

LAURA ANDERSEN

Author of *The Boleyn King*



*The*  
BOLEYN  
DECEIT

A NOVEL

# *The Boleyn Deceit*

A NOVEL



*Laura Andersen*



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PRELUDE



*8 February 1547*

“YOU WILL NOT tell me what I can and cannot do with my own son!”

If there was one thing to which George Boleyn was accustomed, it was his sister’s temper. Anne had never been known for her retiring personality, which was just as well or she would never have caught Henry’s eye.

And if she had not become the wife of one king and the mother of the next, George knew he would still be a minor gentleman of enormous ambition and small fortune. That meant he did not rise to Anne’s anger. “I am not telling you, the council is. The council that Henry’s will put in place.”

“My son is king now!”

“In name and spiritual right, yes. But he is ten years old, Anne. In practice, it is the regency council that will rule England until William is of age.”

A regency council that had pointedly excluded Anne. There had been child kings before in England, and often their mothers were central to the organization surrounding them. But Henry Tudor, for all his flaws, had always possessed superb political instincts. He had known that even after all this time, passions ran high against his wife. Anne could not be allowed anywhere near her son except in the most limited maternal capacity.

George Boleyn was another matter. Six months before his death, Henry had made him Duke of Rochford, and in his will the late king named him not only a member of the regency council, but bestowed on him the position of Lord Protector of England until William turned eighteen. Not that George had any illusions about the solidity of his position. He was just slightly less hated than his sister and he would hold power only as long as he could keep the other council members from turning on him.

“You are mother of the King of England,” he said in a softer voice, gentling Anne into listening. “William loves you and that will never change. I know that you would not jeopardize his position for misplaced pride. You would not risk the Catholics combining against him.”

“They would not dare!” But her protest was halfhearted. They would dare all too well, for in their eyes Henry had left only one legitimate child—the Lady Mary, thirty years old and as stubborn and righteous as her mother before her. Henry’s son or not, religion made William’s position as a boy king precarious.

George took his sister’s hands. “Look around you, Anne. Look at where we are standing.”

Grudgingly, she ran her eyes around the high-ceilinged privy chamber in the heart of Windsor Castle's Upper Ward, reconstructed by Edward III for himself and his queen, Philippa of Hainault. In the midst of winter, the queen's apartments were a haven of warmth with blazing fires, walls softened by exquisite tapestries, the richness of polished wood, and the sheen of silver and gold décor.

"We have won, Anne," George continued with persuasive conviction. "We have broken the chains of Catholic tyranny and opened the way to a new world. William is the promise of all we hoped and dreamed. I will not let him fail."

As well as a formidable temper, Anne possessed a formidable mind, and she knew he was right. That didn't stop her from saying caustically, "And yet you will allow Norfolk a seat on the council despite his attainder. If Henry had lived just one day longer, the Duke of Norfolk would be *dead*."

"But Henry didn't live one day longer. And to further punish the duke now would only enrage the Catholics. Don't worry about him—I prefer my enemies close enough to control. Besides, Norfolk is William's great-uncle. Pride will stay his hand for now."

Anne shook herself free of George. Fiercely, she retorted, "You had better be right. And you had better be my voice on that council. William is my son, no one else's. Don't you forget it."

"I won't."

But even as George kissed his sister on the forehead, he thought, But if William is to be what we want, the world will need to think of him only as Henry's son. It is a king I am creating now, whatever the cost.

## CHAPTER ONE



*Greenwich Palace  
21 December 1554*

*I have but a few minutes before Carrie must dress me for tonight's festivities. Christmas is nearly here, but tonight's celebration is rather more pagan. There is to be an eclipse of the moon, and coming as it does on the winter solstice when darkness claims its longest reign, even the most devout are unsettled.*

*So why not dance and drink and throw our merriment into the dark as a challenge?*

*Also, there is a visitor at court. His name is John Dee and he is reputed one of the finest minds of the age. He has come to court in the Duke of Northumberland's company, and William has commanded him to give a private reading of our stars. Only the four of us—for it would not do to let our secrets, past or future, slip into wider circulation.*

Despite the cold, every courtyard at Greenwich was filled and more. No one wanted to miss the rare and possibly apocalyptic sight of the moon vanishing into blackness before their eyes. Minuette had barely room to shiver beneath her fur-lined cloak, so closely were people packed on this terrace overlooking the Thames.

She had managed to keep away from the royal party; below her she saw moonlight glinting off Elizabeth's red-gold hair. William stood near his sister, surrounded as always by men and women. While everyone else's eyes turned to the heavens, Minuette's sought a familiar figure in the flickering torchlight. She rather hoped she did not find Dominic standing near William.

A whisper ran collectively through the crowd, transmitting itself more to Minuette's body than her ear. She looked up: overhead, the edge of the moon's circle was eaten away. Despite herself, she felt her pulse quicken and wondered what terrible things this might portend.

*More terrible than a star's violent fall?* The voice in her head was Dominic's, an echo of his impatient skepticism.

Minuette fingered the pendant encircling her neck, tracing the shape of the filigreed star, and smiled. This eclipse is no portent of doom, she assured herself, but a sign of great wonder. And that I can believe.

She watched the blackness bite away at the moon until it was half covered and still moving relentlessly onward. There were murmurs around her, some nervous laughter.

A hand came from behind, anchoring her waist with a solidness she could

feel even through the layers of fur and velvet and linen. And then, after much too long, a second hand followed until she was encircled. Minuette made herself keep her eyes open, made herself stand straight and not lean back into the comforting weight behind her. Or perhaps comforting was not the right word—for her heart quickened and her breath skipped.

Although she could count on two hands the times Dominic had touched her since the night of her betrothal, her body knew him instantly, as though it had been waiting for this part of her all her life.

Only in the dark did he dare to touch her, for only in the dark could they remain unseen. No one must know, not yet. Not a single whisper must cross the court while William (openly betrothed to the French king's daughter) threw himself in secret at Minuette's feet, offering his hand, his throne, and his country to her. It would take time for the king's infatuation to die. And, until it did, no one must suspect either William's passion or Dominic's love.

So Minuette laughed and played and worked and flirted as though everything were normal—as though William had not lost his mind and thought himself in love with her—as though her own heart was not fluttering madly inside a cage, wanting only to wing itself to Dominic—as though she had no secrets and everything was as it had been before. She saw Dominic every day and behaved toward him the same as always: playful and young and oh-so-slightly resentful of his lectures.

And then, like tonight, he would touch her, and she thought she might weep with wanting to turn into him and cling.

Instead, she kept her eyes open and directed at the sky as the moon's last sliver gave up its fight and slid into nothing.

Gasps went up from the crowd, and in that covering moment, Minuette felt Dominic's mouth alight softly just below her left ear and linger. She did close her eyes then, and swayed back slightly as his arms tightened around her waist and they both forgot where they were and who, and in a moment she would turn and their lips would meet and she might die if she waited any longer—

A great cheer exploded around and below them, and Minuette's eyes flew open to see the moon pulling itself away from the darkness. By the tightness of Dominic's grip on her waist, she knew his frustration. But he was—always had been—the disciplined one.

Within seconds she was standing alone once more, only warm cheeks and quick breathing to betray what no one had seen.

What no one must ever see.

Greenwich Palace had always been a dwelling of pleasure and luxury, of laughter and flirtation, of light and merriment. It was situated on the Thames five miles east of London, close enough to the city for easy access yet far enough to be well out of the crowds and squalor and pestilence. The last two King Henrys had expanded the complex, Elizabeth's grandfather facing it in red brick and her father adding a banqueting hall and enormous tiltyard. Her

father had been born here, as had Elizabeth herself. A beautiful palace for a beautiful court.

On this longest night of the year, the palace blazed with candlelight and what heat the fires and braziers failed to provide was made up for by the great press of bodies. Men and women dressed in their finest, drinking and dancing and circling around their king as though he were the center of their world.

But what happens to that world, Elizabeth wondered, when the center fails to hold?

Ignoring the chatter of voices directed at her, she watched her younger brother, worried and angry with herself for worrying. When William had returned from France last month with a treaty and a betrothal, he'd poured out to his sister his ardent love for Minuette along with his plans to wed her, and ever since Elizabeth had carried a thorn of anxiety that made itself felt at the most inconvenient times. It's not as though he's being indiscreet, she told herself firmly. He's behaving precisely as a young king of eighteen should behave. Dressed in crimson and gold, William flirted with every female in sight (and even a man or two), he drank (but not so heavily as to lose control of his tongue), and he carried on several layers of conversation with the French ambassador at once.

And he had not been nearer to Minuette than ten feet all evening.

Elizabeth, being determinedly talked at by a persistent young cleric, swung her gaze to where her chief lady-in-waiting held court of her own, surrounded by a gaggle of men, young and old, all clearly besotted by Minuette's honey-light hair and her graceful height and the appealing knowledge that she was an orphan in the care and keeping of the royal court. With the influence she held in her relationships to Elizabeth and William, Minuette would have drawn an equal crowd even if she had been pockmarked and fat. But the men would not then have been eyeing her with quite the same expression.

A voice, very near and very familiar, broke her distraction. "How long," Robert Dudley said conversationally as he neatly cut out the disappointed and ignored cleric, "is your brother going to continue baiting the French ambassador? William has the treaty he wanted—why make the poor man suffer?"

"Because he can," Elizabeth replied tartly. "And you do the same—only with less care. Everyone knows your father continues to grumble about peace with France. How hard it is for him to swallow, a pact with the devil Catholics."

"My father has moved on to other concerns. He's not one to fight a losing battle."

"As fine a commentary on the Dudleys as I've ever heard."

Robert raised his eyebrows and lowered his voice that half step that made Elizabeth's blood warm. "We choose our battles with care—political, religious ... personal."

His voice returned to its normal tones and he changed the subject deftly.

“Are you looking forward to tonight’s audience? I imagine Dr. Dee has found it difficult to read your stars, complex as you are.”

She gave him a withering look. “I am exceedingly skeptical, seeing as this Dr. Dee comes from your father’s household. No doubt you have whispered to him all the things you most want him to say of me.”

“You wound my integrity,” Robert said, hand on heart. But his voice was serious when he went on. “John Dee is not the sort of man to be persuaded by anything but his own intellect and the truth of what he sees in the heavens. I promise you, Elizabeth, whatever he tells you tonight will be as near as you will get to hearing God’s own words. I only wish I could be there with you.”

An hour later, as Elizabeth and Minuette slipped away from the festivities, she wished Robert were with her as well. She understood the need for privacy—anything that approached foretelling a royal’s future was dangerous, and though William had commanded the audience, that didn’t mean he wanted everyone at court to hear about it—but it was beginning to wear on her being just the four of them all the time. The “Holy Quartet” Robert called them, and not entirely in jest. And now that William took every opportunity of quartet-privacy to fawn over Minuette, Elizabeth’s patience grew thinner with each day.

The two young women wound through increasingly depopulated corridors until they came to one only dimly lit by two smoking torches, its brick walls chilly and bare. There was a single guard wearing the royal badge at a discreet distance from the closed door behind which waited their guest, not near enough to overhear but only to keep the curious away.

Elizabeth opened the door to the east-facing room herself, breath quickening with the rare feeling of anticipation. She was not at all certain what was going to happen in the next hour, and she found the sensation unexpectedly delightful.

The room showed signs of a hasty attempt at comfort, from the deep fireplace blazing with light and warmth to the four cushioned chairs ranged along one side of a waxed wood table. Across the table was a single high-backed wooden chair; the man in it rose to his feet and bowed deeply. “Dr. Dee,” Elizabeth said. “Welcome to court.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” John Dee straightened and Elizabeth took him in. Although she’d known he was only a few years older than she, not even thirty yet, in person she was struck by his youth. Considering all Robert had said and all she had read from correspondents in England and abroad, it was something of a surprise that this young man had achieved such scientific and intellectual stature; then again, Dee had been a fellow at her father’s Trinity College at the age of nineteen. More recently the King of France had tried to retain him for his court, but John Dee had declined and returned to England after several years on the Continent, lecturing on Euclid and studying with men like Mercator. He had come to the Northumberland household in the service of Robert’s father, and all the court was anxious to meet this man who made things fly and read the stars and charted the heavens with surety.

Elizabeth sat and waved Dr. Dee back to his chair. Minuette sat next to her, uncharacteristically silent. She had been less than enthusiastic about this idea, which surprised Elizabeth. Usually Minuette was the first to embrace the new and entertaining.

Upon examination, John Dee looked like many a scholar or clerk, with his neatly pointed beard and unostentatious clothing. His eyes were deep and thoughtful and steady and he met her gaze without flinching. She liked those who were not cringingly cowed by her—but best not let him take too many liberties.

“Dr. Dee,” she said, looking significantly at the leather portfolio that lay between them on the table, “you are aware that it is treason to tell a king’s future.”

An irrelevant point. It was William who had commanded this private audience, William who had run with the idea of seeing what lay in his stars. Her brother was afraid of nothing, certainly not his future. But casting charts was legally forbidden for royalty, as it might be used as a pretext for rebellion.

Dr. Dee was no fool to fall into such an easy trap. “I do not foretell the future, Your Highness. I interpret the heavens, which is to say, I translate a very little of what God himself has laid in store. And what could God have in store for our good king but glory?”

Would he lie? Elizabeth wondered. She didn’t think he was an open fraud—even if Northumberland would fall for that, Robert Dudley certainly wouldn’t. But it took subtlety to tell a king what he did not wish to hear without making him angry. How much would Dee avoid saying? Or was William truly charmed, with a lifetime of good fortune inscribed indelibly in the heavens?

The door was shoved wide and William strode in, a little the better for good cheer, followed by Dominic dressed in all black and looking more than ever like a shadow ready to wrest the monarch from danger at any moment.

William went straight to Minuette. Bending low over her chair, he kissed her hand in a lingering and proprietary fashion. Just before it would become uncomfortable for the rest of them, he released her and turned to the visitor.

“Dee!” he said. “Welcome to court. We are always glad to reward those who are useful to us.”

No one could have missed the subtext, thought Elizabeth. *Tell me what I want to hear, and you’ll be rewarded.*

Minuette had brightened with the men’s entrance. “Isn’t this thrilling, to discover what our futures hold in store?” She smiled at William (who laughed), then at Dominic (who did not). “Who is to be first?” she asked.

William dropped into the chair next to hers. “You, sweetling, if you wish. What better way to begin, then, with the stars of the brightest woman at court?”

Elizabeth caught the look that John Dee shot at William before dropping his eyes discreetly. Damn, she thought. He may be young, but he is no fool. And that’s all we need—someone leaking word of how Will behaves with Minuette

in private.

She looked at the one person whom she knew was as concerned with secrecy as she was. Though Dominic had never spoken to her of William's romantic agenda, he radiated disapproval. Now Dominic fixed William with his eyes as though sorely tempted to tell him to behave himself.

As though that had ever succeeded.

Dee cleared his throat and opened the folio. On the top page Elizabeth saw a large circle divided into twelve sections, some of them blank while others contained mathematical and astrological symbols. She knew that each chart would be different, based on the hour and place of their individual births. Despite her wariness, her interest flared as John Dee focused on Minuette. There was something new in his eyes, something that made Elizabeth sharpen her attention and think: This is a man who knows things.

"Mistress Wyatt," he addressed Minuette, and even his voice had a new authority to it. "Our king is right in naming you a bright star. Your birth was a gift—to the king whose hour it shared and to those here who love you. You were born to be loved."

Elizabeth, listening hard for every meaning, felt a twist of annoyance at that. To be loved was far too passive. She herself would prefer to *do* the loving and retain the control. But not everyone was like her—and certainly Minuette could not complain at being loved by a king.

"There has been peril in your life," Dee continued, "and doubt. Do not be too eager to escape either—peril is often the price for doing what is right, and doubt is good, as it makes us search our own motives—"

William interrupted. "Peril, doubt—I dislike this way of speaking to the lady. As the bright star she is, there must also be joy."

For one moment, Dee met William's gaze as an equal, assessing and perhaps understanding more than he should. Then he flickered down a notch and returned to Minuette. "Yes, mistress," he said gravely. "There will be an abundance of joy, for such is your nature. There will be marriage, passionate and deep. Though peril and doubt walk hand in hand with such joy, you will count the price well paid for what you gain."

That pleased William more, for he took Minuette's hand, raised it to his lips, then continued to clasp it as she said, a little shakily, "Thank you, Dr. Dee. You quite take my breath away."

Elizabeth would have bet everything she owned that Dee was not telling all. This was vagueness, but so well finessed that he might not be accused of foretelling an unpropitious future. Peril and doubt? If Minuette were to be William's wife, there would be plenty of both. And even a marriage "passionate and deep" could be a thing of disaster in the end.

"Elizabeth," William ordered Dee. "My sister must be next."

She waited for Dee to search out her page in his folio—though he had not referred to Minuette's at all, as if he had memorized their fates—but surprisingly, he disagreed. "If it please Your Majesty, I had thought to address you next. From the youngest to the oldest—there is symmetry in such a

reading.”

William had been drinking just enough that Elizabeth wasn't sure if he would snarl in anger or give way graciously. After hesitating, he gave way. “Who am I to gainsay the stars?” Another subtext: *I'll let you take me in turn, but it had better be worth my while.*

Dee gave a flick of a smile as he turned over Minuette's star chart to reveal the one beneath it. “As you say. Despite the fact that you and Mistress Wyatt were born nearly at the same hour and in the same place, the stars reflect the differences between you. You know, naturally, that the comet that marked your birth was a portent of great power. The heavens marked you at birth, Your Majesty, and every moment of your life has been lit with the flame of that comet.”

“Flame can be grand or destructive,” William replied, not as lightly as it appeared. “Which am I?”

“A grand king in a time of destruction. The powers of Satan oppose you—”

“Wretched Catholics,” William muttered.

“—and Europe grows uneasy at England's rise. There is much uncertainty on your path, Your Majesty. But a burning star can blaze the way to a new world—or it can flame out and fall into darkness.”

The last words rang ominously into the silent room. Elizabeth's throat tightened. Had Dee just accused her brother of possibly choosing darkness?

William waved it away. “Of course I choose the new world. What of more ... personal fates?”

Was it Elizabeth's imagination that Dee held the image of William and Minuette's clasped hands in his mind as he answered? “The personal and the public march together for a king. Trouble there will be, and opposition, but you will always keep your own ends in mind. You will never lose sight of what you most desire.”

William gave his catlike smile as he leaned back in his chair. “That is a future I can embrace.”

But you need hardly look to the stars to know that much of William, Elizabeth thought—or any king, for that matter. Their father had never lost sight of what he desired, and had nearly riven his kingdom for it.

Feeling more nervous than she'd expected, Elizabeth met Dee's attention next. But his gaze was kind, almost ... sorrowful?

“Your Highness,” he began, and this time he did look down at the new chart he'd turned to, as though wondering where and how to begin, “your stars were the most difficult to interpret. They are changeable, one might almost say willful.”

“Right stars, then,” William said with good humour.

Elizabeth hardly heard him, for her eyes were riveted to Dee's. That cryptic sense she'd had earlier intensified. For a moment she felt that she was seeing the future herself. He is important to me, she realized, or will be. For a long time to come.

As though acknowledging her unspoken thoughts, Dee nodded. “Your future

is veiled even to yourself, Your Highness, for the clearest eyes cannot see straight into the sun. You love deeply and your loyalty to your single love will be everlasting.”

Did he mean Robert? *Everlasting loyalty* ... but that could mean anything from eventual marriage to a lifetime of unfulfilled love.

“You will command men and guide nations,” Dee continued, and in that moment he crossed the line of discretion he had been walking so carefully before.

Suddenly alert (though probably he had been all along), Dominic laid a hand on William’s shoulder. “Beware, Doctor. Your king guides this nation.”

“And as such, he has already given Her Highness her first command, when he named her regent earlier this year. And before another year passes,” Dee returned his gaze to Elizabeth, “you will be your brother’s voice in a foreign land.”

That did speak of marriage—one out of England. Elizabeth blinked, furious at herself for disappointment. It was hardly news. This wasn’t prophecy; this was merely stating the obvious.

But John Dee continued to stare at her and Elizabeth had a queer double feeling that she was seeing him here, now, and also seeing him some years in the future, with white hair and a pointed beard. He was going to tell her how to save England, he was about to tell her what she need do for her people ...

The moment snapped and Dee cleared his throat as he turned his full attention to Dominic. He took Dominic’s measure, the only one standing, protective behind William, with one hand still on his friend’s shoulder. “The elder brother,” Dee said thoughtfully. “The first, who would be last.”

Dominic dropped his hand and said stonily, “I have no need for a star-teller. I choose my own future.”

“But you do not choose that of others—and as long as your life entwines with those you love, you are not entirely free. You are the eldest, but you have the most to learn. Lessons of honour and loyalty and, yes, of choice. Not everything in this world is as it seems. You must learn to see gray, where before you have seen only black or white. There will be pain in the learning, and danger if you will not learn to bend.”

William snorted. “There will only be pain because Dom thinks too much and makes everything more serious than it needs to be.”

“That is your calling,” Dee said to Dominic. “You are, above all, loyal, and you speak always to the king’s conscience. Who will tell him the truth if you will not?”

A pause, verging on uncomfortable, until William spoke. “Tell Dom something pleasant—how many beautiful women in his future?”

An even longer pause, then: “Only one,” Dee said tersely. “There will only ever be the one.”

Tension entered the room, on such misty feet that Elizabeth could not say where it centered. William broke it with a laugh as he stood. “Well, that’s all right, then. All we need do is identify this one beautiful woman and Dom’s

future is set.”

And just like that they were finished. William went so far as to clap John Dee on the shoulder. “My thanks for an interesting diversion, Doctor. I hope you shall find our court accommodating to your intellect and talents.”

Dee bowed. “The most glittering court in Christendom, Your Majesty.”

“Ha! I’d love to see Henri’s face when he finds that the English have captured what the French could not. You are most welcome at my court, Dr. Dee, if ever you should tire of Northumberland’s household.”

Then William spoke to the rest of them. “There is still music to be had this night. Dom, if you dance with Minuette first, then no one will find it odd when I come along and steal her from you.”

“Not odd at all.” Dominic’s voice was toneless. “Dr. Dee, if you don’t mind, I will stay until you have burned those charts.”

“Of course,” Dee answered, and emptied the folio. There were only the four pages; Dr. Dee had written down his calculations, not their interpretations. Those would stay locked in his own mind. One by one he fed the pages to the flames.

“Thank you,” Dominic said. He and Minuette followed William out the door.

Elizabeth hesitated, then confronted Dr. Dee, who straightened, meeting her on that precarious equal ground that made her both nervous and approving.

“Your Highness?” He made it a question, but she would have wagered he knew what she was going to ask.

“What did you *not* say, Doctor?”

“Many things, Your Highness.”

“Why? What is so bad that it could not be told?”

“Why must it be bad? Even glorious futures do not come without cost. And as I believe I said before, this is not exact. God made the stars as he made men. Only He can read them perfectly.”

“What did you see?” Robert’s wife dead? Elizabeth married for love, as William meant to do? Civil war, as another Tudor king cast aside wisdom for desire? Elizabeth far from England for all the rest of her life as the wife of another royal? As she thought that, Elizabeth’s heart pierced with pain and she knew that would be the worst future for her of any—to leave England and never return.

Dr. Dee was silent. The hiss of the flames twisted like cords around her skin, and she had a sudden sense that there were ghosts in the room, pressing into this moment as though they’d been waiting. Her father and grandfather, of course, but even stronger was the sense of her grandmother: Elizabeth of York, whose Plantagenet blood had sealed Henry VII’s Tudor victory when they wed. What did that daughter and mother of kings want her namesake to know?

Unexpectedly, Dr. Dee took her right hand, letting her fingertips rest in his palm. “This is the hand of a woman, Your Highness. But it is also the hand of a ruler. The king, your father, spent much effort and pain to secure a worthy

heir for England. If he had been able to see beyond your woman's body, he would have found the heart of the heir he sought."

He pinned her with his eyes, an urgency to his gaze as though there was more he could say but wouldn't. Elizabeth could almost feel words forming along her skin where he touched her hand, and if she stayed here another moment she would know something she had never dreamed of ...

She snatched her hand away. "Goodnight, Dr. Dee."

## CHAPTER TWO



How, ROBERT DUDLEY wondered, does George Boleyn nose out these insalubriously private areas of every royal palace?

He doubted it was the women George took to bed who told him how to find dank cellars and tunneled-out storage spaces—Rochford was liberal in his sexual activities, but also discriminating. His type of woman might not always be a lady, but she would never be a common whore. And Robert could not imagine any woman except a desperate one being caught dead in this particularly foul-smelling section of Greenwich.

Strictly speaking, the walled yard in which he paced wasn't part of the palace itself. It belonged to a dilapidated stone outbuilding that held a jumble of gardening equipment, which on the night before Christmas was in little danger of being used. The stench came from the Thames, running fast and foul only yards away.

What am I doing? Robert asked himself uneasily. It was a question he'd begun to pose with distressing regularity the last six weeks. Working with Rochford had promised so much, but he was beginning to wonder if it was worth it. It wasn't so much the Duke of Norfolk's death in disgrace that bothered him, nor even the continued imprisonment of his grandson, the Earl of Surrey, for an almost wholly imaginary crime. Robert didn't like the Howards and had no regrets about helping the proud Catholic family along their way to destruction.

What troubled him were particular faces and the memories attached to them: Elizabeth's earnest faith when she'd asked him to go after Minuette for her friend's safety; Dominic's stubborn lies about Giles Howard's death—also done in the interest of protecting Minuette. Her face troubled him as well, because he felt guilty for using her and he couldn't pin her down, all of which was eminently frustrating.

But beneath the frustration was the fact that he had been lying to Elizabeth and her friends for months. All right, be honest, it was more like years. It had begun in the late autumn of 1552, when Rochford suggested Alyce de Clare as a likely instrument in their plans. Alyce had been a lady-in-waiting to Queen Anne and was thus ideally placed to report gossip and pass on carefully calculated rumours of Catholic conspiracy. She was also ambitious, which made her susceptible to flattery and promises. Robert had latched on to Alyce enthusiastically when he'd troubled to study her a little closer. Though not really beautiful, Alyce had possessed an excellent figure and a streak of something in her nature—Wildness? Calculation? Animal cunning?—that had

readily appealed to him. More than once in the months of flirting and intimacy that followed, he'd guessed that Rochford knew firsthand of Alyce's physical appeal, but he had never asked.

"Contemplating your sins, Lord Robert?"

Not only could the Lord Chancellor move almost silently, it also seemed he could read minds. His voice made Robert twitch in annoyance and surprise.

"Contemplating how many of them I can lay at your feet, my lord," he rejoined smoothly.

"Not a one," Rochford answered with equal smoothness. "A man's sins are his own."

"And you've made sure nothing I've done can be directly traced to you."

"Of course."

Robert sighed. "What untraceable task am I to be given next?"

"One very much to your taste and talents: I want you to attend Elizabeth assiduously this winter. Make yourself indispensable, so that my niece does not have a need that you have not anticipated. I want you in her presence chamber and her privy chamber. I want to know who else is there, and what they discuss when they are."

"I will not spy on Elizabeth." Robert said it flatly. "Not for anything."

"I think that point is debatable, but it is also irrelevant. It is not Elizabeth I want you watching—it is Mistress Wyatt."

"Minuette? Whatever for?" But Robert was afraid he very much knew what for.

"I told you she bears watching. My instincts are never wrong. It is for you to tell me why the girl makes me uneasy."

Because she killed Giles Howard, Robert thought. But even if Rochford knew that, he didn't think the Lord Chancellor would care. Giles Howard had been the last and least of the Duke of Norfolk's sons and he had earned his death with his own violence. Not a matter to sharpen Rochford's interest—so what about Minuette made the Lord Chancellor so uneasy?

"It is in your own interest as well," Rochford said now. "Mistress Wyatt is the one who made all the fuss over Alyce de Clare's unfortunate and untimely death. She suspected Giles Howard was responsible, but does she still? If she believes the pregnant Alyce's tumble down the stairs is not to be laid at Giles's feet, she will not rest until she has found the guilty party. And you wouldn't want her stumbling over your mistakes, would you?"

Robert most certainly didn't want Minuette stumbling over his connection to Alyce. The first person she would tell would be Elizabeth, and their relationship was already complicated by his wife. How could he explain a pregnant mistress as well? Especially one who had died so inconveniently while spying on Elizabeth's mother.

The damned man was so certain of Robert's acquiescence that he didn't even wait for it. The only satisfaction Robert could get was calling out a question as Rochford retreated. "Why on earth has the Earl of Surrey not been brought to trial? I thought your goal was to eliminate the Howard family. And

yet Surrey continues to sit in the Tower without any charges being brought.”

That stopped Rochford, just long enough for him to look over his shoulder dismissively and say, “Don’t attempt to know my mind, Lord Robert. You might not like what you find.”

If there was one part of being king that William would have abolished if possible, it was council meetings. Here it was Christmas day, and still his privy council would not let him be. The aftereffects of drought and poor harvests, Rochford said. Torrential rains. People starving. Not to mention Mary imprisoned and the death of a duke of England under taint of treason. A realm does not sleep, Rochford insisted, and her king must be willing to do likewise.

So as the sun rose behind leaden clouds, here was assembled his much reduced privy council, more or less the remains of the regency council that had ruled in his name for years. Six months ago William had turned eighteen and gone immediately to war. Followed by his mother’s death, and then more weeks in France negotiating, and then Minuette ...

William imagined announcing his engagement this very morning, having it preached of in the chapel, setting the bells to ring out his love. Then he imagined the shouting that would follow—mostly from Rochford—and sighed. Not yet.

As Lord Chancellor, his uncle opened the council, which this morning consisted of just over half a dozen men: Rochford and Dominic, naturally, along with the Earls of Pembroke and Oxford and Archbishop Cranmer. Sir Ralph Sadler ran the household and William Cecil, Lord Burghley, the treasury. Most of them were in their forties or fifties—Cranmer was actually in his sixties, though still active in both mind and body—and even Burghley, who was only thirty-four, behaved like a cautious old man.

Age and temperament aside, there were not nearly enough members of the privy council. And that was the true purpose of this meeting. His uncle had been pressing him for a decision for three weeks, and now he meant to force the matter.

“Your Majesty,” Rochford began, “before the new year dawns, we must have a complete council. You cannot long afford to overlook some of the realm’s most powerful men.”

William slouched back in his chair, willing to allow his uncle the chance to drone on and list his no doubt well-thought-out and even better phrased arguments to press his point. Why deny the man his pleasure? William meant to agree—if only to stop the endless tide of pressure—but he could afford to be generous this early in the morning. The Christmas service was still two hours off.

Dominic was not so patient. “Who?” he asked. “With Norfolk dead, and his heir imprisoned, the council already holds the only two remaining dukes in the kingdom.”

Rochford himself and Northumberland, easily the two most Protestant lords

in England. There had been four dukes appointed to the regency council, but the Duke of Suffolk had died of apoplexy when William was sixteen. Suffolk had had only daughters—Jane Grey his eldest—and there had been no question of naming another duke since then. It was unlike Dominic to make a political point, and William wondered where he was headed with this one.

So was Northumberland. His blunt face (the rough edges of which so perfectly mirrored his soldier image, a man uncomfortable with pomp and elegance) looked skeptical as he asked, “What are you implying, Exeter?”

Even though he had named Dominic Marquis of Exeter just six months ago, William still wasn’t used to hearing Dominic called as such.

Northumberland pressed on. “Do you think the realm needs another duke?”

“It is not titles I am thinking of, but opinions. I think the realm needs binding, and this council should represent more than one viewpoint to serve effectively.” Dominic, unlike Northumberland, always looked perfectly suited to the finesse of the court. Tall (though William, at six feet two inches, Dominic had finally topped him by an inch), and though soberly dressed, Dominic had a way of carrying himself that reminded everyone that he had Plantagenet blood several generations back. Mostly, though, Dominic belonged because he never bothered to think about whether he did or not. It was instinctive.

“Such as the views of those who meant to march a foreign army upon London and kill our king?” Northumberland countered, brusque and angry. He had not his son Robert’s careful guile; he was too sure of his power to play games. “There is no place for traitors in England, let alone welcoming them into the heart of the court.”

“Traitors, no,” Dominic retorted. “But men of good heart and honest thought, who want the same end but perhaps through different means. No one man holds a lock on all virtue.”

William laughed. “Really, Dom, how old are you? You sound like a university philosopher. Not,” he added, “that you aren’t right. It is a poor king indeed who cannot be trusted to hear more than one voice in council.”

“Does that mean you are ready to name new men?” Rochford pressed.

“It does. Wriothesley, Arundel, Paget, and Cheney. We need men as skilled as they are opinionated. And they will be free to speak their minds.” William looked around. “That’s all.”

He was half out of his chair when Rochford said, “Lord Exeter spoke truly, Your Majesty.”

Subsiding with a suppressed groan, William said, “He always does. On which particular point do you agree with his truthfulness?”

“We must decide what to do with the Earl of Surrey.”

The late Duke of Norfolk’s grandson, currently held in the Tower of London for suspicion of treasonable activity, Surrey was heir to his grandfather’s title and vast lands that would place him on a footing with Rochford and Northumberland—if he didn’t lose his head. Even if William chose to leave him alive, he could seize the lands for the Crown and, say, banish Surrey to