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The Chalice

Written by Nancy Bilyeau

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THE CHALICE

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PROLOGUE

When preparing for martyrdom on the night of 28 December 1538, I did not think of those I love. Hiding in a narrow cemetery with seven men, all of us poised to commit violence at Canterbury Cathedral, I instead stared at the words carved into the tombstone I huddled behind: 'Here lieth interred the body of Brother Bartholomeus Giles, of Christ-Church Priory, Canterbury, who departed this life on the sixteenth of June, 1525.'

How fortunate was Brother Bartholomeus. He prayed, sang, laboured, and studied, and after his body weakened, was moved to the infirmary, to die there, blessedly ignorant that his was the last generation to serve God in an English monastery. This humble monk had known nothing of the Dissolution.

A gibbous moon hung above me tonight, swollen and bright in the sable sky, illuminating all the gravestones and memorials. But somehow it was a soft moon, not the sharply detailed orb I'd seen on other winter nights. It must be because we were near the sea. I'd been to Canterbury one other time – the same journey during which I learned of my destiny. Against my will, I was told of a prophecy. It was one I feared above all else. Yet here, tonight, I stood ready to fulfil it.

We had each of us picked a stone of concealment in this graveyard, a paean to a departed brother. These seven were like brothers to me now, and one most particularly so. Brother Edmund Sommerville, standing but a few feet away, looked over, and I nodded my readiness. We both knew the time approached. He blew on his frozen fingers, and I did the same. Our hands must be supple enough to grip the weapons we'd brought. I carried a rock with a sharp edge; Brother Edmund held a cudgel. We had no training in combat. Our faith would supply the needed strength.

After King Henry VIII ordered the suppression of our home, Dartford Priory, we had become, to the world, simply Edmund

Sommerville and Joanna Stafford. I'd struggled to prevent that. In the last months of Dartford Priory's existence, under duress, I'd searched the convent for the Athelstan crown, an object that Bishop Stephen Gardiner swore to me would stop the destruction. But the search took unexpected – and deadly – turns, and when it was over, our priory, 180 years old, closed its doors forever, as did the other monasteries. So ended the chaste splendours and humble glories of the only house for Dominican sisters in England. We had no choice but to relinquish our habits and veils and depart. I moved into the town close by and, with a handful of other priory refugees, tried very hard to make a new life for myself. Now that was over, too. The cruelty of the royal court had swung close to me once more. I'd seen fear and treachery and loss – and courage too – and innocent blood spilled on Tower Hill.

The figure of a man darted through the cemetery. In the moonlight, the face of Brother Oswald, a one-time Cistercian monk, was a sliver of ivory within his hooded cloak. His wounds of face and body, inflicted by those who hate us and call us Papists, were hidden.

'We will move on the cathedral soon,' Brother Oswald said in a ragged whisper.

My hand tightened on the side of the gravestone. Within moments, men sent by King Henry would emerge from this dark cathedral carrying a sacred wooden box. And we would be waiting.

Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered inside that cathedral 368 years ago because he would not submit to the will of an earthly king. After his death, Rome proclaimed Becket a saint. His grave became a shrine – the holiest destination in all of England. But Henry VIII had declared our revered saint a criminal, stripping his shrine. Tomorrow was the anniversary of Becket's assassination. Before the first valiant pilgrims arrived, the desecration would have taken place. King's men were at this moment stealing the feretrum, the adorned box containing the bones of the archbishop. The remains of Becket would be burned, his ashes scattered to the wind.

It was the final cruelty from the king who had already taken everything from me and from all of us who had lived enclosed and spiritual lives.

'I heard the prior's prayers from the side door,' said Brother Oswald. 'He begged the king's men to be allowed to pray before they took

away the feretrum, and they relented. We shall go to the street in a few minutes.'

The monk crossed himself. 'God will be with us,' he said, a little louder. 'We do His work tonight. Do not forget – the Holy Father will bless us. He has no knowledge of our business here, but once it is done, all Christendom will give profound thanks.'

Not much time remained. Brother Oswald, our leader, dropped to his knees and prayed, his hands trembling with fervour. Thirteen months ago, when Brother Edmund and I met him, he was a monk who smiled, suffused with hope. Brother Oswald had been turned out of his monastery but was confident he'd learn God's purpose by roaming the land with a dozen other displaced monks. Weeks ago, I found him again, this time fending off blows. There were no more smiles from Brother Oswald. But when was the last time I had smiled, or, for that matter, eaten a meal or slept a night through? I wasn't sure.

A dog barked on the cobbled street between the cemetery and the cathedral. Its mad cries echoed off the towering cathedral. I hunched over, covering my mouth with my hand so my warm breath wouldn't form a white cloud above the tombstone.

Another dog answered, farther down the street. The first beast ran toward it, barking ever more frantically. Then they ran together, through Canterbury, seeking mischief. Their sounds died away.

'Sister Joanna?'

It was Brother Edmund. Even lit by moonlight, the change in him startled me. His determination to take this course of action several days ago had blessed my friend with a serenity of purpose. But now his brown eyes flickered with pain.

'Are you no longer of a mind to do this?' I whispered.

He opened his mouth and then shut it. 'Is it Sister Winifred?' I asked. I knew how much he loved his younger sister. As did I – she was my closest friend.

He still didn't answer. The others were finishing the Rosary; the sounds of murmured prayers and clicking beads drifted across the graves.

'And you – what of Arthur?' Brother Edmund finally said.

I looked down at Brother Bartholomeus's tombstone. I didn't want Brother Edmund to see my eyes, fearing he would read my thoughts.

For it wasn't Arthur, the orphaned boy who depended on me, who had leaped into my mind but a grown man. I could see the angry face of Geoffrey Scovill and hear his words once more: 'You're a fool, Joanna. What you're doing is madness – and it will change *nothing*.'

If I were killed here, tonight, on the streets of Canterbury, it would free Geoffrey, the constable who had helped me time and again. Our bond, so fraught for so long, would be severed and he could begin a new life. He was twenty-nine years old, two years older than I. Not quite young, but not old either. This was a selfless goal. I should have taken strength from it, and yet I felt quite the opposite. My belly leaped and tumbled; I was so dizzy I had to rest my forehead against the gravestone.

'It is time, brothers – and sister,' said Brother Oswald. The others stepped out from behind monuments. Brother Edmund moved forward with determination. I pushed off from the grave marker with one hand – clutching my sharp stone with the other – and took my place in the line moving slowly toward the street.

The gate creaked as our leader pushed it open and slipped through.

One of the monks cried, 'They're coming out!' Lights moved deep inside the cathedral.

There was a loud clattering of hooves on the narrow cobbled street, and a single man on horseback appeared. I recognised his green-and-white livery as Tudor colours. He was a king's soldier – he must have been stationed outside while the others charged into the cathedral. He pulled up on his horse and stared at us, arrayed before him in an uneven line.

One of the monks next to me hissed. It was taken up by another. Then another.

The soldier flinched in his saddle; his mouth dropped open. He was young, I could see that now. Eighteen at the most. In our long tattered cloaks and robes, hissing at him, we must have seemed terrifying wraiths.

He shook the reins and kicked the side of his horse, to return to the front of the cathedral and doubtless warn the other soldiers. Brother Oswald scrambled after him, and his followers went with him.

Brother Edmund looked at them and then at me, torn.

'Go, go, go,' I choked. 'Don't tarry.'

I pushed Brother Edmund away from me with all my strength. To

my relief, he went. But I couldn't follow. My legs were frozen. The moon spun slowly in the sky.

A distant door opened with a thud and men cried out. I could hear it all, the noises boomed from the front of the cathedral, but I couldn't see anything. A noise pulsed in my ears. It was like the roaring sea. Snow came down faster, in stinging gusts. I stuck out my tongue to taste the flakes – I'd do anything to stave off fainting.

I staggered to the wall of Canterbury Cathedral. How could I be struck down by such weakness? This was what was supposed to happen – and my place in it was critical.

'*What you're doing is madness – and it will change nothing.*'

I kept hearing the words, scornful yet pleading, of Geoffrey Scovill. It was as if he sapped my strength from miles away. Frustrated, I grabbed the bricks to pull myself along the wall. I had to fight alongside Brother Edmund and the others. No matter the consequences, I'd finally determined to do this, to stop hiding from the future.

I dragged myself to the end of the wall.

Two fresh torches blazed on either side of the entranceway. Cowering in the doorway was the plump prior, his hands cupping his shiny face. He had no idea of our plans tonight, any more than he had of the royal mission to defile Becket's shrine. It had been easy for the soldiers to despoil the cathedral. That was one thing that always worked in King Henry's favour: the paralysis of the faithful, our inability to resist the destruction of our faith because we couldn't believe this could actually be happening to us. Until tonight. Each of us had sworn to take control of our destiny by trusting in God and believing that this was what He wanted us to do. It did not matter whether we survived. Only whether we succeeded.

In front of the prior stood four of the king's soldiers. I had expected more than this. One man carried a long box – the freretum. The others charged forward, to confront the monks, who formed a semicircle on the street.

Brother Oswald thundered: 'In the name of the Holy Father, I command you to cease your desecration.' His hood fell back. In the torchlight his albino skin glowed like an advent candle of purest white wax.

I was accustomed to Brother Oswald's pallor, but the sight of him had a terrifying effect on the soldiers. One of them cried, 'God's blood, what *is* he?'

My attention was drawn to the aged box, gripped by a king's soldier. Within seconds, my dizziness evaporated. A fiery rage surged through me, singeing every inch of my body. Everything I'd been told in London was true – the night before the anniversary, the king's men were secretly removing the holy remains.

I could not let them defile the bones of Saint Thomas.

This is the city where it began, I thought as I raced towards the door gripping my rock. *And this is the city where it will end.*

PART ONE

Ten Years Earlier

1

Canterbury, 25 September 1528

Before the lash of the wind drew blood, before I felt it first move through the air, our horses knew that something was coming.

I was seventeen, and I had made the long journey down to Canterbury from my home, Stafford Castle. At the beginning of each autumn my father travelled to London to attend to family business, but he had not wanted me or my mother to accompany him. A bout of sweating sickness struck the South that summer and he feared we'd lose our lives to the lingering reach of that disease. My mother would not be dissuaded. She told him she feared for *my* life if I did not take the healing waters at a bath she knew of in Canterbury, to cure me of melancholia.

Once in London, my father remained in our house on the Strand, seeing to business, while we rode on with two servants to Canterbury. The day after we arrived, my mother, greatly excited, took me to the shore overlooking the sea. But when we reached it, and I gazed for the first time at those churning grey waves, my mother's temper changed. She had not seen the sea herself since coming to England from Spain at fourteen as a maid of honour to Katherine of Aragon. After a few moments of silence, she began to weep. Her tears deepened into wrenching sobs. I did not know what to say, so I said nothing. I touched her shoulder and a moment later she stopped.

The third day in Canterbury I was taken to be healed. Below a tall house on a fashionable street stretched an ancient grotto. We walked down a set of stairs, and then two stout young women lowered me into the stone bath. It brimmed with pungent water bubbling up from a spring. I sat in it, motionless. Every so often, I could make out strange colours beneath the surging water: bright reddish brown and a deep blue-grey. Mosaics, we were told.

'A Roman built this bath,' explained the woman who administered the treatment. 'There was a forum in the city, temples, even theatres. Everything was levelled by the Saxons. But below ground it's still here. A city below the city.'

The bath mistress turned my head, this way and that. 'How do you feel, mistress? Stronger?' She so wanted to please us. Outside London and the ranks of the nobility, it was not known how much our family lost in the fall of the Duke of Buckingham, my father's eldest brother. He was executed after being falsely accused of high treason, and nearly all Stafford land was seized by the Crown. Here, in a Canterbury bath, we were mistaken for people of importance.

'I feel better,' I murmured. The woman smiled with pride. I glanced over at my mother. She refolded her hands in her lap. I had not fooled her.

The next morning, I expected to begin the journey back to London. But while I was in bed, my mother lay next to me. She turned on her side and ran her fingers through my hair, as she used to when I was a child. We had the same black tresses. Her hair thinned later on – in truth, it fell out in patches – but she never greyed. 'Juana, I've made arrangements to see a young nun,' she said.

There was nothing surprising about her making such a plan. In Spain, my mother's family spent as much time as possible with nuns and monks and friars. They visited the abbeys that dotted the hills of Castile, to pray in the churches, bow to the holy relics, or meditate through the night in austere cells. The religious houses near Stafford Castle could not compare. 'Not a single mystic within a day's ride of here,' she'd moan.

As we readied ourselves, my mother told me about Sister Elizabeth Barton. The Benedictine nun had an unusual story. Just two years earlier she'd worked as a servant for the steward of the Archbishop of Canterbury. She fell ill and for weeks lay senseless. She woke up healed – and her first question was about a child who lived nearby who had also sickened, but only after Elizabeth Barton lost consciousness. There was no way she could have known of it. From that day on, she was aware of things happening in other rooms, in other houses, even miles away. Archbishop Warham sent men to examine her and they concluded that her gifts were genuine. It was decided that this young servant should take holy vows and so be protected from the world.

The Holy Maid of Kent now resided in the priory of Saint Sepulchre, but she sometimes granted audiences to those with pressing questions.

'Her prayers could be meaningful,' my mother said, pushing my hair behind my ears. There was a time when meeting such a person would have intrigued me. But I felt no such anticipation. With our maid's help, I silently dressed.

When I first left the household of Queen Katherine over a year ago, I would not speak to anyone. I wept or I lay in bed, my arms wrapped around my body. My mother had to force food into me. Everyone attributed it to the shock of the king's request for an annulment – the queen, devastated, wailed loudly; the tall, furious monarch stormed from the room. This happened on the first day I entered service, to be a maid of honour to the blessed queen, as my mother had before me. The annulment was without question a frightening scandal. But, from the beginning, my mother had suspected something else. She must have pressed me for answers a hundred times. I never, ever considered telling her or my father the truth. It was not just my intense shame. George Boleyn bragged that he was a favoured courtier. His sister Anne was the beloved of the king. If my father, a Stafford, knew the truth – that Boleyn had violently touched me, his hand clapped over my mouth, and would have raped me had he more time – there is no force on earth that could have prevented him from trying to kill George Boleyn. As for my mother, the blood of ancient Spanish nobility, she would be even more ferocious in her revenge. To protect my parents, I said nothing. I blamed myself for what happened. I would not ruin my parents' lives – and those of the rest of the Stafford family – because of that stupidity.

By the time summer ended in 1527, a certain dullness overtook me. I welcomed this reprieve from tumultuous emotion, but it worried my mother. She could not believe I'd lost interest in books and music, once my principal joys. I spent the following months – the longest winter of my life – drifting in a grey expanse of nothing. The apothecary summoned to Stafford Castle diagnosed melancholia, but the barber-surgeon said no, my humours were not aligned and I was too phlegmatic. Each diagnosis called for conflicting remedy. My mother argued with them both. When spring came, she decided to trust her own instincts in nursing me. I did regain my health but never all of my spirits. My Stafford relatives approved of the quieter, docile Joanna

– I'd always been a headstrong girl – but my mother fretted.

That morning in Canterbury, when we'd finished dressing, my mother declared we had no need of servants. The priory of Saint Sepulchre was not far outside the city walls.

Our maid was plainly glad to be free of us for a few hours. The manservant was a different matter. 'Sir Richard said I was to stay by your side at all times,' he said.

'And I am telling you to occupy yourself in some other way,' my mother snapped. 'Canterbury is an honest city, and I know the way.'

The manservant aimed a look of hatred at her back. As much as they loved my father, the castle staff loathed my mother. She was difficult – and she was foreign. The English distrusted all foreigners, and in particular imperious females.

It was a fair day, warmer than expected for the season. We took the main road leading out of the city. Majestic oaks lined each side. A low brick wall surrounded Canterbury, most likely built by the Romans all those centuries ago.

As we neared the wall, my horse stopped dead. I shook the reins. But instead of starting up again, he shimmied sideways, edging off the road. I had never known my horse – or any horse – to move in this way.

My mother turned around, her face a question. But just at that moment, her horse gave her trouble as well. She brandished the small whip she always carried.

The winds came then. I managed to get my horse back onto the road, but he was still skittish. The wind blew his mane back so violently, it was like a hard fringe snapping at my face. By this time, we had managed to reach the gap in the wall where the road spilled out of Canterbury. All the trees swayed and bent, even the oaks, as if paying homage to a harsh master.

'*Madre*, we should go back.' I had to shout to be heard over the roar.

'No, we go on, Juana,' she shouted. Her black Spanish hood rose and flapped around her head, like a horned halo. 'We must go on.'

I followed my mother to the priory of Saint Sepulchre. Dead brush hurtled over the ground. A brace of rabbits streaked across the road, and my horse backed up, whinnying. It took all my strength on the reins to prevent him from bolting. Ahead of me, my mother turned and pointed at a building to the left.

I never knew what struck me. My mother later said it was a branch,

careening wildly through the air. All I knew was the pain that clawed my cheek, followed by a thick spreading wetness.

I would have been thrown but for a bearded man who emerged from the windstorm and grabbed the reins. The man helped me down and into a small stone gatehouse. My mother was already inside. She called out her gratitude in Spanish. The man dampened a cloth, and she cleaned the blood off my face.

'It's not a deep cut, thank the Virgin,' my mother said, and instructed me to press the cloth hard on my skin.

'How much farther to the priory?' I asked.

'We are at Saint Sepulchre now, this man is the porter,' she said. 'It's just a few steps to the main doors.'

The porter escorted us to the long stone building. The wind blew so strong that I feared I'd be sent flying through the air, like the broken branch. The porter shoved open tall wooden doors. He did not stay – he said he must see to the safety of our horses. Seconds later, I heard the click of a bolt on the other side of the door.

We were locked inside Saint Sepulchre.

I knew little of the life of a nun. Friars, who had freedom of movement, sometimes visited Stafford Castle. I had not given thought to the meaning of enclosure. Nuns, like monks, were intended to live apart from the world, for prayer and study. That much I knew. But now I also began to grasp that enclosure might require enforcement.

There was one high window in the square room. The wind beat against the glass with untamed ferocity. No candles brightened the dimness. There was no furniture nor any tapestries.

A framed portrait of a man did hang on the wall. The man wore plain robes; his long white beard rested on his cowl. He carried a wooden staff. Each corner of the frame was embellished with a carving of a leafed branch.

My mother gasped and clutched my arm. With her other, she pointed at a dark form floating toward us from the far end of the room. A few seconds later we realised it was a woman. She wore a long black habit and a black veil, and so had melted into the darkness. As she drew nearer, I could see she was quite old, with large, pale blue eyes.

'I am Sister Anne, I welcome you to the priory of Saint Sepulchre,' she said.

My mother, in contrast to the nun's gentle manner, spoke in a loud,

nervous tumble, her hands in motion. We were expected, she said. A visitation had been granted with Sister Elizabeth Barton, the storm roughened our journey, and I'd been slightly injured, but we expected to go forward. Sister Anne took it all in with perfect calm.

'The prioress will want to speak with you,' she said, and turned back the way she came, to lead us. We followed her down a passageway even darker than the room we'd waited in. The nun must have been at least sixty years of age, yet she walked with youthful ease.

There were three doors along the hall. Sister Anne opened the last one on the left and ushered us into another dim, empty room.

'But where is the prioress?' demanded my mother. 'As I've told you, Sister, we are expected.'

Sister Anne bowed and left. I could tell from the way my mother pursed her lips she was unhappy with how we'd been treated thus far.

In this room stood two wooden tables. One was large, with a stool behind it. The other was narrow, pushed against a wall. I noticed the floor was freshly swept and the walls showed no stains of age. The priory might have been modest, but it was scrupulously maintained.

'How is your cut?' my mother asked. She lifted the cloth and peered at my cheek. 'The bleeding has stopped. Does it still hurt?'

'No,' I lied.

I spotted a book mounted on the narrow table and decided to inspect it more closely. The leather cover was dominated by a gleaming picture of a robed man with a white beard, holding a staff – similar to the portrait in the front chamber but more detailed. The beatific pride of his expression, the folds of his brown robe, the clouds soaring above his head – all were rendered in rich, dazzling colours. Running along the square border of the man's picture was an intertwined branch: thin with slender green leaves. With great care, I opened the book. It was written in Latin, a language I had dedicated myself to since I was eight years old. *The Life of Saint Benedict of Nursia*, read the title. Underneath was his span of life: AD 480 to 543. There was a black bird below the dates, holding a loaf of bread in its beak. I turned another page and began to absorb the story. Underneath a picture of a teenage boy in the tunic of a Roman, it said that Saint Benedict forsook his family's wealth, choosing to leave the city where he was raised. Another turn showed him alone, surrounded by mountains.

I'd been concentrating so closely that I didn't hear my mother until

she stood right next to me. 'Ah, the founder of the Benedictines,' she said. She pointed at the branches that stretched across the border of each page. 'The olive branch is so lovely; it's the symbol of their order.'

My finger froze on the page. I realised that for the first time since last May, when I submitted myself to the profligate court of Henry VIII, I felt true curiosity. Was it the violent force of the wind – had it ripped the lassitude from me? Or had I been awakened by this spare, humble priory and the dazzling beauty of this, its precious object?

The door opened. A woman strode into the room. She was younger than the first nun – close in age to my mother. Her face was sharply sculpted, with high cheekbones.

'I am the prioress, Sister Philippa Jonys.'

My mother leaped forward and seized the prioress's hand to kiss it and go down on one knee. It was not only theatricality: I knew that in Spain, deep obeisance was paid to the heads of holy houses. But the prioress's eyes widened at the sight of my prostrate mother.

Pulling her hand free, the prioress said, 'I regret to hear of your mishap. We are a Benedictine house, sworn to hospitality, and will offer you a place of rest until you are ready to resume your journey.'

My mother sputtered, 'But we are here to see Sister Elizabeth Barton. It was arranged. I corresponded with Doctor Bocking while still at Stafford Castle.'

I stared at my mother in surprise. My impression had been that the trip to Saint Sepulchre was spontaneous, arranged in Canterbury or London at the earliest. I began to comprehend that the healing waters served as an excuse to get us here. Coming to Saint Sepulchre, without servants to observe us, was her purpose.

'I have not been informed of this visitation, and nothing occurs here without my approval,' the prioress said.

Most would be intimidated by such a rebuff. Not Lady Isabella Stafford.

'Doctor Bocking, the monk who I understand is the spiritual advisor of Sister Elizabeth, wrote to me granting permission,' my mother said. 'I would have brought his letter as proof, but I did not expect that the wife of Sir Richard Stafford – and a lady-in-waiting to the queen of England – could be disbelieved.'

The prioress clutched the leather belt that clinched her habit. 'This is a priory, not the court of the king. Sister Elizabeth is a member

of our community. We have six nuns at Saint Sepulchre. *Six*. There is much work to be done, earthly responsibilities as well as spiritual. These visits rob Sister Elizabeth of her health. "Will this harvest be better?" "Will I marry again?" She cannot spend all of her time with such pleadings.'

'I am not here to inquire about harvests,' snapped my mother.

'Then why are you here?'

With a glance at me, my mother said, 'My daughter has not been well for some time. If I knew what course to take – what her future might hold—'

'Mama, no,' I interrupted, horrified. 'We were ordered by Cousin Henry never to solicit prophecy, after the Duke of Buckingham's—'

'Be silent,' scolded my mother. 'This is not of the same import.'

There was a tap on the door, and Sister Anne reappeared.

'Sister Elizabeth said she will see the girl named Joanna now,' the elderly nun murmured.

'Did you tell her of these guests?' demanded the prioress.

Sister Anne shook her head. The prioress and nun stared at each other. A peculiar emotion throbbed in the air.

My mother did not notice it. 'Please, without further delay, show us the way to Sister Elizabeth,' she said, triumphant.

Sister Anne bowed her head. 'Forgive me, Lady Stafford, but Sister Elizabeth said she will see the girl Joanna alone. And that she must come of her own free will and unconstrained.'

'But I don't want to see her at all,' I protested.

My mother took me by the shoulders. Her face was flushed; I feared she was close to tears. 'Oh, you must, Juana,' she said. '*Por favor*. Ask her what is to be done. Sister Elizabeth has a gift, a vision. Only she can guide us. I can't cope with this any more all alone. *I can't*.'

I had not realised how much my spiritual affliction troubled my mother. Her suffering filled me with remorse. I would go to this strange young nun. The visit should be brief; I intended to ask few questions.

The prioress and Sister Anne spoke together, in hushed tones, for another minute. Then the prioress beckoned for me alone to follow.

She led me down the passageway, through the front entranceway, and down another dim corridor. Following her, I thought of how the elegance of her movements contrasted with the ladies I'd grown up with. Hers was certainly not movement calculated to draw admiration.

It was grace that derived from simplicity and economy of movement.

I also tried to plan how I could speak to Sister Elizabeth Barton without disobeying the command of Lord Henry Stafford, my cousin and head of the family. It had been the prophecy of a friar, much distorted, that was the basis for arresting my uncle, the Duke of Buckingham. During the trial, he was charged with seeking to learn the future – how long would Henry VIII live and would he produce sons – so that the duke could plot to seize the throne. Afterward, my cautious cousin, his son, said repeatedly that none of the family could ever have anything to do with prophecy. My father agreed – he harboured a personal distaste for seers, witches, and necromancers. It was one of the many ways in which he differed from my mother.

The prioress rapped on a door, gently. She hesitated, her eyebrows furrowing, and then she opened it and we stepped inside.

This room was tiny, as small as a servant's. A lone figure sat in the middle of the floor, slumped over, her back to us. There was no window. Two candles that burned on either side of the door provided the only light.

'Sister Elizabeth, will you attend Vespers later?' asked the prioress.

The figure nodded but did not turn around. The prioress said to me, 'I shall be back shortly,' and gestured for me to step forward.

I edged inside. The prioress closed the door.

Sister Elizabeth Barton wore the same black habit as the others. She didn't turn around. I felt awkward. Unwanted. The minutes crept by.

'It's a wind that brings no rain,' said a young voice.

'Indeed, Sister,' I said, relieved that she spoke. 'There wasn't any rain.' But a second later I wondered how she knew anything about the elements without a window in the room. Another nun must have told her, I concluded. Just as someone told her my name – the monk Doctor Bocking, perhaps. I did not believe that she possessed the powers my mother spoke of. Although devout, I held closer to the spirit of my pragmatic father in such matters.

White hands reached out and Sister Elizabeth turned herself around, slowly, sitting on the floor. This nun was but a girl, and so frail-looking. She had a long face, with a sloping chin.

As she gazed up at me, sadness filled her eyes.

'I did not know you would be so young,' she whispered.

'I am seventeen,' I said. 'You look to be the same age.'

'I am twenty-two,' she said, and continued: 'You have intelligence, piety, strength, and beauty. And noble blood. All the things I lack.' There was no envy. It was as if she mulled a list of goods to be purchased at market.

Ignoring her assessment of me, which I found embarrassing, I asked, 'How can you say you lack piety when you are a sister of Christ?'

'God chose me,' she said. 'I was a servant, of no importance in the world. He chose me to speak the truth. I have no choice. I must submit to His will. For you it is different. You have a true spiritual calling.'

Sister Elizabeth Barton was confused. 'I am not a nun,' I said.

She suddenly frowned, as if she were responding to someone else's voice. She slowly rose to her feet. She was spare and small, at least three inches shorter than me.

'Yes, the two cardinals are coming,' she said. 'It will be within the month. They will pass through on the way to London. I will have to try to speak to them. I must find the courage to go before all the highest and most powerful men in the land.'

My mother had said nothing of Sister Elizabeth leaving Saint Sepulchre to go before the powerful. 'Why would you do that?' I asked.

'To stop them,' she said.

I was torn. A part of me was curious, but another, larger, part was growing uneasy. There was nothing malevolent about this fragile nun, yet her words made me uncomfortable.

At last the curious part won. 'Whom must you stop, Sister?' I asked. 'The cardinals?'

She shook her head and took two steps toward me. 'You know, Joanna.'

'No, Sister Elizabeth, I don't.'

'Your mother wants to know your future – should she marry you off in the country to someone who will take you with meagre dowry, or try to return you to the court of the king? Your true vocation leaps in her face but she cannot see. Poor woman. She has no notion of what she has set in motion by bringing you to me.'

How could the Holy Maid of Kent know so much of my family? Yet I said, nervously, 'Sister, I don't know what you are talking about.'

Her lower lip trembled. 'When the cow doth ride the bull, then priest beware thy skull,' she said.

My stomach clenched. At last, I had heard a prophecy.

'Those are not my words,' Sister Elizabeth continued. 'They come from the lips of Mother Shipton. Do you know of her?'

I shook my head.

'Born in a cave in Yorkshire,' she said, her words coming fast. 'A girl without a father – a bastard of the north. Hated and scorned by all. Not just for deformity of face but for the power of her words. Crone, they call her. Witch. It is so wretched to know the truth, Joanna. To see things no one else can see. To have to try to stop evil before it is too late.'

'What sort of evil?' The instant I asked the question, I regretted it.

Again the nun's lower lip trembled. Her eyes gleamed with tears.

'The Boleyns,' she said.

I stumbled back and hit the stone wall, hard. I felt behind me for the door. I hadn't heard the prioress lock it. I would find a way out of this room. I must.

'Oh, you're so frightened, forgive me,' she wailed, tears spattering her face. 'I don't want this fate for you. I know that you've already been touched by the evil. I will try my hardest, Joanna. I don't want you to be the one.'

'The one?' I repeated, still feeling for the door.

Sister Elizabeth stretched her arms wide, her palms facing the ceiling. 'You are the one who will come after,' she said.

The gravity of her words, coupled with the way she spread her hands, chilled me to the marrow.

Sister Elizabeth opened her mouth, as if to say something else, and then shut it. Her face turned bright red. But in a flash, the red drained away, leaving her skin ashen. I looked at the candles. How could a person change colour in such a manner? But the candles burned steadily.

'Are you unwell, Sister?' I said. 'Shall I seek help?'

She shook her head, violently, but not to say no to me. Her head, her arms, her legs – every part of her shook. Her tongue bobbed in and out of her mouth. After less than a minute of this, her knees gave way and she collapsed.

'It hurts,' she moaned, writhing on her back. 'It hurts.'

'I will get you help,' I said.

'No, no, no,' she said, her voice a hoarse stammer. 'Joanna Stafford … hear me. I … beg … you.'

Fighting down my terror, I knelt on the floor beside her. A trail of white foam eased out of her gaping mouth. She thrashed and coughed; I thought she would lose consciousness. But she didn't.

'I see abbeys crumbling to dust,' she said. The choking and thrashing ended. Incredibly, the voice of Sister Elizabeth Barton boomed strong and clear. 'I see the blood of monks spilled across the land. Books are destroyed. Statues toppled. Relics defiled. I see the greatest men of the kingdom with heads struck off. The common folk will hang, even the children. Friars will starve. Queens will die.'

Rocking back and forth, I moaned, 'No, no, no. This can't be.'

'You are the one who will come after,' she said, her voice stronger still. 'I am the first of three seers. If I fail, you must go before the second and then the third, to receive the full prophecy and learn what you must do. But only of your own free will. After the third has prophesied, nothing can stop it, Joanna Stafford. *Nothing*.'

'But I can't,' I cried. 'I can't do anything. I'm no one – and I'm too afraid.'

In a voice so loud it echoed in her cell, Sister Elizabeth said, 'When the raven climbs the rope, the dog must soar like the hawk. When the raven climbs the rope, the dog must soar like the hawk.'

The door flew open. The prioress and Sister Anne hurried to the fallen nun, kneeling beside her. Sister Elizabeth Barton said just two words more, before the prioress pried open her jaw and Sister Anne pushed in a rag. She turned her head, to find me with her fierce eyes, and then she spoke.

'The chalice …'