

Prologue

ANNE, MAY 1536

Her hair was cut short for the first time in her life and the chill on the back of her neck was unfamiliar. It would be a warm spring day, but the hour was still early and the sun had not yet had a chance to do its work. She could feel the cool air moving around her, not strong enough yet to be a breeze; more like a breath.

She had not many breaths left.

She stifled the impulse to put her hand up to her neck and stilled the accompanying bubbles of panic that had risen in her stomach. She must not think about her neck if she was to maintain her composure.

To distract herself she turned towards the people gathered below the scaffold to watch her die. There was a multitude. They were silent and their faces solemn. Then she heard a woman call out from the back of the throng. She spoke with the harsh accent of the common people of London and her shrill voice carried across Tower Green.

‘Tis a pity good Queen Katharine did not live long enough to see your head upon the block!’

Queen Anne remained motionless, but the woman’s words hit home. She had thought the death of her great rival, Katharine of Aragon, just a few weeks before, only a good thing, cementing her own legitimacy as queen. Even in her extremity, she had to repress a wry smile at the thought of her own foolishness and at the irony of one queen’s death following so hastily upon the other.

A ripple of murmurs ran through the crowd in response to the woman’s insult, whether in approval or disapproval she did not know, although she could guess. Nevertheless she looked down from the scaffold at the people closest to her. She recognised some of the upturned faces: men and women she had once known well and had thought of as friends, but she did not see any kindness in their eyes. She did not see kindness in any of the thousand pairs of eyes that watched her so intently and for that she was grateful. Their hatred helped. It made her feel defiant. She could not have borne any sign of pity.

She had rehearsed this moment ever since they told her the timing of her execution. She had gone over and over it in her mind, imagining what she would see, forcing herself to feel what she would feel so that it might not undo her when she was compelled to face the reality. Composing her final words had helped steady

her. She knew what she must do in her last act on earth. She must do everything she could to safeguard the fate of her little daughter.

Elizabeth would be standing up in her cot at just this moment, Anne thought, arms outstretched to her nursemaid. The vivid image brought tears to her eyes. She had to swallow hard to hold them at bay.

‘Time to get up! Time to get up!’

Anne remembered the child’s imperious demands and impatience. How eager the little girl was to get up and get out into the world. How the child’s tone had made them all – queen, ladies and attendants – laugh with pride and delight at her forwardness. Elizabeth did not speak like a baby, although she was not yet three. Her words were clearly articulated and her piping voice already carried a note of command. She spoke in complete sentences with all the words in the right order. Anne’s heart swelled with pride at the thought of her child. Henry did not realise the jewel he had in this daughter of theirs. Anne must do all that she could to send her safely into the future.

She knew her words must speak no insurrection, no excuses, no defiance. She must not be seen to criticise the justice of her sentence. She would not admit guilt, nor would she claim innocence. Her words must be calm, conciliatory, humble and loving. They would be written down, they would be reported and they would be remembered. She must die quietly and unprotesting

so that her infant daughter might live and prosper and all Anne's hopes and ambitions not be in vain.

'Elizabeth.' She spoke her daughter's name so quietly that none could have heard it but God. The people watching saw her lips move and assumed she was praying. They were right.

'My Lord Constable, may I speak to the people assembled here?' She was relieved that her voice sounded so steady. It raised her spirits a little. She turned back to the crowd below her. They had surged forward in anticipation, the better to hear what she had to say.

'Good Christian people, I am come hither to die, for according to law ...'

It was good that all through the long and sleepless night she had rehearsed the words she would say. She knew them so well they flowed unbidden from her lips, leaving her mind free to take in everything about her. The air she breathed was sweet, the scent of the flowers blooming in the Tower gardens causing her a pang of regret. The crowd was so silent as they strained to hear her words that she could hear the distant roar of the lions and tigers from the Tower menagerie as they anticipated their next feed.

'... for a gentler nor a more merciful prince was there never and to me he was ever a good, a gentle and sovereign lord ...'

She could feel rather than see the crowd relax as

she spoke. It was clear that she would say nothing that would shock or accuse. She would go to her death mildly, causing far less trouble in her demise than she ever did in her life.

‘If any person will meddle of my cause, I require them to judge the best. And thus I take my leave of the world and of you all, and I heartily desire you all to pray for me. Oh Lord, have mercy on me! To God I commend my soul.’

She turned and scanned the stony faces of the people standing with her on the scaffold. ‘Who among you is my executioner?’

‘He will be here presently, my lady.’

But the words of the Lord Constable did not deceive her. She knew he was one of the men standing behind her.

Lady Kingston stepped forward and removed Anne’s mantle. Then the condemned queen was given a linen cap which she tied over her shorn hair. This time she could not resist placing her hand protectively over her neck. The skin was cool to the touch and she could feel little goosebumps pimpling her flesh. Whether from the unaccustomed exposure or from fear, she could not tell.

Now a French-accented voice in her ear. ‘Will you forgive me, Your Grace?’

‘Willingly, good master executioner.’

But she did not turn around. To see him would undo her.

‘Kneel and pray, my lady.’

‘Will you give me a little more time, good sir, so I may make my peace with my God?’

‘I will.’

As she prayed, they put a blindfold across her eyes and the bubbles of panic in her belly fizzed and burst, forcing open her eyes against the dark, so that her eyelashes brushed the linen that shut out all sight of the world. Her ears strained to hear the approach of the executioner, but what she heard was the thump of her own heart and the pant of her now frantic breath.

The executioner had removed his shoes so he would make no sound as he approached. But she heard the collective intake of breath by the assembled multitude as he raised the blade and she knew.

One

ELIZABETH, MARCH 1603

‘You must go to your bed, Your Majesty. The doctors insist upon it.’

Robert Cecil looms over me in the dark. He startles me. I have been thinking about my mother’s death. Imagining myself in her skin, in her brain and her heart. I have tried to feel what she must have felt, see what she must have seen. I know, better perhaps than anyone who was actually there, every action she took, every gesture she made, every word she spoke, minute by minute. When I was young, I insisted that those who were present tell me every detail, sparing me nothing, until my mother’s last moments were imprinted on my brain. Yet still I was unsatisfied. Try as I might, I could not live her death – only she could do that. Anyway, it is my own last moments that press close upon me now.

I stir myself on my cushions and rub at my eyes, trying to bring them back into focus. I clear my painful

throat and peer up at the man who stands over me. I remain silent until I am once again in possession of myself. Only then do I speak.

‘Little man, little man, the word “must” is not to be used to princes. If your father had lived you durst not have said as much.’

I have been reclining on a pile of cushions all this afternoon and into the night. I have been unwell for days with aches and pains and an agonisingly sore throat. I have struggled on with my duties regardless, doing everything while standing, sitting only occasionally in a chair. I could not shake the fear that the minute I gave in to my illness I was giving in to death. The longer I could stand, the longer I held the spectre at bay.

‘Your Grace! Your Grace!’

But I could not stave off the inevitable forever. As my mind drifted, my knees went from under me and I began to swoon and looked to fall. Hands clasped at me quickly, preventing me from tumbling to the floor.

‘Fetch cushions, bring as many as you can find!’

My head was spinning, but I could see my ladies scurrying about, bringing mounds of cushions from chairs and divans and piling them up about me. Once they were in place, my ladies lowered me gently to the floor.

‘Will you not retire to your bed, Your Majesty? You will be so much more comfortable there.’

Philadelphia Carey, granddaughter of my mother’s

sister, knelt beside me, her face filled with concern. I knew she meant only to do me a kindness, but a terrible dread took hold in my belly. The only bed left to me was my deathbed and I was not ready for that – not yet. There was still work for me to do. Not perhaps as a queen, but as a woman. I would not die if I could help it while that work remained undone. I flinched away from the girl and nestled deeper into the cushions.

‘No, no. I will stay here a little while and catch my breath. I will be back on my feet ere long.’

Facing death, I am more my father’s daughter than my mother’s, it seems. I turned my face away from my attendants and closed my eyes. I would rest a little and perhaps then I would be my old self again. And then I remembered that my father’s last words were of just such a false hope. When asked if there was any ‘learned man’ (by which they meant a man of God) he would speak with, he said, ‘If I had any, it would be Dr Cranmer, but I will first take a little sleep and then as I feel myself, I will advise upon the matter.’

The thought made me snap my eyes open. I am dying, but – like my father – I am not quite ready to be dead yet.

I am the last, the very last. There will be no Tudors after me. The dynasty my grandfather risked his life to establish, and my father his immortal soul, has not survived three generations.

All my friends are gone. All my peers. All those whom I loved and who grew to adulthood beside me have died. Elizabeth who was the first of her Christian name will also be the last of her surname.

But all is not lost. The Stuarts will follow me and Tudor blood runs in their veins. England and Scotland will be united without any blood being shed, royal or otherwise. Whether this new nation will be for good or ill, I do not know. That challenge is for future monarchs to struggle with. My race is run. I will have done what I can for it just by dying.

‘May I fetch a doctor, Your Grace? Perhaps they can relieve your pain.’

Robert Cecil is hovering nearby. It is a symptom of my decline that fear of me has faded. I am no longer Elizabeth the queen, mighty and dreadful. I am Elizabeth a dying woman, soon to have no more relevance than a memory.

It hurts so to swallow – yet swallow I must, before I can speak. ‘A pox on your doctors, Master Secretary! They will only torture me with their blood-letting, their cups and their leeches.’

Ah, but my voice is so hoarse! I can no longer bellow in the way that made my attendants jump and tremble in their shoes. Nevertheless, the force of my emotion makes my secretary bow and scrape and back away into the shadows. I have kept the doctors at bay for a little while longer at least.

As I fail, I lose their respect. The mantle of monarchy begins to fall from my shoulders, revealing the wrinkled and haggard flesh of an old woman, long past her prime.

I have lived too long. It may have been my great gift to my people, but it has come at a great cost to myself. There are few alive today who remember an England that was not Elizabeth's. My long reign has given my people the stability they needed and that stability has brought with it prosperity. At least I can die knowing that I have left my kingdom in much better shape than I found it.

The child turned his neck towards me. The scrofula that infected him bloomed like hideous, twisted flowers around his ear, down his neck and onto his shoulders. It took all of my will to stop myself recoiling at the sight.

'Bless you, my child,' I said as I leant forward and laid my fingers upon the horny protuberances. 'May God in his grace cure you of this evil.'

Swallowing hard, I ran my fingers gently over each of the wens as I had been shown. I smiled at the boy, who looked at me with eyes that shone with hope. I felt humbled by his belief in my ability to cure what the common people called the King's Evil. I had only been queen for a few months and it still felt strange. Unlike the boy, I could not believe that I really held the power to cure him in my touch.

The next sufferer was an old woman, her chest hideously swollen with the disease. After her, an old man, then a girl and, most shocking of all, a baby.

Dutifully, I stroked each disgusting sore, made the sign of the cross above each sufferer's head and said the words I had been taught. Earnestly, I hoped that they would be cured. Secretly, I did not believe they would. But it was not just the disfiguring disease that shocked me about the people who queued up to receive my blessing. It was the rags they wore, the bareness and filth of their feet, and how thin their bodies were. I might not be able to cure their sores, but I swore then and there that I would do what I could to return my kingdom to prosperity so that even the least of my subjects were a little better off under my reign than they had been under my sister's.

I could hear the wet coughing from consumptive chests of many of those who waited for my supposedly healing touch. I could see others who rested on crutches and hobbled forward on misshapen legs, all of them humble, patient and respectful. I felt ashamed of my rich garments and full belly.

Eventually, over the years, I grew used to the Maundy Thursday ceremony and familiarity made touching the scrofula less distasteful to me. I almost began to look forward to it, especially when my physicians assured me that most of those I touched did indeed find themselves cured.

Whether God worked through me to cure the scrofula, I do not know, but I do know that I have been a thrifty housewife. I have restored my realm to good order. I have repaired and rebuilt my little island when it was battered by storms and inclement weather. I have not allowed dust and dirt to accumulate in dark corners. My hearth is clean. The windows sparkle. Vegetables and fruits grow in abundance in my gardens and the chickens are all good layers.

Not that it was such a great task to pass on a kingdom in better shape than I found it. England was in disarray when I inherited it and not just for the poor. It was a country rent by religious strife and the instability that followed five monarchs in a little over a decade. Merely by remaining alive I was an improvement on my predecessors.

But how will history judge me when I am dead and gone? Will it be as kind to me as I am being to myself? I once said to my parliament that I would be content with an epitaph that read: 'Here lies Elizabeth who ruled from 1558 to such and such a time (1603, it would seem) and who lived and died a virgin.' Yet, now that the event I once thought was so far in the future is fast upon me, I find such a judgment is not enough. I wish to be thought well of. I hope my labours have not been in vain. Is this pride? If it be so, then it is just another sin that can be added to my long list.

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They say my father sent for a Frenchman called Jean Rombaud to come to London with a fabled sword honed from the steel of Toledo. The Frenchman's task was to separate my mother's head from her body. To send for a skilled swordsman instead of using the brute force of the axeman was a gesture of mercy – a sharp sword being more likely to deliver an instantaneous death than a blunt axe. I hope it was my father who sent for Rombaud. Sometimes I worry that it may not have been the king who felt an impulse towards mercy, but his secretary, Thomas Cromwell. They tell me Cromwell was friends with my mother until she fell from grace.

Certainly someone couldn't bear the thought of such a barbaric instrument mutilating my mother's slender neck. It must have been my father's decision, surely. He had loved the woman to distraction for almost two decades, he had rent asunder God's Christian church just to gain access to my mother's person. He must have kissed that same neck with passion and delight many times before his love turned sour. Surely it was my father who could not bear to see my mother's soft white skin hacked at by a clumsy axe. Unless Thomas Cromwell also carried a torch for her. If my father's suspicions were correct, he would simply have been one among many. Or was it just simple kindness? Is it possible for a man to feel pity for a woman without any accompanying desire? That is for men to answer, I suppose. I do not know that I have ever seen it.

My mother was not accompanied by any friends when she went to her death. The women appointed to attend her in the Tower were not from the ranks of the ladies who loved her, but rather from the ranks of those who did not. Blanche Parry saw my mother lose her life – it was from her lips that I so often begged to hear the horrible tale – but she watched from the crowd below the scaffold, not as an attendant upon it.

According to Blanche, it was Lady Kingston who cut my mother's hair. She was the wife of the Constable of the Tower, sent to spy. I hope the woman had enough pity in her to use the scissors gently and with care. They cut my hair when I was recovering from the fever of smallpox, to help save my life. They cut my mother's to facilitate the headsman and so hasten her death.

Blanche also told me how beautiful my mother's hair was and how they loved to brush it to a shine.

'Gently, Blanche. Gently!'

'Forgive me, Your Majesty. There was a knot!'

'A lover's knot, perhaps?' Only Mary Boleyn had the cheek to tease Queen Anne so, according to Blanche, and the queen tolerated such behaviour from her older sister. This time, however, she did not laugh, but instead became strangely solemn.

'Alas, no, Mary. I have not been called to the king's bedside for some time now.'

'Perhaps he has not fully recovered from his fall at the joust.'

‘Perhaps he worries that you have not recovered from ... well, from ... your recent loss.’

My mother had miscarried what might have been my brother only a few weeks before. How different both our lives might have been if that longed-for prince had been born.

‘I do not know and I have not seen him in a situation where I could ask him. He seems strangely distant, ever since his fall.’

‘All have remarked on his change of temper. Perhaps his head pains him still.’

‘Perhaps.’ And my mother sank her small chin onto her hand in a melancholy aspect.

‘Your hair is very beautiful, Your Grace.’ Blanche held up the mirror. ‘I have never seen hair shine like yours.’

‘It is your skill with the brush, Mistress Parry.’

‘Nonsense, Your Grace. I can brush my hair from now until kingdom come and it will never shine like yours.’

‘The king used to love to stroke my hair and wrap strands of it around his fingers and watch it slip through them – like spun silk, he’d say. Sometimes he’d sink both his fists into it and tug at it gently.’

‘He will do so again.’

‘I hope so, Blanche. I hope so.’

I wonder if my mother grieved over being shorn of her hair. Or if the terror of losing her head made such a loss

seem small by comparison. It is a ritual humiliation for a woman to have her hair taken from her head. Unless such drastic action is needed to cool her during a fever and so save her life – the loss of a woman’s hair is the mark of her shame. Was my mother ashamed when she went to her death? She did not say so. I know every word she spoke on her scaffold but there is one sentence of her brief oration that always brings me to tears.

‘... He was ever a good, a gentle and sovereign lord ...’

She said these words out of love for me, perhaps. I like to think her last thoughts were of what she could do to protect her little daughter, left alone as an infant in a hostile world. If she accused my father of killing her for spurious and manufactured reasons, she made me more friendless and more vulnerable. By speaking well and fondly of the king my father and the king her executioner, she gave him no excuse to look upon me any more harshly than he already did.

Of course there was a bitter irony to her words. How could a gentle and a merciful prince be about to cut off her head?

It makes me want to weep to think of the careful words she sent out into the world on my behalf with what must have been almost the very last of her breath.

They say the swordsman made a little game to distract her from what was about to come. They say that after

she had signalled she was ready, he said loudly so that she could hear him, ‘Now, where is my sword ...?’ As if he did not have it already in his hands raised above her quivering neck. He did this as a kindness, I warrant, so that she did not anticipate the sword until it had already fallen and she was beyond anticipation of any kind. (Perhaps men can feel pity for women, after all.)

I am dying slowly, by inches, and I am aware of every last moment of it. I cannot help but wonder if, when I die I will see my mother at last. I thrill at the thought of such a reunion.

‘When will you pay me?’

Say the bells of Old Bailey.’

I am a small child again, in the nursery at St James’s Palace. My nurse, Kat Champernowne (she is not yet married to John Ashley), is giggling and holding hands with Blanche Parry, their arms raised to form an arch. Other ladies stand in line, doing the same, including a woman more grandly dressed than the others, who I think must be my mother. She is laughing the hardest of all. I am stepping through the arch of their arms, chanting the rhyme with them. I am breathless with alarm and excitement.

‘When I grow rich

Say the bells of Shoreditch.

Pray when will that be?

Say the bells of Stepney.’

I have played this game before and I know what is coming. I am almost bursting with anticipation. The women build the tension, slowing down the chant.

*'I'm sure I don't know,
Says the great bell of Bow.'*

And now the rhythm changes and I begin to giggle nervously.

'Here comes the candle to light you to bed ...'

I shriek and begin to run out of the human arch but – too late – the women are moving their arms up and down fast in uneven waves and I must dodge and weave to avoid them. I laugh with delight.

'And here comes the chopper to chop off your head!'

Fragrant, velvet clad arms sweep me up from the game and hold me close, kissing the top of my head instead of chopping it off. But I do not want to be held. I want to play. I wriggle and squirm against her embrace until the woman puts me down.

'Again! Again! Let's play it again!'

'Oh, enfant bien-aimé, you have worn us all out with your playing.' And to emphasise her exhaustion, she pops herself down on the floor with a great pouff of skirts. I am not impressed. I can see by her amused expression that she is not really tired at all.

'Pooh! Get up! Get up! I want to do it again!'

I go over to the dark-haired woman with the elegant gown and grasp her long fingers in my small hand. I pull her with all my might. She plays along

so that when she suddenly rises I fall backwards onto my bottom. It does not hurt, but I do not quite know whether to cry or to laugh. The women around me burst into laughter and the force of it frightens me a little. My face must have crumpled, because the elegant lady with the French accent sweeps me into her arms again and holds me close, kissing my forehead and soothing me with soft words. ‘Do not cry, *ma petite*, do not cry. You are always safe with me. No harm can come to you.’

And then she begins to sing another song to me and my heart beats faster with delight, all frustration forgotten. It is my favourite game of all.

*‘Rock-a-bye baby on the tree-top,
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,
When the bow breaks, the cradle will fall
And ...’*

At this point the French lady flings me upside down until my head hangs down among her skirts while she holds tightly to my legs.

‘DOWN will come baby, cradle and all!’

Then she sweeps me up again and throws me into the air and I laugh and laugh and hug the lady tightly when I land safely back in her arms. It is the happiest I can remember ever being.

No matter how old we become it seems we never outgrow the need for our mother. Yet I also shrink from

the idea of seeing her again in the afterlife. I cannot help but wonder whether she will judge my actions here on earth as not worthy enough to have made up for her sacrifice and the terrible foreshortening of her life. I have felt the need to do right, to atone for her death, all of my days. I knew I had to survive and succeed to make up for what she had lost.

I do not think she went to her death accompanied by guilt or by shame. I think she knew she was innocent of all the crimes with which she was charged. I think those who watched her die knew she was too, although they would never have dared say as much. My father died consumed by guilt and shame. My stepmother Catherine Parr told me that he screamed at phantoms as he lay on his deathbed and claimed that ghosts gibbered at him from its foot. I do not doubt that one of the ghosts he saw there in his delirium was the headless spirit of my mother. Perhaps she pointed at her wound and made him look at the ghastly mess he had made with his Toledo steel.

I wonder – if her spirit did sit at the foot of his bed tormenting him – did she carry her head under her arm or had God put it back where it belonged? Will Mary of Scotland's ghost carry her head? Is it she who will greet me at the gates of heaven and cast me out, pushing me hard so I plummet downwards to suffer in the everlasting fires of hell? Or will my mother greet me and gently ask me to sit once more at her side?

How will I know which one is which? Aye, there's the rub, for I never saw Queen Mary's face in life and have no clear memory of my mother's. She died too soon for me to fix her face in my recollection and portraits are a poor substitute. And both may have no head. What if I mistake one headless phantom for another?

These are feverish imaginings. Nevertheless I look around me quickly in search of gibbering ghosts that point accusing fingers. I see nothing from an unearthly realm, just a clutch of apothecaries who dare not come closer, and behind them my ladies who pray for my immortal soul. I hope they pray hard. I think it is not possible to rule over men and not commit many sins. Yet, I was not bloodthirsty. As God is my witness I did all that I could to avoid the shedding of blood. I hated going to war and shifted and shied so skittishly when pressed to do so by my ministers that they cursed me and agreed among themselves that my equivocation was proof that women are not equipped to rule.

'Your Grace, will you take a little refreshment?'

It is Philadelphia Carey, my first cousin Henry Carey's daughter, granddaughter of my Aunt Mary Boleyn, one of the few who will dare approach me in my extremity. Her gentle entreaty is to no avail. Despite my thirst, I clamp my lips together like a child refusing its pap and shake my head. Let us hasten to the end.

Philadelphia rises up from her knees with a rustle of silken skirts and many heavy sighs. She turns to the

assembled doctors and shakes her head sadly. I close my eyes. I know what they are thinking. That I should hurry up and die.

But perhaps I am unfair. No doubt they are afraid of the changes that will come after me. I may have infuriated my ministers and attendants, but they know me well. I am the devil they know. My cousin James is the most feared ruler of all: an unknown one. I have never met him, but from his letters to me and from what my ambassadors say, he appears to be a bloodless little man – close-lipped and tight-faced. Although he is married and has been blessed with three children, there are rumours that he is fonder of boys than he is of women. Ah well, it is a common enough vice and best ignored. He, like me, like all of us, will one day have to give an account of himself to God and face a reckoning for all his abominations. The Stuarts must make their own future just as the Tudors made theirs. And the future is no longer any business of mine.