LADY MARY

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BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY



Prologue

April 1525, Greenwich,

in the Queen's Bedchamber, Mary is nine …

'Press a little harder with the pen, Mary. Your letters are all faint.'

'Like a spider's footsteps.'

Mary had spoken without thinking, but the image was striking, and it made her mother laugh. The tiny feet of a spider, trailing across the paper. Yes, Mary's handwriting was difficult to read, unlike the bold, strong strokes of her mother's draft that she was copying.

'Mary! You are daydreaming again, aren't you?'

'Yes, *Mother*. Daydreaming. As always.'

'No need to be pert!'

Mary returned her attention to the task, but the spider wouldn't leave her mind. She imagined him

stopping a moment for a sit-down, crossing his many legs. It made her giggle. Laboriously, she tried to copy out the next few words.

… my heart and soul will always be yours …

Her mother was hovering anxiously, and Mary wished she would go away. Mary did not mind writing, even enjoyed it sometimes, but she hated to be watched. Yet she had to do this for Charles, the emperor, her beloved. Yes, he was her beloved. She had been told it so many times that she almost believed it. Mary stroked her gold brooch, its letters spelling out his name: THE EMPEROUR.

Mary's mother noticed what she was doing.

'Ah yes!' she said, delighted. 'You are thinking of your husband-to-be. I see it! Thoughts of love and honour fill your head, *angelito mio*. What a magnificent future you have ahead of you – an empress! Nothing could be better, nothing more splendid. Your Spanish grandmother would be proud.'

Mary was so used to her mother's rhapsodies about her imperial future that she barely listened. But while her ears might not have been working, her eyes certainly were.

'What's that, Mother?'

Mary noticed that Queen Catherine was holding something in her own fingers, turning it over and over, as if it were precious. She looked up from her examination of the tiny, glinting object, a triumphant smile on her face.

'Can you see what it is?'

Mary peered. It was a ring, clearly. But what kind?

Mary racked her brains for the colours of the precious stones that she had learned with Mr Featherstone. What colour was it? She examined it, turning it to the light.

'It's green, isn't it? Is it … an emerald?'

'Yes!' Her mother was rapturous, in a way that always slightly embarrassed Mary. It was easy to learn her lessons from Mr Featherstone. It was harder to know what to say in any given situation. She wished, often, for less fuss and to be left alone with her thoughts. Mary rolled her eyes. Green and gold, green and gold; they were her mother's favourite colours.

'It's a huge emerald, isn't it?' her mother continued. 'As green as poison. And in a magnificent

setting of gold as well. This will be your gift to your *amado*, Mary. We will send it with your letter.'

Mary slightly lost interest in the ring, if it was to pass so quickly through her possession. 'Oh Mary,' her mother sighed. 'You are not like other girls. You aren't interested in jewels, are you? Don't you want to keep it for yourself?'

'Not really,' Mary admitted. 'I would rather have a sister. Or, if I can't have a sister, then a kitten.' Mary knew that she shouldn't ask for a sister, or a baby brother. It made her mother upset. 'Yes, I'd rather have a kitten,' she said definitively.

Her ruse worked. 'Oh no, not kittens again!' The queen was exasperated. 'They have fleas, *querida*. And there is no place for them in the train of an army.'

'But Mother!' This time Mary's attention was captured to the extent that she threw down her pen. 'I am not in the train of an army. I will never be in the train of an army. I am stuck here in this royal palace, with nothing much to do, and nobody to play with, and loads of people gawping at me whenever I set foot out of our chamber.'

Catherine at once looked very grim, and crouched down by Mary's chair, looking sternly into her daughter's face.

'You,' she said savagely, holding Mary's eyes and jabbing at Mary's chest with her finger, 'are a daughter of Spain. You will not always be kept safe inside this *luxurious* palace, as you are now. You will look back on this as a time of great good fortune. The Wheel of Fortune can take you down as well as up, you know.'

'But *Mother*,' Mary said drily. She tired of this debate. She crossed her arms, sulky again. 'My father is the king of England. Who could know better than him? And he says that women don't go to war.' It really was too exhausting to have this argument over and over again.

Catherine continued exactly as if Mary had not spoken. 'The time will come for bravery,' she said, tapping a finger on the table. 'You are a daughter of Spain,' she said. 'Your grandmother Isabella was a warrior queen. Even when with child she rode to war! And daughters of Spain are always ready to fight! To fight to the death!'

Mary sighed. 'But I don't want to fight to the death,' she said under her breath. 'We're not in the country of the blood-drinkers now.'

She had heard her father refer to Spain in this manner. Although she did not know if Spaniards really did drink blood – what, out of goblets? – she thought it sounded impressively dismissive. But her mother wasn't listening.

'When you are married to Charles …'

Catherine was clicking her fingers to regain Mary's attention. It worked. Mary turned to find her mother's blue eyes blazing at her, a sharp crease between her eyebrows.

'When you are married to Charles, when you have come of age in a few years' time, you will be an empress. You will have many enemies. People will try to take your power away from you. You must always, *always* be ready to fight to the death. I give you a great gift in telling you this.'

Mary's attention wandered again, as it so often did. She tried to imagine being married to Charles. She had of course met him, four years ago, when their marriage contract had been drawn up. But it

would still be another four years until she would go to Brussels and live with him. It was hard to remember his face. It was hard to imagine being an empress, and being ready to fight to the death every single day.

'I'd rather be queen of England than an empress,' Mary said, with decision. 'Can't Charles come and live with me here?' What a lovely thought this was! 'He could live here, with me, and you, and Father!' Mary spun round to her mother, stretching out her arms in enthusiasm, the letter forgotten, enraptured with her new idea.

Catherine's fierce look dissipated in an instant, as it often did when something amused her. But then a shadow crossed her face. She turned back to Mary, revealing her profile like a hawk's, her heavy eyelids that came down half over her pupils, making her look ancient, timeless.

'Girls like you, P*rincess* Mary,' Mary's mother said, 'must always go to live abroad. Like I did, you know that! And you should be pleased to leave this miserable land of England, where they don't care for girls anyway. Just look at the way your father insists that

he still has no children. No children! Despite having you, a wondrous Spanish beauty. Although you have red-gold hair – that's not so Spanish. But of course you get that from me.'

Mary lowered her chin to her chest. Red-gold hair, *indeed*. It was more like a sort of warm light brown. And despite her mother's pride in the colour of Mary's hair, she personally thought it was the same shade as her father's. It was kind of her mother to call her a beauty, but Mary was suspicious of such terms. She had often examined her nose in the curve of the silver water jug. It flared, rather like the nose of a mule. She would turn her head from side to side, trying to make it look smaller, and indeed, at a certain point the swell of the vessel would make it disappear. All bad things could disappear, she thought, if you looked at them in the right light. But what was it that her mother was going on about now? The letter, oh, the letter. Yes, she must finish the letter to Charles.

The half-empty page looked enormous. Mary's writing had so far only filled a tiny bit at the top. She should have started lower down, so as to make

it look like a long letter with less work. She picked up her pen.

Will anything even come of it? Mary asked herself as she dipped it into the ink. Charles never wrote back. Mary sometimes suspected that her mother *went on* about things too much, and that this had the effect of boring people and turning them away. Too many letters; too many words.

She tried to imagine Charles reading the letter, trying on the ring. But what came to mind was a frowning man tossing the letter aside, as her father so often did. Secretaries picked up his discarded correspondence afterwards, from the floor, and took it away to deal with it, while he instead strode out saying that he was going hunting.

'Perhaps,' she said tentatively, 'I write too often to Charles. Perhaps it bores him to receive all these letters.'

'Mary! It is *your duty* to write often to your *amado*.'

It wasn't easy to suggest that her mother might ever be wrong.

Mary sighed. She had known, really, that she would not get off so easily. 'He needs to be reminded,'

Catherine said, as if to herself, 'of his ties to Spain. Of his ties to me, his aunt, stuck here in this damp island and married to a piece of soft curds of cheese. He needs reminding,' she said, her voice rising, 'of his own duty, which is *to marry my daughter*.'

'Soft curds?' In her mother's ravings, these were the only words that Mary picked out. 'My father is not *soft like cheese*, you know!'

'Ah, you are indignant, my spitting cat!' Catherine said, with a laugh. 'That's the spirit. I never knew such a girl for daydreaming, nor one who more admired her father. You worship him too much. You should save your worship for God!'

'Honour thy father and mother,' Mary said primly. 'Isn't that true?'

Catherine knelt again, looking closely into Mary's face. For a moment Mary feared that she'd get told off for answering back.

But not this time.

'It *is* true,' Catherine said gently. 'But *especially* honour your mother, and honour God. That is the Spanish way. There are many spies and liars in the world, but you must always, always trust me.

Now, to work. Finish writing out that letter and then we can play.'

I *would prefer to make up my own letter rather than copy yours*, Mary thought to herself rebelliously as she pulled the draft closer to see it better. A*nd my father is not* soft like cheese *at all.* H*e says that girls can't be king.* A*nd because he's the king, and knows everything in the world, he can't be wrong.*

PART ONE

AT COURT





Chapter 1

April 1527, Greenwich

Mary is eleven …

'And where …'

The great bellowing roar came from the courtyard outside the window. Mary looked up, delighted.

'And where is the high …'

The deep, booming voice was louder now, coming closer, climbing the stairs. Mary had been stuck in a velvet chair for hours, with her mother's ladies fussing all around her, doing her hair and fastening heavy necklaces around her throat until her head almost ached with the strain of remaining upright. She felt the gold links move and clank a little as she stretched her neck round to look between the ladies towards the door.

'And where is the high, mighty and powerful princess …'

Mary was now giggling, and wiggling out of her chair, and darting between the ladies-in-waiting. It was two years later. Mary knew that she was too grown up, now, for playing the old games with her father. But somehow, she could not stop. Behind her, she sensed her mother's body give a slight resigned droop, and her unwilling smile.

'The PRINCESS MARY?'

With that, Mary's father was in the queen's bedchamber, and picking Mary up under the armpits, and spinning her round and round in the air. She shrieked with excitement.

'Oof!'

Unceremoniously, her father dumped her to the floor. The ladies-in-waiting did their usual trick of disappearing, slipping away silently with serene smiles. As they left, they revealed Mary's mother standing by the dressing table.

'Yes,' said Catherine drily. 'She is not so light now that she is eleven!'

'Eleven, nearly a lady! And nearly ready to be

married! Now, let me see you.'

Mary's father had been staggering about, pretending that she had broken his back, while she smirked and giggled. But now he drew himself up and settled his fur-trimmed robe back on his shoulders.

'Come on, stand up straight!' Mary's father said, scanning her up and down with his blue eyes. 'Let us see this princess of ours! The ambassadors are here from your suitor, and they want to inspect you. They'll report back to him, you know.'

'Oh, I think that our daughter will make you proud,' said Catherine lightly. She stepped forward and placed her hands on Mary's shoulders. 'Stand straight, *angelito mio*,' she whispered in Mary's ear.

Mary slowly twirled for her father in her velvet dress and necklaces, slightly resisting the pressure of her mother's hands.

'Have we not done well, my love?'

Queen Catherine showed off two hours' handiwork in Mary's carefully selected velvet gown. She and her ladies had sewn Mary into it, stitching pearls along her neckline and braiding her hair into a crown. Although she was eleven, Mary was too young, still,

to hide her hair under a pointed hat like her mother's. She sometimes longed to feel the weight of such a headdress. Then she would be grown up, and probably married. People would take her seriously, not just tell her how clever she was, then move the conversation on to other things.

'Where are her fur-trimmed sleeves?'

He was asking suspiciously.

Catherine pantomimed surprise.

'I thought she was to play the virginals,' she said.

'Catherine, don't start again. This is all agreed. Yes, my daughter is certainly to play the virginals.'

Mary twitched at the sudden chill in the atmosphere. She knew that it had been long ago confirmed that she would perform for the ambassadors on the virginals, despite her mother's reluctance to have her do so.

'It *is* agreed, my liege,' Catherine said, smooth as silk. She was using a voice that Mary thought of as treacherous. She would say the nicest things in this voice, but she didn't mean them. 'Oh yes, it *is* agreed that Princess Mary will play the virginals. And for that she cannot wear her heavy sleeves. That's why she is not wearing them, obviously.

They're quite safe, here in the box.' She nodded to a heavy leather trunk, brought up that morning from the royal wardrobe department in London, and raided by the ladies for Mary's costume.

Catherine's father nodded, appeased.

'All right, no sleeves,' he said. 'I'll give you credit, Catherine – you might not want this match for our daughter, but you have made her look as fine as any princess in Europe.'

Mary was not feeling particularly fine. In fact, she was beginning to feel more than a little foolish under her heavy clothes and her parents' scrutiny. Her scalp was starting to complain where her hair had been plaited a bit too tight. But then, her father's approval was important. He so rarely came up to see them in their chamber. It was worth going through all this to make him proud.

'Up, stand up straight!' he said tetchily. 'And what's this? Oh, but this is a nice touch.'

Mary pressed out her chest, where she was wearing a golden brooch.

'THE DUKE, it says,' she told him proudly. 'My one true love.'

For a second she felt her parents' eyes meeting over her head, and something powerful being exchanged. She felt cross. It was always like this. She was called the first princess of Europe, and then the next second she was utterly ignored. Much better to be an animal, she decided. Life as a princess was rather like being a piece of fine furniture, to be admired, cooed over, then swiftly forgotten.

'Yes,' said Catherine. 'Mary's heart is committed to this French duke now. The brooch makes it plain who owns her: the French people. I had hoped that she would marry my nephew, the emperor. I admit it. I had hoped that she would not be called upon to play the virginals once more, to yet another set of ambassadors, like a common wench on display, to be sold to the highest bidder. I had hoped to avoid that for *our daughter, the princess*. But I have embraced it in good faith.'

Mary's fingers felt the outline of her brooch once more. THE DUKE, it read, in golden letters, meaning the younger son of the king of France. She didn't mind, really, that her betrothed was no longer Charles, the emperor, but Henri, the Duke

d'Orléans. And THE DUKE was no easier to imagine than THE EMPEROUR, although her mother was much less keen on him.

Henry smiled. 'I understand your dislike of the French,' he said. 'No one can fault you, Catherine, on your constancy. Nor your devotion to that fierce old-fashioned God of yours. But today let's be merry. Have we not got a fine girl? The ambassadors will love her. And how your fingers twinkle on those keys, hey, Mary? You get your musical skills from your father.'

He was taking her hand again, and now spinning her round into a dance, drawing Catherine reluctantly into the movement. '*C'est bonjour, monsieur*,' he sang, to a silly tune of his own devising, 'this prince, this *duc d'Orléans*, he will be your husband, Mary! And maybe one day you'll be queen of France, which is second only to being queen of England.'

At that, he bowed down with a sweeping gesture towards his wife. Of course, Mary's mother really was queen of England. Despite her constant talk of Spain, which made Mary forget it from time to time.

Catherine extricated herself with dignity, but her husband's buffoonery caused an unwilling smile to creep across her face. As Mary continued to join her father in his ridiculous capering, she craned her neck to watch her mother, anxious to see her happy. Mary could see that the crease between Catherine's eyes had not disappeared. But she did manage to give Mary a tight little grin.

Soothed, Mary stopped dancing, and placed her hand formally in her father's.

'I'm ready,' she said. 'Take me to my *amado*.'

'Your *bien-aimé*,' her father corrected her.

They both sensed Catherine's small angry gesture behind them at his use of French rather than Spanish. The king stopped suddenly in the doorway, forcing Mary to stop too.

'You are not a princess of Spain now, C*atherine*,' he said sternly. 'It's no part of your duty to hate the French as the Spanish do. You are a queen of England, and my wife, and I say it is your duty to love the French. And I hope you will come down to the party tonight, to see our daughter dance with the French ambassador. I don't want any talk of

your being ill, and I don't want you skulking away and eating your dinner up here in your room.'

'Oh, I'll be there,' said Catherine coldly. 'But it's been three suitors for our daughter now, and she's only eleven. First the dauphin; then the emperor; now this Duke of Orléans. To whom will you marry our daughter off next? You are fickle, my love, fickle like the wind.'

Mary knew that her father had a burning desire to answer. He expressed it through the savage squeeze he gave to her hand. She knew that he was struggling with himself, for one second, for two. But he did manage to remain silent. He pulled Mary with him through the door.

'Spaniards!' he muttered as they went down the stairs. 'Blood-drinkers! What a bloody stubborn race they are.'