

LAURA ANDERSEN

Author of *The Boleyn King*



The
BOLEYN
DECEIT

A NOVEL

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Boleyn Deceit*

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Laura Andersen



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8 February 1547

“YOU WILL NOT tell me what I can and cannot do with my own son!”

If there was one thing to which George Boleyn was accustomed, it was his sister’s temper. Anne had never been known for her retiring personality, which was just as well or she would never have caught Henry’s eye.

And if she had not become the wife of one king and the mother of the next, George knew he would still be a minor gentleman of enormous ambition and small fortune. That meant he did not rise to Anne’s anger. “I am not telling you, the council is. The council that Henry will put in place.”

“My son is king now!”

“In name and spiritual right, yes. But he is ten years old, Anne. In practice, it is the regency council that will rule England until William is of age.”

A regency council that had pointedly excluded Anne. There had been child kings before in England, and often their mothers were central to the organization surrounding them. But Henry Tudor, for all his flaws, had always possessed superb political instincts. He had known that even after all this time, passions ran high against his wife. Anne could not be allowed anywhere near her son except in the most limited maternal capacity.

George Boleyn was another matter. Six months before his death, Henry had made him Duke of Rochford, and in his will the late king named him not only a member of the regency council, but bestowed on him the position of Lord Protector of England until William turned eighteen. Not that George had any illusions about the solidity of his position. He was just slightly less hated than his sister and he would hold power only as long as he could keep the other council members from turning on him.

“You are mother of the King of England,” he said in a softer voice, gentling Anne into listening. “William loves you and that will never change. I know that you would not jeopardize his position for misplaced pride. You would not risk the Catholics combining against him.”

“They would not dare!” But her protest was halfhearted. They would dare all too well, for in their eyes Henry had left only one legitimate child—the Lady Mary, thirty years old and as stubborn and righteous as her mother before her. Henry’s son or not, religion made William’s position as a boy king precarious.

George took his sister’s hands. “Look around you, Anne. Look at where we are standing.”

Grudgingly, she ran her eyes around the high-ceilinged privy chamber in the heart of Windsor Castle’s Upper Ward, reconstructed by Edward III for himself and his queen, Philippa of Hainault. In the midst of winter, the queen’s apartments were a haven of warmth with blazing fires, walls softened by exquisite tapestries, the richness of polished wood, and the sheen of silver and gold décor.

“We have won, Anne,” George continued with persuasive conviction. “We have broken the

chains of Catholic tyranny and opened the way to a new world. William is the promise of a world we hoped and dreamed. I will not let him fail.”

As well as a formidable temper, Anne possessed a formidable mind, and she knew he was right. That didn't stop her from saying caustically, “And yet you will allow Norfolk a seat on the council despite his attainder. If Henry had lived just one day longer, the Duke of Norfolk would be *dead*.”

“But Henry didn't live one day longer. And to further punish the duke now would only enrage the Catholics. Don't worry about him—I prefer my enemies close enough to control. Besides, Norfolk is William's great-uncle. Pride will stay his hand for now.”

Anne shook herself free of George. Fiercely, she retorted, “You had better be right. And you had better be my voice on that council. William is my son, no one else's. Don't you forget it.”

“I won't.”

But even as George kissed his sister on the forehead, he thought, But if William is to be what we want, the world will need to think of him only as Henry's son. It is a king I am creating now, whatever the cost.



Greenwich Palace
21 December 1554

I have but a few minutes before Carrie must dress me for tonight's festivities. Christmas is nearly here, but tonight's celebration is rather more pagan. There is to be an eclipse of the moon, and coming as it does on the winter solstice when darkness claims its longest reign, even the most devout are unsettled.

So why not dance and drink and throw our merriment into the dark as a challenge?

Also, there is a visitor at court. His name is John Dee and he is reputed one of the finest minds of the age. He has come to court in the Duke of Northumberland's company, and William has commanded him to give a private reading of our stars. Only the four of us—for it would not do to let our secrets, past or future, slip into wider circulation.

Despite the cold, every courtyard at Greenwich was filled and more. No one wanted to miss the rare and possibly apocalyptic sight of the moon vanishing into blackness before their eyes. Minuette had barely room to shiver beneath her fur-lined cloak, so closely were people packed on this terrace overlooking the Thames.

She had managed to keep away from the royal party; below her she saw moonlight glinting off Elizabeth's red-gold hair. William stood near his sister, surrounded as always by men and women. While everyone else's eyes turned to the heavens, Minuette's sought a familiar figure in the flickering torchlight. She rather hoped she did not find Dominic standing near William.

A whisper ran collectively through the crowd, transmitting itself more to Minuette's body than her ear. She looked up: overhead, the edge of the moon's circle was eaten away. Despite herself, she felt her pulse quicken and wondered what terrible things this might portend.

More terrible than a star's violent fall? The voice in her head was Dominic's, an echo of his impatient skepticism.

Minuette fingered the pendant encircling her neck, tracing the shape of the filigreed star and smiled. This eclipse is no portent of doom, she assured herself, but a sign of great wonder. And that I can believe.

She watched the blackness bite away at the moon until it was half covered and still moving relentlessly onward. There were murmurs around her, some nervous laughter.

A hand came from behind, anchoring her waist with a solidness she could feel even through the layers of fur and velvet and linen. And then, after much too long, a second hand followed until she was encircled. Minuette made herself keep her eyes open, made herself stand straight and not lean back into the comforting weight behind her. Or perhaps comforting was not the right word—for her heart quickened and her breath skipped.

Although she could count on two hands the times Dominic had touched her since the night of her betrothal, her body knew him instantly, as though it had been waiting for this part of her all her life.

Only in the dark did he dare to touch her, for only in the dark could they remain unseen. No one must know, not yet. Not a single whisper must cross the court while William (openly betrothed to the French king's daughter) threw himself in secret at Minuette's feet, offering her his hand, his throne, and his country to her. It would take time for the king's infatuation to die. And, until it did, no one must suspect either William's passion or Dominic's love.

So Minuette laughed and played and worked and flirted as though everything were normal—as though William had not lost his mind and thought himself in love with her—as though her own heart was not fluttering madly inside a cage, wanting only to wing itself to Dominic's arms—as though she had no secrets and everything was as it had been before. She saw Dominic every day and behaved toward him the same as always: playful and young and oh-so-slightly resentful of his lectures.

And then, like tonight, he would touch her, and she thought she might weep with wanting to turn into him and cling.

Instead, she kept her eyes open and directed at the sky as the moon's last sliver gave up its fight and slid into nothing.

Gasps went up from the crowd, and in that covering moment, Minuette felt Dominic's mouth alight softly just below her left ear and linger. She did close her eyes then, and swayed back slightly as his arms tightened around her waist and they both forgot where they were and who, and in a moment she would turn and their lips would meet and she might die if she waited any longer—

A great cheer exploded around and below them, and Minuette's eyes flew open to see the moon pulling itself away from the darkness. By the tightness of Dominic's grip on her waist she knew his frustration. But he was—always had been—the disciplined one.

Within seconds she was standing alone once more, only warm cheeks and quick breathing to betray what no one had seen.

What no one must ever see.

Greenwich Palace had always been a dwelling of pleasure and luxury, of laughter and flirtation, of light and merriment. It was situated on the Thames five miles east of London, close enough to the city for easy access yet far enough to be well out of the crowds and squalor and pestilence. The last two King Henrys had expanded the complex, Elizabeth's grandfather facing it in red brick and her father adding a banqueting hall and enormous tiltyard. Her father had been born here, as had Elizabeth herself. A beautiful palace for a beautiful court.

On this longest night of the year, the palace blazed with candlelight and what heat the fire and braziers failed to provide was made up for by the great press of bodies. Men and women dressed in their finest, drinking and dancing and circling around their king as though he were the center of their world.

But what happens to that world, Elizabeth wondered, when the center fails to hold?

Ignoring the chatter of voices directed at her, she watched her younger brother, worried and angry with herself for worrying. When William had returned from France last month with a treaty and a betrothal, he'd poured out to his sister his ardent love for Minuette along with his plans to wed her, and ever since Elizabeth had carried a thorn of anxiety that made itself felt at the most inconvenient times. It's not as though he's being indiscreet, she thought.

herself firmly. He's behaving precisely as a young king of eighteen should behave. Dressed in crimson and gold, William flirted with every female in sight (and even a man or two), he drank (but not so heavily as to lose control of his tongue), and he carried on several layers of conversation with the French ambassador at once.

And he had not been nearer to Minuette than ten feet all evening.

Elizabeth, being determinedly talked at by a persistent young cleric, swung her gaze toward where her chief lady-in-waiting held court of her own, surrounded by a gaggle of men, young and old, all clearly besotted by Minuette's honey-light hair and her graceful height and the appealing knowledge that she was an orphan in the care and keeping of the royal court. With the influence she held in her relationships to Elizabeth and William, Minuette would have drawn an equal crowd even if she had been pockmarked and fat. But the men would not then have been eyeing her with quite the same expression.

A voice, very near and very familiar, broke her distraction. "How long," Robert Dudley said conversationally as he neatly cut out the disappointed and ignored cleric, "is your brother going to continue baiting the French ambassador? William has the treaty he wanted—why make the poor man suffer?"

"Because he can," Elizabeth replied tartly. "And you do the same—only with less care. Everyone knows your father continues to grumble about peace with France. How hard it is for him to swallow, a pact with the devil Catholics."

"My father has moved on to other concerns. He's not one to fight a losing battle."

"As fine a commentary on the Dudleys as I've ever heard."

Robert raised his eyebrows and lowered his voice that half step that made Elizabeth's blood warm. "We choose our battles with care—political, religious ... personal."

His voice returned to its normal tones and he changed the subject deftly. "Are you looking forward to tonight's audience? I imagine Dr. Dee has found it difficult to read your star chart as complex as you are."

She gave him a withering look. "I am exceedingly skeptical, seeing as this Dr. Dee comes from your father's household. No doubt you have whispered to him all the things you most want him to say of me."

"You wound my integrity," Robert said, hand on heart. But his voice was serious when he went on. "John Dee is not the sort of man to be persuaded by anything but his own intellect and the truth of what he sees in the heavens. I promise you, Elizabeth, whatever he tells you tonight will be as near as you will get to hearing God's own words. I only wish I could be there with you."

An hour later, as Elizabeth and Minuette slipped away from the festivities, she wished Robert were with her as well. She understood the need for privacy—anything that approached foretelling a royal's future was dangerous, and though William had commanded the audience, that didn't mean he wanted everyone at court to hear about it—but it was beginning to wear on her being just the four of them all the time. The "Holy Quartet" Robert called them, and not entirely in jest. And now that William took every opportunity of quartet-privacy to fawn over Minuette, Elizabeth's patience grew thinner with each day.

The two young women wound through increasingly depopulated corridors until they came to one only dimly lit by two smoking torches, its brick walls chilly and bare. There was a single guard wearing the royal badge at a discreet distance from the closed door behind which

waited their guest, not near enough to overhear but only to keep the curious away.

Elizabeth opened the door to the east-facing room herself, breath quickening with the rare feeling of anticipation. She was not at all certain what was going to happen in the next hour and she found the sensation unexpectedly delightful.

The room showed signs of a hasty attempt at comfort, from the deep fireplace blazing with light and warmth to the four cushioned chairs ranged along one side of a waxed wood table. Across the table was a single high-backed wooden chair; the man in it rose to his feet and bowed deeply. "Dr. Dee," Elizabeth said. "Welcome to court."

"Thank you, Your Highness." John Dee straightened and Elizabeth took him in. Although she'd known he was only a few years older than she, not even thirty yet, in person she was struck by his youth. Considering all Robert had said and all she had read from correspondents in England and abroad, it was something of a surprise that this young man had achieved such scientific and intellectual stature; then again, Dee had been a fellow at her father's Trinity College at the age of nineteen. More recently the King of France had tried to retain him for his court, but John Dee had declined and returned to England after several years on the Continent, lecturing on Euclid and studying with men like Mercator. He had come to the Northumberland household in the service of Robert's father, and all the court was anxious to meet this man who made things fly and read the stars and charted the heavens with surety.

Elizabeth sat and waved Dr. Dee back to his chair. Minuette sat next to her, uncharacteristically silent. She had been less than enthusiastic about this idea, which surprised Elizabeth. Usually Minuette was the first to embrace the new and entertaining.

Upon examination, John Dee looked like many a scholar or clerk, with his neatly pointed beard and unostentatious clothing. His eyes were deep and thoughtful and steady and he met her gaze without flinching. She liked those who were not cringingly cowed by her—but he would not let him take too many liberties.

"Dr. Dee," she said, looking significantly at the leather portfolio that lay between them on the table, "you are aware that it is treason to tell a king's future."

An irrelevant point. It was William who had commanded this private audience, William who had run with the idea of seeing what lay in his stars. Her brother was afraid of nothing, certainly not his future. But casting charts was legally forbidden for royalty, as it might be used as a pretext for rebellion.

Dr. Dee was no fool to fall into such an easy trap. "I do not foretell the future, Your Highness. I interpret the heavens, which is to say, I translate a very little of what God himself has laid in store. And what could God have in store for our good king but glory?"

Would he lie? Elizabeth wondered. She didn't think he was an open fraud—even Northumberland would fall for that, Robert Dudley certainly wouldn't. But it took subtlety to tell a king what he did not wish to hear without making him angry. How much would Dee avoid saying? Or was William truly charmed, with a lifetime of good fortune inscribed indelibly in the heavens?

The door was shoved wide and William strode in, a little the better for good cheer, followed by Dominic dressed in all black and looking more than ever like a shadow ready to wrest the monarch from danger at any moment.

William went straight to Minuette. Bending low over her chair, he kissed her hand in a lingering and proprietary fashion. Just before it would become uncomfortable for the rest of

them, he released her and turned to the visitor.

“Dee!” he said. “Welcome to court. We are always glad to reward those who are useful to us.”

No one could have missed the subtext, thought Elizabeth. *Tell me what I want to hear, and you'll be rewarded.*

Minuette had brightened with the men's entrance. “Isn't this thrilling, to discover what our futures hold in store?” She smiled at William (who laughed), then at Dominic (who did not). “Who is to be first?” she asked.

William dropped into the chair next to hers. “You, sweetling, if you wish. What better way to begin, then, with the stars of the brightest woman at court?”

Elizabeth caught the look that John Dee shot at William before dropping his eyes discreetly. Damn, she thought. He may be young, but he is no fool. And that's all we need—someone leaking word of how Will behaves with Minuette in private.

She looked at the one person whom she knew was as concerned with secrecy as she was. Though Dominic had never spoken to her of William's romantic agenda, he radiated disapproval. Now Dominic fixed William with his eyes as though sorely tempted to tell him to behave himself.

As though that had ever succeeded.

Dee cleared his throat and opened the folio. On the top page Elizabeth saw a large circle divided into twelve sections, some of them blank while others contained mathematical and astrological symbols. She knew that each chart would be different, based on the hour and place of their individual births. Despite her wariness, her interest flared as John Dee focused on Minuette. There was something new in his eyes, something that made Elizabeth sharpen her attention and think: This is a man who knows things.

“Mistress Wyatt,” he addressed Minuette, and even his voice had a new authority to it. “Our king is right in naming you a bright star. Your birth was a gift—to the king whose honor it shared and to those here who love you. You were born to be loved.”

Elizabeth, listening hard for every meaning, felt a twist of annoyance at that. To be loved was far too passive. She herself would prefer to *do* the loving and retain the control. But not everyone was like her—and certainly Minuette could not complain at being loved by a king.

“There has been peril in your life,” Dee continued, “and doubt. Do not be too eager to escape either—peril is often the price for doing what is right, and doubt is good, as it makes us search our own motives—”

William interrupted. “Peril, doubt—I dislike this way of speaking to the lady. As the brightest star she is, there must also be joy.”

For one moment, Dee met William's gaze as an equal, assessing and perhaps understanding more than he should. Then he flickered down a notch and returned to Minuette. “Yes, mistress,” he said gravely. “There will be an abundance of joy, for such is your nature. There will be marriage, passionate and deep. Though peril and doubt walk hand in hand with such joy, you will count the price well paid for what you gain.”

That pleased William more, for he took Minuette's hand, raised it to his lips, then continued to clasp it as she said, a little shakily, “Thank you, Dr. Dee. You quite take my breath away.”

Elizabeth would have bet everything she owned that Dee was not telling all. This was

vagueness, but so well finessed that he might not be accused of foretelling an unpropitious future. Peril and doubt? If Minuette were to be William's wife, there would be plenty of both. And even a marriage "passionate and deep" could be a thing of disaster in the end.

"Elizabeth," William ordered Dee. "My sister must be next."

She waited for Dee to search out her page in his folio—though he had not referred to Minuette's at all, as if he had memorized their fates—but surprisingly, he disagreed. "If please Your Majesty, I had thought to address you next. From the youngest to the oldest—there is symmetry in such a reading."

William had been drinking just enough that Elizabeth wasn't sure if he would snarl in anger or give way graciously. After hesitating, he gave way. "Who am I to gainsay the stars? Another subtext: *I'll let you take me in turn, but it had better be worth my while.*

Dee gave a flick of a smile as he turned over Minuette's star chart to reveal the one beneath it. "As you say. Despite the fact that you and Mistress Wyatt were born nearly at the same hour and in the same place, the stars reflect the differences between you. You know naturally, that the comet that marked your birth was a portent of great power. The heavens marked you at birth, Your Majesty, and every moment of your life has been lit with the flame of that comet."

"Flame can be grand or destructive," William replied, not as lightly as it appeared. "Which am I?"

"A grand king in a time of destruction. The powers of Satan oppose you—"

"Wretched Catholics," William muttered.

"—and Europe grows uneasy at England's rise. There is much uncertainty on your part, Your Majesty. But a burning star can blaze the way to a new world—or it can flame out and fall into darkness."

The last words rang ominously into the silent room. Elizabeth's throat tightened. Had Dee just accused her brother of possibly choosing darkness?

William waved it away. "Of course I choose the new world. What of more ... personal fates?"

Was it Elizabeth's imagination that Dee held the image of William and Minuette's clasped hands in his mind as he answered? "The personal and the public march together for a king. Trouble there will be, and opposition, but you will always keep your own ends in mind. You will never lose sight of what you most desire."

William gave his catlike smile as he leaned back in his chair. "That is a future I can embrace."

But you need hardly look to the stars to know that much of William, Elizabeth thought—any king, for that matter. Their father had never lost sight of what he desired, and had nearly given his kingdom for it.

Feeling more nervous than she'd expected, Elizabeth met Dee's attention next. But his gaze was kind, almost ... sorrowful?

"Your Highness," he began, and this time he did look down at the new chart he'd turned to as though wondering where and how to begin, "your stars were the most difficult to interpret. They are changeable, one might almost say willful."

"Right stars, then," William said with good humour.

Elizabeth hardly heard him, for her eyes were riveted to Dee's. That cryptic sense she'd had

earlier intensified. For a moment she felt that she was seeing the future herself. He important to me, she realized, or will be. For a long time to come.

As though acknowledging her unspoken thoughts, Dee nodded. “Your future is veiled even to yourself, Your Highness, for the clearest eyes cannot see straight into the sun. You love deeply and your loyalty to your single love will be everlasting.”

Did he mean Robert? *Everlasting loyalty* ... but that could mean anything from eventual marriage to a lifetime of unfulfilled love.

“You will command men and guide nations,” Dee continued, and in that moment he crossed the line of discretion he had been walking so carefully before.

Suddenly alert (though probably he had been all along), Dominic laid a hand on William’s shoulder. “Beware, Doctor. Your king guides this nation.”

“And as such, he has already given Her Highness her first command, when he named her regent earlier this year. And before another year passes,” Dee returned his gaze to Elizabeth. “you will be your brother’s voice in a foreign land.”

That did speak of marriage—one out of England. Elizabeth blinked, furious at herself for disappointment. It was hardly news. This wasn’t prophecy; this was merely stating the obvious.

But John Dee continued to stare at her and Elizabeth had a queer double feeling that she was seeing him here, now, and also seeing him some years in the future, with white hair and a pointed beard. He was going to tell her how to save England, he was about to tell her what she need do for her people ...

The moment snapped and Dee cleared his throat as he turned his full attention to Dominic. He took Dominic’s measure, the only one standing, protective behind William, with one hand still on his friend’s shoulder. “The elder brother,” Dee said thoughtfully. “The first, who would be last.”

Dominic dropped his hand and said stonily, “I have no need for a star-teller. I choose my own future.”

“But you do not choose that of others—and as long as your life entwines with those you love, you are not entirely free. You are the eldest, but you have the most to learn. Lessons of honour and loyalty and, yes, of choice. Not everything in this world is as it seems. You must learn to see gray, where before you have seen only black or white. There will be pain in the learning, and danger if you will not learn to bend.”

William snorted. “There will only be pain because Dom thinks too much and makes everything more serious than it needs to be.”

“That is your calling,” Dee said to Dominic. “You are, above all, loyal, and you speak always to the king’s conscience. Who will tell him the truth if you will not?”

A pause, verging on uncomfortable, until William spoke. “Tell Dom something pleasant—how many beautiful women in his future?”

An even longer pause, then: “Only one,” Dee said tersely. “There will only ever be that one.”

Tension entered the room, on such misty feet that Elizabeth could not say where centered. William broke it with a laugh as he stood. “Well, that’s all right, then. All we need do is identify this one beautiful woman and Dom’s future is set.”

And just like that they were finished. William went so far as to clap John Dee on the

shoulder. “My thanks for an interesting diversion, Doctor. I hope you shall find our court accommodating to your intellect and talents.”

Dee bowed. “The most glittering court in Christendom, Your Majesty.”

“Ha! I’d love to see Henri’s face when he finds that the English have captured what the French could not. You are most welcome at my court, Dr. Dee, if ever you should tire of Northumberland’s household.”

Then William spoke to the rest of them. “There is still music to be had this night. Dominic, you dance with Minuette first, then no one will find it odd when I come along and steal her from you.”

“Not odd at all.” Dominic’s voice was toneless. “Dr. Dee, if you don’t mind, I will stay until you have burned those charts.”

“Of course,” Dee answered, and emptied the folio. There were only the four pages; Dr. Dee had written down his calculations, not their interpretations. Those would stay locked in his own mind. One by one he fed the pages to the flames.

“Thank you,” Dominic said. He and Minuette followed William out the door.

Elizabeth hesitated, then confronted Dr. Dee, who straightened, meeting her on that precarious equal ground that made her both nervous and approving.

“Your Highness?” He made it a question, but she would have wagered he knew what she was going to ask.

“What did you *not* say, Doctor?”

“Many things, Your Highness.”

“Why? What is so bad that it could not be told?”

“Why must it be bad? Even glorious futures do not come without cost. And as I believe I said before, this is not exact. God made the stars as he made men. Only He can read them perfectly.”

“What did you see?” Robert’s wife dead? Elizabeth married for love, as William meant to do? Civil war, as another Tudor king cast aside wisdom for desire? Elizabeth far from England for all the rest of her life as the wife of another royal? As she thought that Elizabeth’s heart pierced with pain and she knew that would be the worst future for her or any—to leave England and never return.

Dr. Dee was silent. The hiss of the flames twisted like cords around her skin, and she had a sudden sense that there were ghosts in the room, pressing into this moment as though they had been waiting. Her father and grandfather, of course, but even stronger was the sense of her grandmother: Elizabeth of York, whose Plantagenet blood had sealed Henry VII’s Tudor victory when they wed. What did that daughter and mother of kings want her namesake to know?

Unexpectedly, Dr. Dee took her right hand, letting her fingertips rest in his palm. “This is the hand of a woman, Your Highness. But it is also the hand of a ruler. The king, your father, spent much effort and pain to secure a worthy heir for England. If he had been able to see beyond your woman’s body, he would have found the heart of the heir he sought.”

He pinned her with his eyes, an urgency to his gaze as though there was more he could say but wouldn’t. Elizabeth could almost feel words forming along her skin where he touched her hand, and if she stayed here another moment she would know something she had never dreamed of ...

She snatched her hand away. “Goodnight, Dr. Dee.”



How, ROBERT DUDLEY wondered, does George Boleyn nose out these insalubriously private areas of every royal palace?

He doubted it was the women George took to bed who told him how to find dank cellars and tunneled-out storage spaces—Rochford was liberal in his sexual activities, but also discriminating. His type of woman might not always be a lady, but she would never be a common whore. And Robert could not imagine any woman except a desperate one being caught dead in this particularly foul-smelling section of Greenwich.

Strictly speaking, the walled yard in which he paced wasn't part of the palace itself. It belonged to a dilapidated stone outbuilding that held a jumble of gardening equipment, which on the night before Christmas was in little danger of being used. The stench came from the Thames, running fast and foul only yards away.

What am I doing? Robert asked himself uneasily. It was a question he'd begun to pose with distressing regularity the last six weeks. Working with Rochford had promised so much, but he was beginning to wonder if it was worth it. It wasn't so much the Duke of Norfolk's death in disgrace that bothered him, nor even the continued imprisonment of his grandson, the Earl of Surrey, for an almost wholly imaginary crime. Robert didn't like the Howards and had no regrets about helping the proud Catholic family along their way to destruction.

What troubled him were particular faces and the memories attached to them: Elizabeth's earnest faith when she'd asked him to go after Minuette for her friend's safety; Dominic's stubborn lies about Giles Howard's death—also done in the interest of protecting Minuette. Her face troubled him as well, because he felt guilty for using her and he couldn't pin her down, all of which was eminently frustrating.

But beneath the frustration was the fact that he had been lying to Elizabeth and her friends for months. All right, be honest, it was more like years. It had begun in the late autumn of 1552, when Rochford suggested Alyce de Clare as a likely instrument in their plans. Alyce had been a lady-in-waiting to Queen Anne and was thus ideally placed to report gossip and pass on carefully calculated rumours of Catholic conspiracy. She was also ambitious, which made her susceptible to flattery and promises. Robert had latched on to Alyce enthusiastically when he'd troubled to study her a little closer. Though not really beautiful, Alyce had possessed an excellent figure and a streak of something in her nature—Wildness? Calculation? Animal cunning?—that had readily appealed to him. More than once in the months of flirting and intimacy that followed, he'd guessed that Rochford knew firsthand of Alyce's physical appeal, but he had never asked.

"Contemplating your sins, Lord Robert?"

Not only could the Lord Chancellor move almost silently, it also seemed he could read minds. His voice made Robert twitch in annoyance and surprise.

"Contemplating how many of them I can lay at your feet, my lord," he rejoined smoothly.

"Not a one," Rochford answered with equal smoothness. "A man's sins are his own."

“And you’ve made sure nothing I’ve done can be directly traced to you.”

“Of course.”

Robert sighed. “What untraceable task am I to be given next?”

“One very much to your taste and talents: I want you to attend Elizabeth assiduously this winter. Make yourself indispensable, so that my niece does not have a need that you have not anticipated. I want you in her presence chamber and her privy chamber. I want to know what else is there, and what they discuss when they are.”

“I will not spy on Elizabeth.” Robert said it flatly. “Not for anything.”

“I think that point is debatable, but it is also irrelevant. It is not Elizabeth I want you watching—it is Mistress Wyatt.”

“Minuette? Whatever for?” But Robert was afraid he very much knew what for.

“I told you she bears watching. My instincts are never wrong. It is for you to tell me what the girl makes me uneasy.”

Because she killed Giles Howard, Robert thought. But even if Rochford knew that, he didn’t think the Lord Chancellor would care. Giles Howard had been the last and least of the Duke of Norfolk’s sons and he had earned his death with his own violence. Not a matter to sharpen Rochford’s interest—so what about Minuette made the Lord Chancellor so uneasy?

“It is in your own interest as well,” Rochford said now. “Mistress Wyatt is the one who made all the fuss over Alyce de Clare’s unfortunate and untimely death. She suspected Giles Howard was responsible, but does she still? If she believes the pregnant Alyce’s tumble down the stairs is not to be laid at Giles’s feet, she will not rest until she has found the guilty party. And you wouldn’t want her stumbling over your mistakes, would you?”

Robert most certainly didn’t want Minuette stumbling over his connection to Alyce. The first person she would tell would be Elizabeth, and their relationship was already complicated by his wife. How could he explain a pregnant mistress as well? Especially one who had died so inconveniently while spying on Elizabeth’s mother.

The damned man was so certain of Robert’s acquiescence that he didn’t even wait for it. The only satisfaction Robert could get was calling out a question as Rochford retreated. “What on earth has the Earl of Surrey not been brought to trial? I thought your goal was to eliminate the Howard family. And yet Surrey continues to sit in the Tower without any charges being brought.”

That stopped Rochford, just long enough for him to look over his shoulder dismissively and say, “Don’t attempt to know my mind, Lord Robert. You might not like what you find.”

If there was one part of being king that William would have abolished if possible, it was council meetings. Here it was Christmas day, and still his privy council would not let him be. The aftereffects of drought and poor harvests, Rochford said. Torrential rains. People starving. Not to mention Mary imprisoned and the death of a duke of England under taint of treason. A realm does not sleep, Rochford insisted, and her king must be willing to do likewise.

So as the sun rose behind leaden clouds, here was assembled his much reduced privy council, more or less the remains of the regency council that had ruled in his name for years. Six months ago William had turned eighteen and gone immediately to war. Followed by his mother’s death, and then more weeks in France negotiating, and then Minuette ...

William imagined announcing his engagement this very morning, having it preached of in the chapel, setting the bells to ring out his love. Then he imagined the shouting that would follow—mostly from Rochford—and sighed. Not yet.

As Lord Chancellor, his uncle opened the council, which this morning consisted of just over half a dozen men: Rochford and Dominic, naturally, along with the Earls of Pembroke and Oxford and Archbishop Cranmer. Sir Ralph Sadler ran the household and William Cecil, Lord Burghley, the treasury. Most of them were in their forties or fifties—Cranmer was actually in his sixties, though still active in both mind and body—and even Burghley, who was only thirty-four, behaved like a cautious old man.

Age and temperament aside, there were not nearly enough members of the privy council. And that was the true purpose of this meeting. His uncle had been pressing him for a decision for three weeks, and now he meant to force the matter.

“Your Majesty,” Rochford began, “before the new year dawns, we must have a complete council. You cannot long afford to overlook some of the realm’s most powerful men.”

William slouched back in his chair, willing to allow his uncle the chance to drone on and list his no doubt well-thought-out and even better phrased arguments to press his point. Why deny the man his pleasure? William meant to agree—if only to stop the endless tide of pressure—but he could afford to be generous this early in the morning. The Christmas service was still two hours off.

Dominic was not so patient. “Who?” he asked. “With Norfolk dead, and his heir imprisoned, the council already holds the only two remaining dukes in the kingdom.”

Rochford himself and Northumberland, easily the two most Protestant lords in England. There had been four dukes appointed to the regency council, but the Duke of Suffolk had died of apoplexy when William was sixteen. Suffolk had had only daughters—Jane Grey his eldest—and there had been no question of naming another duke since then. It was unlike Dominic to make a political point, and William wondered where he was headed with this one.

So was Northumberland. His blunt face (the rough edges of which so perfectly mirrored his soldier image, a man uncomfortable with pomp and elegance) looked skeptical as he asked, “What are you implying, Exeter?”

Even though he had named Dominic Marquis of Exeter just six months ago, William still wasn’t used to hearing Dominic called as such.

Northumberland pressed on. “Do you think the realm needs another duke?”

“It is not titles I am thinking of, but opinions. I think the realm needs binding, and the council should represent more than one viewpoint to serve effectively.” Dominic, unlike Northumberland, always looked perfectly suited to the finesse of the court. Tall (though William, at six feet two inches, Dominic had finally topped him by an inch), and though soberly dressed, Dominic had a way of carrying himself that reminded everyone that he had Plantagenet blood several generations back. Mostly, though, Dominic belonged because he never bothered to think about whether he did or not. It was instinctive.

“Such as the views of those who meant to march a foreign army upon London and kill our king?” Northumberland countered, brusque and angry. He had not his son Robert’s careful guile; he was too sure of his power to play games. “There is no place for traitors in England, let alone welcoming them into the heart of the court.”

“Traitors, no,” Dominic retorted. “But men of good heart and honest thought, who want the

same end but perhaps through different means. No one man holds a lock on all virtue.”

William laughed. “Really, Dom, how old are you? You sound like a university philosopher. Not,” he added, “that you aren’t right. It is a poor king indeed who cannot be trusted to hear more than one voice in council.”

“Does that mean you are ready to name new men?” Rochford pressed.

“It does. Wriothesley, Arundel, Paget, and Cheney. We need men as skilled as they are opinionated. And they will be free to speak their minds.” William looked around. “That’s all.”

He was half out of his chair when Rochford said, “Lord Exeter spoke truly, Your Majesty.”

Subsiding with a suppressed groan, William said, “He always does. On which particular point do you agree with his truthfulness?”

“We must decide what to do with the Earl of Surrey.”

The late Duke of Norfolk’s grandson, currently held in the Tower of London for suspicion of treasonable activity, Surrey was heir to his grandfather’s title and vast lands that would place him on a footing with Rochford and Northumberland—if he didn’t lose his head. Even if William chose to leave him alive, he could seize the lands for the Crown and, say, banish Surrey to the Continent. Or simply keep him imprisoned.

Not that they had evidence Surrey had done anything treasonable.

Not that it necessarily mattered.

Northumberland had already made up his mind; no surprise considering how the Dudley and Howards hated one another. “Norfolk cheated us of a useful execution—make Surrey take his place. That will teach the Catholics not to play at rebellion.”

“Surrey has been raised Protestant,” Dominic pointed out. William didn’t have to ask for his friend’s opinion; distaste was written all over his face. The others would agree with the louder voices. That left, as always, Rochford.

“What say you, Uncle?” William asked. “Kill a man for his name?”

Rochford hesitated, and in that unusual moment of uncertainty William saw a momentary likeness to Dominic. Again, a resemblance not wholly surprising considering that Dominic’s mother was a second cousin to George Boleyn. They both had long, thoughtful faces and dark, good looks that made women pliable. “There is wisdom in the use of a public execution. Besides, there is also wisdom in mercy. You have established a position of strength, Your Majesty, with your victory in France, betrothal to the French king’s daughter, the Lady Mary under house arrest ... I think, perhaps, it is time to ponder mercy.”

“Besides the fact that there is no evidence of Surrey’s involvement?” Dominic broke in, barely a step away from open sarcasm.

“That is true,” Rochford answered slowly. “In fact, I am disturbed by his consistent denial. Surrey has not wavered, or been caught in a single falsehood. It may well be that he is innocent of any crime.”

“Except representing a family that would listen to a foreign pope over our own king,” Rochford asserted Northumberland. “A pope who insists that the throne belongs to Mary Tudor and our king is naught but a bastard.”

The room went very still. Cranmer and Burghley shared a look that united the old cleric and the younger councilor in shared disapproval of such folly. William felt his stomach roil, though he knew it was said of him elsewhere, he should not have to listen to such words in his own council chamber. “That’s enough,” he said sharply. “I will judge a man by word and

action, not by gossip. And certainly I will not rule out of fear. My uncle has doubts. That sufficient for me to be cautious.”

Already a plan was forming, not yet more than a thought and a sense that it would be unexpected and thus fun. As well as useful. He kept the possibility in the back of his mind and dealt with the immediate issue.

“Lord Exeter.” He always addressed Dominic in formal terms when he was about to make a political point. “Visit Surrey in the Tower. Not just yet, though—leave it for a month or so. We will let him sit awhile and ponder the error of his family’s ways. I will keep the interrogators away from him until then. When you go, speak to his guards, speak to his servants, and speak to the inquisitors.”

He dared Rochford to protest, but his uncle seemed, if anything, approving. Hard to tell behind that masklike face. Sometimes William wished Rochford was as openly violent in his feelings as Northumberland.

“What is my brief?” Dominic asked. “Guilt or innocence?”

“Fact,” William said. “Did Surrey have any knowledge of his grandfather’s plot with the Spanish? If you are satisfied that he did not, then it will be time to speak of recompense.”

Dominic was visibly glad, and William basked in that moment of approval. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“That is all.” William waved them away, all except Dominic.

When the door was closed on just the two of them, William stretched out his legs and sighed. “Tell me true, Dom, do you think Surrey knew of his grandfather’s plans?”

“No.”

“That’s an awfully quick answer when you haven’t even spoken to the man yet.”

“I’ve read the interview transcripts. He’s been racked—did you know that?”

Gentlemen were mostly spared torture, but Rochford had insisted. It did make Surrey’s denials more plausible. William ignored the underlying disapproval in Dominic’s question. “We all know how stubborn the Howards can be, particularly when their lives are at stake.”

“Surrey wasn’t at Framlingham during the Lady Mary’s residence. He had come nowhere near East Anglia for eight months. You appointed him to the northern marches and, except for the time he spent in Paris at your command, there he stayed—where, by the way, he had been remarkably effective on the border. He has ever served well and faithfully, with not a hint of his father’s radical Catholicism. I daresay I’ve never heard the man express a religious opinion before now.”

“He’ll have to if I let him live. The Catholics will force it of him. He’ll have to come down on one side or the other.”

“Will he?”

“What does that mean?”

Dominic shrugged, but the tension in his eyes belied his attempt at being casual. “As long as we force men to hold a religious opinion to the exclusion of all else in their life, England will remain unbalanced, liable to be tipped at any providential moment from one side to the other.”

“You think I would return this country to Rome?”

“Never. Which is why you will always be a target for those who would.”

“Then little has changed. Don’t worry about me, Dom. I’m young, I’m handsome, I’ve

beaten the French, and I'm engaged to a Catholic princess. I'd say we're fairly balanced just now."

Dominic shifted restlessly in his chair, but he would not stand until William gave him permission. "If you're thinking about balance, does that mean you would invest Surrey with the Norfolk title and lands?"

"An almost-Catholic duke against two Protestant ones? I think I shall have to." With a grin William added, "And perhaps another title as ballast against my uncle and Northumberland. We shall see."

Dominic seemed uninterested in William's hints. "Then I'll speak to Surrey."

Christmas at court was an exercise in furious revelry and exhausting entertainment. Dominic had never cared much for the masques, those exuberant displays of costume and dramatic theme and over-the-top allegory, though he had been forced to participate in several in earlier years. But this Christmas he had flatly refused when pressed by several comely court ladies to join the play. Minuette did not press him, though he knew she was part of it. In fact from the accounts of the Master of Revels, it appeared she was planning the masque single-handedly. Orders had been given for multiple lengths of black fabric, both velvet and muslin, for red velvet headdresses; and for a machine that would produce thunder and lightning. It all seemed silly to Dominic. These days everything seemed silly that wasn't directly connected to the present security of the state or the secret betrothal of Minuette and William.

But before the Christmas debauchery came Christmas worship. This part Dominic did enjoy, if only because everyone, even William, sat still and he could slip his gaze sideways almost as often as he liked and glimpse Minuette next to Elizabeth. The view of her was one he knew well and never tired of: caught in profile, the line of her brow and throat, the spill of her hair onto her shoulders beneath her sheer black hood ... Dominic had done little enough praying in church these last weeks, unless God counted it worship to devour Minuette with his eyes.

She didn't seem to mind. Although she glanced his way rarely, there was a wealth of pleasure in those flashes.

William, naturally, assumed those glances were for him.

Today's Christmas service was full of gratitude for the nation's safe delivery from the hands of evil councilors and the whore of Babylon who looked to enslave all the world. Dominic caught William's brief frown as the archbishop hinted at the whore being not only the collective Catholic Church, but the individual person of William's half sister, Mary. Though he might not have cause to trust her, the Tudors were very clannish, and William believed he alone had the right to chastise his sister. But Archbishop Cranmer deftly brought his words around to England's king as the champion of true Christianity, and then the choir was singing and the soaring alleluias brought a shiver to even Dominic's religiously conflicted heart.

If anyone had asked his beliefs, he would have said he believed in honour, his king, and God. In that order. Unlike his mother (who had longed to join a religious order when young) Dominic did not follow Rome and would fight to keep England from returning to the sway of papal power. But he also disliked Martin Luther and the other Continental firebrands who thought a new Earth could only come on the blood and destruction of the old one. What was

was any religion, he wondered, that demanded blood? That was the Old Testament. This was the world of the New Testament—did not Christ himself command, “Ye shall love one another”?

These arguments almost never made it out of his closed mouth. He preferred to serve to his strengths, which would never be debate and theology. He was a soldier. He was sworn to his king and country and he would not dishonour that.

Except by loving the woman his king wanted.

Dominic distracted himself from that uncomfortable thought by focusing on the chapel choirmaster—another man who had once loved Minuette. Jonathan Percy had proposed to her just six months past, and Dominic had never been so glad as when he’d learned she had refused him. Percy had taken the rejection well enough and had even served as Dominic’s squire during the French battles, but he had always belonged here—in a royal chapel creating music for kings, both earthly and heavenly.

Dominic wondered if Percy’s continuing presence at court meant that he was truly valued as a musician, or if William’s past relationship with Percy’s twin sister had more to do with than his talent. Eleanor Percy Howard had been married to the Duke of Norfolk’s youngest son in order for William to make her his mistress without complications. She had already borne William one child—a girl—and even now claimed to be carrying another child that she had laid at William’s bed.

Of course, that claim was being made from the Tower of London, for Eleanor had been caught up in the Duke of Norfolk’s plotting, which ended in the violent death of her husband, Giles. The other women of the Howard family were being kept merely under house arrest, but Eleanor had been brought to the Tower almost a month ago. Not because of hard evidence that she’d intended treason, but because she had twice attempted to escape house arrest from the Howard estate at Framlingham. When she was caught the second time—twenty miles away from Framlingham and headed for London—she insisted, as she had always along, that she must be allowed to speak to the king.

But William, wrapped in his consuming passion for Minuette, had sent word for Eleanor to be kept in the Tower since she could not be trusted in a lesser confinement. Dominic thought that had been for Minuette’s sake, for she had always disliked Eleanor and no doubt William thought it a sort of gift to his beloved to lock away his former mistress. Dominic did not expect Eleanor to be locked away for long. She was a woman, and the mother of William’s child, and had proved herself skilled at pleasing the king. No doubt the king’s memories of pleasure would, in time, lead to her release.

When the service was ended, everyone rose for William and waited while he swept out. Dominic was kept from following by Robert Dudley, who left the side of a smiling Elizabeth to speak to him.

“What is it?” Dominic asked roughly. He had a hard time taking Robert’s measure, and that made him uneasy. Add in the fact that Robert had been at Framlingham on that last disastrous night when Norfolk had been arrested and his youngest son killed ...

Robert did not take offense, though he always seemed to give the impression of understanding and somehow pitying Dominic’s unease. “I merely wondered what news from the council this morning.”

“Ask your father.”

“I’m asking you. Is it true that William means to return Surrey to court?”

How did Robert always manage to know what was going on quicker than anyone outside the privy council? Dominic said as little as possible. “No decision has been made.”

“I hear you’re going to meet with him,” Robert threw in carelessly. “Wonder how he’ll feel dealing with the man who murdered his uncle. Well, not that anyone much liked Gil Howard. Probably you did Surrey a favour removing the least of the Howards.”

Before Dominic could frame an appropriate answer without giving way to anger, Robert added in a lower voice, “Have you ever thought that the evidence against Norfolk might have been just a bit too tidy? Penitent’s Confessions, Spanish naval involvement, Lady Mary preparing to lead foreign troops against her brother ... it does sound like a plot made to order by suspicious Protestants. Interesting to think about that when talking to Surrey. The Howards have plenty of enemies themselves, you know. Just a thought.”

He dazzled his mercurial smile at Dominic and whisked off—after Elizabeth, no doubt.

Had Robert just hinted that he believed Norfolk innocent of attempted rebellion? The Dudleys and Howards were long antagonists—why would Robert want to see the Earl of Surrey cleared from suspicion? But then Rochford had voiced something of the same opinion in council earlier. What had he said? *I am disturbed by his consistent denials.* Well, so was Dominic, but he would not have expected the naturally wary Rochford to agree with him. Or Robert, for that matter.

He watched as Robert caught up with Elizabeth and bent his dark head to her red-gold one. Even from behind and at a distance, it was clear how he felt about her, and Dominic experienced a surge of jealousy.

How has it come to this, Dominic thought, that I envy a married man in love with another woman? But he knew his envy wasn’t about Robert’s love—it was because Robert didn’t bother to pretend about it.

Minuette’s Christmas day was a blur of sound and colour, punctuated by clear flashes: the piercing familiarity of Dominic’s dark-green eyes in chapel, the tremor of alleluias in her bones, the headiness and triumph of pageantry. The masque was a fabulous success, everyone said so, even Elizabeth had gasped in delight at the marauding Saracens draped wrist to ankle in black with red velvet headdresses who threatened the court until the gallant Christian knights bearing the enormous papier-mâché dragon of St. George came to rescue the ladies from their clutches. There was smoke and thunder and music and hilarity and dancing and fighting—everything a Christmas masque should be. William kissed her hand before all the court in thanks, and both men and women flattered her with praise. It was very satisfying.

But none so much as when Dominic came to stand beside her and, surveying the crowd, said, “Playing politics, Minuette? That is unlike you.”

Even as she replied, “Whatever do you mean?” in pretended innocence, her heart soared that Dominic alone seemed to have caught the small detail at the end.

“The single knight who took his enemy’s hand rather than put him to the sword. They walked off together, with a woman between them.” He turned his head and lowered it near hers so no one would overhear. “Do you mean to be that woman, to bring peace between Catholic and Protestant?”

“Of course not—it wasn’t a real woman, she was the symbol of Peace itself. And anyway

the masque was about the Turks.”

When Dominic smiled at her, it nearly broke her heart. She so rarely saw him smile. “You could be that symbol, Minuette. You would have that power, if you were ...”

He didn’t say the word, didn’t even mouth it, but she heard it nonetheless. *If you were queen.*

Her eyes went to William, laughing at some clumsy wit from his aunt, Lady Suffolk. “You won’t be,” she said. “Not ever.”

His smile had faded when she turned back to him, but he leaned in farther and whispered in her ear. “Happy Christmas, Minuette. I left your gift with Carrie. I hope you like it.”

He was gone so suddenly that Minuette wanted to cry out in frustration. Why couldn’t he do as William had and hand her the gift himself? The king had seized ten minutes alone with her when he’d come to see Elizabeth after service this morning: one minute to watch with satisfaction as Minuette stumbled thanks for the far too noticeably costly ruby necklace, and nine minutes to thank her for the very simple embroidered missal cover she’d made him. He had been a mostly wordless thanks.

Didn’t Dominic want to thank her the same way? She’d given him a missal cover as well, trying to be discreet, as they all must be. Except it seemed that she alone was discreetly in the middle. On one end was William, recklessly sure of himself and not afraid enough of being caught. And on the other end was Dominic, so absolutely devoted to control that in public he barely even seemed to tolerate her company these days.

Men.

She was still feeling somewhere between excited and wounded when she escaped to her room far earlier than she normally would have. She had a headache—something she had never been prone to until these last weeks—and yes, despite her frustration, she was curious what Dominic had left her.

She had not expected it to be alive. But when Carrie told her Lord Exeter’s gift was in her bedchamber, Minuette flung open the door and was confronted by a pair of silky brown eyes that kept rising and rising as the dog seemed to unfold itself until it stood before her.

The eyes were beautiful, and the cinnamon coat, but good heavens it was enormous! An Irish wolfhound whose nose came level with her rib cage. Minuette could not think of a single thing to say. It was the only animal she’d ever owned, apart from the horse William had given her last year. The hound was nearly as large as Winterfall.

Minuette was even more perplexed when the dog bent his head down and pushed something toward her with his nose. Hesitantly, Minuette picked up the paper-wrapped rectangle—definitely a book—and sat on her bed to open it.

Il Canzoniere ... Petrarch writing to his Laura ... Minuette’s Italian was nearly fluent and her cheeks burned as she skimmed the pages. The last time she had seen these poems had been in the aftermath of her friend Alyce de Clare’s sudden death and a frantic search to decode a message. Now she took the time to look at the words themselves. If this was a fair measure of Dominic’s feelings beneath that damnable self-control, then it was a wonder she did not go up in flames every time he looked at her.

The dog sat and laid his marvelous head in her lap. Minuette stroked him between the ears. “What am I supposed to call you?” she murmured.

Carrie was at the door, ever knowing precisely the moment she was needed. With her

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