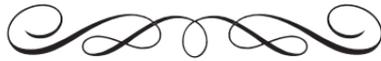


Chapter 2



Mary, Wiltshire, 1557

Alison Banestre and I were cousins of a kind. We were both orphans. There the bond between us began and ended: Alison, my enemy.

We made a bargain, she and I. She helped me to escape; I helped her to find her son. It is entirely possible to bargain with an enemy if there is something that you both want and so it proved. Thus we were bound together through time.

We met at Wolf Hall. I came there in the summer of fifteen hundred and fifty-seven, in the fourth year of the reign of Mary the Queen. I was a Mary, too, cousin of the late king, Edward, daughter to one dead queen and niece to another, with a famous name and not a penny to pay my way. I was ten years old and I already had a reputation for witchcraft.

‘The child is possessed, your grace,’ the cook at Grimsthorpe told the Duchess of Suffolk when, at the age of five, I was found sitting under a table in the kitchens, holding a posset that had curdled. ‘That cream was as fresh as a daisy only a moment ago.’

‘Mary broke my spinning top!’ one of my Seymour cousins wailed one day when the wooden toy was found to have split neatly into two halves like a cut pear. ‘She put a spell on it!’

That was the first time I realised that I possessed the magic. He had been tormenting me and I had hated him; the anger had boiled over within me and I had wanted nothing more than to teach him a lesson.

I did not want such power though. I wanted no more than to be ordinary, accepted. My mother, many years before, had been within inches of arrest for heresy. Witchcraft was but one strand of such blasphemy and dissent and the thought of following her fate terrified me. Yet I could not escape. It came with me to Savernake, the whisper of witchcraft, wrapped like a cloak about me, for I was different, other, an outsider, whether I wished it or not.

My name is Mary Seymour. I was born at Sudeley Castle but have no recollection of my nursery there, hung with red and gold, for almost as soon as I came into the world my mother left it. I’m told that my father had never anticipated that she might die in childbirth, which is odd since it is a common danger, particularly for a woman such as my mother Katherine Parr who was past the age when it was wise to have a first child or indeed perhaps a child at all. But she was giddy for love of him and he was giddy for love of himself so I imagine they gave little thought to the consequences of their infatuation.

I was born. My mother died. My father professed himself to be so stunned by grief that he could not think straight. However he knew enough to realise he did not want the burden of a baby daughter, so he took me to London and

abandoned me in the nursery of my aunt and uncle, the Duke and Duchess of Somerset, where I might have cousins with whom to grow up. It was a good plan, if a self-interested one, and it might well have turned out quite differently had it not been for his overweening ambition, which toppled over into treason.

My earliest memory was of being unwanted.

‘What is to become of the Lady Mary?’ My governess, Mistress Aiglonby was the only one who, in the chaotic aftermath of my father’s arrest for treason, pressed for my family to continue to care for me. I can still hear the wail of her voice rising above the sound of my belongings being packed away into boxes. I had no real sense of what was happening. I remember tipping my set of skittles out of the box again, spilling them all over the floor and tripping the nursemaid up as she ran about trying to fold my clothes into a bag that was too small. She was red of face and flustered, and looked near to tears.

‘Lady Mary cannot stay here.’ It was my aunt, the duchess, who spoke. She had no warmth in her, least of all towards me.

‘I agree it would be difficult to explain to her in the future that her uncle signed her father’s death warrant.’ Dearest Liz Aiglonby. She could be tart when she chose. She had been one of my mother’s maids before she became my governess. Her family were ambitious for preferment at court but that did not prevent her from defending me like a lioness.

‘That was not my point.’ The duchess’s tone had chilled still further. ‘Let her mother’s kin take her in.’

‘The Parrs do not want her.’

No one wants her.

My skittles had been a present from my father. They were carved into the shape of men, painted to look like sailors. I took one in my fist and neatly struck off the head of another with it. Or so I am told. In truth, I probably remember nothing of this, being too young, although it feels as though the memory is real.

‘Lord Seymour suggested her grace of Suffolk...’ Mistress Aiglonby sounded hesitant now and my aunt gave a brusque bark of laughter.

‘Why would he do that? I thought he liked her?’ Her voice changed. Malice rang clear as a bell. ‘Mayhap the rumours are true and she did refuse him and this is his revenge.’

‘Her grace was a close friend of the late Queen.’

‘Which does not mean she would wish to be saddled with her penniless child.’

Yet to the Duchess of Suffolk I was sent, like an unwelcome gift, trailing my retinue of nursemaids, rockers, laundresses and servants.

Lady Suffolk was renowned for her piety but this did not mean she possessed generosity of spirit as well.

‘The late Queen’s child is too expensive for me to keep,’ she told anyone who would listen, but no one *was* listening, not really, not even parliament, which eventually restored to me all that was left of my father’s property. This was practically nothing. So my expensive household was dismissed but for a few servants, and Lady Suffolk sent me to her castle at Grimsthorpe in Lincolnshire since I could live more cheaply in the country than in London.

I loved Grimsthorpe. The castle had been neglected since the visit of the old king Henry some ten years before and

its rooms smelled of stale air and damp and secrets. There were locked doors and tumbledown walls, rambling gardens and endless woods under wide blue skies. Best of all, no one cared what I did so no one interfered. One of Liz's brothers came to tutor me sometimes, and Liz herself tried to instil in me the skills and lessons appropriate to a lady, but I was a stubborn child and had no interest in learning. I think that the Duchess of Suffolk might have tried to betroth me young had I even the smallest dowry but as I had nothing but notoriety she knew no one would want to wed me.

How long my idyllic life at Grimsthorpe might have continued I do not know, for when I was eight years old the duchess and her fierce Protestantism fell foul of the Bishop of Winchester and she vowed to leave England for fear of persecution. There was no question that she would take me abroad with her. For a couple of years, I was shunted from pillar to post, from London to the country, from north to south, from court to church and back again. I was a nuisance. Queen Mary declared that I should be sent to one of my father's manors. Liz Aiglonby staunchly maintained I was too young, that I was the Queen's ward and her responsibility. Mary said dryly that as the Seymours had begat me so to the Seymours I should go.

My uncle Somerset had followed my father to the executioner's block, so it was left to my cousin Edward, as head of the family, to provide for me. He and I were united in disgrace, the Seymours fallen further than they had ever risen.

It was then I first heard the whisper of that name:

Wolf Hall.

My first sight of the place was on a day of bright sunlight, but once we were within the forest of Savernake the sun vanished into darkness and the track seemed interminable and lonely. It felt as though we were arriving at the end of the world.

‘What sort of a name is Wolf Hall?’ Liz asked, as she placed my clothes in the big bound chest in the chamber I was to share with my cousin Alison. We had been welcomed warmly enough on arrival with bread, a little butter and some fruit although it was closer to dinner than breakfast time. Dame Margery, the housekeeper, had then shown us to my bedchamber and had vanished, although Cousin Alison had remained. She sat in the window where the pale light seemed to shimmer on her flaxen hair. I had never seen anything so pretty in my life.

Liz sounded suspicious, I thought, as though she expected a wolf to appear from behind a tree and gobble her whole. She disliked the country and thought its inhabitants unruly and unpredictable, whether human, feathered or furred. Nor did she like Wolf Hall itself. The rambling old manor was even more run down than Grimsthorpe had been and here I was less than no one and Liz, consequently, nothing at all for all her London connections and service to the court.

‘Wolf Hall is nothing to do with wolves,’ Alison said. She sounded faintly patronising. ‘It comes from the ancient Saxon name for the estate.’

‘Saxon!’ Liz said. Her family had come over with the Norman King William. Her sniff of disdain left no room for doubt that she considered the Saxons even more barbaric than the present inhabitants of Savernake Forest.

Alison smiled, tossing her golden plait over her shoulder. She looked very Saxon herself with her cream and roses complexion and her blue eyes. There was a look of the late Queen Jane about her, or so I was told. Except that Queen Jane was pious and demure and Alison was never that.

Alison and I were only distantly related, but at Wolf Hall, I had already discovered that we Seymours were all jumbled up together, called cousins regardless of our relationships, abandoned here because there was nowhere else for the sprawling offshoots of the family to go. There were half a dozen of us children and I never worked out how we were connected other than through rejection or loss. There were two babies in the nursery; whose they were I never discovered. Closest in age to me was a boy of seven, but from the lofty heights of ten years, I considered him negligible. Then there was Alison, two or three years older, and above her in the pecking order a sullen youth who boasted that he was soon to be sent away as squire in a knight's household.

Liz had turned her back as she laid out my linen shifts in the trunk. These had been worked with fine white lace and I saw Alison's gaze narrow on them and something cold and hard and inimical come into her pale eyes as she looked back at me. She could not have looked less like meek Queen Jane then.

'Those are very beautiful linens indeed,' she said.

'The Lady Mary is dressed as befits the daughter of a queen,' Liz said.

Alison's cornflower gaze swept over me. 'Only beneath her gown,' she said.

Even though I was only ten years old I was adept at reading

what went on in the minds of men—and women—for my fate had often depended upon it. I knew that Alison resented me; that for all my notoriety and poverty, she was jealous because I had fame even though it was not of my own seeking. I was also adept at smoothing over discord so I slid from my chair and went over to her.

‘Would you show me the forest?’ I asked.

She looked scornful. ‘It would take days for you to see the forest.’ Her sharp gaze pinned me down. ‘We are forbidden from venturing there. It is dangerous.’

‘Why?’

There was a sudden silence and I realised that she did not know. She had never asked.

‘It just is.’ Her head was bent. I could not see her expression. Her busy fingers were sorting through the skeins of thread in her workbox. She put aside the ones that drew my gaze—the red, the gold, the blue—and selected the brown and the black. ‘Besides we have no time for idleness here. We clean and cook and sew and tend the garden and dairy and a thousand other things beside.’

‘Are there not servants to do such tasks?’

She gave a snort of laughter. ‘So speaks the Queen’s daughter. No, *your highness*—’ her mouth curved into a sly little smile ‘—we do not have that luxury here, at least not when Sir Edward is away. In his absence we make shift for ourselves.’

I bit my tongue before I could make reference to Cousin Edward. Already she found me presumptuous. I would do nothing to antagonise her further. Instead, I slipped out of the bedroom when Liz’s back was turned. I knew Alison

would tell her she had no notion of where I had gone and if I got lost in the dangerous forest she would not mourn me.

I had not been at Wolf Hall long enough to know which chamber was which, but I ignored the blank doors staring at me and trod softly down the stair. Patterns of light and shade speckled the steps. The wood creaked beneath my feet and I hesitated, but no one came. I was accustomed to sliding away on my own, gone like a ghost. Although I had been hedged about by servants from the earliest age, I still managed to be a solitary child.

To my left was the Great Hall with its sloping stone floor, swept clean this afternoon and smelling sweetly of rushes. Behind me the chapel door, heavy studded oak, forbidding, warning of retribution within. But ahead was the passage and, at the end of it, the door was open into the garden and I was drawn irresistibly outside.

The gardens at Wolf Hall proved a delight, a tangled land of enchantment full of overblown roses and secret paths. Beneath the trees of the orchard I could see a harassed-looking goose girl trying to round up her flock. She was flapping as much as they. Over in the stable yard, I could hear the chink of harness and the murmur of voices. The air was full of scent and heat, and I wandered at will, lost in the pleasure of it.

The garden led to the wood. There was a half-open gate covered in ivy and a path beyond. Naturally, I followed it. I say naturally because I am drawn to the forest. I don't know why; people say it is a lonely, lawless place, but to me it is a safe haven in which to hide. One path led to another and another, some overgrown tracks, other wide avenues lined

by trees that looked like the entrance to a manor far more majestic than Wolf Hall. I went where I willed, following a butterfly here or the sound of water there, running through the dappled shade, discovering new delights.

It was growing dark. I realised it suddenly, knew I had been out for a long time because I was hungry. There was a damp chill settling on my skin. The trees that had enchanted me now threw long shadows. The rustle of the leaves sounded too loud. The air felt still and watchful.

I had no notion which way was the road back.

Distantly, I heard the sound of hoof beats. My hopes lifted, for where there was a horse and rider there might well be a track leading to Wolf Hall. I scrambled through the undergrowth, pushing aside bracken and nettle and grasses, fighting my way towards the noise. With each step the night seemed to close in. The hoof beats were growing louder and, as I stumbled out of the clutch of the thicket and onto a wide avenue, they seemed to fill my head and make my entire body pulse. The earth shook. I fell, dizzy and sprawling, and lay there in terror, waiting either for the shout of fury from the rider or the crush of the horse's hooves.

Neither came.

The beat in my head eased a little and I dragged myself up onto one elbow and stared into the engulfing shade. Down the long avenue, I could see the white shadow of a horse galloping hell for leather. In the saddle swayed the figure of a woman. She looked as though she were about to fall at any moment. Her cloak billowed out behind her, a fine velvet cloak laced with silver thread, and on her head... But she wore no hat and she had no face because above the line of

her collar she had no head, nothing but white bone gleaming in the last light and deep red splashes of blood.



There was a jumble of light and voices about me. I was not lost in the forest but lying in a bed. The tip of a feather pricked my cheek and I turned my head against the pillow. There was candlelight. It was night, and I felt hot and sickly and wretched.

‘Already nothing but trouble...’ The lamentation floated far above my head. I recognised Dame Margery’s voice. ‘Only here for two minutes and already we have had to send out a search for her, and pay for a physician—’

‘Pass me the bowl and the cloth.’ Liz this time, sounding snappish. ‘You heard what he said. She has the fever.’

‘She has only herself to blame, wandering around the forest alone! She’s like her father was, reckless and foolish. She does not think about the consequences of her actions.’

‘She is a child who got lost, that is all.’ Liz was starting to sound frayed. I thought it unlikely she would defend my father, whom she had never liked. It was my mother to whom she had been devoted.

‘Babbling about phantom horses and headless women!’ Dame Margery was not so easily appeased. ‘It sounds like witchcraft to me.’

‘It’s fever, no more,’ Liz repeated. I heard the rustle of cloth as she stood. ‘I need fresh water.’

‘I’ll come with you.’ Dame Margery sounded hurried now, as though she did not wish to be left alone with me

for fear of enchantment. 'Alison can watch over her for a moment.'

I had not realised that Alison was there. I opened my eyes a crack. She saw the flicker of movement and immediately she was at my ear.

'I hope you are satisfied, your highness.' She smelled of peppermint and sweat. Her whisper was fierce. 'Thanks to you, I have to share a chamber with the babies now whilst you lord it in here alone. I wish they had not found you!' Her face hung over me like a big red angry moon.

'It's true, there are phantoms in the forest,' she said. 'I think it was the black shuck you saw, a huge dog that brings death and madness to all that see it.'

'It was a horse.' My lips were dry. I felt hot, feverish, and my head was full of the nightmare but I was still stubborn. If I were to be terrorised by a phantom at least let it be the right one.

'A horse and a dead woman?' She laughed. 'Mayhap is was Queen Anne Boleyn you saw then. If it had not been for *your* Aunt Jane she would not have lost her head. Maybe she is coming for you in revenge.'

The sound of voices and the lifting of the latch warned her. She scrambled away and when Liz and Dame Margery re-entered the room she was sitting on the window seat all prim and quiet.

'She sleeps,' she said sweetly. 'May I go now?' And with that she slipped from the room leaving me with my feverish nightmares.