

The 48

DONNA

HOSIE

HOLIDAY HOUSE



NEW YORK

For me!

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one

Margaret

Mother didn't approve of my wearing the light blue gown at court; she said it made me look pale and uninteresting.

Thomas once said it matched my eyes. He smiled when he said it. Thomas didn't find me pale and uninteresting. Thomas said I was a joy to behold. A delicate violet in a tangle of Tudor roses.

I didn't have to be a delicate violet, as far as my father was concerned, or even a rose, so long as I acted the part of a flower. I had six and ten years. I was a maid of honor in the court of Queen Anne. Ready to be plucked.

I knew the type of plucking my mother and father intended for me. It was my duty, as a highborn daughter, to comply with it. Recently, word had reached me that a match was being sought with an earl from Moray, in Scotland. I had not even seen the man, but one of the ladies at court said he was a horror to behold: fat as a toad and covered in warts. Worse, he was so old his youngest son was thrice my age. The earl had already buried two wives. I prayed my future did not lie with him—not with someone who already repulsed me by reputation alone.

Yet I knew better than to voice my wishes to my father, devoted as he was to the king.

My future was now in the hands of His Majesty, who would approve a match for me that enhanced the security of his reign.



The king didn't find me pale and uninteresting either, though I wished he would. Twice since the feast of Christmas he had made lustful eyes at me in the presence of the queen, for which I later suffered her humiliated ire. At least I wasn't alone in this injustice. My friend Jane Seymour bore the brunt of the queen's fits of jealousy. But she took it better than I.

Jane was like that—she had a placid temperament. She had no preference as to whom she would marry. She was happy to be a possession of her father and elder brother, content with the knowledge that the king would decide her fate too. It was an honor, she said.

Perchance it was because she was older than I—wiser, some would say—that she felt this way, but I could not come round to her way of thinking.

I was a maid of honor, yet I found no honor in the position. Instead, I felt only fear.

This court of Tudors, with its contradictions and violence, was terrifying.

So I wore the blue gown. I wore it as often as I could. Not because Thomas had said it matched my eyes, but because I *wanted* to be pale and uninteresting.

I did not want to be noticed by anyone.

I was dressed in blue on the clear March morning I'd spent in the palace gardens, walking and sitting with the other ladies of the court. On a sunny day, those gardens were my favorite place in the world to be. Nothing in God's kingdom could be as beautiful as the blackthorn trees in full bloom, and it was a rare moment

when my court companions and I found ourselves liberated from the tension that constantly pulsed around the queen.

That particular morning, Her Majesty had taken to her bed with a head pain that could only be eased by quiet and darkness. Many of us fretted that a different sort of quiet and darkness was coming for her, but we rarely spoke this fear aloud. And on that March day, especially, in all its loveliness, no one wished to be reminded that the end of the queen could also mean the end of us all.

“Lady Margaret! Lady Margaret!”

I turned on my bench to see a young chambermaid running toward me. Her round face was flushed with exertion. I stole a deep breath and composed myself, trying not to let her panicked expression affect me. A lady was to display decorum and an air of detachment, and too many of the queen’s maids of honor were giggling children. Such behavior was frowned upon by Her Majesty.

“Yes, child?” I asked, with as superior a countenance as I could muster. Inside, I was filled with dread.

The chambermaid tried to catch her breath.

“Lady Margaret, Her Majesty . . . Queen—”

“I know who Her Majesty is, child, now out with it,” I said quickly. If the queen had commanded my presence, it would not do to keep her waiting.

“She—she was resting and the physician said she was not to be . . . be disturbed. But she has been . . . disturbed . . . Lady Margaret,” gasped the maid. “Lady Jane said . . . to find you. The queen is much distressed—”

I crossed myself, stood, and picked up the hem of my dress, not waiting to hear the rest.

Another maid of honor, Lady Cecily, followed as I set off down the path toward the castle. I glanced back at her and nodded gratefully. It was not wise for a young lady of the court to travel the grounds unaccompanied.

We reached the end of the garden and heard male laughter coming from behind a large topiary. Our pace dropped to a brisk walk. I arranged my hood and lowered my eyes as Sir Edward Seymour and a companion rounded the corner.

They walked as if steered by someone who had drunk too much mead. Men of this nature, and in this state, were to be engaged with as little as possible, yet Lady Cecily and I nevertheless dropped to a curtsy, and the gentlemen bowed. Formalities performed, I made to take my leave.

“That gown brings out the color of your eyes, my dear,” said Sir Edward’s friend, grabbing my arm. “Lady Margaret, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied, trying not to show my discomfort. “Forgive my haste, sir. I have been summoned to the queen.”

“A summons will be coming for *her* soon, with any luck,” muttered Edward Seymour. “A summons to the Tower.”

“Run along then, Lady Margaret,” said the companion, his bony fingers releasing my arm. “Better not keep the queen waiting.”

“They despise her,” whispered Lady Cecily as we reached the stone steps of the castle. “What will become of us if—”

“Hush,” I interrupted.

“I’m frightened, Lady Margaret.”

I clasped Lady Cecily’s hand in mine. I wanted to reassure her; I wanted to tell her that all would be well, that we would soon

be married off to men who could protect us from this court. Perhaps even love us.

Yet if I didn't believe it myself, how could I, in good faith, try to convince her of the untruth? There was no pretending the queen wasn't losing the king's favor. And if she was taken to the Tower, and the court continued to whisper, our lives could be in danger too. We were inexorably linked to her. We were Her Majesty's near-constant companions. We sewed clothes for the household at her bidding, read the verses she requested, made music when she demanded it, and played host to lords from foreign lands at her command. We were hers. With such a close association with Her Majesty, the queen's enemies might become our enemies too.

A few of the maids of honor hoped that salvation could be found in marriage abroad. The king, however, was loath to make unions with men in Spain and Prussia. He needed us here to maintain ties to the lords of England and Scotland. *For peace and prosperity*, intoned his closest advisor. And when the all-powerful Cromwell spoke, the king listened.



Suddenly a cascade of noise broke through the silence. Lady Cecily and I both jumped.

The bell in the palace tower was tolling.

Alexander

That's the bell in the palace tower ringing! Why do you suppose—?"

"I don't care, Charlie," I said. I was too engrossed in the psaltery that Mark Smeaton had lent me to pay attention to much else. The instrument was somewhat like a harp but small enough to be placed on the lap and plucked.

I wasn't having much luck playing it. My strumming wasn't tuneful; it sounded more like a cat being tortured. If I played this at court I'd be tossed into the Thames with stones tied to my feet.

"The tolling could be important," said Charlie, ever the worrier. "Possibly a sign of danger."

"Or it could be a couple of fools swinging on the pull rope," I replied. I winked at him and laughed. My brother laughed too, but grimly. We were both thinking the same thing: *We'd* been the last couple of fools to swing on that pull rope. And we were almost skewered by yeomen because of it.

"You are enjoying life here far too much, Alex."

"And you aren't enjoying it nearly enough," I replied. "Must I remind you that we return home tomorrow evening? You should make the most of the time left. There are plenty of pretty maids of honor here just waiting for a handsome son of the land of Cleves to sweep them off their feet. Think of the swooning and pining they'll do while you're away!"

Charlie gave me a look.

“I can hardly concern myself with pretty maids when I’m worrying about your safety, Alex.”

“I assume you’re referring to Marlon. I’m simply doing my part for diplomacy between our great houses,” I replied, placing the psaltery on the bed. I knew a lost cause when I saw one. “The Tudors and the Cleves will go down in history.”

“I’m sure he’s a lovely person. But we’re not at home and you need to take care at court, for your sake *and* his.” He glanced at the door. “Especially tomorrow morning.”

In the morning we would be formally introduced to His Majesty, an occasion I was looking forward to with nerves and pride.

“I will,” I said, standing up and stretching. “And *you* bear in mind that I’m better-looking than you, so don’t be jealous when I get all His Majesty’s attention.”

“We’re twins,” said my brother, sighing. “We’re identical.”

“I’m still handsomer,” I replied, digging him in the ribs with my elbow. “It has to do with scars. I have more scars than you, and scars are marks of bravery.”

“And sometimes lunacy.”

“I’ll ignore that, brother, because I need your forgiveness. I’m deserting you now to meet Marlon. He’s promised to show me a wing of the court I haven’t seen yet.”

“Great,” replied Charlie. “But remember—”

“I know, I know. This court is dangerous.”



My brother was not mistaken. We’d only arrived a few days ago, but I truly *was* enjoying life in this court. And I would enjoy it even more when we returned for the real reason we had come calling on King Henry VIII.

three

Margaret

The bell had ceased clanging by the time I reached the queen's apartments, and no mention of it was made by the other ladies, two of whom were openly weeping. Queen Anne, Lady Jane told me, had raised herself from her bed long enough to rage at everyone in her rooms before retreating to her chamber. The physicians were treating her now with an infusion of lavender, rose, and sage, which I suspected would do no good.

Jane had sent for me, I understood, because mild-mannered as she was, she would have liked a friend by her side in the face of the queen's wrath. Some measure of me was sorry that I'd not been there to aid her. Even so, I gave silent thanks that I had been in the gardens when Her Majesty had lashed out.

This was not a happy court. I had no allegiance or loyalty to Queen Anne—her treatment of Queen Catherine, the queen before her, had been cruel, and few in the court felt sympathy with Anne's predicament now.

And yet this court was where I was, and where I would remain until my future was decided. My father had no other children—none he accepted as legitimate, that is—and so being born a female, I had been a source of great consternation to him. Serving in the court of the queen had been the best I could do for him, as a daughter. I had been brought here at the age of one and ten years, when it was Queen Catherine who sat beside the king on the throne. My mother had been a lady-in-waiting to Her

Majesty, but Mother, like Queen Catherine, had failed to produce sons and was similarly discarded by my father for being a disappointment. King Henry's desire for Anne Boleyn had never been a secret, and he had humiliated Queen Catherine with divorce. My father came to court and ordered my mother back to our cold ancestral home in Hampshire. It was a home I could never hope to inherit by virtue of my sex and visited only when summoned by my mother to deliver news and receive instruction on how to advance at court. My value to my parents and king lay in a beneficial marriage, and nothing more.

For five years, I had lived my life in the Tudor court in quiet observation of the ways of men and women, and the desperate desire by both sexes to do just enough to gain favor with the king without courting death in the process.

'Twas a fine line between those fates.

My father, Sir Richard Montague of Hampshire, now served the king in his navy. His fighting prowess and uncanny ability to foresee the enemy's advances at sea had ensured the king's approval—and my continued place in the court of the queen.

“Another turn outside, Lady Margaret?” asked Lady Cecily, shaking me from my thoughts. “It seems we are not needed here after all, and it would be a shame to waste such a beautiful day. The weather in March can be so . . .”

“Temperamental?” I suggested, glancing pointedly at the thick paneled doors that led to the queen's inner sanctum.

Lady Cecily flushed a pink so bright she could have been mistaken for a rose.

“You are wicked, Lady Margaret,” she whispered, smiling.

“Wait!” exclaimed a voice, high and harsh. We turned to see Lady Rochford approaching. A sister to the queen by marriage, and despised by most.

“Lady Rochford.” I acknowledged her with a nod and the briefest of curtsies, despite her elevated rank amongst the ladies of the court. Lady Cecily trembled beside me, obviously afraid her jovial words about wickedness had been overheard. *Wicked* was not a word used in civilized conversation. It inspired thoughts of witchcraft—and none among us wanted to be accused of that.

“A piece of text that the queen had been sewing was removed to the library for comparison by the biblical scholars,” said Lady Rochford, barely returning our curtsies. “It has been deemed acceptable, and thus Her Majesty wishes to have it back. It brings her comfort.”

The text was scripture, and every lady in the room knew who had removed it for comparison to ensure that the words were not blasphemous: Lady Rochford herself.

“Then we will go there and return with it,” I replied.

I took Lady Cecily’s arm, and without a word to the others, we left for the open air once more. Walking outside with the cool breeze gently caressing my face reminded me of Thomas’s touch. It was a sensation I could no longer seek out or encourage.

I tried to push the memory, and all thoughts of Thomas, out of my head. But he sprang right back to mind when Lady Cecily and I entered the corridors and encountered his friend and fellow yeoman, Marlon. Marlon was with one of the new faces at court, Alexander of Cleves, who had only recently arrived with his brother, Charles, and their father, the Duke of Cleves.

Both sons had come from the womb at the same time. Their

likeness was a novelty, and they had already proven themselves popular at court, especially the gregarious Alexander, who appeared to find joy in everything from music to the artwork that hung in the Great Hall.

Not that I had approached him to confirm his appreciation for such things. I had merely observed him from afar.

The men bowed as we approached; we replied with a small curtsy. My deepest drop was reserved for the king and queen only.

“Alexander of Cleves,” offered the newcomer. “A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is ours,” I replied formally. “I am Lady Margaret, and this is Lady Cecily. We are maids of honor to Queen Anne.”

“I have seen you about,” said Alexander of Cleves.

“As we have seen you,” I replied. “You appear to have charmed the court already.”

“I am the life and soul of this court,” he said, his gray-blue eyes twinkling as if they had caught the stars. His voice was unusual. I knew Cleves was in the northern Rhineland, but the tone and pitch of his words seemed to suggest he was attempting to be more civilized in the English way.

“How long is it that you have been at court now, Alexander of Cleves?” I asked. The young man smiled. He was tall, with the physique of someone who excelled at sport. He and his brother both possessed a head of fiery red hair that had led more than one courtier to wonder whether two more of His Grace’s bastard sons had been accepted into court life.

“My brother, Charles, and I arrived just four days past, milady,” he replied. “We journey to our homeland tomorrow to

attend to other matters, but we will return for a much longer period in due course.”

“Do you have far to travel?” I knew the answer; unlike many of the other ladies and maids of the court, I was somewhat learned, having had a sympathetic tutor in my father’s household as the only child. But I was interested to hear his reply.

“Yes, milady,” he replied after a long pause. “And it is not a journey I am looking forward to repeating.” His voice was becoming ever more pleasant to my ears. Melodic, almost. The voice of a singer. I wanted to ask more of him, but to show a keen interest in any man would have been improper in the open. Cromwell’s spies were always on the lookout for impropriety. And Cromwell’s spies were everywhere.

“Is Thomas guarding the apartments?” I asked Marlon, changing the subject.

“N-nay, Lady Margaret. He is...he is...” Marlon trailed off, his cheeks flushing.

A sharp pain rose in my stomach and pierced my chest. Marlon’s chivalrous hesitation explained very well what Thomas was likely doing.

It was what *all* men did, whether they were married or not, highborn or lowly. Whether or not they’d once felt affection for a maid of honor, or someone else of virtue.

“You mean to say he is *not* on watch, and is making merry with the loose women of London outside the castle walls,” I said testily.

“Lady Margaret,” scolded Lady Cecily. “You should not speak of such things. It is not for a lady to know of them.”

“To know things, even *these* things, is to have power,” I replied.

“The king is the only one with power,” she said. “And his

knowledge and word are all that matters. You should care not what a lowly yeoman like Ladman attends to. He is beneath you.”

“I care nothing for Thomas Ladman,” I lied. “I was merely stating that knowledge is powerful, if you wield it wisely.”

“I happen to agree with you, Lady Margaret,” said Alexander of Cleves. “Knowledge is a gift. Tell me, do you like to read? Perchance there is a library nearby? In my few days here, I have yet to find it.”

“I love to read,” I replied. “And indeed there is a library. It is not as large or handsome as the library in Richmond, but it is still impressive. In fact, I’ve just been ordered there to retrieve a verse the queen has been sewing. It was removed from her rooms.”

“And you have been sent to reclaim it from the person who stole it away?” asked Alexander of Cleves, smiling. “A task for a brave person.”

“I am not afraid,” I said, resisting the urge to smile back.

I wondered just how deep the vaults of gold ran in the House of Cleves. The king could decide my fate any day, but perhaps he would not marry me off to an English lord or that warty, lecherous old Scotsman if a suitor from elsewhere were rich enough. I could feign affection; I had seen courtiers proclaim love after a simple walk around the gardens. Love was declared every day here. It was done for survival. And if a son of the House of Cleves was made to believe that he could love me, then an immediate match could be made. I already liked this Alexander well enough; he spoke to me as if I was worth speaking to. His questioning was sincere. I noticed that his pale skin, even lighter than mine, was free from the effects of pox and other illness. He wasn’t powdered

like many of the men in the court, or sour-smelling. He had an almost divine odor about his person: perfumed, but not heavy.

I wanted to send him a sign. I gently brushed myself against the handsome stranger as we walked, but lowered my lashes as I did so. This was bold, to be sure, and my actions felt somehow disloyal to Thomas. But at that very moment, Thomas was off philandering—and I had long known that my love for him was childish. This was a risk I had to take. I had no future with a yeoman, but there could be a future here. One of my own making.

At my touch, Alexander of Cleves's throat bobbed like an apple dunking in water and he seemed to catch Marlon's eye.

"Would you still like me to accompany you, Alexander of Cleves?" said Marlon. He spoke slowly, deliberately—almost as if he was questioning more than our destination.

"Do not leave me," replied Alexander of Cleves with great haste. "Not for one moment."

They nodded in silent agreement, about what I could not tell. It was very peculiar behavior.

In the library, Lady Cecily and I recovered the queen's property after a good deal of pleading with the scholar on duty.

Then Mark Smeaton, a musician in the household of the queen, arrived to inform us that the queen was not to be disturbed for the remainder of the day or evening. The needlework could wait. I forced a smile to hide my exasperation. Queen Anne's whims were becoming exhausting. Lady Cecily and I took to a window seat, where we were offered wine by a cupbearer to the king's scribe. Alexander of Cleves looked about the busy room.

"Well, shall we amuse ourselves in the library, then, since we've

come all this way?" he asked. I nodded, and Lady Cecily's breathing steadied enough to show that she was not totally averse to this idea.

I made a show of studying a set of Latin texts but observed as two chambermaids entered and began making eyes and more at the handsome son of Cleves, who soon abandoned the volume he had opened. He had not yet been corrupted by court life, but I would not have long before he was. It was my good fortune that Marlon interrupted the chambermaids' advances on at least two occasions; yet as the minutes passed and the wine kept flowing, the foursome's laughter became louder.

I wondered for a moment what it was like to live with such abandon. A closer inspection of the chambermaids, however, reminded me that it was really only the men who could truly be at ease. Both girls had bruises. One was wearing a dress that was too large for her, despite her ample charms. Her bruises lay around her neckline and looked like green fingers stretching across her skin.

"It is time we took our leave, Lady Cecily," I announced loudly.

Alexander of Cleves was suddenly on his feet. "Do allow me to escort you to your rooms, Lady Margaret."

His chivalrous offer heartened me. "That would be most kind," I replied. I avoided eye contact with the chambermaids, and with Marlon, who had risen unsteadily to his friend's side. I could not acknowledge a yeoman who was clearly the worse for wine, and on duty as well.

"Please accept my apologies, Lady Margaret," said Alexander of Cleves, slurring his words slightly as we walked. "Just now I was neglectful of our—our newfound friendship. Can you forgive me?"

I give you my word that I will be more attentive when I return to court after my travels.”

“There is nothing to forgive, sir,” I replied. “I pray that this is the first of many meetings between our houses. I long to tell you of my father, Sir Richard Montague, and his lands in Hampshire, and I would be most pleased to hear more of the House of Cleves.”

I hoped my words were of interest to the son of Cleves. I wanted him to know that my father was a Knight of the Realm and I would be a rich reward for any courtier.

Alexander did not seem to find my daring untoward. When we reached the queen’s apartments, he bowed deeply. Lady Cecily and I curtsied. As she and I slipped through the doors, I turned back to see Alexander of Cleves pat Marlon on the shoulder.

What a beguiling gentleman, I thought once more.

Yet I could not fathom what was in that wine that would have caused him to lose the Saxon intonation in his voice.

four

Alexander

*“Hunt, sing, and dance,
My heart is set!
All goodly sport,
For my comfort,
Who shall me let?”*

“What on earth are you doing?” moaned my brother from his bed.

“Singing,” I replied. “It’s one of the king’s compositions.”

“Butcher his songs like that and they’ll hang, draw, and quarter you.”

“You’re only saying that because I woke you up. Really, you’re jealous because you can’t sing like me.”

“That’s true,” muttered Charlie, and his obvious admiration almost made me blush.

I pulled back the heavy, dusty drapes. A gray, gloomy light filtered through the windows, and rain pelted the glass. It was so noisy it was probably hail. I could feel the damp spreading into the room. We had been warned about the English weather. Rightfully so.

“What time is it?” asked Charlie, sitting up groggily.

“I’ve no idea anymore,” I replied. “It is whatever time the king says it is.”

Charlie buried his face back in the pillow.

“Everything feels so wet,” he mumbled. “And there’s a musty smell coming from those drapes.”

“I’ll make sure to see a few peasant washerwomen are hanged, just for you,” I replied, smiling. “You look like death, brother.”

“I feel like death. After you deserted me yesterday for Marlon, I ended up drinking with one of the keepers of the keys.”

“Keeper of the keys to what?”

“The wine cellar, apparently. I can’t move yet. Leave me here until later. I need to sleep,” said Charlie, his voice muffled by the pillow.

“Questionable behavior from the brother who told *me* to be careful?” I said. I was genuinely surprised, and secretly pleased. On any other day, I’d have plied him for more details. But we had important matters to attend to. “You don’t have time to sleep. Or have you forgotten? We’re being introduced to the king this morning. Aramis was just here, and he said he doesn’t care if you’re actually dying. He’ll have our heads if we’re not ready soon. And he recommends dressing warmly. Apparently the king wants to go riding, even though it’s the type of weather that’ll drown ducks.”

“The king!” Charlie groaned.

“Yes! The king!” I replied. “Big man, red hair? Likes to behead people?”

I pulled back my brother’s sheets and he howled. I couldn’t blame him; the room was freezing. The fire had run its course during the night and no one had been in to stoke it.

“Are you going to die quietly or die making a fuss?” I asked. “Because I could collect a crowd to cheer you on.” Charlie dragged his legs out of bed and placed his bare feet on the cold stone floor.

“You’re in a good mood,” he said. “You’re always in a good mood. It’s very annoying, Alex.”

“Of course I’m in a good mood. I’ve had a bath, I’ve been fed, and I’ve made several new friends over the last few days,” I replied. “This short reconnaissance to England has been a success. I could actually get used to this way of living.”

“Well, don’t.” Charlie stood up and winced as his back cracked.

“Have something to eat and drink, you’ll feel better,” I said, determined to keep up a cheerful appearance for my brother’s sake. “What about some wine?”

“I’m going to kill you if you don’t stop talking. And did you really mean it when you said the king wants to go riding? I thought Henry was still recovering from the jousting accident a few months ago.”

“He is. Aramis thinks it’s just bravado, but do you want to volunteer to be the one to tell the king he can’t get on a horse?”

“Don’t cock your eyebrows at me,” said Charlie with a groan as he tried to move. “You look like you have two red caterpillars doing the Almain over your eyes.”

The door suddenly flew open.

“Are you *still* not dressed, Charles?” yelled Aramis, storming into the room. Two young boys, no older than ten, scuttled in after him.

“I’ve only just woken, *Father*,” he replied.

“The king wants to go riding,” said Aramis.

“So I’ve heard,” Charlie said miserably.

“Well, a poor impression you’ll make if he is curtailed because you couldn’t find your pants!”



Charlie dressed with haste and ran with me down the corridor after Aramis. We drew looks from everyone. Two redheaded, six-foot-tall marionettes here for their amusement.

Aramis stopped suddenly as we reached two huge doors, guarded by four armed soldiers on each side. He beckoned us over to a tall window that was stained with blue, green, yellow, and red glass.

“Charles, Alexander,” he said in a low voice. “It’s all down to you and the choices you make from now on. I have spent months gaining the trust of the court and king to enable you to take over from here. The future is in your hands. Remember that the king will look at you both and see a mirror image of himself. His vanity and pride are to be used to your advantage. So is your age. Recall that half of those alive in England are no older than eighteen years. This court is filled with people younger than you. Your age makes you superior in the eyes of the young court, and appealing to a king who wishes to maintain an appearance of virility. So if Henry wishes to hunt, you hunt until your hides are numb. If he wishes to feast, you stuff your stomachs until you cannot move. He will ask for your counsel because you are new and he likes to be flattered. Make the king adore you and he will listen to the House of Cleves when you work it into his head that he is *not* to marry Jane Seymour when he goes looking for another wife. And why not Seymour?” Aramis looked severely at me.

“Because he is to marry a Protestant,” I answered automatically.

“And why is that?” He turned to Charlie.

“Because the Catholic faith is dying in England. Marrying another Protestant after Queen Anne will be its death blow.”

“Correct. Now, make an impression this morning, and when you return to the court, your task will be easier. You’ve done well in a short period, do not fail today.”

“I don’t think we should keep the king waiting any longer,” I whispered, flicking imaginary dust off my clothes.

Aramis nodded. This was it.

Aramis nodded to the guards, who opened the two doors outward in perfect synchronization. I was expecting an announcement of our names, but there was nothing. Following Aramis like two faithful puppies, my brother and I walked into a long room filled with circular pillars and lined on both sides by more stained-glass windows.

“Cleves,” said a low voice to our left. A large man in black robes lined with brown fur seemed to slide out from behind a pillar. He had a round face, a bulbous nose, and black hair that fell like curtains around his face. I knew immediately that this was Thomas Cromwell, the king’s chief minister.

“What is it, Cromwell?” replied Aramis. His Rhineland accent was much thicker than the one Charlie and I spoke with.

I looked around as Cromwell bent his head low and started muttering to Aramis. I could only catch every fifth word, and if I had moved closer it would have been obvious I was listening.

Eyes were flickering around the room. It must have been populated by at least twenty people. There were several men—both young and old—costumed as Charlie and I were, but in more colorful doublets. There were also a number of women—some of whom didn’t seem older than twelve years—dressed in long gowns with tight bodices and flared skirts that made them look

like stacked triangles. All of the women had their hair swept back beneath French hoods.

The queen was absent.

The king was not.

He was sitting on a dais, dressed in dark purple. His tunic was fastened—only just. Even from my position at the back of the hall I could see the buttons straining across his expansive chest. He was wearing a fur gilet and chunky brown boots.

We locked eyes and my stomach tried to escape via my mouth. I had never felt so intimidated in my life. The king wasn't smiling; he was grimacing, as if he was in pain.

All of my training in proper behavior in the inner sanctum of the king flew out of the stained-glass windows as I looked at him. I couldn't remember if I was to nod, bow, get on my knees and crawl—

“Shut your mouth, Alexander,” hissed my brother. “You look like a fish. Now bow . . . bow.”

I did as my brother instructed, just as the king's barking voice echoed above all others in the room.

“Cleves . . . come here, man.”

“Follow me and do not speak unless spoken to,” said Aramis. The Duke of Cleves walked confidently up to the dais and bowed deeply. Charlie and I did the same.

“So these are the sons of Cleves,” said the king, leaning back. He was rubbing his thigh. “Which is the heir, and which is the spare?”

The court burst into spontaneous—and very fake—laughter. The king either didn't notice or didn't care. He was the center of attention and that was all that mattered.

“Alexander, Your Grace,” I said, going down on bended knee. “By virtue of a few moments, I am the spare.”

The king snorted his approval at his own joke being repeated.

“Which means you can have a lot more amusement,” he said. “I was in that position—once.”

The tension in the court was so heavy it was as if the stormy elements from outside had crashed into the palace. Not a breath could be heard.

“And I am Charles, Your Grace,” said Charlie, sinking to a knee and filling the silence. “My brother and I are honored to have been afforded a place in your court.”

“Do you both ride, heir and spare?” asked the king.

“We do, Your Grace,” replied Charlie.

“And what say you to riding today?” asked the king. “My advisors say it is no weather to be hunting outside. The cowards are scared of getting wet.”

“I think they are correct, Your Grace,” said Charlie.

Now the collective intake of breath from those closest to the dais was completely audible. I half expected to see my brother’s head fly in an arc across the hall. Had Charlie lost his mind?

“You believe I am frightened of getting wet?” asked the king in a low, menacing voice.

“No, Your Grace,” replied Charlie. I clenched every muscle I possessed as he rose to full height to look the king in the eye. “I believe it will be the animals you wish to hunt that will be scared of getting wet. The deer in the parks will not be running freely. Their wish to cower from the elements will curtail your enjoyment. How can a king truly hunt to his full potential when the animals do not run to theirs?”

The king sat back and raised his chin, as if he was appraising us. His body language had gone from taut and uncomfortable to more relaxed. Charlie had made the greatest first impression ever. With his left elbow resting on the arm of his throne, Henry clicked his jeweled fingers, and a golden goblet was handed to him.

“I have affairs of state to attend to with my advisors,” said the king. “But I will have your company, heir and spare, this afternoon. Do you play archery?”

“We do, Your Grace,” I replied, standing. “I am more skilled than my brother. In my experience, second sons usually have the lion’s share of the talent.”

That comment raised a smile. It wasn’t one that showed a set of teeth, but the king’s lips definitely curled at the edges. He nodded to Aramis, and we were dismissed without further comment or question.

We took several steps back to show deference and then turned as the dais was surrounded by men with papers and quills.

“Seymour,” called Aramis to a thin-faced man with a long black beard. “My sons, Charles and Alexander.”

“Your offspring saved us all from a soaking this morn,” replied the man. “The court will be grateful.”

“This is Edward Seymour, first Earl of Hertford,” said Aramis. “The Seymours’ residence is Wulfhall, a favorite of the king’s.” Seymour smirked at that comment. “Sir Edward’s sister, Lady Jane, is a maid of honor to Queen Anne.”

The introduction was strategic. When we returned to the court, we would have to make the king turn away from Seymour’s influence.

“It’s an honor to meet with you,” said Charlie.

“Cleves here speaks of you both often,” said Seymour. “I would wager he is angling for earldoms already.”

“Only if the king is prepared to throw in some pretty girls,” I said, forcing a laugh.

Seymour laughed too; it was high and squeaky.

“Then we will see what we can do,” he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I would introduce you to my sister, but more and more it seems she is spoken for.”

His mud-colored eyes flicked to the king, whose voice was getting louder and louder with impatience.

“It would still be an honor to make her acquaintance,” Charlie said with a bow.

As my brother straightened and stood by my side, Seymour seemed to be taking the measure of our long frames. “I have a request concerning your archery contest, sons of Cleves,” he whispered. “A personal favor in deference to our new friendship. Don’t let him win.”



“Why doesn’t Seymour want us to let the king win?” I asked softly as we left the room. “I would have thought his opponents would sabotage their own bows rather than defeat Henry.”

“Because if the king loses, then Jane can be sent for to make him feel better,” replied Charlie. “It’s all strategic.”

“Not for us it isn’t, if we beat the king,” I said grimly. “And I have such a pretty head.”

Charles

I expected Aramis to scold Alex for making light of the king's bloodlust. But when we entered the corridor, the man instead stopped short, listening. For a split second his eyes widened. What had I missed? Rain was still pelting against the glass, and now rumbles of thunder echoed in the eaves. Then, somewhere underneath it all, I heard footsteps.

"Your Majesty," said Aramis, suddenly bowing deeply.

I turned to see a woman walking down the center of the corridor, followed by two young ladies. Her long green gown swept the ground as she held her head high. A small leather-bound book was clasped tightly between her hands.

The woman stopped directly in front of Alex and me. Aramis had stepped back into the shadows. My brother bowed, but I was paralyzed, hypnotized by the woman's eyes. They were as black as night.

"The sons of Cleves," she said in a throaty French accent. "Just what this court needs. More men to make foolish decisions for us all."

It was Anne Boleyn.

I was very good at holding my breath, but it was only when I heard the slow beat of my pulse in my temples that I realized I was doing it. It was hard to stay calm. The union of King Henry and Anne Boleyn only a few short years ago had split not only England, but seemingly all of Europe. It pitted religion against religion, as Aramis was fond of saying. Monarch against monarch.

“Your Grace,” I said with a bow. “Miladies.”

“You have seen the king?” asked the queen, staring directly at me.

“My brother and I were only just introduced to His Grace by our father,” I replied.

“And how was my husband?”

“Eager to get outside.”

Anne touched a small gold cross at the base of her neck; her skin was pale and flawless.

“Who was with him?”

“People of the court,” I replied, trying to remember names. “I do not know many of them yet. I believe Cromwell was there... and Seymour.”

“Lady Jane?” snapped Anne.

“No... no,” I replied quickly. “Sir Edward.”

“Likely you merely overlooked her. I have no doubt that English mouse was waiting to scuttle out of the darkness,” said Anne, her eyes narrowing. “She has not appeared in my chambers for three days now.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t prepared for the queen’s openness about the disintegration of her own court, although it was all anyone else here talked about.

Anne cocked her head at me like a quizzical dog.

“But then you have only been at court for a few days at most, son of Cleves,” she said. “You would not yet be acquainted with the whisperings of witches and sorcerers. And I understand you are leaving again.”

“My sons will return to the court shortly,” said Aramis, stepping forward. “We have some affairs to attend to at home first.”

“Why?” demanded the queen. “Why would you return here?”

“We are to be of service to the king and our father,” I replied. “To be friends and allies.”

“Fresh meat for the slaughter,” said Anne, walking over to a rain-splattered window. “Watch your backs, Charles and Alexander of Cleves. The knives are being sharpened everywhere, but Cromwell, Seymour, and Norfolk have the longest blades.” Her face had become stony and harsh, like one of the stone carvings on the façade of the palace.

The queen then swept past us without so much as a backward glance. But one of her attendants let her gaze linger on Alex as she passed. My pulse quickened as I started breathing again.

“Who were the ladies with her?” asked Aramis quietly.

“Lady Margaret and Lady Cecily,” replied Alex immediately. “Lady Margaret is the only child of Sir Richard Montague of Hampshire. He’s in the king’s navy. According to Marlon of the yeoman guard, she’s in love with Thomas Ladman, the bastard son of some earl or duke, and has been since they were children. They have no future and they both know it. He’s recently taken to seeking the comfort of women outside the palace. She’s sixteen years old and will be married before the year is out, probably to a Scottish earl or northern lord. Lady Cecily is fifteen. Her mother has already made overtures about marriage to one of the sons of the Duke of Somerset. The king is considering it.”

“Excellent work, Alexander,” said Aramis. “Did you see how Lady Margaret was looking at you?”

“Unfortunately,” replied my brother.

“Exploit that if you have to.”

Aramis didn’t say a word to me. I knew it was because I had

disappointed him. This was a reconnaissance. I, too, was supposed to be gathering information that could be used strategically to advance our cause when we returned.

“Don’t be hard on yourself,” said my brother as we walked back to our rooms.

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You can’t lie to me. And the only reason I knew who the ladies were was because I met them yesterday when I was with Marlon.”

“You’re better with people than I am,” I said quietly. “You could get information out of a corpse.”

“Yes, I am,” replied Alex. “And yes, I could. But think of all the ways you’re better than me.”

“Like?”

“I would bet a stable of horses that you’re already prepared for the journey back.”

“Yes.”

“And I’m not prepared at all.”

“You don’t need to be,” I said. “I’ve already checked everything for you.”

Alex clapped his hand on my shoulder.

“I would be lost without you, brother of mine. And don’t you ever forget it.”

I wouldn’t. Alex and I were a team. We had come into this world together, and we would leave it together.

And unlike most people, we had a good idea of when our demise would come.

Margaret

It appeared that the fates were conspiring to acquaint me with both sons of Cleves now. I took the crossing of our paths as a sign. Lady Cecily had been quivering beside me as the brothers spoke with the queen, afraid, as she always was, that words would be uttered that could somehow be twisted and used against us.

I, however, had held my composure. If Alexander had showed overfamiliarity toward us during our interaction, I would have kept a mask of indifference. Who were the sons of Cleves to me in the presence of the queen?

Other than my possible salvation away from this murderous den of snakes?

Thankfully, the queen had been in no mood for idle chatter, not even with distinguished guests from abroad. Perchance if the sons of Cleves had been from France, where Her Majesty had spent much of her childhood, she might have tarried longer. Queen Anne still believed herself to have allies there who could somehow protect her. The truth was she did not have allies anywhere, and even her family members at court were openly rebelling against her. In her position, I would have stolen away on a ship for distant shores and never returned.

“I see what they are doing better than they see themselves,” Her Majesty hissed when we were some way down the corridor. Lady

Cecily and I exchanged glances. To which of us was the queen speaking? Were we meant to acknowledge her utterance? Queen Anne would often speak aloud and then rebuke a person for answering her. Yet her wrath was fearsome if she believed she was being ignored.

“What do *you* see, Lady Cecily?” asked the queen.

“Your . . . Your Grace?” stammered Lady Cecily.

“Open your eyes and tell me what you see,” demanded the queen. She was walking at such a pace it was as if the hounds of Hell were snapping at her feet.

“I do not understand, Your Grace.” Lady Cecily had gone the color of sour milk.

“Foolish child,” snapped the queen. “Lady Margaret, tell me. What do *you* see in the arrival of the sons of Cleves at court?”

“I see His Grace allying himself and strengthening the bonds of friendship between the houses of the Saxon lands and England. His Grace has a gift for seeing the advancement in friendships between countries.”

“Exactly,” replied Queen Anne. “At least I am blessed with one maid of honor who is not a simpering mess or a disloyal wench.”

We knew to whom she was referring with that latter insult. I stayed silent, for I would not condemn Lady Jane Seymour. Recently, my friend had been moved to more spacious, luxurious apartments closer to the king—and the mystery of her whereabouts at night raveled Her Majesty no end. Yet Lady Jane was even more loyal to her family of Wulfhall. The king was sending her gifts. The queen knew this, and there was nothing she could say or do to stop it.

It wasn't just the king who needed to advance friendship between countries.

I needed to get away from this life.

And I believed I had found a way.

“Lady Margaret,” said Queen Anne, as if reading my thoughts. “I want you to find out what has become of that treacherous witch.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” There was no heart to my reply. I would not forsake Lady Jane, either. I would lie if I had to.

“And I command you to get acquainted with the sons of Cleves upon their return to court. I want to know when they see the king, how often, and what is being said.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” This I could agree to in good conscience.

“You saw their resemblance to the king?” asked the queen.

“There are similarities, Your Grace.”

“I have neither the time nor the patience for more bastards in this court. When I have a son in my belly, my husband will forget these usurpers. And I will make them rue the day they believed they could discard me like a commoner.”

It was an understandable obsession with her now: providing the king with a son and heir would almost certainly turn His Majesty’s attention back to her.

But it was never going to happen. The sole child the queen had borne was female, and since then she had lost too many, too early. The king’s patience was spent. He was virile. He had bastard sons. In his eyes, it was the queen’s fault he had no heir.

I prayed for Lady Jane’s sake that if her time came, she wasn’t barren.

For my sake, I prayed that one of the sons of Cleves was amenable to being acquainted with a potential bride.

Alexander

With the rain continuing to do its best to drown England and everything in it, the court decamped to another, much larger, hall in the palace for an afternoon of archery. While Charlie and I despised our toxophilite instructor back home, I had to grudgingly admit that Piermont had turned me into a great bowman. It was the law of King Henry's land that any fit man over the age of twenty-four should be able to shoot a target from two hundred and twenty yards, which was around the length of ten tennis courts.

I was seventeen years old and had been able to hit that target outdoors since the age of thirteen.



No one was allowed to touch the bows until His Majesty arrived. When he did, he was accompanied by the large-nosed Thomas Cromwell on his left and the thin-faced Edward Seymour on his right. The large king was hobbling, and Seymour appeared to be limping so as not to outstride Henry. It was quite the sycophantic spectacle, and it took a lot of effort not to laugh out loud.

Yet another learning experience in how far men would go to curry favor with the king.

“That must be Lady Jane,” I whispered to Charlie, nudging him with my left elbow. “Behind Edward and next to Lady Margaret.”

Lady Jane had a plain freckled face, with an angular nose and

a weak chin that disappeared into her neck. She also had small eyes and thin lips. It was the kind of face that disappeared from memory the second you looked away.

“And the king has chosen her over Anne?” whispered back my brother, incredulously.

“Apparently, but we’re here to make sure he *doesn’t* choose her. Or more importantly, her religion,” I replied. “Besides, I don’t think it’s her face he’s interested in.”

“Their son *would* be a redhead,” quipped Charlie.

“I’m sure there are some redheaded Protestants around,” I whispered, running my fingers through my own bright hair. I couldn’t resist smiling at Marlon, my new friend, who was standing near the archery targets. I’d made his acquaintance only a few days ago. He was a yeoman, and according to the laws of this court, beneath me. But he was kind. Unassuming, but self-respecting. And yes, handsome. I’d felt drawn to him immediately. I didn’t see the harm in at least being amicable.

“Will you stop being so obvious?” hissed my brother.

“Nothing wrong with being friendly.” It felt good to say aloud. “When in England, as they say—”

“Right now in England, even friendly can get you hanged, drawn, and quartered,” interrupted Charlie.

With an exaggerated sigh, I went back to looking at Jane Seymour. Her covered head was bent; she was staring straight at the floor. It was the antithesis of what most of the younger girls were doing; they *wanted* to be seen. Lady Jane wouldn’t stand out in a crowd of one, let alone drown out the vivaciousness of the current queen.

But it was also a lesson in self-preservation. It was a tactic that

my brother, too, used brilliantly, but that I could never quite master myself. If no one notices you, then you don't become a target. Lady Jane wasn't meek and mild. She was playing the game and winning.

And I admired her on the spot for it.

"I'll concentrate on flattering the king. You concentrate on flattering Jane," Charlie whispered. "We need to start drawing her away from him. If we can report that we've already made headway when we return, our positions will be strengthened."

"I like the sound of that," I replied.

"Cleves, come here," barked the king, beckoning with his fingers without looking at either of us. I immediately walked forward, as did Charlie.

"Come as a package, do you?" said Edward Seymour, smirking.

"All great things come in twos," I replied, bowing. The king laughed. The courtiers laughed too. Edward gritted his teeth and smirked.

"Pick a bow, man," ordered the king.

Two were offered to me by a yeoman guard. Both were made of yew with hemp strings strung tightly together. At six feet tall, I had a long reach. I flexed both bows before deciding to take the one that was a little more rigid. Harder to fire for an amateur, but accurate in the hands of someone who knew what he was doing.

Charlie got the second bow by default; he didn't look happy. Then I remembered he was the one who was supposed to be impressing the king. Time to push down the pride and get in the shadows. I passed my bow to my brother, knowing he would do well with it.

I was handed a brown leather quiver filled with birch arrows, tipped with tiny gray goose feathers. The king's fur-lined coat was stripped from his shoulders by an aide and he immediately took aim with an elongated, fluid movement. Henry was an incredibly large man, and when his chest was exposed, he looked very intimidating. In that moment, I completely understood why people were terrified of him.

Henry's arrow flew through the air and landed. The target wasn't the colorful board I was used to practicing on, but was instead a black outer circle with a smaller white bull's-eye. The king's arrow had just made the white. The courtiers clapped enthusiastically.

Edward Seymour caught my eye as Charlie stepped up next. He wanted one of us to win so his sister could console the king. I needed to be average, to disappear into the crowd and get to know Jane, so today, Charlie's prowess with a bow needed to elicit a memory in the king that reminded him of... him.

Charlie's arrow wobbled slightly off course as it sailed in a straight line. He was better over the curve with a longer distance, but this wasn't the length of ten tennis courts. His arrow just made the white like Henry's. There was polite clapping.

I then hit the black—on purpose. I practiced archery back home more than anyone. Not because I liked it, but because I was terrified of Piermont placing an orange on my head and practicing on me as punishment for poor performance.

Courtiers, male and female, all had a shot, except Jane, who stayed behind her brother and close to Lady Margaret, who had been the most enthusiastic of clappers at my shot, even though it was a miss. The younger courtiers didn't struggle as much as I

thought they would. There were a few who were good enough to deserve a respectful nod. One earl, who stood out because he was almost as tall as me, asked me for some tips, which gave me an introduction into his group of friends.

I caught Jane Seymour's eye several times. She seemed to be impressed that my brother was actually trying to beat the king; I was even sure he got half a smile from her at one point, but Jane showed no interest in taking up a bow herself.

The king was a very talented archer, and after several rounds, he and Charlie were well placed ahead of the rest of the court. I pretended to get very annoyed at my game, blaming everything from the bow to the strings to my fingers. Then the daughter of one duke took a particular shine to my ineptitude and started *assisting* me, which simply seemed to involve a lot of sighing and chest-heaving.

I tolerated it, as her attentions had inadvertently drawn me closer to where Lady Jane and Lady Margaret stood. My new friend, Marlon, was also nearby.

When the duke's daughter finally tired of helping, Edward Seymour approached. "The fair Lady Agnes seems enamored of you," he said with a smirk. When I made no reply, he asked, "Her feelings are not reciprocated?"

"Women are a mystery to me," I replied.

"You hope to be a man of the cloth, then?"

It took all my willpower not to laugh at his question.

"I do not see you presiding over a church, Alexander," said Marlon, stepping closer to the small group. "You are too—"

"Foreign?" interrupted Edward Seymour spitefully.

"I was going to say *honest*," said Marlon, smiling.

“What would a yeoman know?” replied Edward Seymour, barely keeping the sneer from his face. “Cleves, in this court, yeomen know their place, and it isn’t to converse with nobility. You would do well to remember that, sir.”

“I’m not certain of my future,” I said, deciding to intercede quickly before matters took a turn for the worse. “Especially the Church’s role in it.”

“All men should be certain of their future,” boomed an angry voice behind me. It was the king. “For every man’s future should have God, riches, and heirs.”

“My brother reads the core theological teachings,” said Charlie, rescuing me from the king’s ire and incredibly bad breath. “And yet I believe he is right to question the future. We both have concerns about the wealth of the Church, for one.”

“Explain.”

“We believe in the divine right of the king. A man of the cloth has no requirement of jewels and gold, because a divine man should be a penitent man. The wealth should come to the king. It is he who governs the people,” said Charlie, taking his last arrow from the quiver. “And it is the king who should provide, for he knows his people best.”

I had no idea where my brother pulled these lines from, but they were brilliant. And the king clearly agreed.

“A chief ministership I see in your future with rhetoric like that,” said Henry.

“Or shall I be a poet?” replied Charlie. “Both are talented with words.”

“Ha!” barked Henry. “Cromwell, you have your match here.” The chief minister dipped his head in deferential reply. He and

Edward Seymour took several steps back and started conversing quietly, occasionally pausing to look up at the king and those around him.

“Your brother is a fine archer, Alexander of Cleves,” said a quiet, calm voice behind me.

“Lady Jane.” I bowed. “I am honored to make your acquaintance. Lady Margaret, a delight to see you again.”

“You and your brother are looking well, Alexander of Cleves,” said Lady Margaret boldly. “I had hoped to see you . . .”

Lady Margaret suddenly trailed off. Her pale blue eyes were transfixed by my wrist. Damn. I pulled my sleeve down, hoping no one else had seen—hoping I’d been fast enough that she’d simply rationalize it away.

A trick of the light, she might say. That was all it was.

“Is this your first time at court, sir?” asked Lady Jane.

“It is indeed. My brother and I leave for home this night, but we will return shortly. The king informed our father on our second day here that we have been afforded the honor of a place in the court until the summer and possibly beyond.”

Not that we’ll need to stay that long, I thought, watching Lady Margaret carefully.

“Will you require assistance in removing your belongings to a carriage?” asked Marlon quietly, barely moving his lips. He was taking a risk in continuing to converse with me, but I was glad he did. “I could speak to the groomsman to ensure that the best horses are made available to you.”

“All arrangements have been taken care of,” I replied. “As we are to return, most of our possessions will remain. But I thank you for your attentiveness.”

Marlon nodded and stepped back in deference to my status, but his dark green eyes remained locked with mine.

“When *will* you return?” asked Lady Margaret.

“As soon as we possibly can. It is a great honor for us to be of service to His Majesty.”

“As it is for all of us,” said Lady Jane, lowering her head. I looked over at her brother, who was now glaring at me.



The atmosphere in the room was getting heavy with the condensed breath of so many people. The king suddenly ordered the game over, and a welcome blast of frigid air swept through the hall as the main doors were opened. Everyone congratulated Henry as if he had won. The king inhaled and stood up straight to receive his heavy coat once more, and he grimaced as his legs took his full weight.

“Well played, Cleves,” called the king. “You will practice with me daily on your return to the court.”

“It would be an honor, Your Majesty,” replied Charlie.

“Just you.”

Henry pushed past me and offered his hand to Jane Seymour, and she placed hers on his. He dwarfed her in every sense. The room chilled quickly as everyone departed.

“I think I was just dismissed,” I said as Charlie sidled up to me.

“Henry saw Jane talking to you,” he replied. “What did you expect?”

“Is that going to be our strategy? I’ll flirt with Jane and get the king jealous, and you’ll stop him from chopping my head off by kissing his ass?”

“It’s one of my strategies,” Charlie replied. “If only because watching you flirt with women is hilarious.”



We made our way back to our rooms. We would be traveling light, and Aramis had already spoken to the head of the household to keep our clothes in storage while we were gone.

“Is everything arranged?” I asked my brother.

“The painting is still exactly where it was this morning, and yesterday, and the day before . . .”

“So the nighttime departure is on,” I replied. “How very . . . clandestine.”

“Story of our lives,” muttered my brother. “Story of our lives.”