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Written by Nancy Bilyeau

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The CROWN



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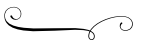
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I



LONDON, MAY 25, 1537

When a burning is announced, the taverns off Smithfield order extra barrels of ale, but when the person to be executed is a woman and one of noble birth, the ale comes by the cartload. I would ride in one of those carts on Friday of Whitsun week, the twenty-eighth year of the reign of King Henry the Eighth, to offer prayers for the soul of the condemned traitor, Lady Margaret Bulmer.

I heard the cartsman's cry go out as I made my way on Cheapside Street, clutching the London map I'd sketched from a book in secret two nights before. I moved faster now that I'd reached such a wide and cobbled street, but my legs throbbed. I'd spent the morning trudging through mud.

"Smithfield—are ye bound for Smithfield?" It was a cheerful voice, as if the destination were a Saint George's Day fair. Just ahead, in front of a tannery, I saw who had shouted: a burly man flicking the backs of four horses hitched to a large cart. A half-dozen heads peeked above the rails.

"Hold!" I shouted as loudly as I could. "I wish to go to Smithfield."

The cartsman whipped around; his eyes searched the crowd. I waved, and his face split into a wet smile. As I drew nearer, my stomach clenched. I'd vowed I would speak to no one this entire day, seek no assistance. The risk of discovery was too

great. But Smithfield lay outside the walls of the city, to the north and west, still a fair distance away.

When I reached him, the cartsman looked me up and down, and his smile sagged. I wore a heavy wool kirtle, the only one available to me for the journey. It was a bodice and skirt made for the dead of winter, not spring, and not a day when bursts of warmth were anchored by sheets of billowing mists. Mud soaked my tangled hem. I could only be grateful no one could see beneath the heavy fabric, to my shift drenched with sweat.

But I knew it wasn't only my dishevelled garments that gave the cartsman pause. To many, I look strange. My hair is black as polished onyx; my eyes are brown with flecks of green. My olive skin neither reddens by Saint Swithin's Day, nor pales by Advent. Mine is the colouring of my Spanish mother. But not her delicate features. No, my face is that of my English father: a wide forehead, high cheekbones, and strong chin. It's as if the mismatch of my parents' marriage fought on the foundation of my face, plain for all to see. In a land of pink-and-white girls, I stand out like a raven. There was a time when that troubled me, but at twenty-six years of age, I was no longer subject to such petty concerns.

"A shilling to ride, mistress," the cartsman said. "Pay up and we'll be off."

His demand took me by surprise, though, of course, it shouldn't have.

"I am without coins," I stammered.

The cartsman barked a laugh. "Do ye think I do this for amusement? I've run low on ale"—he pounded a wooden barrel behind him—"and I must earn enough to pay for the cart." On the far side of the barrel, I could see his passengers craning to get a look at me.

"Wait," I said, and fished for the small cloth purse in the pocket I'd stitched into my dress. Swirling my fingers around

the purse, I found a slender ring. I didn't want to give him anything finer. Some important bribes lay ahead.

I held out the ring. "Will this do?" In an instant his scowl turned to delight, and the slight golden ring of my dead mother disappeared into the driver's dirty palm.

When I climbed into the back of his cart, I could see pity and contempt playing across the faces of the other passengers. My ring must be worth more than the ride. I found a clean pile of straw in the corner and looked down, trying to avoid their curious stares, as the cart resumed its journey.

An elbow poked my side. A sturdy woman sidled closer, one of middling years, the only other female in the cart. Smiling, she held out a piece of brown bread. I'd had nothing to eat since last night's supper. Ordinarily, I gloried in the pangs of hunger, the mastery over my weak mortal flesh, but my mission required a certain vigour. I took the bread with a grateful nod. A mouthful of food and a gulp of watery ale from her wooden tankard brought strength to my dazed body.

I leaned back against the railing. We passed a small market that appeared to sell nothing but spices and herbs. Now that the rain had stopped, the sellers threw off the blankets keeping their narrow stalls dry. A rich mix of borage, sage, thyme, rosemary, parsley, and chives surged in the air, and then dissolved as we rumbled on. The urgent smells of the city rose again. A row of four-storey buildings came into view—more prosperous than any I'd seen so far. The sign of the goldsmith hung from a street corner.

A young man sitting across from me grinned and said, loudly, to the whole cart, "We're grateful to King Hal for burning a young beauty at Smithfield. Last person killed was an ugly, old forger."

A knot of swallowed bread rose in my throat, and I covered my mouth.

"But is she a beauty?" demanded someone else.

An elderly man with milky blue eyes twisted a long hair that sprang from the middle of his chin.

"I know someone who has seen Lady Bulmer in the flesh, and yes, she is bonny," he said slowly. "More so than the queen."

"Which queen?" one of the men shouted.

"All three of them," answered another. A nervous laugh raced around the cart. To mock the king's marriages—the divorce of the first wife and the execution of the second to make way for the third—was a crime. Hands and ears had been lopped off for it.

The old man twisted his chin hair harder. "Lady Bulmer must have offended the king grievously for him to burn her out in the open before commoners, not to order the axe for Tower Hill or hang her at Tyburn."

The young man said, "They've dragged all the nobles and gentry down to London, the ones who followed Robert Aske. For king's justice. She's just the first to die."

My breath quickened. What would these Londoners say, what would they do to me, if they knew who I was and where I came from? One thing was certain: I would never reach Smithfield.

I searched my prayers for something to uphold me. *O Lord my God, help me to be obedient without reserve, poor without servility, chaste without compromise.*

"The Bulmer woman's a foul rebel!" shouted the woman who'd shared with me her bread. "She's a Papist northerner who plotted to overthrow our king."

Humble without pretence, joyful without depravity, serious without affectation, active without frivolity, submissive without bitterness, truthful without duplicity.

The old man said mildly: "In the North, they gave their lives for the old ways. They wanted to protect the monasteries."

Everyone erupted in scorn.

"Those fat monks hide pots of gold while the poor starve outside their walls."

"I heard of a nun who had a priest's brat."

"The sisters are whores. Or else they're cripples—idiots, all cast off by their families."

I heard a ragged noise. It was my own laugh, a bitter, joyless one—and unheeded, for there was a shout just then outside the cart. An urchin ran alongside, so fast he shot ahead of our horses. A panicky look over the shoulder revealed the child to be not a boy but a smudge-faced girl, her hair chopped short.

A clod of dirt sailed through the air and hit her shoulder. "Awww," she howled. "Ye curs!"

Two large boys, scrambling up along the side of the cart, laughed. Within a minute, they'd have her. The men in the cart cheered on the chase.

The boys' prey darted out of the street and toward a row of shops.

Another girl beckoned from a doorway. "This way!" she shouted. The urchin darted inside, and the door slammed shut behind them. The boys reached it seconds later and pounded, but it was locked.

I closed my eyes. A different girl was running. Eight years old, breathless, a stitch in my side, I charged down a narrow path between tall hedges of yew, searching for a way out.

I could hear people calling my name, but I couldn't see them. "Hurry, Joanna, hurry—we're to play tennis next!" shouted my boy cousins, so strong, so hard. "Come now, girl, you can manage it," boomed the careless voice of my uncle, Edward Stafford, third Duke of Buckingham and head of the family. "You must find your own way out. We can't send anyone after you and risk the loss of another child."

I was trapped in my uncle's maze. He'd just had it built—"I hired better monks to design mine than Cardinal Wolsey used," he said again and again. Today, September 4, the annual

birthday celebration of the second Duke of Buckingham, my long-dead grandfather, the maze was put to use. We cousins were blindfolded and led to the centre. Then they whipped the cloths off and told us to race out, to see who'd be first. "Tread the maze! Tread the maze!" my uncle cried from outside the tall winding hedges.

I was one of the youngest and immediately fell to the back of the pack. Soon I was alone. I ran this way and that, hoping to see the hedge walls open to the gardens, but my instincts were always wrong and just led me deeper into the maze.

"What's wrong with you, Joanna?"

"Think, girl, think!"

The voices grew louder, more impatient. "Joanna, don't be such a doddypoll," shouted one Stafford boy. An elder hushed him.

I'd become the centre of attention, something I always hated. Had I turned right at this corner, or left? Panic made me forget which paths I'd already tried.

How my head spun with the smell of the roses. Dozens of sternly tamed red bushes dotted the maze. It was almost the end of the season; the rose petals had frayed and loosened. And the hour of the day had passed for peak freshness. But there were so many bushes, and I had passed them so many times. I could almost taste those cloying, dusty, imperious roses.

I turned a corner, fast, and slammed into Margaret.

We both fell down, laughing, the beads of our puffy sleeves hooked together. After we'd disentangled, she helped me up: Margaret was a year older and two inches taller, and always a hundred times cleverer and prettier. My first cousin. My only friend.

"Margaret, where have you gone to?" bellowed the Duke of Buckingham. "You'd better not have slipped back in the maze for Joanna."

"Oh, he's going to be angry with you," I said. "You shouldn't have done it."

Margaret winked. She brushed the dirt off my party finery and hers and led me out, holding my hand the whole way.

At the mouth of the maze, they'd gathered, what looked like the entire Stafford clan and all of our retainers and servants. My uncle the duke, the pre-eminent peer of England, wore cloth of silver and a long ostrich feather in his hat. His youngest brother, Sir Richard Stafford, my father, stood at his side. A long shadow stretching across the garden almost reached them. It was cast by the square tower that soared above us all. Thornbury Castle, in Gloucestershire, was built to withstand attack. Not from a foreign enemy but from covetous kings.

Margaret walked right up to the duke, unafraid. "See, Father, I found Joanna," she said. "You can play tennis now." He looked us both over, eyebrows raised, as everyone waited, tense.

But the Duke of Buckingham laughed. He kissed his cherished daughter, his bastard, raised alongside the four children of his meek duchess. "I know well that you can do anything, Margaret," he said.

My father hugged me tight, too. He'd been sporting all day, and I remember how he smelled of sweat and soil and dry, flattened grass. I felt so relieved, and so happy.

The London cart lurched and shuddered, throwing me down on the straw. My reverie was finished.

We'd left the city walls and taken a side street. The cart's wheels were trapped in the muck. The cart horses whinnied, the driver cursed, the boisterous men moved to the back of the cart.

"No matter," the woman said to me. "We are almost at Smithfield."

I followed the group to the end of the street and then down

another one lined with taverns. It opened into an enormous flat clearing, teeming with people already arrived and awaiting the day's execution. There were hundreds of them: men and women, sailors and seamstresses, children as well. A family pushed ahead of me, the mother carrying a basket of bread, the father with a boy sitting on his shoulders.

Without warning, a foul stench filled my nose, my throat, and my lungs. My eyes watered. It was worse than anything I'd breathed in London so far. With a cry I clutched my burning throat.

"That's the butcher yards to the east," said the woman I had ridden with. "When ye catch the wind, the blood and offal can be rank." She touched my elbow. "Ye be unused to Smithfield, I can see that. Walk with me, stay close."

I shook my head, blinking. I wouldn't bear witness to the end of Margaret's life with such a heartless creature. She shrugged and melted into the mob. I stood alone.

Trembling, I reached into my pocket once more and removed the letter, the one Margaret wrote to me days before the outbreak of the Northern Rebellion, what we call the Pilgrimage of Grace. I unfolded the tight rectangle of cream-coloured paper and admired, as always, her sloping, delicate script.

My most entirely beloved Joanna:

I have learned from my brother that you plan to enter the Dominican Order at Dartford Priory and take vows to become a bride of Christ. I admire you so much for your choice of a holy life. I lit extra candles at morning Mass to honour you, dear cousin.

I only wish that somehow you would find a way to know my second husband, Sir John. He is a good, honest, true man, Joanna. He loves me. He cherishes me. I have finally found peace in the North, the same peace I hope you will find at Dartford Priory.

I cannot but think these are hard, wretched, frightening times. Those who serve God as our Holy Father ordains are scorned and persecuted. There is heresy everywhere. It is different in the North. Every night I say three prayers. I ask God to protect our monasteries. I seek salvation for the soul of my father. And I pray that someday I will see you again, Joanna, and that you will embrace me and forgive me.

Written at my manor in Lastingham in York,
the last Thursday of September
Your cousin and dearest friend for eternity

Margaret Bulmer

I replaced the letter, pulled my hood over my head as far as it could go so that not a single strand of hair showed, and stepped into Smithfield.

2

Standing on the edge of the clearing, filled with people eager for the sport of Margaret's burning, I remembered something my father said about Smithfield. "That was where the Plantagenet court once held their most magnificent jousts, Joanna. That's why they chose it. Not far from the palaces was a 'smooth field.' And it became Smithfield."

My father wasn't a man ready with fine words. But he could describe a joust. He had been a champion in his youth, one of the finest jousters in the kingdom. That was before the execution of my uncle the duke for high treason when I was ten years old, and my parents' banishment from court. Before the fall of the Staffords.

It had been many years since he'd jousted. But the memories were sharp. I'd close my eyes and listen to him tell the story and feel as if I were on horseback: thundering down the course, divided in two by a low wooden fence. Silver armour blazing in the sun. A shield in the left hand, a lance in the right. In the distance, an opponent draws closer . . . closer . . . until the other jouster is a few feet away and down come the lances with a mighty crash.

When I imagined that moment of contact, when a man might die if a lance pierced below armour, I'd shiver and my father would smile. That quick grin was like a boy's, no matter his thick chestnut hair showed a few strands of grey.

I hadn't seen that grin for a very long time. When I told him last year I wished to become a novice and profess vows,

he argued with me, tried to change my mind, but not for long. He could see I was sincere in my longing for a higher life, far from the clamour of human voices and the touch of man. My father wrote the necessary letters and, with some difficulty, paid for my endowment at the priory. He did it to make me happy, since he knew no other way to do so.

And for some months at Dartford I *was* happy. In a contemplative life, I found certainty and purpose, the grace I'd longed for, insulated from the selfishness and vanity, the mindless pomp of the world. But it was a fragile happiness. I had come to a religious life that was not just in decline—far fewer people entered monasteries today than in past centuries—but under vigorous attack. Our king had broken from the Holy Father. In the last two years, England's smallest abbeys and priories had been closed, their monks and nuns sent onto the road. Prioress Elizabeth reassured the sisters that the larger religious houses such as ours would not be touched, but the fear of another round of closings haunted the stone passageways, the cloister garden, even the dormitories of Dartford.

It was just a week ago, on my way to Vespers, that I'd heard her name whispered for the first time, ahead of me on the south passageway. "The woman who helped lead the second Northern Rebellion, Lady Margaret Bulmer . . ."

I cried out, "Whom do you speak of?" and the two sisters who'd been walking together stopped and turned around. A novice should never address her superiors in such a way.

"Forgive me, Sister Joan and Sister Agatha." I bowed my head low and clasped my hands and then peered up at their faces. Sister Joan, the *circator,* the enforcer of rules, regarded me with cold disapproval. But Sister Agatha, novice mistress, could not resist sharing her gossip. "The last rebel leaders were brought down to London and tried at Westminster," she said, her voice a quick whisper. "All were found guilty. The men will be hanged, including Sir John Bulmer, but his

wife, a lady, will be burned at the stake at Smithfield. It is the king's pleasure."

I tilted and reached out with one hand to grip the damp stone wall to keep from falling.

"Yes, isn't it terrible?" clucked Sister Agatha.

But Sister Joan's shrewd eyes were on me. "Sister Joanna, did you know Lady Bulmer before you came to Dartford?" she asked.

"No, Sister." Just like that, a grievous sin committed.

Sister Agatha continued, "I always wonder what becomes of them . . . afterward. Would the family of Lady Bulmer be allowed to take her poor body for burial, even though the crime is high treason?"

Sister Joan gave her a stern look. "Such matters are not our concern. I'm sure the lady's family has the means to bribe the guards afterward if necessary. It is souls that we attend to, not mortal flesh."

We'd reached the church. Sister Joan and Sister Agatha bowed to the altar and took their assigned places. I followed suit and made my way to the novice stall, at the front. My place, as youngest, was next to the chancel step. My voice rose in song. I made all the correct responses in the chanting of the office.

Yet within my mind I stitched together a plan. I knew that our terrified Stafford relations would have nothing to do with Margaret or her burial. I could not bear the thought of her dying, alone and frightened, without the presence and the prayers of a loved one to ease her suffering, and then having her poor corpse consigned to oblivion. God desired me to bear witness, I was absolutely sure of that.

I'd leave Dartford Priory and travel to London, to Smithfield, and since the Dominican Order observed strict rules of enclosure for novices as well as nuns, I'd have to go without permission.

It frightened me, yes. The consequences for breaking enclosure were so serious, the only greater offence was violation of our chastity. For the next two days I wavered, not sure of my decision. I sought direction in prayer.

At the office of Matins, at midnight, enlightenment came. Dartford novices were abed customarily by nine, ordered to rest, but my eyes never closed that night, I was so troubled. I filed into church with the others, and between the Pater and the Ave, it struck me. All of my doubts and fears and worries fell away, as if I stood in a waterfall, cleansed by the purest streams. I would go to Smithfield. All would be well. I raised my arms and turned up my palms, toward the altar, my cheeks damp with gratitude.

As we shuffled up the stairs, back to the dormitories for a few more hours of sleep until Lauds, Sister Christina, senior novice, nudged me. "Did you find Divine Truth?" she whispered. "It appeared so."

"Perhaps," I said.

"I pray I receive the same blessing," said Sister Christina, her voice fierce. She was remarkably devout and sometimes wore a hair shirt under her novice habit, although she'd been reproved for it. Novices were discouraged from seeking mortification of the flesh. We weren't ready.

Sister Winifred, the other novice, who had professed three months before me, squeezed my arm. "I am happy for you," she said in her sweet, lilting voice.

I made my preparations to leave in secret. The night before Margaret's execution, I slept but an hour or so. In the thick darkness of our novice dormitory, I dressed myself in the kirtle I'd worn when my father brought me to Dartford last fall. I crept down the stairs and made my way to the kitchens. I knew one of the windows had a broken lock. I eased through it and ran across the grounds, through the barn, past the sleeping stable hand, and out the door. I most feared

discovery at the large gatehouse out front, for sometimes our porter assigned a watchman. To stay clear of it, I went over the stone wall that surrounded the priory at a low point. I walked up the slope, the grass damp under my feet, to meet the lane leading through the woods to the main road.

The moon hid behind heavy clouds; it was so very dark on the lane, under the trees. There was just the song of the night creatures. They were not disturbed by my presence. No, it was like passing through the ranks of an undisciplined choir—crickets and other shrill insects took the soprano part while the toads and owls played bass. Their gleeful serenade did not please me. My business was deadly serious, and, as ridiculous as it is to admit, I felt mocked in the woods. I was glad that when I reached the main road, the sky to the east was lightening. Soon the impetuous night choir would fall silent.

With a pair of lady's earrings clinking in his pocket, the sleepy warden for Hedge House Wharf helped me into a boat, but with reluctance. "I pray the young lady knows what she is about," he muttered. I did not answer him. As the boat eased away on the River Darent, past the fishery, I thought I heard the faint peal of the bells of the priory, for first prayers, but I may have imagined it.

Dartford is nearly a day's journey on foot from London, two hours by good horse and more than four hours by water. The River Darent twists and turns before meeting the Thames. It is not the way most would choose to travel to London, but I feared being seen in the village if I tried to hire a conveyance. I must disappear long enough to complete my mission.

Soon after we departed, rain pattered on the river and the oarsman tossed me a long covering to shield my head. The last person to wear the covering had eaten salted fish; I could still smell it. A thick, cool white mist enveloped me on the river. I could see next to nothing. There was just the pinprick of rain on the river and the rhythmic grunts of the man sitting

behind me as he pulled his oars out of the grey water. I took out my crucifix and wooden beads from the purse and began to say the Rosary.

Margaret, I am coming. I won't abandon you.

The mist parted to introduce a dull sky. As the river widened on its trek, other boats joined us, large and small. A few oarsmen called out to mine, making rude remarks over his passenger being young and female and unaccompanied. I fingered my beads and ignored their coarse foolishness. The instant we docked, well south of London Bridge, I leaped out of the boat. My greatest fear was that I would reach the appointed place too late.

Now I was here, I had indeed reached Smithfield before the burning, but I had not expected such crowds and confusion. All I could see were common people, milling around, laughing, drinking, or crying out to one another. I walked among them, this way and that, searching for some sign of where the execution would take place.

When I came upon a tight circle of men shouting, my pulse quickened. I pushed my way forward to find an opening.

In the middle of the circle was not a person but a chicken. Misshapen and bloody, its eyes flickering in terror, it had one foot tied to a wooden stake. A pockmarked man across from me held a small wooden bat over his head, readying it for his target.

The man hurled the bat with a loud grunt, and it struck the bird.

"God's wounds, what have ye done, ye stupid arse?" bellowed the man next to me as he wiped a splotch of dripping red liquid from his cheek. The bird had been struck so hard a geyser of blood sprayed him.

Uncaring, the pockmarked man scrambled into the circle. "She's me dinner!" he howled. "And it's not even Shrove Tuesday."

I looked down and saw my own dark skirts spattered with bright fresh blood. "Sweet Mother Mary," I moaned and backed away, slipping into a muddy patch. On the way down, I grabbed the arm of a young woman next to me.

It was a mistake. Red-faced, with a laundress's bag slung over her shoulder, she swatted me away, screaming, "Are ye stealing from me?"

"Madame, I was breaking a fall," I said. "I apologise."

The laundress made a mock curtsy. "No, my lady. Forgive *me*."

Someone laughed. A few heads turned.

A burst of hot foetid breath singed the side of my neck at the same second two thick arms encircled my waist from behind. I tried to pull away and could not.

"Hullo, poppet," growled a voice.

I yanked myself away from the stranger. "Take your hands off me," I ordered him.

He spun me around, and I saw my attacker. He was at least a foot taller than me and barrel-chested. A greasy beard hid his face except for a pair of bulging eyes and a nose bent to the left.

"Don't ye fancy me?" he sneered, pulling me hard against his rough clothes and slobbering on my forehead, too drunk to find my lips.

I fought down my revulsion and said calmly, "Sir, I have come to pray for the poor lady's soul. Will you join me? Shall we pray together?"

His drunken leer sagged. I knew I had touched something. Even the most brutish louts spend mornings on their knees at church, at the pleading of a wife or mother.

But then the laundress screamed: "Have at her! Why do ye wait?"

He grabbed my arm. I twisted and turned; I could see a group gathering around, but no one stopped him. No one

helped me. I swung back my right foot and kicked him in the shin, and the crowd laughed.

He slapped me, a sloppy blow, but still strong enough to send me staggering backward into the mud. He threw me the rest of the way down, his huge belly knocking the breath out of my body. One hand gripped both my wrists, holding them over my head. The other felt my waist, then higher, and higher. I struggled as hard as I could but for nothing.

Ten years ago, I realised. *Ten years almost to the day.*

Men and women drew closer, in a circle, nudging one another, laughing. I shut my eyes as I sank deeper and deeper into the mud of Smithfield.