

THE KING'S DAUGHTER

By Barbara Kyle

Chapter 1: "The Vow"

New Year's Eve 1553

Snow crunched under the feet of three cloaked figures – a queen, her lady, and a gravedigger – as they hurried along a moonlit path in Windsor Castle's lower ward. The gravedigger pushed a cart that held a slab of marble, his pick and shovel, and some straw. When the trio reached the steps of St. George's Chapel, Queen Mary stopped. She turned her head, pushing aside the fur of her hood, and a gust of wind needled her with crystallized snow. She looked back at her attendants. Was she wrong to trust them with this night's work?

The gravedigger lowered his eyes in deference and nervously tightened his grip on the cart's handles. Queen Mary had sworn him to secrecy. He shivered stoically and waited. The tall lady beside him stood pale-faced under the torch she held. She, too, looked anxious. But she did not turn away from the Queen's scrutiny. Mary smiled. No oath of secrecy had been necessary with Frances. Daughter of a noble family, she and Mary had lived together as girls and women, enduring years of adversity. They were both in their thirties now; both had waited a long time for their happiness. More than a lady-in-waiting, Frances Grenville was Mary's friend.

Satisfied, Mary beckoned the two to follow. She picked her way up the ice crusted steps. The gravedigger's cart thudded up each stair, grating over ice and stone. At the top, Mary pushed open the double wooden doors. Ghosts of snow swirled past her shoulders and into the church as though frantic for sanctuary, and then instantly, as if overcome with relief, collapsed in powdery drifts on the stone floor.

Mary led the others down the dark nave redolent with incense, toward the altar where two candles burned. The torch behind her swept firelight over the heraldic brass plates on either side of the choir, each brass – of lions and leopards, swords and crowns – commemorating a Knight of the Garter, immortalized here for two hundred years. But Mary did not look at the walls. She was searching the floor. Her father's tomb was beneath this central aisle. Henry VIII. Great Harry. Bluff King Hal.

Mary reached the tomb's marker on the floor near the high altar. She pointed at it for the gravedigger. "Begin," she said.

The gravedigger's iron tools clanged as he set them down. Mary walked on toward the altar. When her back was turned, the gravedigger glanced at the altar and crossed himself. Then he spit on his hands and set to work.

Mary knelt before the gem-studded great cross. She beckoned Frances to do the same. "You are my witness," Mary whispered. She gazed up at the cross and was soon lost in communion with it. The gravedigger's pick smashed into the stone floor, but Mary's face remained as rigid in concentration as the marble saints watching her from their shadowed niches. This time, the saints would see that she was doing what was right. Once, she had known what was right but did not do it. She had tried to withstand her father's torments and threats, but he had crushed her, just as he had crushed her mother; crushed all God's faithful here, driving the realm into heresy and ruin. All to get himself a new wife, to satisfy his lust. Defeated, Mary had signed his abominable oath, acknowledging her mother as a harlot, acknowledging herself as a bastard, betraying God himself. The saints had watched her surrender. And seventeen years of misery had followed, for her and for England. Seventeen years of heresy. But five months ago God had given Mary a miraculous deliverance. He had brought down her enemies and raised her to the throne. God had not forsaken her. He had made her Queen of England. And from now on she would do what was right, no matter the cost.

"I make this vow," she began, speaking to God, "to honor the memory of my mother, Catherine, Princess of Spain, who—"

A draught rustled the altar cloth. Mary stiffened. A breath from her father's tomb? Her eyes followed its path as it warped the altar candle's flame, twisting a thread of smoke so that it snaked up to an oriel window overlooking the altar. Her father had installed the window for her mother in the first happy days of their marriage, as a gallery to partake of Mass in the manner Catherine preferred – privately, silently, devoutly. Mary stared at the window. It was dark and empty. Her mother was with God.

And her father's spirit, if it was here, came from the damned.

". . . the memory of my mother, Catherine, Princess of Spain," she went on steadily, speaking again to the cross, "who spent her life in devotion to Our Blessed Savior. For my mother's sake I vow to return this realm to the bosom of the one true Church. For her sake I vow

to take my cousin, Philip, most Catholic Prince of Spain, as husband. And if I fail to keep faith in all of this, may You destroy me utterly."

The Queen and her lady knelt for some time in murmured prayer. Behind them, the gravedigger hacked and shoveled, his labor forcing his breathing into grunts.

A last groan from him and a final grating of stone told Mary it was done. She rose and approached the spot. The new marble slab covered the tomb. On the cart, a dingy piece of canvas shrouded its contents. The gravedigger stood wiping his glistening forehead with a rag. Mary lifted a corner of the canvas.

"No!" the gravedigger whispered in shock. But Mary was already reaching out to touch the gray bones. Was she imagining it, or did they give off a putrid odor, the very stench of degeneracy? She laid her hand on one. Its coldness sent a thrill of victory through her veins as if she herself had made the kill.

"Take the cart out to the cloister," she said.

The gravedigger pushed the cart out of the chapel. The two women followed. The cart wheels scraped over the flagstones of the dean's arcaded cloister surrounding a snow-filled garth. Mary ordered the gravedigger to turn into a narrow passage close to the outer wall of the castle. Here the dozen canons of the chapel had their houses. But the priests were asleep. All was dark and quiet.

Beside a kitchen door a cat's eyes glinted in the moonlight. The cat stood still beside a mound of scullery refuse. As the intruders approached, the cat streaked away.

"There," Mary said, pointing to the pile of moldy bread, cabbage leaves, fowl carcasses, and offal – all sheened with an icy slime. "Dump it there."

The gravedigger's jaw dropped. A king's bones left out for the dogs? He did not move.

"Never mind," Mary sighed, as if to a child. "You've done enough. Go home to your bed." She motioned to Frances, who took out a purse and gave it to the gravedigger. He jerked a grateful bow at his liberation and hastened away.

"Frances, go in and wake Father Williams," Mary said. "Bring him here. A man of God must do this office."

Frances hurried toward the priest's house. When her torch disappeared, there was only moonlight.

Mary stood alone in the alley, staring at the cart. She grasped the handles and pushed the load towards the rubbish heap. She raised the handles high and shoved. The contents slid out – canvas, straw, and grimy bones. A king's bones. Great Harry. Bluff King Hal. He could do nothing to her now. She was Queen. She would restore the one true faith in the realm, and she would bring the heretics to burn at the stake, as they deserved for their wickedness. She would marry Philip, most Catholic Prince of Spain, and make a holy, new beginning.

The priest roused by Frances arrived confusedly blinking away sleep, then became wide-eyed with even greater confusion when he saw the Queen standing in the kitchen alley beside the scullery mess.

Mary took the torch from Frances. Without a moment's hesitation she plowed it into the rubbish heap. The straw blazed instantly.

"Say the office, Father," the Queen commanded. "Tonight we are burning a heretic."