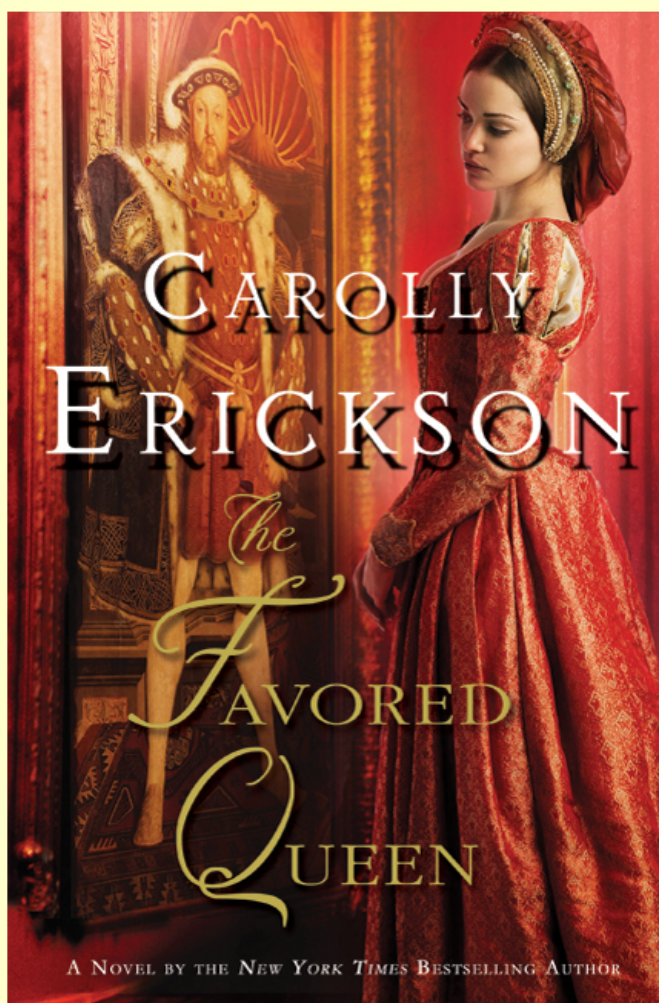


READ IT FIRST



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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ONE

HAS she lost her baby?"

My question hung in the air, unanswered.

The three Spanish midwives, brought from Legrognio especially to attend Queen Catherine at this, her tenth delivery, did not meet my steady gaze but looked down at the thick carpet at their feet. The queen's closest friend and principal lady in waiting, Maria de Salinas, her expression somber and her shoulders rounded in defeat, stood loyally beside her mistress's bed but said nothing. The surgeons who had been summoned by King Henry to attend the queen were nowhere to be seen.

Queen Catherine lay asleep in her high carved wooden bed, mouth agape, her sparse greying auburn hair spread out over her lace-trimmed pillow, the pillow sweat-stained and rumpled as were the bedclothes. Her face was haggard, weary. As those of us who served her knew well, she had been struggling to give birth ever since the previous evening, and it was clear to me now, as I looked down at her, that the effort had taken all her

strength. She looked like a woman nearer in age to sixty than forty, though her fortieth birthday had been celebrated by her entire household not long before.

As I watched, she began to murmur in her sleep, as if troubled by disturbing dreams. Her small white wrinkled hands, the fingers bent and swollen, clutched convulsively at the satin counterpane.

I glanced around the darkened bedchamber, taking in the closely drawn thick curtains of purple damask, the heavy, old-fashioned furnishings the queen had brought from Spain many years earlier when she came to the English court as a bride, the religious pictures and crucifixes on the paneled walls, the elaborately embroidered prie-dieu, embroidered by the queen herself, where I had so often seen her kneeling in prayer, the implements of torture (as I thought of them) used by the midwives and laid out on a table beside the bed. Knives, probes, metal clamps and pincers. Bowls and towels, powders and flasks full of medicines. Cruel tongs used, I knew, to reach in and grasp a resistant infant trapped inside a diseased womb. I shuddered at the sight of them, and looked away.

Another sight also made me shudder. A plain wooden chest stood against one wall of the room, its lid not quite closed. Protruding from one corner was a bloody cloth. A sheet, I thought. Hearing me approach, the midwives must have tucked the bloodstained sheets hastily into the chest, and left one corner out.

The pungent odor of lavender filled the room. Lavender, given to women after childbirth to induce a restful calm and sleep. And there was another odor as well. The sharp, unpleasant odor of opium. I had smelled it often, for my father's physician prescribed it for him to ease the pains of his gout.

So the queen had been given opium to assuage her labor and

to induce the sweat trance believed to lessen the fever that carried off so many women after giving birth. Opium, that helped the mother but often (so I had heard it said) cost the child's life.

I was still waiting for an answer to my question. There had been a delivery, of that I was certain. But what of the child? We had not heard the cry of the newborn, the joyous shouts of welcome and triumph from the midwives and physicians when the newborn was a boy.

All was quiet in the room, except for the sound of the queen's ragged breathing. Then I heard a stifled sob. One of the midwives had tears rolling down her olive-tinted cheeks.

"Will no one tell me plainly?" I demanded. "Has she lost her baby?"

After a pause, Maria de Salinas looked at me and gave the slightest nod.

"He lived for an hour," she said. "Only an hour. He was baptized." At these words Maria and the other women crossed themselves. "We prayed," Maria went on. "But it was the Lord's will to take him."

My heart sank. Once more, I thought. Once more, to hope month after long month for a living child, and then to be so cruelly disappointed. I could only imagine the queen's deep sorrow and dismay.

"Has the king been informed?"

"No, Mistress Seymour," Maria answered in her heavily accented English. "It was the queen's wish that he not be informed for a little while yet."

But I had my orders. King Henry had insisted before leaving for the hunt that should the queen's child be born while he was away, a messenger would be sent to him at once. It was my responsibility to follow the royal order.

I left the bedchamber and sought out Queen Catherine's gentleman usher Griffith Richards, giving him the sad news and instructing him to send word to the king.

"I will go myself, Mistress Seymour," he said. "I know where the huntsmen are today."

"Ride slowly then," I said softly. "The queen is in no hurry to let her husband know what has happened."

He sighed and nodded. "Yet again," he said. "Yet again." He turned and left the room, and I noticed that he did not make haste.

Several hours later Maria de Salinas came to me.

"Mistress Seymour, Her Highness is asking for you."

I followed her at once into the royal bedchamber where Queen Catherine, out of bed and dressed in a becoming, loose-fitting gown of fine magenta wool trimmed in miniver, was seated before her pier glass.

"Ah, Jane," she said as I entered, "gentle, kind Jane. Soothe me. Brush out my hair."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

I took the soft brush from the dressing table and began to gently run it through the thin strands. I saw the queen's eyes close in pleasure as I did so.

"I must not let the king see me in my tired state. I must try to be pleasant to look at when he comes, when I greet him. After all, he will be tired from his hunt, and in need of refreshment and rest. He will not be in a mood to hear bad news about our child."

"May the Lord bless the little one and take him to His bosom," I said.

"Amen," was the queen's soft reply. Her thin lips were curved into a wan smile.

"Another small shrine to be added," she remarked, indicating a cabinet above the prie-dieu where were kept eight miniature portraits, one for each of the children she had lost. Above each portrait was a silver crucifix, below each a tablet with the name of the baby. "We had planned to name this one Edward—or Isabel, had she been a girl. After my sainted mother."

Her voice, normally low and pleasant, trembled slightly and she was speaking so softly that it was hard for me to hear her. I felt as though I were listening to someone in a trance. I thought of the opium, the sweat trance . . . was the queen still under the influence of the strong medicine? She did not seem like herself. Though she often honored me with her confidences, the way she was talking to me now was more open and free than in the past. Almost as if I were her confessor, Fray Diego, and not her maid of honor, Jane Seymour.

She went on talking, as I brushed the long thin strands of hair and gathered them into my hand. I could not help but notice that the brush was filling with hair; there were thin patches where the queen's scalp all but shone through. What did it mean, that her hair was falling out?

I looked into the pier glass and saw a slight frown pass across her features. "I was so certain that this time . . . this time . . . the Lord would give me a strong boy. I made a pilgrimage to Our Lady at her shrine at Walsingham. Afterwards I felt so certain that she would grant my wish."

I knew well that the queen had made a pilgrimage to the shrine, for I had gone with her. Had she forgotten? Had the opium made her forgetful?

"Perhaps she will, Your Majesty. Next time," I said.

She shook her head. "No. I cannot go through such a terrible labor again. No, this was the last time." She made a small sound. I realized that she was laughing quietly to herself.

“My old duenna, Dona Elvira, used to tell me when I was a little girl that I never knew when to give up. I kept on doing the same thing over and over, she said, even though I never got the result I wanted. I guess she was right.”

“Your Majesty has been granted a beautiful, intelligent daughter, Princess Mary. Your jewel and delight, as you always say.”

“Yes. But she is not a prince. And England needs a prince.”

I had nothing to say to that, so was silent. Everyone knew the situation, the problem—many called it a crisis—over the succession. King Henry needed a son to inherit his throne. But he had only a daughter, only Princess Mary, who had been given the title Princess of Wales, the title traditionally given to the officially designated heir, but who could not be expected to reign. No woman could govern the unruly English, that was evident to all. The chronicles told of a queen in the distant past, Queen Maud, who attempted to rule but was overthrown. No woman had tried since. Better the throne should pass to the king’s natural son, the boy known as Henry Fitzroy. But should he be the one to inherit, there would be challenges to his rulership. There would be chaos, possibly civil war, as in the time of King Henry’s grandfather.

So the king’s loyal subjects prayed that the queen, despite her many failures in the past, would at last give birth to a healthy boy. But those prayers—including my own—had gone unanswered.

Presently I said, “Shall I bind Your Majesty’s hair?”

“Yes, Jane. And put on my hood, the cheerful rose-colored one with the pearls.”

“That one is very becoming.”

“It brings a little color to these pale cheeks. Henry complains that I am too sallow. And then, Jane, it will be time to bring in

the other ladies and the maids of honor. I must tell them my news myself."

I did my best to complete the queen's coiffure—normally the task of her hairdressers—and to put her hood in place. Together we regarded her image in the pier glass. She smiled. She had come out of her trance. Once again she was the serene, gracious royal wife, head of her extensive household. The signs of her recent ordeal were there to be seen, in her drawn features and the dark circles under her eyes, but her manner was more confident.

"Please tell Maria that I am ready. And send Fray Diego to me, to hear my confession."

Her confession, I thought. What had she to confess? Surely bearing another stillborn child after undergoing many hours of heroic labor was no sin? Or did she imagine that the death of her child was a divine punishment?

I went out through the antechamber and into the room where the ladies in waiting and maids of honor were assembled.

"She is ready," I told Maria de Salinas. "She asks for Fray Diego, to make her confession, and then she will speak to us all."

I remember so well what happened later that afternoon. We had all taken our places in a reverent circle around the queen's chair, where she sat in benevolent calm. There were her Spanish ladies, Maria de Salinas, Ines de Venegas, Francesca de Lima and others whose names I barely knew, not having occasion to speak with them or perform tasks alongside them. And there were the chief officers of her household, and her chaplains and confessor. And then there were the women I knew best, the ladies in waiting and, especially, the other maids of honor.

There were nine of us, as I remember, and we were a widely

varied lot. First came Anne Cavecant, Lord Cavecant's daughter and the oldest among us, ashamed of her looks (she was rather homely, with a long sharp nose and pockmarked skin and a shy, almost furtive expression) and even more ashamed that, at twenty-seven, she was still without a husband. It was said that she had once been chosen by an elderly knight to become his fourth wife, but he had died before the wedding ceremony could take place. Since then she had waited in vain for another man to choose her.

Lavinia Terling was sly and pretty with hair that fell in long blond waves and innocent-looking blue eyes, a well-behaved girl but with only one thought in her head: how soon would she marry, and how rich and highborn would her husband be? The Belgian among us, Jane Popyngcort, insisted upon dressing in the foreign style rather than wearing English gowns and hoods. She was said to have been King Henry's mistress when both were young, and this gave her a certain air of mystery. ("Though she didn't last," the other maids said behind Jane's back. "She couldn't have mattered very much to him.")

Of the remaining maids, the ones who stood out most were Bridget Wiltshire, small and feral and as lean as a greyhound, and with a sharp tongue and a quick wit, who had just become engaged to Lord Wingfield, and her close friend Anne Boleyn, the temperamental dark-haired, dark-eyed sister of the king's mistress Mary Boleyn Carey whose name we were not allowed to mention in the queen's presence. Anne, so it was said, was well beyond the age when a gentleman's daughter (and the niece of the powerful Duke of Norfolk) ought to be married, and although she had had at least three chances for a match, none of them had resulted in a betrothal.

I was the youngest of the maids of honor, but—I am not being immodest, merely telling the truth—I believe that, among

the English women in Queen Catherine's household, I was the most favored by her. She liked having me near her, especially when upsetting events were challenging her usual calm and self-possession. There were many such challenges in those years, when I first came to court. Naturally her Spanish ladies resented the favoritism she showed me, believing that since they shared her native speech and customs, they should be the ones to be kept nearest her person. I was well aware of this resentment and did what I could to lower it. But I knew that Maria de Salinas and the others regarded me as a presumptuous intruder in their midst, and imagined that I had risen to favor with the queen through trickery or by slandering them, whereas in fact I had merely been myself.

The queen was preparing to speak. There was quiet in the room; even Bridget and Anne, whose giggles and titters were forever interrupting solemn occasions, were silent for the moment.

All eyes were on Catherine. Then, with a sweet and gracious smile, she addressed us.

"By now you all know that the Lord has not seen fit to bless this kingdom with a male heir to the throne. My son, Edward, did not live to take his first breath."

Polite murmurs of consolation greeted these words. The queen acknowledged them with a small nod, then went on.

"Our prayers are not always answered as we would wish, as Fray Diego reminds me. The Lord's purposes are not ours. But then, it is not our bodies, or their fruits, that matter, it is our eternal souls. As we read in the gospel, they should not be feared which have the power of the body, but Him only, that hath power over the soul.

"I have been shriven," the queen went on, "and will be churchd in due course. Until then I will keep my chamber, and will expect you all to say little of what has passed here in recent

days. If you should be asked, 'What news of the queen?' you ought simply to say, 'The Lord's will has been done.'"

Maria de Salinas stepped forward to indicate that all present should take their leave, and we did so, each of us passing in front of Her Highness and bowing. "I am grateful for your loyal service," she said to each of us, or "Thank you for your continual prayers."

We had not gone far in this small ceremony when we heard heavy footfalls outside the queen's apartments. Boots thundered along the corridor outside, and almost before we could react, or even draw back in alarm, the heavy double doors burst open with a loud crack of splintering wood and King Henry came into the room. I almost wrote that he exploded into the room, such was the force of his vital presence. His angry presence.

He wore his green hunting jerkin and a cap with a feather such as huntsmen wear. Leaves and twigs stuck to his jerkin and were caught in his long blond hair. He has ridden here in great haste, I thought. He has not taken the time to make himself presentable. His muddy boots left ugly dark tracks on the immaculate carpet, and the long knife that hung from his belt, its blade glinting in the firelit room, was still red with the gore of his kills.

He strode up to the seated Catherine.

"Why was this news kept from me, madam?" he barked. "Why was I not told at once?" His rich, resonant voice filled the room. We all stood still, in awe of his royal anger, of the sheer force of his presence. Would he blame us for withholding word of the stillborn prince? I felt myself shrink, as if, by making myself smaller, I could avoid his wrath.

He glared down at Catherine, who looked up at him with her usual mildness.



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