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PROLOGUE

17th July 1586

Chartley Manor, Staffordshire

Six gentlemen. Six of them, ready to undertake that tragic execution in her name. She smiles at the euphemism. But then: why not call it that? Elizabeth Tudor is a heretic, a traitor and a thief, occupying a throne she has stolen; dispatching her would be no regicide, but a just and deserved punishment under the law. Not the law of England, to be sure, but God's law, which is greater.

Mary sits at the small table in her room, in her prison, thinking, thinking, turning over and over in her mind the pages of the great ledger of injustices heaped against her. Eventually, she dips her quill in the inkpot. She wears gloves with the fingers cut off, because it is always cold here, in Staffordshire; the summer so far has been bleak and grey, or at least what she can see of it from her casement, since she is not permitted to walk outside. She flexes her fingers and hears the knuckles crack; she rubs the sore and swollen joints. A pool of weak light falls on the paper before her; she has havered so long over this reply that the candle has almost

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burned down, and she only has one left until Paulet, her keeper, brings the new ration in the morning. Sometimes he pretends to forget, just as he does with the firewood, to see how long she will sit in the cold and dark without protesting. And when she does ask meekly for the little that is her due, he uses it against her; charges her with being demanding, spoilt, needy, and says he will tell her cousin. But should a queen plead meekly with the likes of Sir Amias Paulet, that puffed-up Puritan? Should a queen be starved of sunlight, of liberty, of respect, and endure it with patience? Twenty years of imprisonment has not taught her to bear it any better, nor will she ever accept it. The day she bows to their treatment of her, she is no longer worthy of her royal title.

She sets the quill down; she has worked herself into a fury and her shaking hand has spattered ink drops on the clean page; she will have to begin again, when she is calmer. She pushes back the chair and heaves herself with difficulty to her feet, wincing at the pain in her inflamed legs. Each step to the window hurts more than it did the day before; or perhaps she is imagining that. One imagines so much, cooped up here in these four walls. She smooths her skirts over her broad hips; and there is another injustice, that she should still be fat when she eats so little! She doesn't trust the food they bring; one day, she is certain, she will eat or drink something and not wake up. That would suit her cousin Elizabeth very well, so she will not give her the satisfaction. And yet, Mary thinks, curling her lip at her rippled reflection in the dark of the windowpane, she has grown heavy and lumpen on nothing but air, half-crippled by rheumatism, grey and faded, an old woman at forty-four. No trace left of the famous beauty that once drove men to madness. But Elizabeth is ugly too, she has heard; near-bald, teeth blackened, her skin so eaten away by the ceruse she uses to hide her age that she will not be seen by any except her closest women without a full mask of face-paint. There will be no children

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for her now; at least that is one contest that Mary can say she won, even if she hasn't seen her son for nearly twenty years.

She cups her hands around her face to peer out at the night, watching a barn owl ghosting over the moat, when there is a soft knock at the door. She starts, hastens back to the table to hide the papers, but it is only Claude Nau, her French secretary. He bobs a brief bow, takes in her guilty expression.

'You are writing him a reply, Your Majesty?'

'I am considering.' She draws herself up, haughty. He is going to tell her off, she knows, and she has had enough of men speaking to her as if she is a child. She is Queen of Scotland, Dowager Queen of France, and rightful Queen of England, and they should not forget it.

'I counsel against that.'

She watches Nau; a handsome man, always quietly spoken, infuriatingly self-contained, even when she works herself into one of her fits of passion.

'I know you do. But I make my own decisions.'

'Majesty.' He inclines his head. 'I smell a trap.'

'Oh, you will see conspiracies everywhere. Did you read what he promises, Claude? He has men to do the deed, and earnest assurance of foreign aid, and riders to take me to liberty. Everything is in place.' She allows herself to imagine it, as she has so many times, crossing back to the window. 'See, I have an idea' – she taps the glass, excited – 'if we know the exact date to expect him, we can have one of the servants start a fire in the stables. Everyone will rush out and in the commotion, Anthony Babington and his friends can break down my chamber door and whisk me away.' She spins around, a wide, girlish smile on her face that fades the instant she sees his look. 'What? You do not like my plan?'

'It is a very good plan, Majesty. Only . . .' He folds his hands.

'Speak.'

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'We have heard such promises before. This Babington is proposing an assassination.'

'*Execution*.'

He waves a hand. 'Call it what you will. But your own cousin. England's queen. In your name.'

'She is no queen.'

He adopts the patient, pained expression that so irritates her. 'Of course not. But if you agree to their proposal, if you so much as acknowledge it in writing, you make yourself an accessory to treason, and there is only one punishment for that offence.'

'My royal cousin loves me too much to allow that.'

'She loves you.' Nau does not contradict her outright, but he allows his gaze to travel pointedly around the room in which she is held captive.

Mary's eyes flash; he has overstepped the mark. 'Leave me.' She flaps a hand to the door. 'I have my letter to write. Come back in an hour and you can encrypt it.'

'I implore you not to put anything on paper which would implicate you in this reckless business. Babington and his friends are impetuous boys. We would do better to proceed with caution, keep our options open.'

'And I order you to get out. There is no *we* here, Claude. They are *my* options, and *I* will choose. Obey your queen.'

Nau sighs audibly, bows, and backs out of the royal presence. When the door clicks shut behind him, Mary smiles, pleased with herself. She sits again at the table and dips her quill, but she cannot think how to begin. She wants Elizabeth to love her, it's true. She wants Elizabeth dead. She wants only her freedom; she wants the throne of England. She is ill, and desperate, and ready to clutch at any straw Providence tosses her way.

She glances up and sees her embroidered cloth of state hanging on the wall over her bed. Every time the snake Paulet comes into the room, he rips it down – she is not permitted

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the trappings of a queen, he says. And every time he leaves, her women patiently gather it up, mend the tears and hang it again. Now, this Babington is offering her the real prospect of seeing it where it belongs, above her throne at last. She has waited long enough. She is done with caution. What she wants at this moment, more than anything, is to win.

She takes a fresh sheet of paper and writes the date: 17th July 1586. It is a letter that will kill a queen.

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