scandal wrought upon us because of my husband’s misdeeds.”

“What Henry chooses and who he chooses is not for me to decide,” I said.

Her action was quick. With a subtle move, nothing more than a flick of her wrist, she drove her needle upward, the point of it pricking the end of my thumb. I drew a handkerchief from my bodice and pressed the linen against the wound, holding it there for a moment before drawing it away. There was no mark. There was no evidence of the wound the queen had inflicted besides the slight smear of blood on my handkerchief and the throbbing of my thumb. I stood and pulled my hand quite forcefully from her grip.

“There is no one to choose between, Mistress Boleyn.”

The girls behind her tried not to take notice of such a quick and retaliatory action by their queen. Catherine stayed in her seat, though her eyes narrowed into a sharp glare that marred her already unpleasant face. “What your husband chooses is none of my business, and what scandal you believe I would be to blame for is...” I began as I stood over her.

“It would do you best to remember to keep your eyes away from his wandering ones. He always finds his way home,” Catharine replied as she turned her attention back to the needle and thread in her hand once more. It was the only dismissal I would receive, and I took it gladly.

### *Chapter 31*

#### *A Common Ailment*

*June 1528*

My body felt like it was covered in ice despite the sweat that rolled off my forehead and dripped down the column of my neck before disappearing beneath the collar of my cotton chemise. Every limb felt heavy. I had been told I was improving during one of my rare moments of consciousness.

As I was roused again from my sleep by soft hands, I first assumed they belonged to my mother. That of course was wrong, and I was instead greeted by the worn face of Elizabeth. The head maid of my mother’s household, whom my siblings and I had named Betty in our youth, was the most trusted of the staff. She had been tasked with watching over us when I was a child, though I hardly remembered her then. She was always just there, a staple at Hever Castle and the time I had been able to spend there. Now it was she who acted as my nurse. Now her blurry brown eyes gazed down at me with great concern, enough that I no longer felt much improved.

“Not many sick babes in this hall since you left us, Anna.”

I began to wonder how many more of my siblings had become ill. Surely Mary was spared. She was off in her own home with her own husband. Had George then been suffering the same as I. “Who?” I asked for it was all I could manage through my cracked lips and dry throat.

“George was not nearly as sick as you. He’s already well recovered and returned to court,” my nurse said. She reached for a glass of water and helped to force some of the cool liquid down my throat. I felt refreshed despite the sheen of dry sweat that covered me from head to toe. I knew I would enjoy a bath more than anything else at that moment. I wanted to feel like myself, not the sick child I felt like then.

“The king, has he sent for me?”

Her gentle lips hardened into a firm line though her eyes remained soft at my urgent question. “No, dear, King Henry has sent no messenger to Hever Castle in some time.”

I leaned back further into my pillow to gaze up at the ceiling. I could not see her face and allow her to see the disappointment that had overtaken me. “How long have I been here?”

“Two months.”

For two months I had been away from my king and court. Those eight weeks felt now like eternity stretched out behind me. Would I ever return? Was I doomed to remain at Hever forever, trapped within its walls? Had he forgotten me in those two months? I had made sure I made a good impression, the right impression, even. Now, all that work seemed to be for naught. Perhaps he had moved on. There were plenty of other little birds he could occupy his time with ones that were free to flit about at his every call instead of being trapped behind the wire walls of a cage with broken wings. I had seen how Henry dealt with flightless, purposeless birds; he wrung their skinny necks.

“Thank you, Betty,” I said dismissively.

She gave me a small smile and squeezed my hand before she rose from the chair that had been placed at my bedside. Her round body sunk into a curtsy, one as low as her tired back would allow her, before she left me at peace.

I continued to stare up at the ceiling and allowed the full weight of my failure to overcome me.

### *Chapter 32*

#### *No Mistress*

*July 1528*

The sun had just begun to creep in through the curtains when Betty returned, a bundle of green silk cradled in her arms. I had been awake for hours, laying still and staring up at the ceiling, so her arrival did not cause the start she had surely been expecting. I sat up and stretched my arms over my head. She scurried about the room, depositing the pale green mass into the chair by the window before she threw open the curtains.

“You have a visitor, Miss Anne.”

“Me?” I muttered as I rose slowly. I had not seen anyone but the staff since I’d been sent from court. Perhaps those still surrounding the king believed I was dead. Some of them might have hoped so. I was suddenly struck with the thought that the king might also believe I was dead. That might have been why I had yet to hear from him in all these months. “Who would come all this way to see me?”

“His majesty just arrived,” Betty answered as she lifted the dress from the chair and laid it out on the empty bed. She tried to smooth some of the wrinkles with her boney fingers before she turned to look at me. “He is here for you.”

“Then we should not keep him waiting. He is not patient,” I said. I met her gaze through the glass of the dressing table mirror before I focused on my reflection. I was still dressed in my chemise, the white fabric clinging to my still pallid skin. I had yet to confront the toll of my affliction. The normal glow of my olive skin was gone, replaced by a dullness that reminded me of my sister’s complexion. I wiped the veil of sweat from my skin with a damp cloth. Betty picked up a handful of pins from the tabletop before she began her work. She twisted the front pieces of my hair back from my face and pinned them in place before she began work on the rest of my hair. “Leave it down.”

Her hand drew away from my hair and she set the remaining pins back down. “Your hood -”

“Hoods are for proper ladies. I am an ill one, perhaps that will garner his sympathy more than being proper.”

“You were not raised to be a wanton girl.”

“You did not raise me,” I said as I stood. I had to use the tabletop as leverage to push myself from the chair. My limbs felt stiff and heavy from how little I had used them.

I could see how my words had affected her as I turned to face her. She simply nodded before she went to collect my stays, which she helped me into and laced, though not as tightly as usual or as I would have liked. As she collected my gown from the bed, I pulled the laces tighter,

sinching in my waist and pushing my breasts up just a bit more. I stepped into the gown and pulled it up over my figure, sliding my arms through the sleeves before Betty tightened the laces at the back. The fabric was a color made for spring, with ties up the sleeves that allowed the white of my chemise to show through in small sections.

“You may go now, Betty.” The older woman looked me over and gave me a small nod of approval before she left, closing the heavy door behind her.

I knew I would need to apologize to her, but that would come with time. I rushed over to the dressing table, sorting through the box of jewels to find the pieces I needed. I fastened a strand of pearls around my neck and another a bit higher around my throat, then forced a pair of earrings through the holes in my ears. I opened the drawer and lifted out the tiny box I had stowed the king's gift into. I peeled back the lid to find the golden locket still tucked inside just how I had left it among its silk bedding. The wicked spell lay asleep, waiting for its purpose to be filled, and what better time than now to release it into the world. I kept the box clutched in my hand as I made my way down the stairs, the other supported me on the rail.

I could hear his booming voice before I could see his face. His face came into view as I stopped just inside the study door. Henry was seated at my father's desk, with my father seated on the opposite side. Both rose to meet me as I entered. I gave Henry a curtsy as he approached and took my hand. I leaned into him for a bit more support, my legs still weak from all the time I had spent in bed. His eyes observed me. He took in my state, the weakness that had overtaken me too obvious. I straightened my back a bit more but had yet to meet his eyes.

“You look lovely,” he said with a small smile, his finger catching my chin so he could observe further. My cheeks had sunken. My cheekbones stuck out at odd angles; my collarbone looked the same.

“Thank you, sir, but I cannot accept your sweet words,” I said as I met his eyes. “I know the state I am in.”

“That illness could have left you dead, but you pushed through. No matter how you think you look, you look lovely to me.”

I could not help but smile at his words as I stepped away from him. He had come to me. He overlooked the pallor of my skin and the dullness that the sickness had left me with and still thought me lovely. I knew he was lying to draw me in, but I could not help the pleasure his words brought me. Even in such a state, he could still call me beautiful. If he was lying, then I chose to disregard it.

“Thank you, my lord,” I said. I have another small curtsy, though I stumbled a bit as I rose. Henry reached forward and caught my arm to pull me to my feet. I leaned into him on legs that felt as if they couldn’t support my weight. The box in my hand almost slid from my grasp. I tightened my grip so that it did not hit the floor between us. “My apologies.”

His arm snaked around my waist to pull me tighter against his side, “Perhaps some air will do you well, Mistress Boleyn.”

“An excellent idea, your majesty,” said my father. He stood with his hands folded behind his back, a silent observer of the interactions between us. “Anne loved the gardens as a child. Perhaps you will find them just as entertaining.” He moved toward the door, opening it for the two of us as we stepped into the hall and out toward the back gardens.



Some of my father's couriers stepped out to follow us but the king lifted his hand and they stopped in their tracks. "We will need no supervision."

I followed him out, still leaning into his side as the two of us stepped into the gardens. It was the first time I had been able to leave the halls of Hever in nearly four months. The stone walls I had thought would become my crypt, but as I stepped into the sun, those despondent feelings disappeared. I was alive, and even better, I was spending time with the most powerful man in the country, one of the most powerful men alive even. The two of us walked down the stone path my mother had made.

"I was asking about you the entire time we were traveling," he said as we walked. "I sent my physician."

"I know, he was able to help my brother too. We are both grateful," I responded. I stepped away from him, but his hand caught my waist to keep me from departing. His fingers closed around my hip. I could feel his grip despite the skirts of my dress. "Very grateful, your Majesty."

"I sent you gifts as well. They all returned with my messenger."

"I could not accept them." I managed to slip from under his hand and took a seat on the edge of the fountain that sat at the center of the garden. "They are gifts meant for your wife or your mistress and I serve as neither."

"You could."

"I won't."

His eyes met mine. His jaw was clenched, and he grit his teeth. I had never seen his anger pointed at me. He shouted at others often and made scenes at court, but this was different. “Why not?”

I wanted to cower under his gaze. I bit my lip to hold in an apology. I had to be firm on this. He had had my sister, ruined her despite his gift of a child, and then sent her away. He had never loved her, but he would love me. “Allow me to give you a gift instead.”

“Answer my question, Mistress Boleyn.”

“Then allow me to speak freely.”

He observed me, taking in my seated position and the way I folded my hands in my lap. I was still the submissive subject. “Speak.”

“I know what you are,” I said. I met his gaze finally, but his eyes weren’t full of the anger I expected; they were sad and confused. “You are a scoundrel. You take women and you use them for your gain and when they bore you, you give them assurances and you send them off. I will not be cast off. I will either be treated as your wife, or I will not be treated at all.”

“You know I can’t make those promises.”

“Then I won’t take any of them. I have laid out my terms. I will not be trod upon.”

He folded his hands behind his back and stepped away from me. His back was straight and rigid, his fingers tangled together. “Then I will keep Wolsey in Rome. He will be successful and when he returns, and all that business is done, I will have you.”

I felt my throat dry. I felt ill again, my forehead suddenly damp. He would do that all for me, without my asking. He would do it because he wanted me. No one had ever wanted me so

badly without aid. They wanted Mary or George. His affection was surely lust, but it was affection and want, and suddenly I wanted that with him. "I have a gift for you."

He laughed as he turned to look at me. His body was much more relaxed as he approached though his hands were still clasped behind his back. He sat down next to me on the edge of the fountain, his broad frame hardly able to fit on the ledge. "I am not allowed to give you gifts yet you treat me with my own."

"You are my king. You deserve my gifts," I said as I handed him the small box I had been holding to as if it were my life. "For you, your majesty."

He leaned forward and kissed my forehead before he took the box from my hand and removed the lid. The garden was at peace around us besides the occasional chatter of birds out in the trees beyond the castle grounds. He held the golden chain between his fingers as he lifted the locket up and out of the box. I could not take my eyes off it, and neither could he. The thing was suspended in the air, held only by his fingers.

"It's lovely."

"Open it," I said. I had to force excitement into my voice. This was cause for my death if things got out of hand. I would need to make sure it was all in control.

He set the box down before he pried open the locket and looked at the tiny portrait I had tucked inside. The most amused smile I had seen him make took form on his features. It was sweet and gentle, and he looked pleased. "Now I will have you everywhere with me." He took my hand, running his hand over the back of it before he lifted it and placed a kiss on my knuckles. His lips were soft, and he let them linger on my skin before he lifted his eyes again to meet mine.

The smile I gave this time was sincere. I felt the heavy chain as he dropped the locket into my hand before he took my arm and pushed me to stand. Even with his body angled so precariously on the ledge, even as I stood over him, I understood the draw of his authority. In his most simple of attire, he may as well have been wrapped in gold. His figure was still broad and imposing, even in such a passive and relaxed way. I undid the clasp and leaned forward, guiding the chain around his neck. I could see the muscles just beneath the skin, and I imagined the rest of his figure was much the same. I carefully clasped the chain around his neck, leaving the locket to land at the center of his chest. As I leaned away, I made sure to give a small curtsy, though my eyes met his and I could not help the sly smile that met his own amused one.

“The perfect gift from my most beloved mistress,” he said.

I slowly rose from my curtsy. In such close proximity, I could see the varying hues of his eyes. They were not muddy brown like my own, but were instead a soft blue, though the tint of green in them reminded me of pond water. I could have just as easily leaned in, to press my lips to his in a kiss I knew he was so patiently waiting for. His words, though, still hung between us.

“I will be no mistress, my lord.”