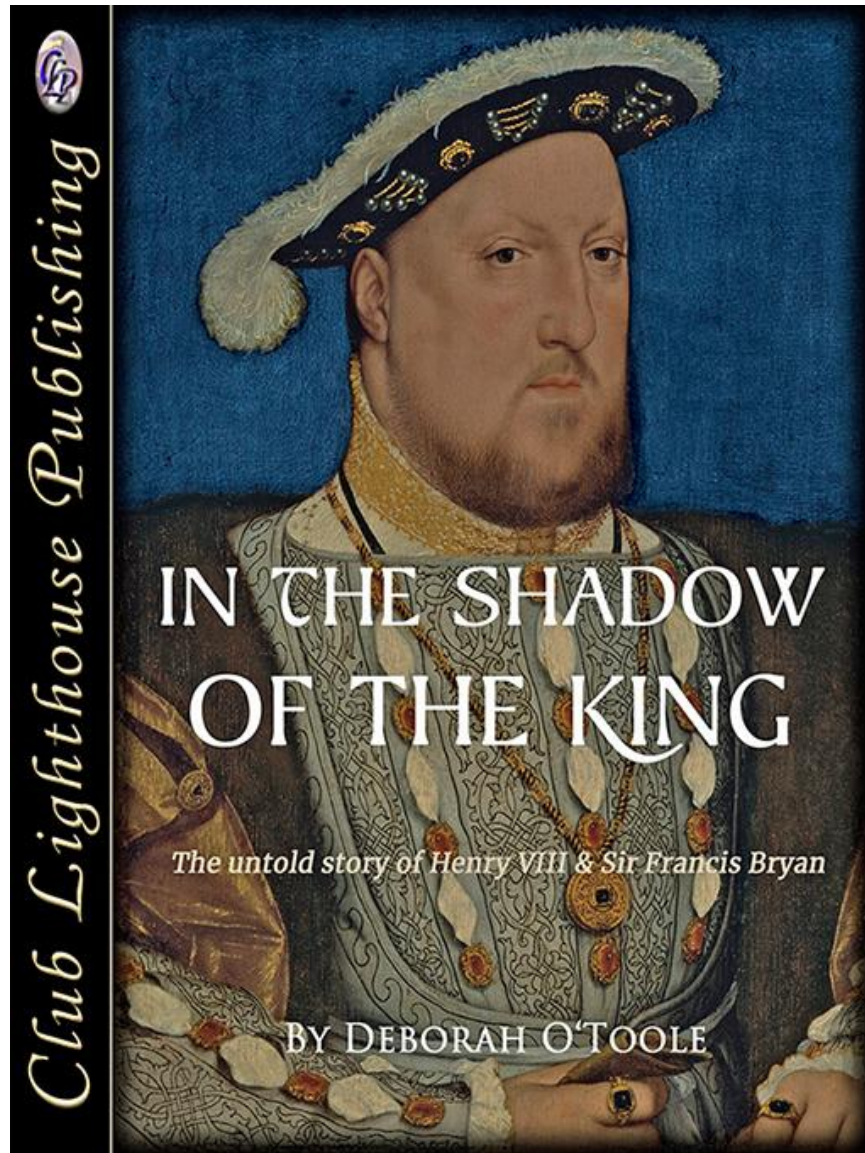


*** EXCERPTS ONLY ***



IN THE SHADOW OF THE KING

By Deborah O'Toole

"In the Shadow of the King" is a work of semi-fiction. Some of the names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to a specific portion of actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author.

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ABOUT "IN THE SHADOW OF THE KING"

In the Shadow of the King by Deborah O'Toole is a semi-fictional account of the dramatic life of Sir Francis Bryan, confidant to King Henry VIII.

Sir Francis Bryan was a man of letters who distinguished himself as a cipher, diplomat, poet, sailor and soldier. He was also knight bannerette, chevalier, Lord of the Tor Bryan, chief gentleman of the privy chamber, Lord Chief Justice of Ireland and a gifted sportsman. He lost an eye during a jousting tournament and forever after wore a rakish eye patch, which merely added to his allure.

During his time in Henry VIII's court and one of the few who escaped the King's wrath, Bryan was dubbed the "one-eyed Vicar of Hell" by the King's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, because of his apparent lack of scruples and legendary sexual exploits. Bryan had a well-earned reputation as a self-indulgent libertine, and was said to have been a willing accomplice in the King's tangled love affairs.

Bryan's irresistible charm masked an inveterate intriguer full of barely-contained energy. He could be duplicitous, manipulative and promiscuous as well as highly articulate, ferociously witty and generous when the mood struck him. In videlicet, he was the perfect courtier. Many observers were astounded by the familiarity he used towards Henry VIII, especially in speaking his mind. However, Bryan was no creature of principle. By bending his opinions to fit the King's policy, he managed to remain in favor throughout Henry VIII's reign.

In the Shadow of the King brings to life the story of Sir Francis Bryan, as told by one of his descendants in the twenty-first century.

The book was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in July 2023.

For more, go to:

<https://deborahotoole.com/king/>

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PROLOGUE:

Clonmel, Ireland (October 2021)



*What death is worse than this?
When my delight,
My weal, my joy, my bliss
Is from my sight.
Both day and night,
My life, alas, I miss.*

~ Sir Thomas Wyatt (What Death is Worse Than This?)

Clonmel, Ireland

October 2021

THE TWO MEN stood by the open grave solemnly, each one absorbed in his own thoughts. The wind had turned cold as evening approached, whipping orange-colored leaves in and around the old headstones as if they had independent will. Clouds had gathered overhead earlier in the day, so it was only a matter of time before rain began to fall in earnest.

The older man was short and rather rotund, with a graying goatee and a blustery face. He wore dark tan khaki trousers and a cream-colored knit sweater with deep pockets. At the moment, he had the balls of both fists shoved into the pockets in an attempt to keep the cold wind from his hands. He glanced nervously at his companion at the graveside, who was a youthful and much taller man.

The younger man was lost in his own thoughts still, paying little heed to the weather or to the older man standing next to him. He stared down at the freshly covered grave and experienced a stab of regret, a wave of sadness which surprised him. He was slender, with a head full of black hair that reached to the tips of his jawbone. His eyes were also dark, almost black, with a piercing appearance. His skin was fair, but at the same time held a faint olive-tint, especially prominent around his eyes. He was otherwise clean-shaven, the shape of his nose long and lean. His lips were full and well-shaped, but they were pursed as his preoccupation continued.

"We should get back," the older man suggested kindly. "It's going to start to rain at any minute."

The younger man looked at him, as if realizing he was there for the first time.

"I suppose you're right, Daniel." He shook his head. "I just can't believe the old blighter is dead."

"There was no love lost between the two of you," Daniel replied, gently touching the man's arm to steer him away from the grave. "You fought with old Thomas more often than not."

"But we respected one another," the younger man maintained, resisting the subtle tug of Daniel's hand on his arm. "I may have irritated Thomas as much as he did me, but we also had respect for what the other was."

Daniel released the younger man's arm. "I can't believe you're saying that, Shane Michael Gallagher. Not when you know how he left his estate."

Shane's eyes darkened, narrowing slightly. The he glanced at Daniel. "Even with that, I feel a great sadness that old Thomas is gone." He paused, and then started walking slowly away from the grave. Daniel followed him. "That's to be the

way if it, then," Shane continued softly. "You have to follow his instructions, don't you?"

"You know I'm obligated to do so," Daniel responded. "I may be your friend, Shane, but I was also a friend to Thomas, and I have to honor his last wishes as his counsel. Besides, his will is legal and binding. There's no way around it, as much as I'd like to see it otherwise."

The two men continued to walk along as they made their way out of the ancient cemetery, again lost in their own thoughts.

Shane Gallagher was the caretaker of the local manor house, Butler Castle. Daniel Kent had been friend and solicitor to the recently deceased Thomas Bryan, owner of the manor and its demesne. Locals were fond of saying that Thomas had been as old as the hills. Rumor had it he had reached his 99th birthday just prior to passing a week ago.

Thomas had held ownership of Butler Castle for well over sixty years before he died. Many Clonmel natives were hard put to recall if he had any blood heirs left in Ireland to take the reins of the ancient estate. The castle itself was in superb condition, thanks in no small part to Shane, and it was assumed the place was worth a fortune. Thomas had been a reclusive eccentric. He had never married, yet often hinted he had many distant relatives living in America. None of the locals had ever seen Bryan kin in the area, although there were whispers that Bryan also came from English stock, stemming from the 16th century.

Shane was a regular at Lonergan's Pub in Clonmel on Saturday nights, although he tended not to mix-it-up with others. He seemed to prefer his own company along with his pint, and often a good book. Yet he was polite when spoken to, and never seemed to have an unkind word to say about anyone.

Once they had settled into the silver Austin mini-metro parked near the graveside, Daniel took the wheel as Shane began speaking again.

"How soon before you notify the next of kin?"

Daniel started the car as he glanced over at Shane. "Right away," he replied. "I'll compose a letter tonight, and mail it by express tomorrow. It has to be done, and the sooner the better. Who knows? Maybe the heir will not be interested in Butler Castle."

"Only in selling it," Shane responded caustically. "Then where will I be?"

Daniel smiled as he drove the metro away from the cemetery. "You can come and work for me. My cottage is a mess, especially the gardens. The loo hasn't worked right in years, and one of the burners on my stove has been out for just as long."

Shane managed to laugh. "I could do all that, but your cottage is small. I'd have it fixed in a few months at the most, and then what? Go back to Dublin?"

Daniel shrugged. "That would be up to you."

The two men were silent for a long time, each thinking his own thoughts again, yet comfortable in the setting.

Suddenly, Shane glanced over at Daniel. "Can you tell me who the heir is? Who did old Thomas leave Butler Castle to?"

Daniel paused, unsure whether to tell Shane the bit of information. Yet, what could it hurt now? Once Daniel informed the heir to Butler Castle of its existence, Shane was bound to find out sooner or later who it was. Being the caretaker of the castle would make it doubly ridiculous to hide the heir's identity from him.

"I wasn't sure if you'd want to know," Daniel said. "You've never expressed any interest until now."

"I had no reason to – until now," Shane replied.

"The heir is an American," Daniel finally responded. "The last of the legitimate Bryan line, or so old Thomas said, besides himself. Her name is Sheila Bryan. She is a college professor living in Maine."

Shane was not sure if he had heard Daniel correctly. "A woman is to inherit Butler Castle? An *American* woman?"

Daniel nodded. "Yes, this is a fact. She was the only child of Randall and Elaine Bryan, who died about four years ago following a car accident."

"A college professor is to be the new owner of Butler Castle?" Shane asked, still disbelieving. "What is she – close to ancient age herself? Good God, Danny – don't tell me this teacher has no heirs, either."

"None. She was married once, but has no children."

Shane leaned his head back into the car seat, laughter bubbling from his lips. "What kind of joke was old Thomas trying to pull off? An American teacher is *not* going to be interested in Butler Castle. Oh, she might be interested in the place for some sort of historical purpose, but certainly not to live in. As sure as I'm sitting here, the woman will probably sell off the castle and it will be lost forever."

"Don't be too sure," Daniel warned him.

"Is she even aware of the existence of the castle, or of her inheritance?"

"No. Apparently her parents didn't have a clue, either. But old Thomas did, and the idea used to tickle him. He thought how shocked these people would be one day to find themselves the owners of such a fine place, along with his other properties. As far as I know, neither Sheila nor her parents knew they were related to Thomas at all. I don't think any of them realized their own family history."

"Not many people bother to go back that far," Shane conceded. "But all the same . . . oh, this should be a right hoot, this one. I can't wait to see the poor lady's face when she gets a good look at Butler Castle." He paused. "If she decides to come, that is."

"I have a feeling she will come," Daniel said as he turned onto the main street of Clonmel village. "What do you say we have a pint in memory of Thomas? Afterward, I'll take you back to the castle and then get myself home to start that letter."

Shane raised his dark eyebrows at the solicitor. "You'll use any excuse for a pint, won't you Danny?"

Daniel laughed. "You know me too well, Shane. Too well indeed."

"Then pull into Lonergan's," Shane said, laughing in return, warmed by his friend. "We should have two pints, at least."

"My thoughts exactly. You're a man after me own heart, Shane Gallagher. That you are."

* * *

A FEW HOURS later, a brisk storm released its spell of rain over County Tipperary's main city of Clonmel. Set on the River Suir and framed by the Comeragh Mountains, Clonmel had been an Anglo-Norman stronghold and once a fiefdom of the Desmond's, then eventually of the Butler family. The prosperity of Clonmel was founded on milling and brewing, with attractive millworks still lining the quay. In the modern age, Clonmel was a bustling village with a shopping center and a lively night life.

The local cemetery, which was located next to St. Patrick's Chapel near the quay, had been in use for hundreds of years. An ironwork fence surrounded the burial yard, only accessible by a set of gates that faced the street by the River Suir. It was a virtually treeless area with carefully tended gravel walkways and paths. St. Patrick's Chapel was a modest greystone structure with a small, circular tower and an adjacent rectory. It was the eventual resting place for most Clonmel inhabitants, where they joined other former residents from centuries past. The graveyard was sectioned off in areas by family: husbands, wives, children and other relatives laid to rest, side by side in the earth. The "Bryan" plot, as it was known, rested in the far north corner of the cemetery. It had the appearance of an especially private place, somewhat removed from the rest of the headstones. It was not by coincidence as the Bryan family had elevation above the rest due to their long history with the noble Butler's and their illustrious castle.

Workers had already covered the new grave of old Thomas Bryan, the dirt rising in a mound over the opening of his final resting place. A fine mist of rain sprinkled down from the leaden sky, turning the fresh earth into damp clay.

A few yards away was another grave. It was obvious it had been there for some time, but attentive care of the marker had left it standing erect. Not large by any means, it was impressive nonetheless with its faded carvings of the Bryan coat of arms. The design had been intricate in its day, but the many years had worn the surface smooth, leaving a telltale visual of the original workmanship. The arms held three upright swords – which were fairly visible – but the carving of the Lion of Judah had faded somewhat with the weather of time. The misty rain now swept across the marker like a fine sheen, sending rivulets running along the carving and into the ground. The drops also swirled in the name carved in the stone, which was still visible as well.

It was a simple headstone in truth, merely enhanced by the faded yet exquisite carving. The marker read:

SIR FRANCIS BRYAN

1ST JUNE 1490-2ND FEBRUARY 1550

KNIGHT & LORD CHIEF JUSTICE OF IRELAND

FAITHFUL SERVANT TO HENRY VIII & EDWARD VI



The fine mist of rain then became a torrent, creating small rivers of water that scurried around the grave, joining the patterns of earth as if they were one.

PART TWO:

Sir Francis Bryan (1509-1517)



*... sacred Bryan (whom the Muses kept,
And in his cradle rockt him while he slept)
~ Michael Drayton (Heroicall Epistle)*

CHAPTER FIVE

Marsworth Manor

Cheddington, Buckinghamshire, England

October 1509

ROBIN HAVERS DARTED around the private bedchamber of his master and dear friend, Francis Bryan. Evening had fallen on Marsworth. Candles were lit along the mantle of the fireplace, as well on the small end-tables on either side of Francis' large tester bed. There was also another candle on a small writing desk in a corner of the room, where Francis often sat while he was home. He loved to write, toying with poetry and essays, so the desk became a favored part of his bedchamber. Even then, the heavy wall-tapestries and the dark bed curtains gave the room a rather gloomy appearance even before night had fallen.

Francis' bedchamber was located on the front side of Marsworth, overlooking a large expanse of lawn through two mullioned windows. Robin hurried over to the casement to draw the curtains closed, but his attention was drawn to a carriage coming to a stop in front of the manor. He frowned as he recognized the personal coach of Sir Thomas Bryan. The lord must be returning from his trip into Cheddington. Robin knew he would want to see his son first thing.

Sighing, Robin turned away from the window, forgetting to draw the curtains closed.

Robin was in his early twenties. He had been born and raised on the Marsworth estate. His father, Michael Havers, who had passed away the year before, had been the head gardener, raising his son alone after his mother had died in childbirth. Because he was so close in age to Francis, Robin had been a natural playmate for the knight's son.

In contrast to the lankiness of Francis, Robin was small and compact. His slenderness and scant height belied his extreme intelligence and common sense. His innate sense of prudence had been one of the reasons Lady Margaret wanted Robin to take on the duties as Francis' valet. She knew very well that if Francis got himself into any sort of mischief, Robin would be there to pull him out of it.

Robin had short, dark auburn hair and dark green eyes, with a dusting of freckles on his nose. His proboscis was his one regret as to his physical appearance. While he was sometimes frustrated by his smallness - only because most people regarded this as a trait of weakness - he was more than mortified by his overlarge nose. Knowing how sensitive he was about it, Francis never mentioned the protrusion.

Francis burst into the room as Robin was setting out fresh breeches and a silk shirt on the tester bed. Francis was out of breath. Robin looked up at him in askance. He saw the almost-wild expression in Francis' dark eyes, and he assumed Sir Thomas had spoken to his son already.

"Whatever is the matter?" Robin asked him, trying to sound casual as he resumed setting out the clothes. "Did your hound Nasir finally have his fill of you, and chase you up the stairway?"

"Cease your prattle," Francis replied crisply, coming into the room and shutting the door. "My father is on his way up. He just arrived."

"I know," Robin responded. "I saw him from the window. Why are you so nervous?"

Francis snorted as he walked toward the fireplace, rubbing his hands together. "I'm not nervous, you pygmy," he said. "I merely know what my father wants to talk about. I'm not in the mood for a lecture."

Robin turned to face Francis. "You know as well as I do that Sir Thomas will have his say, whether you are in the mood or not."

"My point exactly," Francis snapped, glaring at his valet.

"You are making much about nothing," Robin assured him, walking over to stand by Francis at the fireplace. "Your father has your best interests at heart. Going to Greenwich is a golden opportunity, and one that my lord does not want to see misused."

Francis expelled frustrated air. "Why would I misuse such an opportunity? It is what I want."

"You have been known to become rather reckless in your exploits, my friend," Robin replied gently, not wanting to hurt Francis' feelings.

"Such as?" Francis asked him pointedly, irritated with the remonstrations, subtle as it was. In the distance, the rumbling of thunder sounded, warning of a coming rain shower.

Robin raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms in front of him. "Let's see, would you like me to run down the list? What about Mistress Mary Lasalle - the daughter of one of the scullery maids? Do you perhaps recall her?"

Francis glowered at Robin, but he nodded.

"As I seem to remember," Robin continued, "there was an incident involving you and Mistress Mary in one of the servants rooms on the second floor. You were thirteen years old, I think, and she was not much older . . ."

"She was two years older," Francis pointed out defensively. "That much I do know. And she wasn't exactly unwilling."

"That's beside the point," Robin said, his tone weary. "What I'm trying to tell you, in a nice manner, is that you have been known to go with whatever feeling suits your fancy at the moment, and your father is quite aware of it."

"I'm older and I've changed," Francis said flatly, brushing a lock of hair from his cheek absently. "Those were the old days, and I was a mere child, for God's sake. I'm a man, Robin, and I know how to comport myself properly, thank you."

Robin started to laugh, but Francis cut him off.

"I'm serious," Francis continued strongly. "I did a lot of thinking while I stayed on at Lord Parr's. I can't hope for much of a future at court if I get into scrapes, now can I? I would never let my father down that way. There is too much at stake. If I'm to make any impression at court, I must be circumspect and abide by the rules."

Robin stopped laughing. "And you think you can do that now?"

Francis stared long and steady at his friend, his reply coming in a firm voice: "I'm certain of it."

"I'm glad to hear it, my son." The deep voice came from the doorway of the bedchamber, startling both Francis and Robin. They turned to see Sir Thomas Bryan, his hand on the large knob of the door. There was a slight smile on the older man's face.

Sir Thomas was a tall man, like his son, but he had developed a slight bend to his frame at the shoulders. His hair was now completely silver, while his light-blue eyes had become slightly rheumy. There were lines around the corners of Thomas' mouth, and a worry crease in his forehead. His hands were large and big-knuckled, another trait he had passed on to his son.

Looking between Francis and Sir Thomas, Robin knew no one could deny that the two men were father and son. He could envision Francis appearing much the same when he someday became an old man. However, the difference between them was the simultaneous and duality of their basic natures. While Thomas was staid and calm, Francis possessed a quicksilver temperament and passionate mien made most apparent in his dark eyes. Whatever Francis might be feeling - whether it be anger or happiness - he simply could not stop the emotion from reaching his eyes. Perhaps the one element would be the very one Francis could control once he was at court. It might be his salvation one day.

Thomas looked to Robin. In his ever-polite tone, he asked: "Can you leave us for a short while, Robin? I would like to speak to my son alone."

Robin bowed his head slightly. "Yes, my lord. I will see to another task elsewhere in the manor."

"Thank you," Thomas said. He stood aside from the door as Robin passed him, bowing his head slightly again.

Thomas closed the bedchamber door as light rain began to patter against the window panes.

"I hear from Lord Parr that you did very well in his household," Thomas began as he walked into the room, joining his son by the fireplace mantle. "I am very proud of you."

"Thank you, Father," Francis replied softly, his body tensing as Thomas came to stand next to him.

"Very well, indeed," Thomas continued, almost absently as he looked at the flames in the hearth. After a brief pause, he continued. "You have a few weeks yet before we go to court, but I would like to impart a few words of wisdom to you."

"I would be most grateful for your sage counsel, Father," Francis said politely, although he was not anxious for the advice. Without fail, his reluctance reached his eyes.

Sir Thomas felt a brief flash of disappointment as he saw the obvious expression.

"This will not be a long lecture, my son," Thomas said, suddenly sounding tired.

"*And old,*" Francis thought, struck by his own musings. Thomas seemed older somehow since Francis had last seen him - was it only three months ago at Lord Parr's? - and he also seemed a bit out of sorts, as if he found it difficult to focus. For the first time in his life, Francis felt pity for his father.

Thomas saw the expression of sympathy in his son as well, and it irritated him momentarily. He did not want Francis' empathy because of his old age - he wanted Francis to listen to what he had to say, to truly hear his words and heed them.

"May I sit?" Thomas asked abruptly. "I fear I'm rather weary tonight, and would like to rest my feet."

"Of course, father," Francis replied quickly. "Have the chair by the fire."

"And you?"

"I'll stand," Francis insisted.

Thomas took the chair, sinking gratefully into the cushion. He stared up at his son and marveled at his attractive physique, as if noticing for the first time. His son had become a man. There was a flash of confusion on Thomas face, but the expression was so brief that Francis thought he had imagined it.

"Court is a very dangerous place, Francis," Thomas began slowly, his eyes returning to the fire. "You can advance far if you behave accordingly, but you must always be aware of false friends. They are everywhere. Everyone is there for the

same reason - to perhaps gain a title, a good marriage, or the grant of prosperous lands."

"I understand, father," Francis said. "Isn't that what I desire?"

"Is it?"

"I have wanted to be a part of the court for as long as I can remember," Francis told his father passionately. "I have never wanted anything else."

"Think of the experiences I will have there, the people I will meet."

"True," Thomas finally agreed. "But you must always be careful, my son. Whatever you do, believe me when I tell you never to trust any one person too much. You must look out for yourself, and very carefully."

Before he could stop himself, Francis blurted out: "You make the court sound as if it were a pit of vipers."

"It might seem that way at times," Thomas admitted. "Better, though, not to trust anyone."

"Even the King?" Francis prodded.

"Especially the King."

Francis stared open-mouthed at his father. "How can you say such a thing? Is not the King our sovereign prince, the one to whom we owe our loyalty and fealty?"

Thomas sighed. "Of course. However, the current King's court is not the same as his father's once was. This King is an extraordinary human being, granted, but he is also young. He came to the throne just six months ago, and is still proving his mettle. However, I don't think there is his like in all of Europe. Henry VIII is indeed a rare man."

Francis was puzzled. "How is this King's court different from what his father's once was?"

"Treachery abounds in this court," Thomas said strongly. "It did so in Henry VII's time, yes, but not to the degree it does in his son's."

Deciding it was useless to prod his father any further, Francis murmured: "I take your word, father, and I believe you. What would you have me do? Or not do?"

"Trust no one but yourself," Thomas repeated. "Being a courtier is a privilege, not a right. You must be well-born and of general good stock, which you are. You must not be vain or discourteous in any fashion, especially with those who are your betters. Do not carry tales and spread gossip about anyone - keep all to yourself. But most of all, favor the King and honor him. He will notice you, Francis. It may not seem so, not at first, but he cannot fail to see you."

Francis was still for a moment, absorbing his father's words. "How can you be so sure?" He finally asked.

"You have the means at your disposal," Thomas said, his eyes becoming slightly damp. "You have yourself, and your own wits. I know you may not feel like you can control your spontaneity at the moment, but you will eventually learn to do so. You can manipulate the means to an end, if you use your own judgment wisely and reasonably."

"But what if I can't do it?" Francis questioned Thomas, suddenly filled with great uncertainty.

Thomas stared at his son. "You must, without fail. It will be your only saving grace at the court of King Henry VIII."

* * *

HOURS LATER, AS he lay in his bed listening to the steady downpour of rain, Francis allowed his mind to wander back in time. Although it seemed ages ago, he recalled meeting Henry VIII when they were children. Henry's father, King Henry VII, brought Francis and a few other noble children to Windsor Castle for a few weeks during the summer of 1500 so that his son could have suitable playmates.

Francis had been part of an elite, albeit small, group which also included Charles Brandon (son of Sir William Brandon, Henry VII's standard-bearer at the Battle of Bosworth Field), Nicholas Carew (son of Sir Richard Carew, Captain of Calais), and William Compton (Prince Henry's page).

Prince Henry had only been nine years old at the time, but was already sports-minded. Francis recalled long days of fencing, archery and wrestling, along with rides in the country astride royal horses, and fulsome suppers to end the days. Yet the four young boys didn't just lavish their time with sports activities. They also discussed philosophy, religion, poetry and other writings.

Francis tried to recall Prince Henry's physical appearance, but the memory was vague. He knew the prince was tall with red hair, but could not remember exacting facial features or other physical traits. The brief time he had spent as Prince Henry's playmate was akin to a flash in his mind - a blur of red hair and bustling activity.

Francis then thought about what his father had said to him earlier in the day, and what it would mean for him.

"Father fears for me," Francis thought with a sudden clarity. "He feels as if he is throwing me into the viper pit, but he has no other choice. What else could I do with my life? Stay here at Marsworth, marry a local mouse, and father a passel of brats? Then eventually die myself and pass all of this onto my own son? What kind of life would that be? A shameful waste, that's what it would be."

Francis was certain his future was at court. He knew it deep in his soul. His only way to a life beyond obscurity in Buckinghamshire was to go to court. With trust in such a conviction, Francis knew his future and his destiny would be centered around Henry Tudor, King of England, who would perhaps be Francis' salvation.

CHAPTER SIX

Greenwich Palace

November 1509

THE GREAT HALL at Greenwich Palace was massive, not only in size, but in its flagrant ostentation as well. Everything seemed to be done on a grand scale, which was only fitting for the dining chamber of a King and his court. Garland wreaths were placed on the walls, and the great, high fireplaces were roaring to stave off the late autumn chill in the air. The ceiling of the hall was constructed of yellow roof timbers, offsetting the darkness of the hall itself and the glowing candlelight. Fresh rushes had been lain just for the occasion, while several long tables were set with bowls and goblets. The balconies above the hall were for the lesser people at court - servants, footmen and fools - while nobles were seated nearest the King, according to rank.

Naturally, the King held the place of honor at the head of a large table set in a three-sided square dais. His chair was laid with red velvet, the arms studded with small diamonds. The back was high, the top ridge carved with intricate lions heads. Gold plate and silver goblets were at the King's setting, as was a small glass water bowl and white cloth for the discreet washing of hands after eating each course.

Sir Thomas Bryan held a reserved place next to Harry Guildford and Meg, just six seats from the King. While Robin was relegated to the balcony, Francis would be able to sit next to Meg, thanks to the intervention of Harry. The chairs were of lesser elegance than the King's, of course, but they were cushioned in silver-and-white tapestry just the same.

Francis entered the Great Hall trailing his father, sister and Harry, and was barely able to conceal his wonder. People filled the room, but there seemed to be a much more subdued air than there had been in the entry way of the palace earlier. Lords and ladies were more circumspect, more controlled, in the regal atmosphere even though the King had not yet arrived. Voices appeared muted and calm, and every so often Francis would hear the faint whispers of awe from others. He felt reassured that he was not the only one present who felt the compelling anticipation of being in the presence of King Henry VIII.

"How long does the banquet last?" Francis whispered into Meg's ear.

"Several hours," Meg replied, her tone hushed. "There is the meal, of course, but there are also revelries and celebrations. You will see."

Francis took notice of his sister's appearance, impressed by Meg's glowing beauty. Having viewed her as his bossy older sister for most of his life, he had never

thought of her in terms as a mature woman. He tried to be sensitive and not stare at her so, but he could not help stop himself. It was as if he were seeing her for the first time not only as a woman, but as a bone fide member of the royal court. Meg had on a dark-blue velvet gown, cut square in the bodice as was the fashion, while a dainty white lace covering adorned her plaited hair. The folds of her skirt were different shades of blue, which only seemed to heighten the glowing beauty of her face. It struck Francis that Meg was as exhilarated as he was. Despite her own time at court, and the prestige of being lady-in-waiting to the King's sister, Princess Mary, she was under the magic spell of royalty the same as he.

He had to admit he felt confidence in his own attire. His hose was dark blue, with the lighter blue of his doublet almost matching Meg's dress. His breeches were black and slit with gold color, handmade by Robin Havers. It was another one of the valet's hidden talents, although not one he bandied about. Unaccustomed to the confines of such a uniform, Francis had at first felt self-conscious but realized everyone was dressed in the same manner, as befitting the occasion of the royal banquet. Francis' normal attire while at Marsworth - or anywhere else, for that matter - had been the typical dark brown hose and a beige doublet, comfortable and yet very practical. An amusing idea crossed his mind, almost making him laugh out loud: "*If I stay with the royal court,*" he thought to himself, "*I will have to become a mincing fop like the rest of the nobles. Smelly, with powdered body and all.*"

As no one was allowed to sit before the King arrived and sat himself, people were milling about, seemingly casual, although most eyes often strayed to the double-entry doors made of oak, which was the King's private entrance to the Great Hall. Francis was among them.

"Is the Queen at court?" He asked his sister. "I've heard no mention of her."

Thomas Bryan spoke up before Meg could reply. "Queen Catherine is at Windsor, son. She is heavy with child, and no doubt will give birth to a fine prince before too long."

Francis nodded absently, his eyes going to the royal doors involuntarily. He was expectant, just like everyone else in the room, and growing a trifle impatient with the wait.

"The King keeps his own time," Harry said, noticing Francis' gaze. "You will soon learn it well. We all dance attendance on him."

The doors suddenly opened, causing a hush to fall over the Great Hall. It was then, in that moment, Francis Bryan laid eyes upon Henry Tudor, King of England, now well beyond the nine-year-old boy prince he had briefly known nearly a decade ago. The child had been replaced with the splendid figure of a man and king.

Francis would remember the instant in time for the rest of his life. Years from now, when he could imagine himself to be old and musing, the memory would likely be one of the most fondly and vividly recalled. In simpler terms, it could easily be said it was where Francis felt his life was just beginning, or rather his experiences and the formation of his true and complete character were now earnestly in progress.

Henry VIII was perhaps the most magnificent and extraordinary specimen of a man for any age or time. His very presence in the room made the grandeur of Greenwich pale in comparison. As he entered the Great Hall, flanked by four footmen resplendent in gold-and-black uniforms, all eyes were riveted to him.

Taller than any man in the room - save perhaps Francis himself - Henry VIII carried himself with an air of majesty as was befitting his station. He had a natural air of self-confidence and authority. He had red-gold hair and bright blue eyes set in a squarely handsome face, with a small mouth and a long, narrow nose. His Majesty's muscular and athletic form was clothed in the greatest and most elegant of state. His shirt was of the finest silk, with a woven drawstring at the base of his neck. His doublet was of cloth of gold. Sewn amongst the ruffles of the puffed sleeves were studded rubies that shimmered from the meager light in the room. Several gold chains adorned his neck, matching the small gold ring bands on every other finger of his hands. The King's breeches were also gold, slit with black and dark red, the golden threads knotted and silky. The hose was dark brown and made from satin, trimmed in white to match his gold-colored shoes. A velvet robe was draped over his shoulders, sloping downward toward his waist and lower body. The gold fringes of the robe swept behind him over the rushes on the floor, sending the footman behind him to pick up the slack.

The slender and fit King seemed to glide to his place at the table. As he moved, he nodded perceptibly to several of the nobles who stood with their wives, all of them bowing from the waist. The women dipped into the deepest of curtsies, spreading their skirts around their feet as they sank to the floor, heads appropriately lowered.

Once the King had seated himself, he draped the robe back over both of his shoulders. His bejeweled hand went up, signaling that the rest of the company could also be seated. There was almost a collective sigh of relief as people began to take their places. A small mistral in the gallery above the hall began to play music softly.

"God almighty," Francis whispered in Thomas Bryan's ear. "I never thought to see the like in my entire life."

"The King is quite impressive, is he not?" Thomas agreed, pleased by his son's proper awe in the face of royalty.

Impressive was beyond the comprehension and scope of words available for Francis to grasp. The King embodied majesty - as well he should - but it was more than that. Henry Tudor was natural King. Had he not been born to it, he would have surely found his way there somehow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Windsor Castle

December 1509

FRANCIS QUICKLY REALIZED female company was sadly lacking during his stay at Windsor Castle. There were ladies aplenty, of course, but most of them were above the fray and not likely to conduct an illicit albeit brief affair with him. In general, the ladies of court were mostly women of noble birth, or had married into the nobility. There was always the kitchen or chamber maids to be considered, but Francis had yet to succumb to their dubious charms.

Then he met Alice Drury, the seventeen-year-old daughter and only child of Baron William Drury and Margaret Daubeney. The family came to Windsor from their holding in Suffolk the day after Christmas by invitation of the King. Baron Drury had been a presence in the court of Henry VII, receiving his title from the current King's father for fighting off a band of marauders in Bury St. Edmunds.

Alice was tall for a woman, perhaps a mere six inches shorter than Francis. Her slender frame was adorned with full breasts, blonde hair and light brown eyes. Francis was enchanted by her thin upper lip, full lower lip and a pert nose. Her pale skin almost appeared translucent in the lighting to be had at Windsor, giving her a soft glow he found impossible to resist. She was not overly shy, deliberately keeping her eyes level to his when they were introduced by William Compton.

Francis bowed slightly. "Very pleased to meet you, Mistress Drury."

She offered him a half-smile, almost mocking in its display. "Likewise, Mr. Bryan."

"How long will you be staying at Windsor?"

"His Majesty has asked us to remain until after Twelfth Night, Mr. Bryan." She regarded him with her light brown eyes. "And how long are you staying, may I inquire?"

Francis was already calculating in his mind how much time he would have to seduce Alice. It was currently December 26th, giving him just ten days to woo her before Twelfth Night on January 5th.

Francis met her gaze. "I'm staying as long as the King has need of me. We will probably return to Greenwich sometime in March." He gave her a smile. "It is unfortunate you will not be there as well."

She appeared surprised. "I must go where my parents will, Mr. Bryan. I am nothing if not a dutiful daughter."

"As you should be," he murmured in response.

Dancing was part of the nightly entertainments at Windsor. When calls for the Galliard began, Francis invited Alice to be his partner. She quickly accepted, taking his arm as they walked to a cleared area of the Great Hall. Many young couples were eager to partake of the lively dance as a band of musicians started to play from a balcony above.

"You know the Galliard?" Francis asked Alice as they paused on the floor.

She laughed. "Yes, of course. Just because I live in Bury St. Edmunds doesn't mean I'm ignorant of modern ways."

He bowed. "My apologies, Mistress Drury."

Francis was impressed by Alice's quick agility as they swept through the dance moves. When he took four hopping steps to complete one turn with a high leap, holding Alice in the air during the cadence, she squealed with delight. When he landed with one foot in front of the other, she melded into his arms. He gazed down at her, a warm light in his eyes. She returned his regard boldly, as if to let him know she wholly approved.

"You almost make me forget my comportment," he whispered into her ear.

"Don't mind your manners on my account," she returned flirtatiously.

Francis drew in his breath softly. It was obvious Alice was his for the taking. All he had to do was reach out and he could have her.

"Would you like to take a walk in the Moat Garden?" He asked her.

She nodded. "Yes, Mr. Bryan. I've grown quite warm all of a sudden. A turn in the cold air would surely remedy it."

Another set of the Galliard had commenced, so Francis and Alice were able to slip away with little notice, apart from the watchful eyes of the King. He saw the couple leave the Great Hall, a smile forming on his lips. Francis had taken a quick fancy to Mistress Drury, as well he should. She was a lovely young woman, but from a good family. Francis would have to be cautious in his perusal of the lady, the King mused. It wouldn't do to besmirch the honor of Baron Drury's daughter.

Francis and Alice went through the Guard Chamber in the round tower to exit the castle, stepping swiftly into the cold night. Torches blazed high on stone walls, lighting their way as they took a path to the garden, which was dusted with newly-fallen snow. Royal guards holding upright halberds stood in groups of two near the torches, merely nodding to Francis as he passed by them.

Alice wore a long, black ermine coat with gold-braided cuffs over her dark blue velvet gown, which included a square neckline, fur-lined sleeves and a gabled hood. Francis admired her profile as she walked briskly alongside him.

"Are you cold?" He asked her solicitously.

She shook her head. "No, not at all. I find the air to be invigorating." He saw the condensation of her breath turn into a mist when she spoke, and was oddly aroused by it. She was seemingly unaware that she was a warm, sensual woman, inviting with her eyes, speech and the simple presence of her voluptuous body. She gave an air of innocence, yet there was no denying her nubile form and quick mind.

"Are you spoken for?" He asked her suddenly, his tone blunt.

She glanced sideways at him. "Pardon?"

"Are you spoken for?" He repeated, turning his head to stare straight ahead as they walked on the path.

"No, I'm not spoken for. Are you?"

"Never."

She studied him. "Never as in you've *never* been spoken for, or never as in you'll *never* be spoken for?"

"A bit of both," he admitted sheepishly.

"Oh." She seemed to let her thoughts settle before continuing. "Why? Don't you want to marry one day to carry on your family name?"

He shrugged. "I suppose, but I'm in no hurry to do so."

Alice gave a short laugh. "To be honest, neither am I. In that we are alike, Mr. Bryan. Yet I know it will be expected of me, so someday I'll have to shackle myself to a man and produce a passel of brats."

Francis laughed at her frank description. "You're right, Mistress Drury. To me, as an observer, marriage appears to be a bit of a prison sentence."

"Exactly," she replied flatly. "And who wants *that*?" She paused on the path, turning to look into his face. "If we are going to be friends, don't you think we should call each other by our given names? Can we please forgo with the mister and mistress drivel?"

He smiled widely at her. "I heartily agree with you, Alice."

"Thank you, Francis." She returned his smile, her eyes bright. "I feel much better now."

"Shall we return to the Great Hall?"

"I suppose we should, although I'm finding our walk preferable to a hall crowded full of revelers."

"You're a country mouse at heart," he teased her as they turned to make their way back to the round tower.

"Not so much a mouse," she responded softly. "More like a paradoxical mix of clapping thunder and a purring kitten." She gazed at him boldly. "Do you think you can handle me, Francis?"

He returned her intense stare. "I can and will, Alice. You won't regret it. It is the one promise I can make to you."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

PART FOUR:

Sir Francis Bryan (1518-1522)



*A wreathed garland of deserved praise,
Of praise deserved, unto Thee I give,
I give to Thee, who knowest all my ways,
My crooked winding ways, wherein I live ...
~ George Herbert (A Wreath)*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Greenwich Palace

April 1521

FRANCIS MET PHILIPPA Spice, widow of Sir John Fortescue, at Greenwich Palace in the thrush of springtime. Little did Francis know, the King and Charles Brandon had been scheming for several weeks to find him a suitable wife. Charles felt Philippa, with all of her wealth, would be perfect for Francis and, perhaps, he could blend his illegitimate son with her four children in due course. Charles sent for her to come to court with the King's blessing, and then went about trying to bring her and Francis together without seeming to.

Francis was none the wiser when he joined the King and Charles for supper in the Great Hall one evening in April. To him, it was akin to any other night, with nothing untoward in the offing.

After the meal ended, Charles turned to Francis. "There is someone I'd like you to meet."

Francis was immediately on guard. "Who?"

"A lady recently come to court . . ."

Francis raised his hand as if to stop him. "I can find my own female companionship, Charles, thanks all the same."

Charles sighed. "Yes, you find women for brief flings or one-night tumbles." His voice turned hard. "You're not getting any younger, Francis. It is time you found a proper lady and settled down."

Before Francis could protest, the King spoke up. "I agree. Give her a chance, Francis. That's all we are asking you to do."

Francis gazed back and forth between the two men, his expression turning incredulous. "Are you both in this together?"

Charles grinned. "Guilty as charged."

Francis rolled his eyes. "Bloody hell. Very well, I'll meet her. Who is she, may I ask?"

"Philippa Spice, widow of Sir John Fortescue from Ponsbourne, Hertfordshire," the King replied. "She has four children by her late husband, and is very wealthy in her own right."

Francis' interest was piqued. "Wealthy, you say?"

The King nodded. "She retained Fortescue Manor in Ponsbourne, Hertfordshire, which she is holding in trust for her oldest son, Henry."

"She is definitely *not* mistress material," Charles interjected.

"How old is she?" Francis pressed.

"Around twenty-seven. She's quite lovely, really. She cannot read, unfortunately, but she is no simpleton, either."

Francis' eyes narrowed. "Does she know why she's been brought to court?"

Charles shook his head. "No, of course not. I invited her to visit for a few days." He made a wry face. "I've yet to encounter anyone who turns down an invitation from myself or the King."

Francis snorted. "She came here on her own?"

"She was accompanied by her father."

"Who is?"

"Sir Humphrey Spice of Black Notley, Essex."

Francis groaned. "Very well, gentlemen. Let's get this over with so I can find a proper whore to warm my bed tonight."

The King roared with laughter, moisture from the effort making his eyes glisten. "You do me in," he finally managed to say when he recovered. "You do me in, Francis."

Charles rose from the table. "Come with me, my friend."

Francis mumbled as he followed him. "Like a lamb being led to slaughter."

He heard the King chuckle, which made him smile. Keeping Henry in good humor was an important element of being a successful courtier, and Francis rarely missed the mark.

Charles led him to a relatively quiet corner of the Great Hall, near one of the glowing fireplaces in the room. Several people sat in an assortment of chairs and stools, talking as they kept warm by the hearth.

Francis instinctively realized who Philippa Spice was when he saw her, sitting next to an older man on a chair. The woman appeared somewhat delicate, small and slender, with auburn hair, green eyes and light freckles. She had a generous mouth and breasts, and long-tapered fingers. He immediately felt a sense of calm overwhelm him, momentarily puzzled by the physical sensation.

Charles approached the older man sitting next to her. "Greetings, Sir Humphrey. I would like to introduce you to my friend, Sir Francis Bryan."

The man rose, nodding at Francis. "Glad to meet you, my lord." He gestured to the woman still seated. "This is my daughter, Philippa." Humphrey Spice was of medium height with dark hair and a trimmed mustache. He was thin but wiry, with dark eyes and a faint pallor.

Francis looked to Philippa, surprised to see her returning his gaze fully. Then she lowered her head slightly as she acknowledged him. "My lord."

Her voice was like silken honey to his ears, smooth yet effortless. He stared at her, transfixed. She was nothing like Alice Drury in appearance - she was the exact opposite, actually. Her voluptuous shape and soothing demeanor belied the fact she had borne four children and was already a widow.

Francis bowed from the waist. "A pleasure to meet you, my lady."

She raised her head and regarded him curiously. "You've made quite a name for yourself at court, Sir Francis, or so I've heard. Very impressive."

He beamed at her. "It is my great honor, my lady, I assure you."

Philippa smiled, revealing her even, white teeth. "Tell me, how do you keep yourself entertained at court?"

"The King enjoys hunting, cards and dice, as well as other revelry. We make good use of it all year round, but especially during the winter months when the weather is inclement."

"You have no home of your own?"

"My family seat is Marsworth Manor in Buckinghamshire, but I also have a house on The Strand."

Charles and Humphrey watched the couple as they continued to converse.

"Perhaps I can show you my homes some day," Francis offered.

"Properly chaperoned?" She asked, her green eyes twinkling.

"Of course."

They parted company a few minutes later, but only after Francis elicited a promise from Philippa to walk in the garden with him the next day.

"Well?" Charles prompted as they walked back to the King's table.

"You were right," Francis admitted. "She's lovely, and wonderfully different from Alice."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Most assuredly," Francis replied. "Philippa might very well be an anecdote to getting Alice out of my head, once and for all."

"See here," Charles said with some urgency. "The King is keen for you to make this match. It will give you great monetary wealth and property."

"I'll court Philippa in proper fashion but I'll not make a rush of it. She intrigues me, Charles."

Charles smiled broadly. "We were hoping you would agree. The King will be very pleased to hear it."

"His Majesty's happiness is what I live for," Francis intoned with a hint of sarcasm.

Charles laughed, clapping him on the back as they approached their King.

PART EIGHT:

Sir Francis Bryan (1534-1547)



*Bryan . . . who knows how great a grace
In writing is to counsel man the right.
To thee . . . that trots still up and down
And never rests, but running day and night
From realm to realm, from city, street and town,
Why dost thou wear thy body to the bones?
~ Sir Thomas Wyatt
(How to Use the Court and Himself Therein)*

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Greenwich Palace

January-February 1536

A JOUSTING TOURNAMENT was planned to take place at the Greenwich tiltyard on January 24th, which Francis declined to attend or participate in. Instead, he took the opportunity to retreat to The Strand. He had only been in residence for three days when he received word of the King's accident on the jousting field.

Henry had been thrown from his horse in full armor, after which his horse had fallen on top of him. He was unconscious for two hours after hitting his head hard against the ground and gashing his leg.

Francis hurried to Greenwich Palace, only to arrive in time to hear that Queen Anne had miscarried a son on January 29th, the same day Catherine of Aragon had been buried in Peterborough Abbey. He went directly to her apartments, where he saw Henry standing in the doorway to her chamber.

"You will get no more sons by me!" He bellowed as he leaned heavily on a wooden cane. Francis heard Anne sobbing within the chamber, but there was nothing he could do to help her without angering the King.

Henry turned and saw Francis standing behind him. "What took you so long to get here?" He demanded waspishly. "Help me back to my chamber."

Members of the court tried not to stare as the King and Francis slowly made their way along the hallway. Henry was red-faced and made livid by the eyes following him, so he waved his hand in dismissal.

"Go about your business," he ordered angrily. "Leave me in peace, for the love of God."

Once they were behind the closed doors of his privy chamber, the King settled into a chair with a grunt, elevating his leg on a footstool.

"What happened, Sire?" Francis asked quickly.

"I fell from my horse during the tournament," Henry snapped in return. "And then the damned horse fell on top of me. I was unconscious for some time. When I awoke in the tent, my leg was bleeding and oozing, and my head felt as if a hundred men were running around on my brain with spears."

"What does your physician say?"

"Butts told me I will heal in time," he replied grudgingly. "Apparently, Norfolk ran to Anne to tell her of my mishap, where after she collapsed." He closed his eyes. "She lost my boy, Francis. The child she miscarried was my son, may God damn her soul to hell. This is it for me, my lord. I am well quit of her."

Francis kept his voice calm. "What will become of her, Majesty?"

"I know not at this time," Henry grumbled. "I want to be rid of her by whatever means necessary." He stared at Francis. "Anne is your kin. Does this present a problem for you?"

Francis shook his head. "My first loyalty is to you, Sire. Never worry on that account."

The King appeared visibly relieved. "I trust your word, my lord."

* * *

IT WAS A sunny day in late February when Francis was summoned to the Queen's private apartment, where he found her sitting in a chair in her bedroom. He was alarmed by her harried appearance, her dark eyes sunken into her face as if she had not slept in days.

He bowed before her. "Your Majesty."

Her eyes were pleading. "Why does this happen now, when I have finally come to realize how much I love Henry? I cared for him the beginning, probably flattered by his attention, but was it love then? No, not even close. Yet now I find myself to be deeply in love with him as a man and my husband, not as a King."

Francis became uneasy. "That is a matter between you and your husband, my lady."

Anne wrung her hands together nervously. "I need some truths from you, cousin."

Francis was dismayed. He'd had a feeling she would confront him sooner or later to determine the King's frame of mind.

"Truths, Ma'am?" He asked carefully.

Her face darkened. "Don't play false with me, my lord. It does not suit you."

"What do you need from me?"

"The King's mind," she ground out in frustration. "What is his disposition toward me? I have not seen him since the day I lost our son, and he has refused my requests for an audience. Not one word, Francis." She leaned forward slightly. "What does he say about me?"

Francis moistened his lips. "He has said nothing, Anne."

"You're lying," she accused him indignantly. "I can see it in your eyes."

He shrugged. "I have nothing to tell you."

She rose from the chair, clutching her hands at her sides. "How could you abandon me in this? We are blood kin, Francis. Would you see me fall without lending a hand to stop it?"

"You understand the King as well as I do," he replied evenly. "There is nothing I can say or do to stop him in pursuing what he desires."

"Which is?" She prodded.

Francis remained silent, but met her angry eyes.

Her expression turned scornful. "I see it now. You will do all in your power to save your own skin, but think nothing of throwing me to the wolves. You and Norfolk are of the same mind, I think."

"You're being unfair," he protested. "You understand, more than most, how the court works. I will not purposely put my head forward to be severed, not even for you."

"Useless knave," she cried, angry tears filling her eyes. "I disown you, *cousin*. You had better pray my husband does not return to me, for if he does, your days will be numbered."

Before Francis could reply, she continued in a cold voice. "You are dismissed, Bryan. Never darken my door again."

Without bowing, he turned and left the room.

CHAPTER FORTY

Hampton Court Palace

October 1537

AFTER A HARD labor of three days, Queen Jane was delivered of a healthy son at Hampton Court on October 12th. The King was ecstatic, ordering *Te Deums* to be sung and bells to be rung in churches. His subjects were overjoyed - and relieved - that the King finally had a legitimate son. Bonfires were lit in celebration, and two thousand shots rang from the Tower of London to honor the new prince.

Francis attended the christening of the child - to be named Edward - three days later at Westminster Abbey, along with Lady Mary and Lady Elizabeth, who carried her half-brother's chrisom. Jane, grateful for Francis' presence at the event, sent him gold chains as a gesture of appreciation.

The Queen suddenly took a turn for the worse, falling into a high fever with added delirium. Henry rushed to her chamber, taking Francis with him.

Jane was on her back in the cavernous royal bed, her face ghostly pale and her skin glistening with beads of fever. The King took her hand, holding it to his cheek as he stared at his stricken wife.

"My lady, you must get well so you can see to our son," Henry said with a false bravado.

She tossed her head back and forth on the pillow, her eyes open but sightless. "I fear he will never know me," she said weakly. "Take special care with our son, husband. I am entrusting him to you."

"No need, sweetheart. You shall recover and see him grow into a man."

"No, Sire. It is not to be." She closed her eyes. "My dreams are full of horrors as of late. I see a headless body floating in the moat at Windsor." She reached her hand up to shield her closed eyes. "Why, Henry? Why do I see such things? Is it your wife come back to haunt me?"

"You are my wife, sweet Jane." Henry was appalled by her word, but was doing his best to maintain a soothing tone.

"Yet Anne came before me. I suspect she has unfinished business with you or me, I don't know which." Jane opened her eyes and gazed in Francis' direction. "She visits you in your dreams, too, does she not?"

Francis was at a loss for words. Jane was obviously delirious and he did not want to add to her confusion. "I have no such visions, Majesty."

She sighed, closing her eyes again.

"We will let you rest, sweetheart," the King said. "But I will be nearby if you have need of me."

She turned her head away without acknowledging that she heard him.

Once they left Jane's chamber, the King turned to Francis. "What did you make of that?"

Francis shrugged. "The Queen is delirious with fever, Hal. She doesn't realize what she's saying, so I wouldn't put too much stock into her words at the moment."

"She *has* to recover," Henry said as they walked along the corridor back to his chambers. "I cannot lose her, Francis. Not now."

* * *

QUEEN JANE DIED nine days later at Hampton Court.

Francis had never seen the King in such a mire of grief and depression. He donned black and retreated to his chambers with his fool, Will Somers, for several weeks of seclusion. He allowed no one else into his presence, not even Francis.

Jane was buried in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle on November 12th, with the Lady Mary as chief mourner. A line of twenty-nine additional mourners followed, each one representing every year of Jane's life. The King, as was custom for husbands, did not attend the service. Francis escorted Mary, saddened by the somber procession. Jane may have replaced his cousin in the King's affections, but she had been a kind and gentle lady worthy of a queen's funeral.

When Henry broke his seclusion in late November, he rode to Ampthill Castle with Francis and Charles in tow.

"Cromwell suggested I take another wife," Henry grouched as he sat with the two men at the long table in the great hall. The King was deep into his cups, which was unusual for him. "How can I even contemplate taking another wife? My beloved Jane is barely cold in her grave."

"Because you are a king," Charles replied simply. "It is expected of you, Hal. Thanks to be God you have a healthy son in Prince Edward, but he could go the way of FitzRoy without notice, and then where would you be? Your tasks are difficult, Sire, but in order to keep the succession secure you need to beget more sons."

"You are not a mortal man like others," Francis joined in. "Much more is expected of you."

"I know my duty," the King muttered darkly. "But it does not assuage my broken heart."

* * *

CHRISTMAS 1537 WAS a rather solemn affair at Windsor Castle, although all three of the King's children were present, along with Prince Edward's new governess, Lady Margaret Bryan. After an unusually quiet dinner banquet on Christmas Eve, the King asked Francis to accompany him to St. George's Chapel, which was about one-third of a mile from the castle.

"I want to see where Jane is," Henry explained. "And where I shall also rest some day."

"Hal, are you sure you want to go there?"

"I must."

The short distance to the chapel took about fifteen minutes as Henry still relied on a cane to slowly propel each step. Ever since his jousting accident in 1536, he had suffered from a festering sore on his leg. It had caused him to avoid much exercise, thus increasing his girth accordingly.

The King that Francis had known when coming to court in 1509 - the slender and strong athlete - had been replaced with an overweight and aging man who seemed to have little concern for his appearance.

It was cold and dark as they walked along, their way illuminated by torches carried by the King's guards. Once inside the chapel, Henry hobbled to the quire and stood silent for a few minutes.

"Sire," Francis spoke quietly. "The Queen is buried in the vault underneath the quire."

"I know," he replied without turning around. "I've changed my mind. I don't think I can bear to see her in a cold, dark place, all alone."

"A wise decision, Hal."

The King finally turned to face him. "Will you send a carriage for me when you get back the castle? I cannot make the walk again for my leg is paining me."

Francis bowed. "Yes, Majesty. I'll return shortly."

"Take your time, Francis. I'm enjoying the peace and solitude the chapel affords me."

With another short bow, Francis turned and left the chapel to do the King's bidding.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

England

Summer-Autumn 1541

THE KING FELT well enough to go on a lengthy progress in the summer of 1541, his entourage almost as large as the one he had taken to the Field of the Cloth of Gold in France some twenty-one years earlier. The current display was meant to impress Henry's subjects, which it did not fail to do. The King seemed more popular with his people than ever before, eliciting cries of welcome from residents in every town they came to.

The royal retinue contained five thousand horses, one thousand soldiers, members of the court including Queen Katherine and Lady Mary, and two hundred tents and pavilions to be used by everyone else when there was no remaining space in the houses the royals stayed in along the way.

They began in Hatfield, and then continued on to Dunstable and Ampthill - with much hunting and hawking as they went - stopping for a few days at Grafton Manor in Worcestershire because heavy rains had made muddy roads impassable. When the weather cleared, they went to Stamford, then Grimsthorpe Castle in Lincolnshire as guests of the Duke of Suffolk, then on to Lincoln, Boston, Doncaster, Pontefract, Hull, Kettleby, Collyweston, The More, Windsor, and finally, back to Hampton Court on October 30th.

Francis had found the pace of the journey exhausting, his mind wandering to Charlotte, as it often did. He had not seen his daughter in two years, and he missed her sorely. Angela sent him frequent letters, reporting on the girl's progress as she grew, but it was not the same as seeing her in person. Now five years old, he imagined she must be talking and walking with great ability, and he longed to be in her presence. Yet, he knew his duty to the King came first, however frustrating the knowledge was to him.

Henry asked Francis to attend a service of thanksgiving for Queen Katherine with him in the royal chapel on November 1st. The King was intent on giving thanks to God for the good life he led with his "jewel of womanhood" beside him. As they reached the pew, Francis noticed a sheath of wax-sealed paper on Henry's cushion.

The King took the paper. "It is addressed to me from Archbishop Cranmer," he said, tucking it into his doublet. "I shall read it after the service."

* * *

Your Majesty,

During your recent progress, one John Lossels came to me and said he had been with a sister of his who had been servant with the old duchess of Norfolk, who brought up the said Katharine, and he had recommended her to sue for service with former Queen Anne of Cleves. Katherine said she would not, but was very sorry for the Queen. "Why?" asked Lossels. "Marry," said she "for I am light, both in living and conditions." "How so?" quoth Lossels. She replied that one Francis Dereham had lain in bed with her, in his doublet and hose, between the sheets on a hundred nights, and a maid in the house had said she would lie no longer with her because she knew not what matrimony was.

More brazen, however, is that Katherine appointed this same Dereham as her private secretary and then a Gentleman Usher of the Queen's chamber this past August.

Moreover, one Henry Maddox, a servant of the Duchess, who gave her music lessons, knew a privy mark upon her body, a small brown mole on her upper thigh.

I, being much perplexed, consulted Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford, and by his advice, reported the matter to Your Majesty in writing as I had not the heart to tell you of it by word of mouth.

Your Majesty's most bound chaplain,

T. Cranmer

Henry felt his heart sink his chest as he read the letter. He was alone in his secret chambers at Hampton Court, having dismissed Francis for the night as he wanted to be alone with his aches, pains and thoughts. Now he wished he had kept his friend close.

"Fetch Sir Bryan to me," the King directed Culpepper, who bowed and left the room.

Henry sat in silence at his rounded table as he waited, his gaze going to the fire burning in the grate. He felt as if he was on the edge of tipping into madness, and it took every bit of his inner strength to hold steady. It seemed to take Francis forever to return, when it was actually only five minutes as he knew Francis' chamber was not far away.

He came into the secret room, the veil of sleep still in his one good eye and his hair tousled. He bowed quickly.

"Sire?"

"Please sit, Francis." Henry looked to the waiting Culpepper. "You may leave us, Tom. You can retire for the night."

Culpepper bowed deeply and left the room.

Francis sat at the rounded table, across from the King, who pushed the letter in his direction. "Read this and tell me it is false," he requested quietly.

Francis nodded, taking the letter and scanning its contents quickly. With a loud exhale, he looked to an anxious Henry. "Majesty, Cranmer is not known to gather false tales or to perpetuate mischief for the sake of it. He is merely repeating to you what someone else told him."

The King looked down at his pudgy hands, which were resting on the surface of the table. "But how can it be? Katherine is my jewel, the sweetest and most beautiful of all my wives, innocent when she came to me."

"Are you sure, Hal?"

Henry glanced at him sharply, then looked away. "I'm fairly certain."

Francis paused, regarding the King with concern.

"Some advice, my hellish vicar?" Henry prompted.

Francis sighed. "Allow Cranmer to investigate the accusations, to dig deeper for more facts. It's the only way you can be sure, Sire."

"What should I do about Katherine in the meantime?" Henry asked, appearing to be at a loss, as if confused.

"Keep her at arm's length for now," Francis suggested in a measured tone. "Feign illness if you must, in order to keep her away from you until this matter can be decided."

"I can do that," the King replied slowly, his eyes filling with tears. "Even as it breaks my heart."

* * *

IT WAS WORSE than either Francis or the King could have imagined. While being interrogated and tortured, Francis Dereham shockingly pointed a finger to Thomas Culpepper, claiming: "Master Culpepper has succeeded me in the Queen's affections." Dereham insisted he had only known Katherine during her time in the household of the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk, but that he was hardly the first man to breach her defenses. "Before me came Henry Manno, her music master, who taught her much more than how to play the virginals." He did admit they were pre-contracted at one point, hoping to marry someday, but it had been forgotten as she moved on "to bigger and better things." In addition, he confessed that he had blackmailed Katherine into hiring him as her private secretary in 1541.

Cranmer's men searched Culpepper's quarters at Hampton Court and found letters written to him in Katherine's hand, one of which was signed with the ending

salutation: "*Yours as long as life endures.*" Culpepper was immediately arrested and questioned, albeit without instruments of torture.

When interrogated, Culpepper denied having carnal knowledge of the Queen, insisting "my sweet little fool" pursued *him* even after he tried to end their friendship. "She told me she was dying of love for me," Culpepper confessed with desperate fear in his voice.

Lady Jane Rochford, widow of George Boleyn and serving as lady-in-waiting to Queen Katherine, was also arrested and taken into custody for "facilitating lewd meetings" between Katherine and Culpepper, when she acted as a lookout for them.

Cranmer and his delegates went to Whitehall Palace to question the Queen on November 7th, Francis among them. Katherine was white with fear, her wide-set eyes rimmed with tears as she watched the gentlemen approach in her privy chamber.

Francis almost felt pity for her, but then he thought of the state Henry was in because of her. The King seemed to have aged ten-fold in the past few days, his deep hurt mingled with injured pride. Francis knew the King had sent him with Cranmer because he could be intimidating just by rote of his presence, and brutal in method when the occasion called for it. And this particular occasion definitely warranted a callousness he could easily muster.

Cranmer began, telling Katherine of Dereham's confession and Culpepper's claims, causing her to weep openly, unable to form words in response.

Francis had no patience with her hysterics, sensing they were forced to bring drama and elicit pity from the men assembled in front of her. "Steady on, Madame," he retorted loudly, his tone cold. "Were you contracted to Dereham as he claimed?"

She raised her fearful eyes to him. "He lies, my lord. While I lived with the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk at Chesworth House, Dereham raped me more than once. This I swear to you."

Francis did not break stride, his voice now coming unfeeling and harsh. "You knowingly wed the King in such a state? If you lied about the nature of your innocence, could you not also be lying about everything else?"

Cranmer drew in his breath. "Sir Bryan, I beg of you to treat the Queen with the respect due her station. Nothing has been proven yet, and she is still the King's wife."

Katherine appeared triumphant as she tossed a scowl to Francis. "Yes, Sir Bryan. I am your Queen."

"Not for long you're not," he taunted her cruelly. "Do you honestly believe the King would take you back after being told of how you sullied yourself?"

"Sir Bryan," Cranmer stammered. "I must insist . . ."

Francis waved his hand in dismissal. "Insist all you like, my lord archbishop, it matters naught. This little trollop's days are numbered, and you know it as well as I do."

"We are done here for now," Cranmer said abruptly. He bowed toward the Queen. "I will speak to you another time, Your Majesty."

Francis left the room without looking back. Cranmer caught up to him, anger written on his face. "What possessed you to treat the Queen in such a fashion?" He seethed.

"The King gave me leave to do so," Francis replied with a glare. "Why do you think he sent me with you? He knows my methods. His Majesty wants answers, not more flowery language and excuses."

"She was incoherent with grief," Cranmer returned grimly.

"She plays you false, my good archbishop."

"I found her to be genuinely lamented with such heaviness I've never before seen in another creature. It would strike pity in any man's heart to have looked at her in such a condition."

"Which is exactly what she wants," Francis answered him sarcastically. "She's a good actress, I'll give her that. She must not, under any circumstance, be allowed to see the King again. He is in a deep grief over her disloyalty and cannot bear to look upon her."

With one final glare at Cromwell, Francis turned and strode away.

* * *

THE QUEEN WAS stripped of her title on November 24th, henceforth to be known as Lady Katherine Howard. The King directed Francis to escort her to Syon Abbey in Middlesex, where she would be held a virtual prisoner, while Dereham, Culpepper and Lady Jane Rochford were already ensconced in the Tower.

Syon Abbey was a former monastery of the Bridgettine Order, but had stood essentially empty after its dissolution in 1539.

Katherine appeared uneasy by Francis' presence as he took her to Syon, which was less than ten miles from London. She no longer shed copious tears in front of him, keeping her mouth in a grim line as he rode alongside her covered coach.

Once at the abbey, Katherine was given a set of rooms at the end of a long gallery. The King had ordered that she was to be lodged "moderately." She was forbidden to display cloth of estate, and her gowns were to be devoid of jewels sewn into the fabric. She was provided with a mere six hoods, six sleeves, six gowns

and kirtles, a meager collection when compared to her former glory. However, she was allowed to have four ladies and two chamber servants of her choice. She was also supervised by Sir Edward and Lady Baynton, who were, in essence, to be her jailors.

Satisfied that Katherine would be well protected with no routes of escape, Francis turned to leave but she stopped him.

"Sir Bryan, wait," her voice came tremulously.

He looked at her, waiting expectantly.

"Tell the King I love him," she spoke softly.

He laughed harshly. "Haven't you injured him enough, my lady? No, I will not relay your pathetic mewling to him, nor will I deliver any other messages you may devise. Good day to you, Katherine. Enjoy the peace and quiet while you can for I have a feeling it will be short-lived."

* * *

"CULPEPPER, OF ALL men," the King moaned into a cup of wine as he sat in his secret chambers at Hampton Court with Francis. "I most trusted Culpepper these past two years. He never gave off a hint to his devious actions, and I saw nothing."

Francis noticed Henry was becoming slightly drunk, but what did it matter? He had lost his misguided yet beloved wife and close personal servant in one fell swoop. He deserved to solace himself in his cups.

"Thomas Culpepper won't be a thorn in your side much longer," Francis told the King in a strong voice. "He and Dereham have already been convicted at Guildhall, and now cool their heels in the Tower. It's only a matter of a few days before both men meet their maker."

"I commuted Culpepper's sentence to beheading," Henry replied, his words nearly slurred. "But I care not for Dereham, so he shall be hung, drawn and quartered. Both of their heads will adorn London Bridge after being separated from their bodies."

"You have no choice, Hal." Francis' tone turned gentle. "Who knows what would have happened if it been allowed to continue? You are doing the right thing."

The King sighed. "I know, Francis, but it doesn't make my mind rest any easier."

Francis regarded him. "I hate to see you this way, Hal. You don't deserve what has happened. You did nothing wrong to either Katherine or Culpepper to

warrant such despicable behavior. In fact, you lifted them both higher than they ever were before, only to be repaid with treachery."

"It's all true," Henry agreed, his eyes watering. "Not only that, they made me out to be a fool, a cuckold in the eyes of the entire world. I am King of England and Defender of the Faith, not some lowly peasant or minor noble. They took advantage of my good nature and generosity, probably laughing together during their illicit meetings." He took a long swallow of wine and belched without ceremony. "I'm sure they mocked my age and infirmities between them." He shook his head. "The fact they likely conversed of me with derision is perhaps the hardest to bear."

"They committed treason, Sire. All four of them, if you count Lady Rochford."

"And treason is punishable by death," the King whispered.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

England

October 1546-January 1547

FRANCIS SPENT NEARLY every waking moment with the King from October 1546 onward. The court moved to Whitehall Palace and then to Oatlands in November, where Henry fell ill of fever again. Dr. Wendy described the bout as colic, but those close to the King knew better.

Once he somewhat recovered, the King moved on to Hampton Court and then Greenwich, and finally back to Whitehall, where he once again took to his bed.

Francis tried to entertain him by reading aloud Chaucer poems or urging him to play a few hands of *Primero*, their table surface comprised of the King's bed covers.

"Did you talk with the Queen yet?" Francis asked one afternoon as a snowstorm raged outside the window of the King's bedchamber.

Henry nodded. "I told her, along with my children." He sighed. "Mary seemed to be the most upset. She is my most sensitive of children, easy to cry, much more so than Edward or Elizabeth. I regret the years Mary and I were at odds . . . so much time was wasted on trifles. Edward didn't cry, but he looked frightened. And Elizabeth - well, she was typical Elizabeth. I've yet to see anything move her to tears."

"All of your children are exceptional, Sire."

"I instructed them to leave Whitehall on Christmas Eve," the King continued. "I told them to go to Greenwich because I wished to convalesce alone. In truth, I want to die without sniveling dramatics."

"Understandable, Sire."

"But you will stay, my lord?" Henry reiterated.

"I will stay as long as you have need of me, Hal."

* * *

THE KING SPENT Christmas in seclusion, with only Dr. Wendy, Anthony Denny and Francis allowed into his chambers. Henry vacillated between chills and high fever, so Denny kept a fire roaring in the grate at all times. Francis took to sleeping on a trundle bed in the King's room at Henry's urging, leaving Robin alone in Francis' large rooms at Whitehall.

Francis often laid awake in the night, listening for the King's even breathing and light snoring. His nerves were taut with emotional tension, fearing the day when he no longer heard the sounds of a living man.

Members of the Privy Council continually requested an audience with the King, but he denied them. Instead, he sent Francis to them with a message. Councilors regarded him frostily in the council chamber at Whitehall, as if he was an underling overstepping his bounds. Francis had little use for any of them, but did as the King had bid him to do.

"His Majesty has instructed me to tell you that his will has been set, and he has no desire to change it. He feels there is nothing left to discuss with any of you, and asks for your good graces in leaving him alone to cope with his malaise." He shrugged. "Do what you will with his order, but it would probably be best if you obeyed him at this point. He is quick to anger nowadays, so there is no telling what he may do if you deny him."

"Who are you to direct us?" The Earl of Hertford asked with blatant hostility.

Francis gazed at him, cold ice glittering in his eye. "I am the King's servant, the same as all of you. I suggest you remember it, or rue the day." Then he turned on his heel and left the council chamber.

Whitehall became fairly deserted after that, with courtiers now in their own homes and very few councilors remaining.

On one January afternoon, Francis went to his rooms to take a bath and consume a quick meal, aided by Robin, before returning to the King's chamber.

He came back to find Denny whispering in the King's ear, whereupon Henry sat upright and cried aloud. "No! No!"

"What is this about, then?" Francis asked angrily, taking a menacing step toward Denny.

Denny appeared frightened but said nothing.

"No man alone should wield power," the King panted, his eyes wide with alarm. "My will is clear. The Council of Regency for my son stands as it is. On this, I will not be budged."

Francis grabbed Denny by the scruff of his collar. "Tell me what you just said to the King," he snarled. "Or I will take great pleasure in breaking your neck with my bare hands."

"Hertford directed me," Denny stammered with fear. "He asked me to suggest to His Majesty that he be appointed as chief counselor for Prince Edward when the time comes."

Francis flung Denny from him, landing him on the floor. "Tell the bloody bastard Hertford to go to hell," he raged. "And you, *get out*. Never let me see your face near the King again."

Denny scurried from the room.

Francis looked to the King, who had collapsed against the pillows on his bed, his face gray with pain.

"Hal?"

"Thank you, Francis," the King managed to say. "There are serpents surrounding me at every turn now. Am I to have no peace, even in death?"

"You will from this point forward," Francis replied grimly. "I will make certain of it."

Henry sighed and closed his eyes, secure in the knowledge Francis would do just that.

* * *

THE KING FELL seriously ill again on January 1, 1547, when Dr. Wendy cauterized the wound on his leg. Nine days later, Queen Catherine and Lady Mary returned to Whitehall, but Henry refused to see them. It wasn't until January 22nd that he instructed Francis to escort the Queen to his chambers.

"It is God's will that we should soon part," the King began before her outburst of tears stopped him. He tried to continue. "I commend you for your great love, obedience and chastity of life being our wife and queen."

Catherine's wails grew louder as she held her head in her hands.

Henry glanced to Francis, who stood nearby. "Escort the Queen back to her chambers, my lord. She is overwrought."

Francis bowed, and then gently led the weeping Queen from the room by her elbow.

* * *

IT DAWNED COLD and gray on the morning of January 27, 1547. The King slept peacefully as Francis ate a platter of eggs bathed in butter, keeping his eye on Henry at all times.

The King hadn't eaten in two days, turning his head away from food when it was offered to him. He was ashen, clearly near his end. Francis was saddened, unwilling to lose the one man who had defined him to date. The past years flashed through his mind. Their nearly instant rapport, the trials and tribulations of

mistresses and wives, the births of all his children - alive and dead - victories in battle and political finesse, legal wrangling and leisure pursuits such as hunting, jousting, games, revelry, music and dancing.

It was all about to end with a firm resoluteness.

Francis was sitting in a chair by the fireplace in the King's chamber, sipping wine and intermittently glancing at Henry.

"My end is near, Francis," the King mumbled as he stared at the ceiling from his bed. "And I am alone in it."

"I'm here, Hal. I won't leave you."

Henry sighed. "I was chosen by God to be King, but in the end I am much the same as all mortal men." He swallowed with visible struggle. "My one consolation is I will be able to see those I love again, but my dreams are haunted by those I sent to their deaths, or contributed to as such."

"Sire?"

"The Duke of Buckingham, Thomas More, Cardinal Wolsey, Anne Boleyn, George Boleyn, Mark Smeaton, William Brereton, Henry Norris, Francis Weston, Nicholas Carew, Robert Aske, Thomas Cromwell, Katherine Howard, Thomas Culpepper, Francis Dereham, Margaret Pole, Anne Askew - so many others - none of them deserved to die as they did. I was a monster in the throes of my power, which could not be denied in the moment." A look of fear came across his face. "What if I go to the other place, Francis? What if I reawaken in hell rather than heaven?"

"There is no need to torture yourself with such thoughts," Francis protested, knowing he could not refute Henry's claims. "What's done is done, Sire. There is no turning back the clock for any of us, no matter how much we may wish it."

"I desire to see Charles Brandon and Anne Boleyn again above all others," the King continued faintly. "Charles was loyal and true until his own end. And, no matter how her life ended, I always loved Anne and it never changed. Jane wasn't my true beloved - Anne was. Yet my pride was damaged when she could not give me a son, and I took my rage out on her fair frame. The world had to know it was *her* fault, not mine. She understood what I was about, but she loved me regardless. I was a fool for forsaking her as I did." He sighed again. "I suffer with great grief over the injuries I have done to her and our daughter."

Francis felt helpless. "Hal, do you wish me to fetch a priest?"

The King closed his eyes. "I will first take a little sleep, and then, as I feel myself, I will advise upon the matter."

"Very well, Sire. I will be right here if you need me."

Henry had been sleeping for more than six hours when he suddenly sat up straight in the bed, just before two o'clock in the morning on January 28th.

Francis leapt to his feet. "Hal, what is amiss?"

"All is lost, Bryan," he gasped before falling back onto the pillows.

Francis stared at him, then leaned closer to try and detect the King's breathing. There was none. It was finally over - the mighty Henry VIII was dead, God seeing fit to take him in the middle of the night with no warning. He lay in the bed, eyes open and sightless. Francis reached over and drew his eyelids down gently, and then turned away.

He walked back to his chair with leaden feet, sitting down with a great exhale of air. Hal was gone, along with his protection and possible hope for salvation. Francis swallowed, tears streaming down his face. He was almost the last of his generation, having lost so many in the process. It was incomprehensible.

He knew, instinctively, that the world would never see the likes of Henry VIII ever again.

PART TEN:
Sir Francis Bryan (1548)



Nephew of Norfolk, first cousin of Anne Boleyn. One would think that with this background, Sir Francis Bryan could not fail to advance. For a time he was considered the emerging favorite, but could not support his position. He loved drinking and had a talent for mistruth.
~ J. Le Grand (*Histoire du Divorce de Henri VIII*)

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

England

April-August 1548

JOHN BRYAN ELWELL died suddenly on April 22nd, a victim of consumption at the age of thirty.

Francis was heartbroken over the loss of his oldest child, a grief that was mixed with flashes of guilt that he might not have been the best father in the world.

"You did the best you could under the circumstances," Robin remonstrated with him. "Never doubt it, my friend."

Arthur joined Francis and Edmund to retrieve John's body from his cottage in Oxford. They took the coffin for burial at St. Giles Churchyard in Cheddington, near the grave of Thomas Bryan.

A brief service was held in the chapel. Lady Margaret Bryan, Francis, Edmund, Robin, Alice, Arthur and Sybil were the handful of mourners present, a sad commentary on a kind man who relished education and teaching others, his life devoted to such at Magdalen College.

Edmund appeared the most upset. He and John had grown close over the spans of their childhood and youth, never losing touch and often meeting one another for meals at the various taverns, specifically the Bear Inn located near Christ Church College in Oxford.

"I never thought to outlive my own son," Francis said sadly at the gravesite.

Lady Margaret took his hand. "I've been down this road before, Francis. You are my last living child. Please take care of yourself."

He glanced at her. "I will be off to Ireland after my wedding to Lady Joan Butler this summer, mother. The Irish are not known to be gentle and forgiving sorts. Of all the places I've ever been, the idea of Ireland is the most to make me uneasy."

She pursed her lips. "I shall pray for you." She kissed him on the cheek. "Try to be happy, Francis."

"I'm happy when I'm with Alice," he replied dismally. "But it is not to be in the cards for us."

* * *

FRANCIS ESCORTED ALICE, Arthur and Sybil back to Bury St. Edmunds following John's funeral, staying a few days at Drury Manor before going on to London.

It was a bittersweet time for him. He might not see Alice for quite awhile, if ever again, once he was married and moved to Ireland, so he wanted to make the most of it.

When he had first told of her his impending marriage, she had taken the news fairly well. While saddened, she understood it was a political match with no love involved.

"I haven't even met her yet," Francis complained. "If I had my druthers, there would be no marriage, expedient or otherwise. I also have no desire to go to Ireland, but must do as the King and Lord Protector bid me."

Alice tried to lighten his mood. "Perhaps when we are ancient and mindless, we will finally be allowed to rest together easily with no one left to interfere."

They held hands as they walked the grounds of Drury Manor, comfortable with the quietness between them. When they turned and started to go back to the house, he stopped her.

He brought her hand to his lips. "It was never my intention to be parted from you for all of these years."

"I know, my love."

"Never forget, Alice." His voice was barely audible, so she leaned closer.

"Francis?"

His tone grew stronger. "Never forget that you are the only one I've ever loved. I will go to my grave with your name on my lips and your image in my heart."

Her eyes glistened. "It is the same for me, my lord. And I shall never forget."

* * *

JOAN FITZGERALD BUTLER made the journey from Ireland to England in July, going to Hanworth Park House near Richmond to wait for her first meeting with Francis. He arrived shortly after she did, going to a vacant chamber to freshen his appearance with Robin's assistance.

He was fleshier of face now that he was fifty-eight years old, with more pronounced streaks of gray in his once dark hair. His neatly-trimmed beard was also peppered with silver, and the lines on his forehead, around his eyes and at the corners of his mouth had deepened.

Francis grunted. "There is no help for it," he told Robin. "She'll have to take me as I am."

"She's lucky to have you," Robin returned. "She is getting a distinguished English noble, a knight of the realm. She couldn't do better in her own untamed land."

They made their way to the presence chamber, admitted by two of the King's pages. A woman sat alone by the cold hearth, her head turned away as she stared out of a nearby window.

Francis approached her slowly, taking in her appearance. She turned to meet his gaze. Joan looked to be in her early thirties, with curly brown hair, green eyes and long limbs. She was beautiful in a sense, but the first thing traits he noticed about her outward demeanor was the coldness in her eyes and her unsmiling face, which made her seem pinched with misery.

"My lady, welcome to England."

She regarded him coolly. "You are older than I imagined you would be." Her voice was deceptively soft and fluttery, but with no hints of warmth.

Francis felt a strong flash of dislike for her in that instant. If she wanted to play battles of word games and cruel taunts, he could give her as good as she gave. "This is not a meeting of romantic love, Madame Butler," he replied gruffly. "We have been called upon to make an alliance."

"One that is not to my liking," she returned abruptly.

"Nor is it to mine," he continued in a brusque tone. "However, I suggest we make the best of it." He stared at her for a long moment. "I hear you are the mother of seven sons and one daughter by Butler, all of whom live. Such an unusual feat counts in your favor, my lady. Additional sons from my own loins would not go amiss."

She visibly recoiled in distaste. "I am no brood mare, my lord."

"It's all that matters between us," he responded curtly. "Do not fail in that, or you will regret the day."

Joan maintained eye contact with him. "You will find no fault with me, my lord, but . . ."

"You lack natural poise," Francis interrupted her. "You are beautiful, yes, but you possess none of the refinement happily shared amongst Englishwomen of noble birth. Perhaps you can learn the finer nuances while you find yourself in England." His gaze turned hard. "I also sense you are educated - as much as a woman can be - yet I feel you will attempt manipulation with little or no conscience to stop you. I will brook no disobedience, Madame. Don't forget it."

Joan drew in her breath sharply. "We have nothing left to say to one another, my lord."

He inclined his head slightly. "I quite agree. The bans of our wedding have already been read, which will take place on August 1st at St. George's Church in Hanworth Village." He gave a crooked smile. "I will not look upon your sour face until then."

He turned and left the room.

* * *

THE KING, SEYMOUR and several nobles came to Hanworth to attend the wedding of Sir Francis Bryan and Lady Joan Fitzgerald Butler, most notably John Dudley, Earl of Warwick; Thomas Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton; Baron William Paget and Sir Thomas Seymour. The ceremony was officiated over by Archbishop Cranmer.

Joan came down the aisle in St. George's Church, face covered with a heavy white veil and hair free, while her cream-colored gown was fringed with dark green lace.

Francis took her hand but did not look at her, or compliment her appearance, as they stood at the altar. The vows were quickly and flatly spoken, after which the King hosted a small wedding feast at Hanworth House.

Joan and Francis sat next to one another on the dais, but they did not speak or even acknowledge the other. The coldness between them was palpable as a grim-faced Francis drank deeply from his wine cup. He ignored the platters of roasted meats and sweets, preferring to refill his cup with more of the fortified wine.

After the King and the nobles departed, Joan disappeared upstairs with two ladies to prepare for her wedding night. Francis drank two more full cups before climbing the stairs after her.

The chamber set aside for them was a medium-sized room at the head of the stairs, with one tall fireplace and a large bed in the center. The floors and walls were of polished wood, light sconces shedding illumination on the bride as she sat upright in bed, waiting for him. She was enveloped in a white, diaphanous gown with her hair free about her shoulders. Her face was expressionless, but her eyes regarded him frostily.

"Take off the gown," he ordered her harshly as he began removing his own clothes.

She made no move to do his bidding, so he took an intimidating step toward the bed.

"I can take you by force if need be," he snarled. "I will have my due as your unwilling husband, whether you like it or not."

Joan shrank against the pillows, her eyes wide with fear, yet she still did not shed her gown.

Francis quickly climbed on the bed and savagely ripped the gown from her. She made to scream, but he covered her mouth with the firm pressure of his hand, shaking her head roughly.

Robin sat in a chair outside the chamber, wincing when he heard Joan's muffled cries of pain for more than an hour.

Then, finally, it was blessedly quiet.

* * *

ROBIN NOTICED JOAN'S bruised mouth the next morning when he served breakfast to the newly-wed couple in their chamber. Her eyes were downcast as she pushed her plate of food away.

Francis, on the other hand, ate with gusto. He looked to his wife and noticed her indifference to the food. "I suggest you take some sustenance, Madame. We have a long day's journey ahead of us in order to make it halfway to Woburn Abbey."

She finally raised her eyes. "I thought we were going to Marsworth, your family seat?"

Francis laughed harshly. "Not hardly, my lady. My mother has no interest in meeting the likes of you."

Joan lowered her eyes again, moving a piece of bread around on her plate.

Robin almost felt sorry for her. Francis was being inordinately cruel to Joan in the light of day, but she was the one who had set the tone of their relationship during their first meeting. Her frigid stance had raised Francis' ire. Knowing him as he did, Robin realized Francis would make his new wife pay dearly for her behavior, and would likely never forgive her lack of proper respect.

Later, as Robin assisted Joan in the family coach, he imparted a few quiet words as Francis had not emerged from the house yet. "You injured his pride upon your first meeting, my lady. He took great offense to your comments and will undoubtedly take some time to forgive you."

Joan stared at him. "You know him well?"

Robin nodded. "Since we were children."

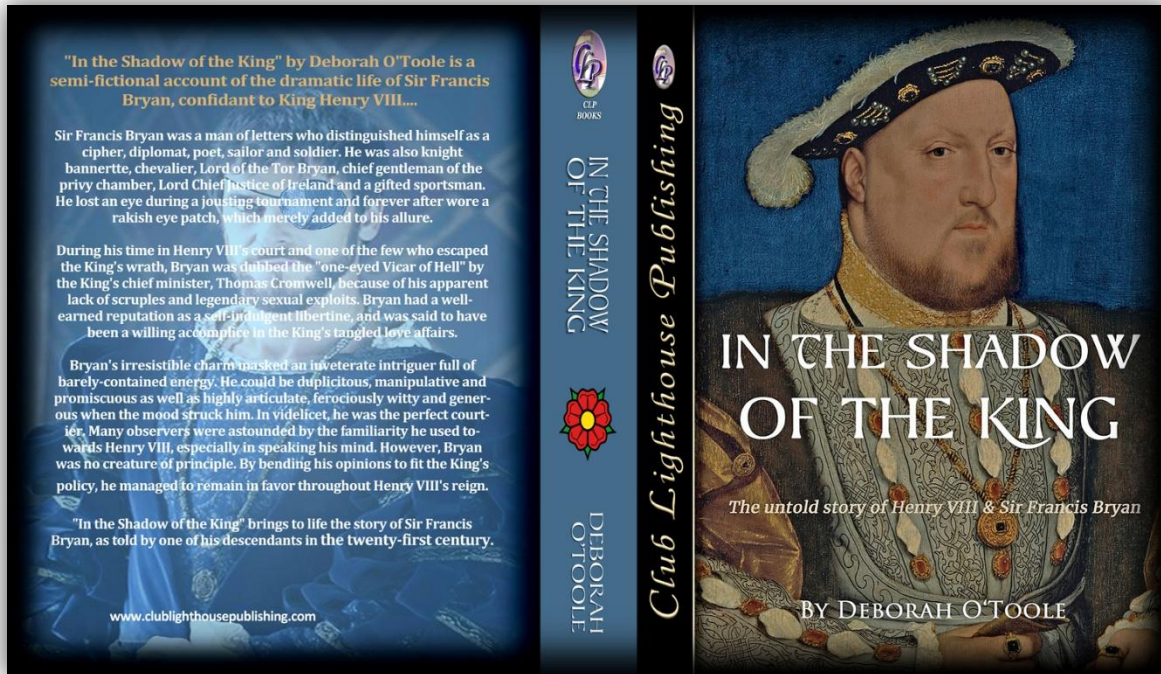
Her green eyes turned steely, which belied her fluttery voice. "While I was a widow and not married to your Englishman, I defended and kept my own council, or at the very least, no man went about to defeat me of my right. Happy is the

woman who remains unmarried. I am bidden to hold my peace, and my husband shall have answers made to him of my actions. I cannot abide such stricture."

Robin drew back, stunned. "Then you will reap the harvest of it, my lady, with no one but yourself to blame."

"IN THE SHADOW OF THE KING" INFORMATION

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Deborah O'Toole

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BOOKS BY DEBORAH O'TOOLE

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