

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Lady Elizabeth

Alison Weir

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About the Book

England, 1536. Home to the greatest, most glittering court in English history. But beneath the dazzling façade lies treachery . . .

Elizabeth Tudor is daughter to Henry VIII, the most powerful king England has ever known. She is destined to ascend the throne, and deferred to as the King's heiress, but that all changes when her mother Anne Boleyn - Henry's great passion and folly - is executed for treason.

Elizabeth's life alters in a heartbeat. A pawn in the savage game of Tudor power politics, she is disinherited, declared a bastard, and left with only her quick wits to rely on for her very existence. But Elizabeth is determined to survive, to foil those who want to destroy her, or who are determined to use her as a puppet for their own lethal ambition, and to reclaim her birthright . . .

About the Author

Alison Weir lives and works in Surrey. Her books include *Britain's Royal Families*, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, *Children of England*, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, *Henry VIII: King and Court*, *Mary, Queen of Scots*, *Isabella: She-Wolf of France*, *Queen of England*, *Katherine Swynford: The Story of John of Gaunt and His Scandalous Duchess* and the novel, *Innocent Traitor*.

Also by Alison Weir

Fiction

Innocent Traitor

Non-fiction

Britain's Royal Families:
The Complete Genealogy

The Six Wives of Henry VIII

The Princes in the Tower

Lancaster and York:
The Wars of the Roses

Children of England:
The Heirs of King Henry VIII
1547-1558

Elizabeth the Queen

Eleanor of Aquitaine

Henry VIII: King and Court

Mary Queen of Scots and the
Murder of Lord Darnley

Isabella: She-Wolf of France,
Queen of England

Katherine Swynford: The Story of John of
Gaunt and his Scandalous Duchess

Alison Weir

THE LADY ELIZABETH

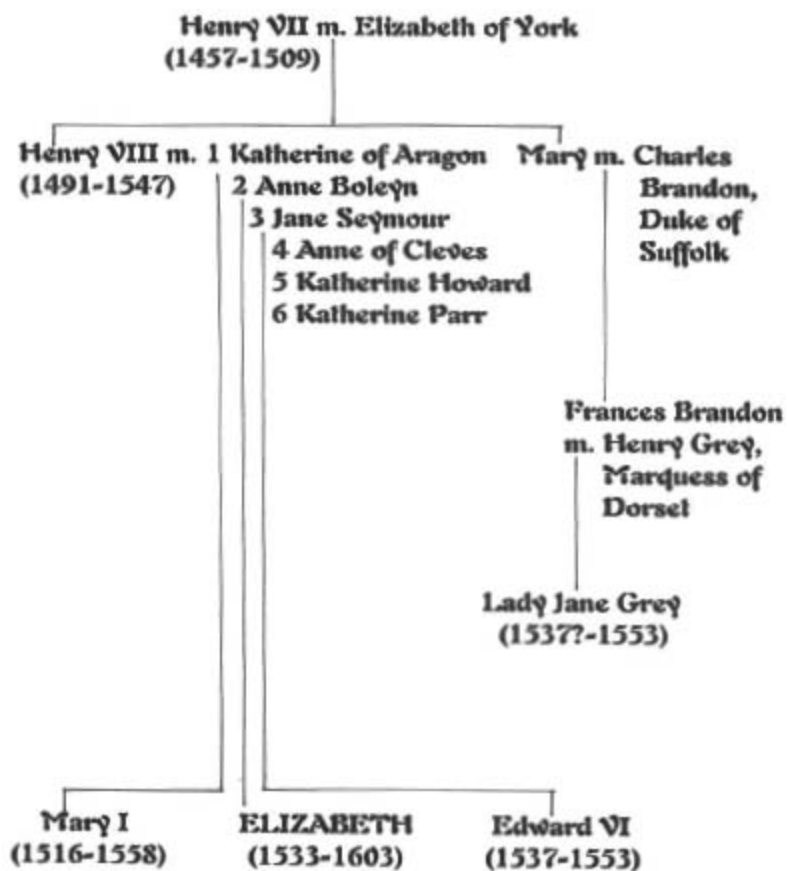
A novel



arrow books

To my very dear friends
Tracy Borman,
Sarah Gristwood,
Kate Williams,
Martha Whittome,
Ann Morrice
and
Siobhan Clarke
for all their help and support,
with much love.

Family Tree: The Tudors



Part One: The King's Daughter

Elizabeth

On a hot, still morning in July, the Lady Mary, daughter to King Henry the Eighth, arrived at the great country palace of Hatfield, trotting into the courtyard on a white palfrey, followed by four gentlemen, two ladies-in-waiting and a female fool.

As soon as she had dismounted, she stooped to kiss the small girl who was waiting to greet her, whose nurse had just reminded her to sketch a wobbly curtsy to the older sister she had not seen for many months. The child was solemn-faced, fair-skinned and freckled, with long tendrils of burnished red hair escaping from the embroidered white coif that tied beneath her chin.

‘My, you have grown, sweeting!’ Mary exclaimed in her gruff voice, stroking Elizabeth’s hair and straightening her silver pendant. ‘You’re nearly three now, aren’t you?’ Elizabeth stared back, unsure of this richly-dressed lady with the sad face and skinny body. Mary was not beautiful like Elizabeth’s mother: Mary had a snub nose and a downturned mouth, and although her hair was red like Elizabeth’s, and their father’s, it was thin and frizzy. And of course Mary was very old, all of twenty years, she had been told.

‘I have brought you gifts, Sister,’ Mary smiled, beckoning to a lady-in-waiting, who brought over a wooden box. Inside, wrapped in velvet, was a rosary of amber beads and a jewelled crucifix. ‘For your chapel,’ Mary said, pointing to the latter.

‘Pretty,’ said Elizabeth, gently fingering the beads.

‘How does my sister, Lady Bryan?’ Mary rose to her feet and greeted the governess with a kiss. ‘And you yourself? It is good to see you again, but I would it were in happier circumstances.’

‘I too, my Lady Mary. We are well enough, both of us, I thank you,’ the woman answered.

Elizabeth, watching them, was slightly discomfited by their words and curious at seeing a pained expression fleetingly shadow Mary’s plain features.

‘I will speak with her presently,’ her sister said. Lady Bryan nodded.

‘I am grateful, your Grace,’ she said. ‘I pray you eat first, for it is nigh to eleven o’clock and dinner is almost ready.’ Elizabeth was no longer listening; her attention had now focused on her new beads.

‘I have brought my fool, to afford a diversion later, if need be,’ Mary said, and Elizabeth’s ears pricked up. She liked fools. They were funny.

While the roast goose and hot salad were being served with appropriate ceremony to Mary in the great hall, Elizabeth was sent to the nursery to have her dinner.

‘I hope your Grace will excuse us,’ the nurse said to the Lady Mary. ‘The Lady Elizabeth’s Grace is too young as yet to eat with the grown-ups.’ After being pressed into another curtsy, the child was led away by the hand.

As soon as she had gone, Mary laid down her knife and shook her head sadly.

‘I hardly know how I am going to tell her, Margaret,’ she said miserably, looking to her former governess for support.

Lady Bryan rested a comforting hand on hers.

‘I would not be too explicit if I were you, Madam.’

‘Oh, no,’ agreed Mary fervently. ‘Does she often speak of her mother? Do you think she will be much discomforted? After all, she cannot have seen much of her.’

‘I’m afraid she did. Her Grace – I mean the lady her mother – kept the child with her, more than was seemly for a queen. If you remember, she even refused to have a wet-nurse,’ Lady Bryan recalled, with a sniff of disapproval.

Mary looked at her with mounting anxiety. She was dreading the coming confrontation.

‘Do you think she will understand?’ she asked.

‘There is much she understands,’ Lady Bryan replied. ‘My lady is more than ordinarily precocious. As sharp as nails, that child, and clever with it.’

‘But a child for all that,’ Mary said, ‘so I will break it to her as gently as I can, and may our Holy Mother and all the saints help me.’

Seeing her so distressed, Lady Bryan sought to steer the conversation away from the subject, but while she and Sir John chattered on about household matters and the state of the weather, and while all of them toyed with their food, having little appetite for it, Mary, her heart swelling with love and compassion for her little sister, could only think of the heavy task that lay ahead of her.

Why should she feel this way, she asked herself? Why had she agreed to come here and perform this dreadful errand? Elizabeth’s very existence had caused her untold pain and suffering, and it was because of Elizabeth’s mother, that great whore, Anne Boleyn, that Mary had lost all that she held dear in life: her own mother, the late sainted Queen Katherine, her rank, her prospects of a throne and marriage, and the love of her father the King. Yet Mary had found nothing to resent in an innocent child, had in fact lavished all the love of which she was capable on the engaging little creature, and now, when the perilous twists of cruel fate had reversed Elizabeth’s fortunes too, she could only grieve for the little girl.

As soon as the meal was finished, Elizabeth was brought back to her sister, and together they walked in the sun-browned park, away from the palace, their attendants following a short distance behind. The daystar was blazing down, there was barely the stir of a breeze, and the sisters were sweltering in their long-sleeved silk gowns; Elizabeth

was glad of her wide-brimmed straw hat, which protected her face from the sunshine and the glare, while Mary, wearing a smart French hood with a band under the chin, was suffering decorously. Her lips were pursed, and she looked unhappy, Elizabeth noticed.

‘You have been much in my thoughts, Sister,’ Mary said. ‘I had to come and see you, to satisfy myself that all was well with you, and . . .’ Her voice tailed away.

‘Thank you, Sister,’ Elizabeth replied. Again, Mary caressed the long red curls that fanned out beneath the sun-hat; again, she looked unutterably sad. Young as she was, the child could sense her misery.

‘What’s wrong?’ Elizabeth asked. ‘Why are you unhappy?’

‘Oh, my dear Sister,’ Mary cried, sinking to her knees on the grass and embracing Elizabeth tightly. Elizabeth struggled free. She did not like to be squeezed like that; she was a self-contained child. Yet Mary did not notice, for she was weeping. Elizabeth could see Lady Bryan watching them intently, standing a little way off with Mary’s ladies and the nursemaids, and she was puzzled as to why her governess did not hasten to her rescue.

‘Come, Sister,’ Mary was saying, sniffing and dabbing her eyes with a white kerchief. ‘Let us sit here.’ She drew Elizabeth to a stone seat that had been placed in the shade of an oak tree to afford those who rested there a grand view of the red-brick palace spread out beyond the formal gardens, and lifted the child onto it.

‘I am charged by our father to tell you something that will make you very sad,’ Mary said. ‘You must be a brave girl . . . as I too have had to be brave in my time.’

‘I am brave,’ Elizabeth assured her, none-too-confidently, wondering fearfully what this was all about.

Nothing had changed outwardly in the last few weeks – her daily routine had remained the same, and the people in her household still curtsied to her and treated her with

deference. If it hadn't been for something her governor had said, she would not have realised there was anything untoward. But she was a sharp child, and the change of title did not go unnoticed.

'Why, Governor,' she had asked Sir John Shelton, in her clear, well-modulated voice, 'why is it that yesterday you called me Lady Princess, and today just Lady Elizabeth?'

Caught off guard, Sir John Shelton had pulled at his luxuriant chestnut beard, frowned and hesitated, while Elizabeth stood before him, her steely gaze imperiously demanding a response. Not for the first time, he was struck by this regal quality in her, which in his opinion was unsuited to the female condition, but would have been admirable in a prince, the prince that England so desperately needed.

'The King your father has ordered it,' he said carefully.

'Why?' asked the child, her dark eyes narrowing.

'The King's orders must always be obeyed,' he declared.

The little face clouded, the lips pouting, the brows furrowing. Sir John had side-stepped the question, but Elizabeth was determined not to let him off so easily. At that moment, mercifully for him, Lady Bryan entered the room. Always immaculate in her dark velvet gowns, with never a hair nor any detail of dress out of place, she had been ruling her army of nursemaids, servants and household officers with quiet authority since her royal charge had been given her own establishment at the age of three months.

Lady Bryan was carrying a pile of freshly laundered linen strewn with herbs, and heading for the carved chest that stood at the foot of Elizabeth's bed. Seeing Sir John, who had overall charge of the household, she dipped a neat curtsey without in any way sacrificing her dignity, then bent to her task. But Elizabeth was tugging at her skirts. Surely her governess, who knew everything, would tell her the answer to her question.

‘My lady,’ she pleaded, ‘I have asked Sir John why he called me Lady Princess yesterday, and Lady Elizabeth today. Why is that?’

Elizabeth was stunned to see tears well up in her governess’s eyes. Lady Bryan, who was always so calm, so composed, so in control – was she really about to cry? She, who was always instructing Elizabeth that a lady never betrayed her feelings, never laughed too loudly or gave way to tears. It was unimaginable, and thus shocking. But perhaps she had imagined it, for when she looked again, Lady Bryan was perfectly in command of herself.

‘You have a new title, my Lady Elizabeth,’ she said, in a voice that was clearly meant to reassure. ‘The King’s Highness has decreed it.’

‘But why?’ persisted the child. She had a sense of things hidden from her . . .

‘I’m sure the King has very good reasons,’ answered Lady Bryan, in a tone that forbade further discussion. ‘Now, where are those dolls you were playing with earlier?’

‘I put them to bed,’ said Elizabeth, plainly not interested.

‘In the morning? The very idea!’ exclaimed her governess. ‘Look, I’ve got some pretty silks in my basket, and some scraps of Holland cloth. Go and fetch your best doll, and I’ll help you to make a cap for her.’

Elizabeth toddled reluctantly to the miniature cradle by her bed. It was clear that the answers to her questions would not be forthcoming.

Elizabeth often sat with her governess, being taught the things that all well-brought-up little girls needed to know. They might look at the vivid pictures in one of the beautifully illuminated books that the King had provided, or sort through embroidery silks, Lady Bryan allowing the child to pick the colours herself. Then she would teach Elizabeth how to make rows of different stitches. Elizabeth learned this quickly, as she learned everything. Already, she knew

her alphabet, and her numbers up to one hundred, and in chapel she was striving to understand the Latin rubric of the Mass.

‘What is Father Matthew saying?’ she would pipe up, ever inquisitive, and Lady Bryan would put a finger to her lips and explain patiently, murmuring in a low voice. Afterwards, Elizabeth would pester the chaplain, urging him to teach her the words and phrases that so intrigued her.

‘I do declare that that my Lady Princess has the gift of languages,’ he told Sir John Shelton and Lady Bryan, and indeed he appeared to be right, for Elizabeth had just to hear a thing said once and she had it by heart.

When the embroidering palled – after all, Elizabeth was only in her third year, and her quick, darting mind was always flitting to the next thing – Lady Bryan would see to it that her day was filled with distractions: a walk in the great wide park of Hatfield, a visit to the stables to see her dappled pony, or a spell in the kitchens to watch the cook making marchpane, which she was allowed to sample after it had cooled; the child had an inordinately sweet tooth. Then a story – nothing too sombre, but perhaps that old tale of Master Chaucer’s about Chanticleer the cock, which always made Elizabeth laugh out loud; and after this, a light supper of pottage and bread, then prayers and bedtime.

Once Elizabeth was settled in her comfortable bed, with its feather mattress, crisp heavy linen, rich velvet counterpane and curtains, and the arms of England embroidered on its tester, Lady Bryan would sign the cross on her forehead and then leave her to go to sleep, settling herself with a book in a high-backed chair by the fire, a candle flickering at her side. The room would be warm, and soon she herself would be slumbering, her book abandoned on her lap.

Elizabeth, however, would lie wide awake, her fertile mind active, puzzling over the mysteries and marvels of her life . . .

Her earliest memories were of her father. Her big, magnificent father, King Harry the Eighth, the most wonderful being in the world. It was Elizabeth's greatest grief that she did not see him very often. The rare occasions on which he visited her at Hatfield were the most exciting days of all. God-like in his rich velvets and furs, his jewels and chains, he would chuck her under the chin, swing her up in the air and whirl her around, she shrieking with delight, her beribboned cap askew and her long red tresses flying.

'How does my little Bessy?' he would enquire. 'Are they keeping you hard at your books and your prayers, or do they let you out to play as often as they should?' And he would wink conspiratorially, so that Elizabeth could know that it was alright to say yes, she did spend a lot of time playing, and that she loved the latest doll or toy he had sent her.

'But I do learn my letters, Sir, and my catechism,' she would tell him.

'Well and good, well and good,' he would say, pulling her onto his wide lap and sitting her on strong muscular thighs, with her cheek against the brilliant rough surface of his doublet, which was encrusted with gems and goldsmiths' work. She would breathe in the wholesome smell of him, a smell of herbs, musky perfume and the great outdoors, and nestle against him, enjoying the sensation of his bristly red beard tickling the top of her forehead.

'I will tell you something, Bessy,' he said once. 'When I was a young king, I did not wish to be at my prayers or attending to state affairs; I wanted to enjoy life. So can you guess what I did? I would sneak out of the palace by a back stair and go hunting, and my councillors would never know I had gone.'

'Didn't you get into trouble?' Elizabeth posited, wide-eyed.

'Hah!' roared her father. 'I am the King. They would never have dared!'

‘Can you do what you like when you are King?’ she asked, a whole new vista of freedom opening up in her mind.

‘Of course I can,’ her father replied. ‘People have to do my will.’ There was an edge to his voice that, young as she was, she missed.

‘Then,’ she told him, ‘I am going to be King when I grow up.’

She had not understood at the time why this angered him. Suddenly, he was no longer her loving father, but a man of steel, cold of visage and inexplicably cross. Without a word, he put her from him, setting her none-too-gently on the floor, and drew himself up to his towering height, a big bulk of a man, powerful and daunting.

‘You can never be a king,’ he told her, in a voice as quiet as it was menacing. ‘Until you have a brother, you are my heir, but it is against Nature and the law of God for a woman to rule, so enough of such foolishness, for I *will* have a son to succeed me!’ Then he was gone, his broad figure disappearing through the oak door of the nursery. But he had been back to visit her since, as cheery and as boisterous as if nothing had upset him. She had understood by that that his rages were but passing storms.

Whenever her father came, her quiet, ordered world would explode into colour, gaiety and noise. He was always surrounded by brilliantly dressed gentlemen and ladies – who made much of her – and attended by hordes of ministers, officers and servants, many of whom, she was told, were very important people. She watched them all flattering and fawning upon her father, and was impressed when they always did exactly as he ordered. It was marvellous to be the daughter of such a king.

She was a great lady, her father had often said it. All must bow to her, and none scant their respect to her, for she too was important. That was why she lived away from the court in her own household, with her own servants. She was the Princess of England, and – Lady Bryan had revealed – one

day, if God did not see fit to send her a brother, she would be its Queen, despite what her father had said to her that time. Something called Parliament had decreed it, and no one could gainsay that.

These were more recent memories. The first thing she could remember was her father carrying her in his arms about the court, that glittering world where he lived, and showing her off to all the lords and ladies. Both he and she had been wearing yellow, and she had been aware that it was a special occasion, although she wasn't sure why. Her father kept saying how pleased he was that some old harridan was dead, but Elizabeth had no idea of whom he spoke, and only the vaguest notion of what 'dead' meant.

Her mother, also wearing yellow, had been there on that night – she remembered this too. Her beautiful, slender mother, with the raven hair, the vibrant, inviting eyes and the witty smile. But she had been talking to other people as the King paraded Elizabeth around the room, bidding his courtiers to admire her. It was strange, but Elizabeth had very few memories of her mother and father being together. Usually, they had come separately to see her at Hatfield, and she had understood that her father was so often occupied with ruling the kingdom that he could only rarely get away. Her mother, Queen Anne, visited more often, bringing her beloved dogs, and gifts for Elizabeth too, most of them beautifully made clothes – an orange satin gown, a russet velvet kirtle, a pair of crimson taffeta sleeves, a pearl-embroidered cap or some tooled-leather leading reins. Her mother did not play with her as boisterously as her father, but would sit with her in the walled garden, looking at the colourful pictures in the Queen's exquisite Book of Hours, or strumming a lute – even at this young age, Elizabeth was already showing aptitude as a musician, a skill she had inherited from both her parents. Anne was more patient with her than Henry, and never seemed to grow bored in her daughter's company. To Elizabeth, her

mother was the ideal queen, beautiful, poised and kind, and her love for her was tinged with reverence and awe.

Lying in her bed, with the firelight flickering on the wall, it had occurred to Elizabeth that it was a long time since her mother had been to Hatfield. The last time she had seen her was when the court was at Greenwich, a few weeks back; but that occasion had left Elizabeth disturbed and fearful. For the first time in her short life, she had sensed unhappiness and danger, for her mother and father had been angry with each other, very angry, and then her mother had grown tearful and distracted, which frightened the child. She could not understand why they were at odds, nor why, later, her mother had picked her up urgently and hastened to seek out the King once more. He had been standing by an open window, looking down on the courtyard below, when she approached him, and his anger was a tangible thing that left his daughter shrinking in her mother's arms. Harsh words were exchanged, words that Elizabeth did not want to remember. She hated hearing her father calling her mother a witch, amongst other unkind names. Witches did bad things, things she could never associate with her mother. And what, she wondered, was a whore? And why should her mother have been so upset just because she had found the King with a wench called Seymour on his knee? There was nothing wrong with that, was there? Elizabeth herself had sat on his knee many times.

She could not recall how it had ended. The last thing she remembered of the encounter was her mother lifting her up, willing her father to take her in his arms.

'She is your true daughter!' Anne had wept. 'You have named her your heir, and Parliament has approved it. She is yours - you have only to look at her.' Her father was frowning darkly, his face flushed with anger. He would not take her. Elizabeth had wriggled around and buried her face

in her mother's silken shoulder, full of fear. Then the Queen was almost running with her, hastening through one lavishly decorated apartment after another, until she reached a small wood-panelled closet hung with bright blue cloth. A young man was there, a priest by his garments, and when Elizabeth's mother set her on the floor and sank to her knees on the prayer desk before the little altar, he laid a comforting hand on her shoulder.

'Tell me, Daughter,' he said.

'I may not have much time,' her mother whispered, mysteriously - and alarmingly. 'Dr Parker, I want you to promise me something. Swear you will do so.'

'I will do whatever is in my power, Madam,' he answered. There was great kindness in his blunt features. Then Queen Anne rose and began breathlessly murmuring in his ear, her words indistinct, so that Elizabeth could not hear them. Dr Parker's face grew grave.

'If aught happens to me,' the Queen concluded, more audibly, 'I must charge you with the welfare of my poor child here. Promise me you will look after her interests.'

The kind man had not hesitated to promise, and Elizabeth began to hope that he would speak to her father the King and tell him not to be nasty to her mother any more. She had been horrified to witness the father she idolised behaving in such a harsh manner towards her mother, and appalled to see Anne's distress. It was all far beyond her infant comprehension, and all she wanted was to retreat back into the safe little world she had hitherto inhabited, with her parents in harmony with one another, and she happy and secure in their love.

Soon after that, Elizabeth had been sent back to Hatfield, a new doll in her arms - a parting gift from her mother. When she went, clutching Lady Bryan's hand, to bid her father farewell, he had been his usual genial self, patting her on the head and smacking a kiss on her cheek. Once more she was his Bessy, which left her feeling greatly

reassured, and by and by, as the daily routine of the nursery asserted itself, she began to forget the nastiness at Greenwich, and to believe that all was now well in her small world.

Until Sir John Shelton had called her my Lady Elizabeth.

Looking down on her little half-sister, who was far too young to understand fully what she was about to say, Mary was filled with all the old conflicting feelings. She loved the child dearly, knowing that she was an innocent whom it would be unfair to hold responsible for the wrongs that her mother had done Mary and her own mother, Queen Katherine. Yet she could never forget that Elizabeth was Anne Boleyn's child, and Mary had hated Anne Boleyn more than any other mortal on Earth.

She should forgive, she told herself; her faith demanded it. But it was hard, nay, impossible, for the hurts had cut too deeply. Were it not for Anne Boleyn, her father would not have wickedly broken with the Pope in Rome, her mother would not have died abandoned and alone, and she herself would never have been declared a bastard – she, who had been the King's true heir and successor to the throne – nor made to act as maidservant to the baby Elizabeth. But her father – and here again, there was that conflict of emotions, and loyalties, for she loved him too, for all her fear of him – had fallen in love, bewitched by the black eyes and cunning charms of that whore, Anne Boleyn; and after that, twenty years of chaste and loving wedlock to Queen Katherine had counted for nothing, and Mary's world had crashed in ruins about her.

Her sainted mother had borne rejection, harassment, exile and mortal illness with great patience and fortitude, insisting all along that she was the King's true wife, and believing through the weary, bitter years that he would one day come to his senses – even after he had set her aside

and married Anne, even in the face of Anne's threats to have Katherine and Mary executed for their refusal to acknowledge that marriage, which, Mary knew, was no true marriage.

On her knees, Mary had prayed that she might be granted that same patience, that fortitude. But she had been young, bitterly miserable and deeply resentful, and she missed her mother desperately. How she had longed to be with her: her yearning for the comfort that only Katherine could give had been constant, and not even five years of enforced separation could diminish it. And nor, she had found, could death, for Katherine had been dead these six months, poisoned, Mary was convinced, on the orders of *that woman*. She had been ailing for some time, and when they had cut her body open for the autopsy, they had found her heart to be black and putrid. What else could that betoken but poison? And then her father and the whore, wearing yellow for the mourning, they said, parading Elizabeth around the court, gloating in their triumph.

Anne had not gloated for long. On the very day of Katherine's funeral, she had miscarried of the son the King so desperately wanted, had failed him in the same way that Katherine had failed him. He had been King of England for twenty-seven years, and still had no son to succeed him. Just two daughters, both now declared bastards.

Which brought Mary back to the matter at hand, the dread task from which she shrank. Elizabeth's pointed little face was looking up at her, her black eyes enquiring. Apart from her colouring, she was entirely Anne Boleyn's child – even her long-fingered hands were Anne's. Anne, Mary remembered, had had a sixth finger – a devil's mark, some people were saying, knowing that it was at last safe openly to revile her. But her detractors were not so many now, for astonishingly, in the wake of what had happened recently, there were an increasing number who expressed sympathy . . .

Yes, Elizabeth was her mother's child, in her appearance and her quick wits, her mercurial temperament and her vanity: already, she held herself with poise, delighting in fine gowns, and peering into mirrors to admire herself. But was she King Harry's? This thought had tortured Mary ever since she had heard the accusations against the lute player, Mark Smeaton. Mary had never seen him herself, she had not been at court for many years, but some of her friends there were of the opinion that Elizabeth had a look of him, although of course they could not be certain, since they had never thought to pay him that much attention during the years before he had won notoriety. It worried Mary, though, because no one else, even the King, appeared to entertain the suspicion that Mark was Elizabeth's father, and it would continue to vex her: every time she saw Elizabeth, she was consciously or subconsciously scrutinising the child, hoping to see in her some trace of the King.

Resolutely, she pushed the thought aside. Whoever her father was, and whatever Anne Boleyn had been, Elizabeth was a helpless little child who had to be told that her mother was dead. Mary resolved to be gentle with her, and her innate kindness asserted itself.

Elizabeth was swinging her legs restlessly, wondering when Mary was going to say something. Something in the way her sister was regarding her, at once mournful and questioning, made her feel uncomfortable. Then Mary laid a hand on hers.

'Elizabeth, sweeting, do you know what treason is?' Mary had been agonising for days as to how she would broach this painful subject. She had even thought of beginning by saying that Anne had gone to live with God in Paradise, but Mary did not believe this herself – the witch was surely in Hell – and her inborn honesty demanded that she speak the truth.

‘No,’ said Elizabeth doubtfully, her innocent eyes wide and perplexed.

‘It is when someone does something bad against the King. Hurts him in some way, or plots wickedness. Do you understand?’

Elizabeth nodded. Plotting wickedness featured largely in the stories Lady Bryan told her, like the naughty fox in *Chanticleer*. She was in familiar territory here.

‘People who commit treason get punished. They are put to death,’ Mary went on.

Death. Elizabeth now knew what that was. The chaplain had explained it to her. It meant your body going to sleep for ever and ever, and your soul – although she still wasn’t quite sure what that was – going to Heaven to live with God and all the saints and angels – if you were good. If you had been bad, you went to a terrible place called Hell where devils were horrid to you all the time and hurt you with their sharp pitchforks. Elizabeth had once seen a painting of Hell in a church, and had had to hide her eyes because it was so frightening. Ever since then, she had tried to be good – but it was very difficult, for there were so many pitfalls into which a headstrong little girl like herself might stumble.

‘Do you understand, Elizabeth?’ Mary was saying. ‘People who commit treason are put to death. Treason is the worst crime of all, worse than murder or stealing, because it is against the King’s Majesty, who is God’s Anointed on Earth.’

Elizabeth nodded.

‘Sweetheart, there is no easy way to say this’ – Mary’s words were coming in a rush now – ‘but your mother committed treason against the King our father, and she has suffered the punishment. She has been put to death.’

Elizabeth looked as if she hadn’t heard. She was staring into the distance towards the palace that basked in the sunshine, her face a passive blank.

‘Do you understand?’ Mary asked again, squeezing the little hand beneath hers. Elizabeth drew it away. Suffered

the punishment . . . put to death . . . suffered the punishment . . . put to death . . . Mary's words were beating over and over in her head; she was trying to make sense of them. What did Mary mean? Put to death . . . put to death . . .

Lady Bryan was walking towards them.

'My lady, have you told her?' she enquired gently. Suddenly, Elizabeth slid off the bench and ran to her governess, burying her face in her skirts and bursting into violent tears.

'Mother! My mother! Mother! Where is she? I want her!' she wailed piteously, her small body trembling in fear. 'I want her! Get her!'

Both Lady Bryan and the Lady Mary knelt down, doing their best to comfort the stricken child, but she would not be consoled.

'Where is my mother?' she wailed.

'She is dead, my lamb,' wept Lady Bryan. 'She is with God.'

At this, Elizabeth began to scream. 'I want her! I want her!'

'You must pray for her,' faltered Mary.

But Elizabeth was beyond speech, howling her heart out.

They were all very kind to her in the days that followed. Lady Bryan found her special tasks to do in the house, the cook served her favourite foods, her sister's female fool made merry jests and capered before her at mealtimes, brandishing her jingling bells, but it was Mary whom she wanted, Mary who was kindest of all, who spent hours playing with her, and who rescued her from the tedium of the well-meaning Sir John's dull stories.

'What shall it be tonight, my lady? *Patient Grizelda* or *Theseus and the Minotaur*?' he had asked.

'I had *Theseus* yesterday, *again*,' declared Elizabeth, sighing. 'Read *Patient Grizelda*.'

‘Listen carefully,’ he said, opening the book. ‘This is a fitting tale for a little girl such as yourself, who might profit by its example of an obedient wife.’

‘The Lady Mary reads stories much better than you do,’ his audience pronounced, fidgeting, before he had completed the first page.

‘Allow me,’ smiled Mary, taking the book. Sir John withdrew gratefully, but not a little disgruntled at the criticism.

Later that evening, Mary joined him and Lady Bryan for a cup of wine before bedtime.

‘Did the Lady Elizabeth enjoy her story?’ he asked.

‘No,’ smiled Mary. ‘She was very definite on the subject of how *she* would have treated Grizelda’s husband.’

‘Oh dear,’ frowned Sir John ruefully. He knew his charge well. ‘I hope it diverted her, at least.’

‘I think so,’ said Mary. ‘It took her mind off things for a time.’

There were no further storms of tears. With the resilience of childhood, Elizabeth allowed herself to be further diverted and, although subdued, responded to the comfort afforded her by others. Praised be God, Lady Bryan said to herself, the worst moment is surely over.

‘I have something to tell you,’ Mary said, fanning herself with her kerchief as they sat in the shade in the flower garden. It was still hot, and the scent of roses and honeysuckle hung heavy on the air.

Elizabeth looked at her suspiciously.

‘Nothing bad. Good news in fact. We have a new stepmother.’

‘I don’t want a stepmother,’ said Elizabeth through pursed lips. ‘I want you!’

Mary smiled, touched by this, and patted the child’s cheek.

‘Sister, you should rejoice. She is a kind lady. She has been so good to me, and she is ready to be a mother to you too.’

Elizabeth thought about this.

‘What is her name?’ she asked.

‘Queen Jane,’ Mary answered. ‘Jane Seymour that was.’

Seymour. Where had Elizabeth heard that name before?

‘The Queen has made me most welcome at court, and she wants you to visit her there also,’ Mary continued, then paused. Of the price of her return to court, and being received back into her father’s favour, she could not bear to think.

‘Sign!’ Master Secretary Cromwell had urged. ‘Submit to your father, as is your duty. Admit that your mother’s marriage was incestuous and unlawful, and that you were wrong to defy his Majesty. Then all will go well for you.’

If she signed, as they were hounding her to do, nothing would ever be well again: she had known that for a certainty. How could she be cowardly and give in, when her mother had held fast and stood firm on these very issues, for so many years, and in the face of great adversity?

But Mary also knew that her submission would win back her father’s love, so she had written, begging for permission to come to him, had even offered to prostrate herself at his feet and ask his pardon for any offences she had committed against him; but he had not answered. All he was interested in was her written submission to his demands: he must see with his own eyes her unequivocal acknowledgement of the rightness of his decision to set aside her mother.

She could not bring herself to give it. She was ill, with the megrims and monthly aches from which she had suffered these many years, and she could bear no more pain.

‘Sign!’ insisted the Emperor’s ambassador, Chapuys, sent by his master to champion the cause of the late Queen Katherine and her daughter. The Emperor was Katherine’s