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Six Tudor Queens:

Anne Boleyn: A King's Obsession

Written by Alison Weir

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ALISON WEIR

SIX TUDOR QUEENS

ANNE BOLEYN
A KING'S OBSESSION

REVIEW

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1512

EUROPE

Maximilian I
Holy Roman Emperor
b.1459

m.

Mary
of Burgundy
1457–82

Ferdinand II
King of Aragon
b.1452

m.

Isabella I
Queen of Castile
b.1451

Juan
Prince of Asturias
1478–1497

m.

Margaret
of Austria
b.1480

Juana
b.1479

m.

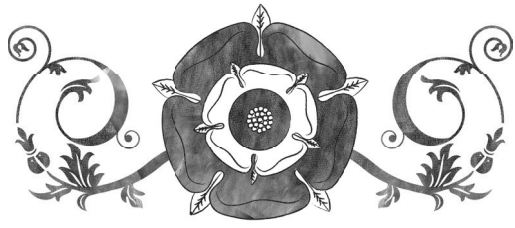
Philip
of Habsburg
b.1478

Katherine
of Aragon
b.1485

m.

Eleanor
b.1499

Charles
b.1500



ENGLAND

Thomas Howard
Earl of Surrey
b.1443

Thomas Butler
Earl of Ormond
b.1426

Sir Geoffrey Boleyn
d.1463

Edmund Tudor
Earl of Richmond
d.1456

m.

Margaret Beaufort
d.1509

Edward IV
King of England
d.1483

Margaret Butler
d.1539/40

m.

Sir William Boleyn
d.1505

Henry VII
d.1509

m.

Elizabeth
d.1503

Anne
d.1511

m.

Thomas Howard
b.1473

Elizabeth Howard
b.1480

m.

Sir Thomas Boleyn
b.1477

(1) **Arthur**
Prince of Wales
1486–1502

(2) **Henry VIII**
King of England
b.1491

Margaret
b.1489

Mary
b.1496

Thomas
b.1496

Mary
b.1499

Henry
b.1500

ANNE BOLEYN
b.1501

George
b.1503

To Rankin, my wonderful husband, and Julian,
my brilliant literary agent, without whom none of my books
would be possible.

Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I may spend his time in vain.
And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written her fair neck round about:
Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.

(Sir Thomas Wyatt)

'. . . Verily,
I swear, 'tis better to be lowly born
And range with humble livers in content,
Than to be perk'd up in a glistering grief,
And wear a golden sorrow.'

(William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, Act 2, Scene 3)

Part One

‘Not of Ordinary Clay’

Chapter 1

1512

Her skin *was* rather sallow, Anne thought as she studied herself in the silver mirror, and she had too many moles, but at least her face was a fashionable oval. At eleven she had no womanly figure to speak of, but that hopefully would change in the next year or so. Mary, after all, was already buxom at thirteen.

She drew back, considering herself. People had often said, within her hearing, that Mary was the more beautiful of the two Boleyn sisters. Yet they were both brunettes, with long glossy hair, high cheekbones and pointed chins, and both slender and graceful, for the deportment fit for royal courts had been drummed into them. So what was it that made a girl beautiful? What made the arrangement of Mary's features better than hers? It had begun to bother Anne, now that she was growing up and was constantly being enjoined to prepare herself for a glorious future in which royal favour and a wealthy husband of rank loomed large.

Maybe it was the moles and the sallow skin. The sallowness could be rectified by a lotion of powdered egg whites and alum. At least she had a pretty mouth, and the black eyes that her Grandmother Butler always said were her best feature.

'And you know already how to use them for effect, child.' Anne had not quite understood what that meant, but then Grandmother was Irish and a little fey and often said some startling things. Everyone tolerated it because she had been a great heiress and one of the chief sources of the family fortunes.

Anne propped up the mirror on a chest and twirled in front of it. She did look good in the green gown, which made her waist seem so

slender. The dark colour became her too. The only thing that was wrong was the cut of the sleeves, which were tight to the wrist and did not cover the deformity of which she was always so painfully aware. She was forever curling it into her palm, the little finger of her right hand, so that none should see the tiny extra nail. If only she could have a gown with hanging sleeves that would cover it! But Mother said it was foolish to worry about such a little thing. It was not a little thing to Anne, and it had loomed larger than ever since the day when Mary, bested in one of their interminable arguments, had called it a witch's mark.

Anne pushed the hateful memory aside. She would not dwell on it on this beautiful late-summer day. She had a free hour before her lesson with the chaplain, and was determined to waste not a minute of it. In a trice she had summoned her maid, changed into her everyday worsted, descended the stairs and crossed the stone drawbridge across the castle moat; then she picked up her skirts and ran through the gardens into the meadows by the River Eden, where she loved to wander.

From here she had a grand view of moated Hever Castle, her family's seat, and the lush wooded Kentish countryside that cradled it. But of greater interest was the sight of her beloved brother George lying sprawled in the grass, twanging his lute, his dark brown hair tousled, his clothes crumpled.

'They are looking for you indoors,' she told him, kneeling down. 'You should be at your books. You'll be beaten if you don't go back.'

George grinned up at her. 'I had an idea for a song. Listen!'

He played well for a boy of nine, and his composition had the sophistication one would have expected from someone far older. He was gifted, this brother of hers. He could make his mark as a musician if he did not carve out a career at court, as their father expected.

They had always been close, Anne and George. They looked alike and thought alike.

'I know, I know – I can't spend my days making music and writing poetry,' he sighed, mimicking Father's voice.

'Much good it would do you! And in the end you would not be satisfied. It would never be enough for you. So stop playing truant. Father Davy is livid.'

For all her mock reproof, she felt sorry for George. She knew how deeply it gnawed at him, being the youngest of three sons. It was sixteen-year-old Thomas who would inherit Hever and all their father's lands and wealth – and it was Thomas who, to George's envy, had been sent to the household of the mighty Duke of Buckingham at nearby Penshurst to learn courtly manners and the martial arts, which would befit him for the glorious future that awaited him. And then there was clever Henry, twelve years old and destined for the university at Oxford, since Father had decided to dedicate him to the Church – and save himself the burden of having to provide for him. There had been other sons too, but they slept in St Peter's Church, to their mother's great grief. Anne had never got used to the appalling sight of her tiny dead siblings lying in their cradles, all decked out in macabre finery, to receive the final prayers and farewells of their family.

Lady Boleyn doted on George, her youngest, more than she did on Thomas and Henry. But in George's breast there burned a fierce resentment against his older brothers. Unlike them, he must make his own way in the world. Father reminded him of it often.

Given her rivalry with Mary, and George's envy of their older brothers, Anne often felt that it was a case of her and George, the two youngest Boleyns, against the world. Because she did not have looks and he was not the heir, they had pulled together since they were very little. Some took them for twins.

'Come on!' she commanded, pulling him up, and together they raced back to the castle.

Father Davy was waiting for them as they sped across the courtyard and tumbled into Father's new entrance hall. Their tutor was a rotund little man with a merry face and cheeks rosy as apples.

'Ah, you've deigned to grace us with your presence,' he said to George. 'And mightily timely too, for we've just had word that your father is expected home this evening, and we wouldn't want to greet him with the news that you're in disgrace, would we?'

'No, Father Davy.' George was trying to look contrite.

'Mistress Anne, you may join us,' Father Davy said. 'You can set an example to this young knave.'

'Where's Mary?' George asked, rolling his eyes.

'Reading,' said Father Davy. 'I have given her a book on kings and queens. It will improve her mind.' It was no secret that he had almost given up on Mary.

Anne followed them into the private parlour used by the family in the evenings, and sat down at the oak table. She knew she was fortunate, being a girl, to receive a good education. Father had very advanced ideas, but then he was always concerned that his children should do well in life – which, of course, would reflect favourably on him. Accomplished in foreign tongues himself – which was why he had been away these last weeks at the court of the Regent of the Netherlands at Mechlin in the Duchy of Burgundy – he was particularly anxious that his sons and daughters become proficient too.

Anne struggled with French, despite excelling at everything else. Mary was good at French, but dismal in all other respects. Anne could compose passable poetry and songs, thanks to Father Davy being a famous composer of church music and a gifted teacher. Mary battled, murdering her lute; it did not help that she was tone deaf. Anne danced gracefully; Mary galumphed about the floor. Anne sang like a lark; Mary's voice was flat. But Mary had the looks, everyone said, so it didn't matter that she was an idiot. Most men would not see beyond her beauty and the dowry Father could give her. Thus it did not matter that, when the time for lessons arrived, she was rarely to be found.

Most of the daughters of the local gentry in the Boleyns' circle could barely wield a pen, Anne reflected, as her quill traced her graceful Italianate hand across the paper. Today's exercise was composing a letter in French, which was a challenge, but she was determined to persevere. She enjoyed learning for its own sake, and revelled in the praise Father Davy lavished on her.

From the kitchens nearby they could hear a great clatter and commotion. The household was preparing for the return of its master, and Mother would be giving orders and inspecting the cooking pots, much to the cook's ill-concealed annoyance. There would be a feast tonight, Anne thought happily.

*

Dressed in the new green gown, Anne stole a peep at the great hall, where the tables had been beautifully laid with snowy-white linen. The best silver was set out on the high table above the great gilt salt, with polished pewter on the lower trestles set at right angles to it. Banks of greenery trailed along the centre of the boards, interspersed with candles and ewers of wine. Hever was a small castle, and the hall not large compared to some she had seen, but it was sufficiently grand for an up-and-coming diplomat and favourite of the King, with its great stone fireplace and imposing carved screen. The early evening sunshine cast a golden glow through the tall windows set high in the thick walls, reflecting its jewel-like glints on the impressive display of family plate on the buffet and the expensive wall hangings. Father liked to impress his neighbours with his wealth. They were all coming tonight: the Wyatts from Allington, the Sackvilles from Buckhurst Park and the Hautes from Ightham Mote.

Normally the family dined in the parlour, seated at the long polished table. It was a cosy room, its walls adorned with wainscots of oak and painted friezes, and hung with another of the costly tapestries of which Father was inordinately proud. But that was all familiar and commonplace; feasting in the great hall was an occasion, and Anne was impatient for it to begin.

Father was home, and she had been summoned to see him in his study before dinner. There he sat, in his high carved chair, nodding as she made her curtsey: the man who had dominated her life for as long as she could remember, whose lightest word was law to his family and servants, and to whom Anne and her brothers and sister had been brought up to render unconditional obedience. When she and Mary married, their husbands would take over his role. It had been drummed into them both that women were weak creatures and should always be subject to the wise dominion of men.

When Sir Thomas Boleyn was at home, the household revolved around him, but that was a rare occurrence. When he was not abroad using the diplomatic skills that had so endeared him to King Henry, he was usually at court, building on his reputation as a jouster and courtier

and all-round good fellow. At thirty-four, he was still a handsome and agile man, and sat a horse superbly. He was outstandingly learned – it seemed to his children that he knew everything – and even the great Dutch scholar Erasmus had dedicated two books to him. Thanks to these virtues he had risen high and fast in royal service, becoming one of King Henry's best friends and jousting partners, and never tired of reminding everyone of it. He had been knighted at the King's coronation, three years earlier, and then appointed Esquire of the Body to the monarch.

'It is a most sought-after post,' he was prone to boasting, 'for it brings me into daily contact with the King. I enjoy great influence. I have His Grace's ear.' He would gleefully expand on the patronage he was in a position to exercise. Anne understood that there were many people who wanted Sir Thomas Boleyn to ask the King for favours, and that they were ready to pay him a lot of money to do that.

She was pleased to see Father's pugnacious face broaden into a wolfish smile as she rose from her curtsey. 'I have some good news,' he said. 'The Regent Margaret was most interested to hear of your accomplishments and has offered to take you into her household as one of her eighteen maids-of-honour. It is a signal favour, much sought after.'

'Me, sir?' Anne echoed. 'Surely Mary . . . ?'

'I know, it is highly unusual for the younger sister to be advanced before the elder, and Mary speaks good French. But,' and he gave Anne a calculating look, 'I believe that *you* have what it takes to succeed at court and be a credit to me. Besides, I have other plans for Mary. And the Regent specially asked for you.'

Anne felt excitement bubbling up.

'When am I to go, sir?' she breathed, envisaging the glorious palaces, the fine gowns, the glittering lords and ladies, the Regent smiling as she made her obeisance with everyone looking on.

'Next spring,' her father said, and the bubble burst. That was *months* away. 'There will be many preparations to make. Your mother will know what is required. I'd rather it be you than the Devil who makes work for idle hands.' He and Mother barely spoke to each other unless they had to.

'You must work hard at your French,' he went on. 'You will complete your education at the court of Burgundy. There is no finer place, for it offers many opportunities for a young girl of good birth, and is universally well regarded. You will be well placed to attract a marriage that will advance the interests of our family. I hope you appreciate your good fortune.'

'Oh, yes, sir!' Anne exclaimed. It was almost too much to take in.

'I would remind you that the competition for places in the Regent's household is fierce, and there are many who are ready to offer substantial financial inducements to secure the honour of an appointment for their daughters. Each one of her *filles d'honneur* must know how to dress fashionably, be accomplished at dancing and singing, and be able to entertain her mistress and important visitors with witty conversation – and she must understand how to conduct herself when in attendance on the Regent in public and on state occasions.' Father leaned forward in his chair, his rugged face intent. 'It was for such an opportunity as this that I provided you and Mary with a good education, although much Mary has profited from it. But you, Anne . . . you will shine. And I have no doubt that the considerable outlay required of me to provide you with suitable court attire will be well spent.'

'Yes, Father. Thank you, Father.'

'You may go. It's nearly time for dinner.'

Anne sped upstairs, still buzzing with excitement, to the chamber she shared with Mary, whom she found fastening around her neck the gold pendant in the shape of a bull that she always wore on important occasions. The girls had been given one each by their father; the bull was his family's heraldic emblem, and a pun on its name.

Mary leaned into the mirror. Her black eyes, with their alluring slant, were watching Anne's reflection.

Anne was savouring her news, wondering how to break it to Mary with maximum impact. She could no longer contain herself. 'I'm going to court!' she announced.

Mary swung round, shock and fury in her face. '*You?*' she shrilled. 'But – but *I* am the elder.'

'Father knows that, but the Regent asked for me.'

'The Regent?'

'I am summoned to the court of the Netherlands to serve her. It is a great honour to be asked. Father said so.'

'But what of *me*?' Mary's lovely face was flushed with outrage. 'Am I not to go too?'

'No. Father said he has other plans for you.'

'What plans?' Mary hissed.

'I don't know. He didn't say. Why don't you ask him?'

'I will! He cannot pass me over like this.'

But he had. Anne hugged that delicious knowledge to herself. For the first time in her life, it felt good to be the younger and less beautiful sister.

Elizabeth Howard, Lady Boleyn, unravelled the bolt of tawny velvet and held it up against Anne.

'It suits you,' she said. The mercer standing respectfully at her side beamed. 'We'll have this one, and the good black, the yellow damask and the crimson tinsel. Pray send your bill, Master Johnson.'

'Very good, my lady, very good,' the merchant replied, gathering up the fabrics that had been rejected and withdrawing from the parlour.

'I'm glad the Regent gave us good notice,' Mother said. 'It allows us time to get these gowns made up. You should be grateful that your father has made such generous provision for you.' She tilted her daughter's chin upwards and smiled at her. 'You have fine eyes, and innate grace,' she said. 'You will do well and make me proud.' Anne's heart was full. She loved her mother more than anyone else in the world.

Elizabeth Howard herself was dark in colouring, but her long Howard face was rounded with generous lips and fine eyes. In youth she had been a celebrated beauty, and the poet laureate, Master Skelton, had dedicated verses to her, likening her charms to those of the gorgeous Cressida of Troy. It was Mother's little conceit. Her great conceit was her pride in her aristocratic lineage. She let no one forget that she came of the noble House of Howard, and it was no secret that, had her family

not been in royal disfavour at the time, plain Thomas Boleyn, as he then was, could never have aspired to marry her, even though his grandsire was the Earl of Ormond. But with her father stripped of his titles and not long released from the Tower for fighting on the wrong side in the battle that had put the late King Henry on the throne, her chances of making a decent marriage had been slender; and so she had permitted herself to be tied to a young and ambitious man whose recent ancestors had been in *trade*.

But thanks to that, the Boleyns were rich. By dint of their business acumen and by marrying wealthy heiresses, they had steadily acquired wealth and lands. Anne's great-grandfather, Sir Geoffrey, had been a mercer like the fellow who had recently departed with his wares, but he had risen to be Lord Mayor of London and been knighted. That was the way one made good in the world, and it was new and able men such as the Boleyns, rather than the old nobility, who were now favoured by the young King Henry.

But for all that Father had done – and was still doing – to make himself a suitable husband in the eyes of his high-and-mighty in-laws, there was no doubt in anyone's mind, even her children's, that Mother had married beneath her.

'You will be the equal of any of the other maids,' she said to Anne now. 'You can be justly proud of your Howard ancestry. Remember, we Howards are descended from King Edward Longshanks and from all the English monarchs back to William the Conqueror, so you have royal blood in your veins and must be worthy of it.'

'Yes, Mother,' Anne said, bobbing a curtsey. She walked slowly back to her bedchamber, thinking on what Lady Boleyn had said. She was deeply proud of her heritage, especially now that the Howards had been rehabilitated and were firmly back in favour at court. In the long gallery she paused before a portrait of Grandfather Howard, the Earl of Surrey. She was in awe of this just and honest aristocrat, the head of the family, and of his son, whose picture was further along – Uncle Thomas, her mother's brother, a stern-faced, no-nonsense soldier and courtier. She had only a few memories of his wife, the aunt for whom she herself had been named, but she could never forget that the late

Princess Anne of York had been daughter to King Edward IV and sister to the present King's mother. It made King Henry her own cousin, in a sort of way.

Anne had long been aware that any love her parents might have had for each other in the beginning had long since died, for they avoided each other as much as possible. It was easy to understand why Mother looked down on Father. What was more difficult to comprehend was why Father treated Mother, that highly prized bride, with ill-disguised contempt.

It disturbed Anne that Mother had once been compared to the Trojan beauty Cressida. For, having pledged her undying love for Prince Troilus, Cressida, cruelly captured by the Greeks, had treacherously betrayed him with the heroic Diomedes. Father Davy had read them the story when they had studied the Greek myths.

'Her name has become a byword for a faithless woman,' the good friar had said. Anne stifled a gasp. Clearly he did not know what Skelton had written of her mother. The five of them – Tom and Henry had been at home then – had looked at one another, appalled.

Yet Anne had never heard of any hint of a blemish on Mother's reputation. Lady Boleyn presided over her household with competent authority, and preferred country life to the teeming existence of the court, although she did sometimes go there when needed as an occasional lady-in-waiting to Queen Katherine.

At home Anne and Mary helped Mother in her still room, where they made comfits and jams while she distilled sweet waters or prepared medicines and poultices from the herbs they had gathered in the gardens.

'It is essential that you both learn the skills that will enable you to run a great house,' she was always reminding them. 'A lady should keep her servants busy not only by precept, but by example.' But if Anne might happen to glance up from what she was doing, she would occasionally surprise Mother with her hands idle, a faraway look on her face and a tune playing on her smiling lips, as if she had withdrawn into a secret life. And again she would wonder if her mother had a lover.

*

The months that she had envisaged dragging sped by. Expensive tutors were engaged to give her and Mary advanced instruction in singing and dancing, skills that Anne acquired easily and enjoyed.

'Bravo!' cried the tutor, as she twirled and leapt and skipped in *branles*, farandoles and *basse* dances. It came easily to her, as if she had been born to it. Mary, who was all arms and legs at awkward angles, would glower at her. Father had not revealed what his plans for Mary were, and Anne now doubted that he had any, while Mary's angry jealousy simmered and often bubbled over. Thrown together as the sisters were, it did not make for a peaceful existence.

Sir Thomas, however, was impervious. Anne was to go into the world as his ambassador, a walking testimonial to his greatness. If there was any talent that might be useful at court, she was to acquire it. Father Davy was deputed to enhance her musical skills.

'You have a true voice,' he said, and Anne thrilled to hear it, for his praise was never won lightly.

He also encouraged Anne and George's love of poetry. The two of them would sit together for hours composing and transcribing verses and binding them into books. Father Davy told Anne she had a rare talent for it, especially for a woman. He refrained from remarking on how Mary thought that cow rhymed with low.

In these months in which her wardrobe was being prepared, Anne became an expert embroiderer. She made biliments to edge necklines and hoods, quilted sleeves and pouches, and decorated her lawn night-rails in bright scarlets and greens. She discovered the pleasure of enhancing her clothes with novel details: a border here, a contrasting colour there, and – always – long hanging sleeves to hide her extra nail. Her nurse, Mrs Orchard, a plump, motherly soul who had been with her since birth and was to accompany her as chaperone on her journey, did all the plain sewing, stitching and hemming under-smocks and petticoats. As the weeks went by, the pile of finished garments stowed in Anne's new travelling chest grew and grew.

In the autumn, Father returned to the court of the Netherlands, leaving Mother in charge of the preparations for Anne's departure.

'Remember,' he said to Anne before he left, 'your task is to perfect

the attributes that will secure you a good marriage. I have had you educated to that purpose, and to instil virtue.' Father was very zealous on virtue. He was always warning his daughters of the dire consequences – mostly for him – if they fell from it. They were his assets – his jewels, as he liked to put it – and their success was essential to him.

In these last months at Hever, Anne found herself resenting the dull routine. She longed for her escape into the glamorous world of courts. She and Mary found their chief excitement in putting on their best gowns and, escorted by a groom and a maid, riding the three miles into nearby Edenbridge for the market that was held there every Thursday, just to show off their finery. When they were not at lessons or sewing, they played cards, or visited the houses of neighbours with their mother – and fought constantly over silly things until Lady Boleyn lost patience and sent them to their rooms to cool down.

Their existence was dominated by the unchanging round of the seasons. That autumn of 1512 was heralded as usual by Michaelmas, soon followed by Harvest-tide, when St Peter's Church by the castle was filled with ears of wheat and hymns of thanksgiving. That was the grease season, when all the local gentry went hunting. Father had ensured that Anne and Mary were both competent horsewomen, and they were allowed to participate in the chase or go hawking in the company of their neighbours. In the evenings they savoured the rich game from their bag, served on thick bread trenchers saturated with meat juices.

On wet days they took their exercise in the long gallery above the great hall, a new-fangled improvement to the castle that Father had decided he must have. Up and down his daughters walked, past the pictures and hangings that adorned the walls, bickering and gossiping and occasionally slapping and pinching each other.

As autumn fell, fires and braziers were lit, and the castle was filled with the sweet aroma of beeswax candles. The three young Boleyns played cards, dice and chess in the flickering light, or teased each other with riddles, before tumbling into their feather beds. On many nights Anne lay awake, with the damask bed curtains pulled back and the

moonlight glinting on the diamond-paned windows, imagining the glittering life to come in the magnificent court that lay miles across the sea in another land.

Hard on the heels of All Souls, when the nights were dark and ghosts were said to walk in the woodland that faced the castle, came the season of Advent, followed by the Christmas and Twelfth Night celebrations. Before Anne knew it, it was Candlemas, then Lady Day – and soon it would be May Day, when she and Mary always observed the ancient custom of rising early to bring in the May blossoms.

With the May came Father, back from the Netherlands.

It was time, at last, for her to depart.