

# **FACE DOWN BELOW THE BANQUETING HOUSE**

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## CHAPTER ONE

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The royal standard flew over Greenwich. Jennet Jaffrey's heart fluttered in unison with Elizabeth Tudor's ensign as the wherry that Jennet's sister-in-law had hired carried them past the queen's favorite residence. Behind them, boats and ships of all sizes passed by, some on their way to nearby dockyards, others bound for London or headed out to sea.

Jennet had no interest in the colorful water pageant of barges, tilt boats, and merchant vessels. Mouth dry, she could not tear her eyes away from the sprawl of high brick walls and gilded turrets that made up the rambling palace.

"You act as if you've never seen Greenwich before," Sarah chided her.

"Only from the land side." The road from Rochester to Deptford ran between a two-hundred-acre deer park and the sixteen acres that comprised Greenwich, but that view lacked the impact of the water approach. The royal gardens, a tiltyard, the tennis court, bowling alley, cockpit, banqueting house, and stables stood between the road and the palace itself.

The river façade of Greenwich dazzled the eye. The wooded hill behind, lush with the pale green of spring, joined a cloudless blue sky to form a perfect background for bricks painted bright red and decorated with black. Each mortar joint had been picked out in a white so brilliant it reflected the sun. Every battlement was surmounted by an elaborate carved beast. Some held flagpoles, others glittering golden vanes.

But splendid as the exterior appeared to Jennet, what awaited her within was more wonderful still. This very day, she would see the queen. Jennet Jaffrey, a simple goodwife from Kent, would be among the spectators in the great hall when Her Majesty performed the annual Maundy Thursday ritual.

The waterman turned his small craft toward shore, pulling with steady rhythm on the oars until the wherry bumped against a nondescript pier some four hundred paces east of the elaborate water gate by which more prestigious guests entered the palace. On the few rare occasions when they had leave from their duties, lower servants attached to the court used this side entrance to reach the Thames.

"Hurry, Jennet." Sarah tugged on her arm.

Like Jennet's husband, Mark, Sarah had fair skin, pale blue eyes, and light brown hair. She was more delicate than her brother, but she shared with him one characteristic that plagued many of their kin: oversized ears. The close-fitted, trellis-work cap she wore as part of her livery did a good job of hiding this defect, but also leached away what little color she had in her face.

"If Mistress Jeronyma notices how long I've been gone," Sarah said, "she will be wroth with me."

"She cannot begrudge you time to feed." As if to emphasize the argument, Jennet's stomach growled. She'd had only bread and ale to break her fast and now it was well past the hour at which she was accustomed to eat dinner.

"You do not know her." Sarah clambered out of the wherry and ascended wooden steps set into the embankment with more speed than grace. When Jennet stood beside her, she pulled impatiently at her sleeve.

Jennet had no wish to cause trouble for Mark's sister, but having been a tiring maid at one time herself, she did not understand why Sarah looked so worried. Once she had arranged Jeronyma Holme's hair and helped her dress, Sarah's remaining duties—empty the chamber pot, mend any damaged clothing, and run errands—should all have been chores that could be carried out at any point during the day.

"Does some fiend pursue us that I must be dragged along at such an undignified pace?" Jennet was hard put to keep up with her husband's youngest sister as they negotiated the narrow path from riverbank to palace.

"I did not think it would take so long to fetch you." Far from slowing her steps, Sarah walked faster.

"I could scarce come with you until Lady Appleton set out for Westcombe Manor."

Lady Appleton intended to pass the afternoon poring over old books and manuscripts with a man whose greatest ambition was to produce an alphabetical description of places in England and Wales. Jennet had been glad of the excuse to escape such tedium. She would have accepted Sarah's invitation to visit her at Greenwich Palace even if it had not included the chance to come within hailing distance of royalty.

As she puffed and panted, Jennet reminded herself that Sarah knew best how her mistress would react, just as Jennet knew that Lady Appleton regarded Jennet, who was, strictly speaking, only her housekeeper, as a friend and favored traveling companion, entitled to her own pleasures. It had been Jennet's sense of responsibility that had kept her in attendance on the widowed gentlewoman all morning, not the exacting demands of a mistress.

If Sarah had other matters to attend to before she could take Jennet to see the queen, so be it.

All the Jaffreys were proud of Sarah's advancement. Ten years ago, as a girl of fifteen, she had entered service at Leigh Abbey, where Jennet was housekeeper and Mark the steward. Sarah had, from time to time, taken charge of Jennet's children, but in the main she had been given extensive training as a tiring maid. Once she'd mastered the necessary skills, she had found employment with Mistress Jeronyma Holme, the only daughter of one of Lady Appleton's neighbors, and when Mistress Jeronyma had been summoned to court to be a waiting gentlewoman to Lady Cobham, the queen's mistress of robes, Sarah had accompanied her.

A royal guard, instantly recognizable by his long crimson tunic, braided in black and emblazoned with the Tudor rose, challenged the two women the moment they reached the servants' entrance. Then he recognized Sarah. She smiled at him with such warmth that he colored all the way to his flat, plumed bonnet and admitted them without further question.

From the small outer courtyard just inside the gate, they passed through back service ways until they emerged into an inner courtyard. Sarah would have rushed across without stopping had Jennet not dug in her heels. "Let me catch my breath," she begged.

Reluctantly, Sarah stopped.

"And you did promise me a bit of food," Jennet reminded her.

"Mistress Jeronyma—"

"How can Mistress Jeronyma need you when she has duties of her own? Why, the queen herself must be dining by now, with all her ladies in attendance and all their ladies attending on them."

"Mistress Jeronyma does not wait on the queen direct. And those of little importance do not dine in Her Majesty's company."

"And you?"

"Domestic servants sleep with their workmates. We eat in those rooms as well."

"Then let us go to your room."

"We have already missed dinner, and there would not have been enough food for you in any case."

Jennet tried to hide her disappointment, but her unruly stomach defeated her by growling again.

Sarah sighed. "We can go to the kitchens to beg a few crumbs from a friend of mine there, but only if you promise not to dawdle. I have been too long away from my mistress as it is."

"Agreed." But a moment later, an odd sight distracted her. She sidled closer, scarce able to believe her eyes.

"Come away, Jennet." Although Sarah sounded exasperated, Jennet heard an undercurrent of mirth. "That is one of the pissing places."

"So the smell tells me." A row of lead-lined urine pots decorated the courtyard wall.

"A necessary nuisance," Sarah said, straight-faced. "Otherwise gentlemen would relieve themselves in any convenient corner. In King Henry's time, red crosses were painted on some walls to deter courtiers from pissing against them. 'Twas thought, wrongly, that they'd not dare profane a religious symbol."

Stifling a chuckle, Jennet allowed herself to be guided toward yet another small, inconspicuous door. "Never tell me there are no garderobes or privies!"

"Most of the principal lodgings have a separate room called the stool house because a close stool is housed there, and there is a large common privy." A grin blossomed. "The one here at Greenwich is not as big as that at Hampton Court—it seats but twenty-eight at one time."

"Paltry," Jennet declared, "and no challenge to Whittington's Longhouse in London." Built with funds left to the city by a former lord mayor, it boasted seats for sixty-four.

Shared amusement served to ease Sarah's worries. Although they continued to move swiftly through a maze of corridors and rooms, Jennet no longer sensed so much urgency.

They emerged from a service wing into a great vaulted kitchen. Awed, Jennet tilted her head back until she could see to the very top of the high ceiling. This proved a great mistake, since Sarah continued on, towing Jennet after her. Jennet stumbled over her own feet and pitched forward into her sister-in-law, causing Sarah to let out a startled squeak when she was rammed from behind.

Jennet managed to right them both before they toppled to the stone-flagged floor, but it was a near thing and the clamor attracted unwanted attention. Jennet glared at an impertinent scullion for staring at them. Twitching her skirt straight, she thrust out her

chin, as she had often seen Lady Appleton do, daring anyone else to object to her presence.

Sarah turned a brilliant shade of pink. Jennet thought she knew why when she took a good look at the sergeant cook bearing down on them. He was a most handsome fellow, tall and thin with blue-black hair and a blade of a nose. His broad shoulders were tensed in the manner of a man going into battle and his face wore a ferocious scowl . . . until he recognized Sarah. In an instant the severe expression melted into a benign, almost doting smile. The color in Sarah's cheeks deepened at the transformation.

"Back to work," he barked at his minions, and followed suit himself, but not before he sent a conspiratorial wink in Sarah's direction.

"A guard. Now a cook," Jennet murmured. Either would make a suitable husband for a tiring maid.

"Six hundred people feed at Greenwich daily," Sarah said in a blatant attempt to divert her sister-in-law's attention.

Jennet resisted the urge to pepper the young woman with questions. She'd have time later, in private, to discover how many suitors Sarah had collected since she'd been at court. Instead she allowed herself to be led on a whirlwind tour of the service rooms.

"Kitchens, scullery, bakehouse, larder, pastry, pantry, poultry, and acatary—for meat and fish—each is staffed with a dozen men in the charge of a sergeant."

"I never imagined so much space could be devoted to naught but the preparation of meals."

"Close to two hundred people work in the kitchens. The officers live next door to or above the area where they work."

"And your friend?"

"He is the sergeant for the queen's mouth, the sergeant cook who sees to the food for the queen's own platter."

"A most distinguished position."

"Across that kitchen courtyard are the spicery, saucery, confectionery, and wafery—an office that makes only wafers."

For the moment, Jennet stopped teasing and paid attention to what she was seeing. Hard by the food stores, including a separate fish larder, were the buttery, a pitcher-house, and the entrance to several enormous cellars for storing barrels of wine. At a greater distance, Sarah pointed out the royal laundry, the chandlery, the brew-house where ale was made for the domestic staff, and an avenery, for storing fodder for the horses. As they went, she also appropriated bread and cheese and a pitcher of ale, and with them in hand led Jennet up a narrow flight of stairs and into a small room furnished with a bed, a table, two stools, and a storage chest.

Jennet wondered if this was the lodging assigned to a certain sergeant cook, but Sarah allowed her no time to inquire. She pointed out the tiny window.

"From here you can see the slaughtering and scalding houses."

Jennet peered through the panes. "They are passing inconvenient to the main buildings."

"It distresses some courtiers to listen to their dinner squawk or bellow as it is killed."

"Pampered popinjays." Country-bred, Jennet had little patience with squeamish attitudes.

"Distance also reduces the smell of wet feathers."

That excuse sat better. Few things stank worse than a freshly killed chicken dipped in boiling water to facilitate plucking.

Munching on the softest manchet bread she'd ever tasted, Jennet plopped down on one of the stools, stretched her legs out in front of her, and wiggled her toes inside her sturdy leather shoes. She felt as if she had walked miles, all of them inside the palace.

"Your sergeant cook—does he have a name?"

"Cormac."

"An Irishman?" The Irish were a troublesome race and not much trusted in England. Jennet was surprised to hear of one holding a post so close to the queen. Why, he was in an ideal position to poison Her Majesty, if he had a mind to.

"His mother was Irish born and named him for her father, but he is as English as you or I."

Jennet took note of the way Sarah leapt to his defense. "And your guard? Who is he?"

Before Sarah could answer, rapid footfalls sounded from the other side of the door. A moment later, Mistress Jeronyma Holme burst upon them in a flurry of brown velvet skirts and a flood of words.

"Here you are, then, just as I supposed you would be! Such a to-do today! I vow I am quite light-headed from all this rushing about. Where is my black hat with the high crown? The one with two black ostrich feathers set with gold crowsfeet covering the crown at one side."

The gentlewoman was no more than twenty. Shorter than Sarah but taller than Jennet, she had plump cheeks, hair the color of ripe wheat, and green eyes flecked with amber. Jennet saw no trace of anger in them, and no reprimand to Sarah for shirking her duties was forthcoming. Rather, Mistress Jeronyma's small mouth settled into a pretty pout as she waited for an answer.

Using swift, efficient movements, Sarah made minor adjustments to her mistress's attire. The brown velvet bodice had ridden up at the waist, twisting a black leather girdle askew and exposing the points that tied bodice and skirt together. "You have no need of that hat until Lady Cobham leaves the palace." On the morrow, Sarah and her mistress and her mistress's mistress journeyed to Cobham Hall for a few days' visit.

With a practiced, professional eye, Sarah surveyed the partlet and sleeves of light brown silk, searching for wrinkles. Jennet's gaze followed the same path, sweeping over the braided shoulder pieces and the trellis-work of narrow brown velvet strips that covered the sleeves, then shifting to a skirt, also braided, that opened over a black satin underskirt decorated with black velvet bows and tiny roses. To complete the ensemble, Jeronyma Holme wore a necklace of jet beads. From her girdle, which was decorated with cut steel, she'd hung a small mirror and a black velvet pouch.

In shocked disbelief, Jennet saw Sarah slip one hand inside the pouch.

If her mistress noticed she'd been robbed, she gave no sign. "You are a great comfort to me, Sarah," Mistress Jeronyma said. Bestowing an affectionate pat on her tiring maid's cheek, she left without a backward glance.

"What did you take?" Jennet demanded.

Sarah opened her fingers to reveal an ornate circle banded with mother-of-pearl and rubies.

"You stole your mistress's ring?" The bread Jennet had eaten turned to a rock in her belly.

Sarah sighed. "No. She stole it." She rolled the elaborate piece of jewelry over on her palm until they could both see the raised portion—diamonds arranged in the shape of a tiny letter *E* and beneath, in blue enamel, an even smaller *R*.

"Elizabeth Regina. Elizabeth the queen."

"Just so." There was a note that blended horror and awe in Sarah's voice. "She's never dared take something from the queen before."

Unable to help herself, Jennet reached for the glittering object. It had been designed to open. Within, she discovered two little enameled busts. One, wearing a tiny ruby brooch, was clearly meant to represent the queen. Jennet had seen other likenesses of Her Majesty, both on coins and in portraits. The second woman's visage was unfamiliar to her but she wore a diamond speck. Someone important, then.

Sarah peered over Jennet's shoulder at the minuscule portrait. "That is the queen's mother," she whispered.

Queen Anne Boleyn. Jennet knew the story. Queen Anne had been beheaded for adultery when her daughter was a child of three. No doubt Her Majesty had many jewels, but this image-in-small, representing a mother she could scarce remember, was certain to have a great deal of sentimental value.

Jennet swallowed hard. "Why did Mistress Jeronyma steal the ring? How did you know she had? What—?"

Hands covering her face, shoulders slumped, Sarah sank down on one of the stools and rested her elbows on the table. "I do not know why she does it, but she takes things all the time." Weariness and defeat laced Sarah's voice. "It is left to me to return them before anyone discovers they are missing. In the ordinary way of things, it is not a difficult task. People are fond of Mistress Jeronyma and have no desire to cause her trouble. But how am I to get into the royal apartments?"

Jennet crossed to her sister-in-law's side and placed one comforting hand on her shoulder. "The same way you get into other lodgings here at court. The guards are accustomed to seeing you, are they not? Besides, we both know servants tend to be invisible."

"The queen's personal guards are most vigilant." Sarah lifted her head and met Jennet's gaze with sorrowful eyes. "I do much doubt I can get past the presence chamber, where audiences are held."

"There must be another way."

Sarah rubbed the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes in apparent defeat, but after a moment she rallied. "The queen's chief gentlewoman and keeper of the queen's jewels is a woman named Blanche Parry. She is getting on in years. It is possible she will retire to her own lodgings rather than attend the ceremony in the great hall."

"Do you mean to confess all to her?"

"I see no other way out of this dilemma. The queen is sure to miss this ring. Will you help me, Jennet? There is no risk to you." She managed a weak smile. "All you need do is wait outside Mistress Parry's lodgings and prevent anyone coming close enough to overhear what is said within."