

My ~~LADY~~ Jane  
not entirely  
THE TRUE STORY



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WALKER  
BOOKS

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For everyone who *knows* there was enough room for  
Leonardo DiCaprio on that door.

And for England. We're really sorry for what we're about  
to do to your history.

*What is history but a fable agreed upon?*  
– Napoleon Bonaparte

*The crown is not my right. It pleaseth me not.*  
– Lady Jane Grey

# PART ONE

*(in which we revise a bit of history)*

# Prologue

You may think you know the story. It goes like this: once upon a time, there was a sixteen-year-old girl named Jane Grey, who was forced to marry a complete stranger (Lord Guildford or Gilford or Gifford-something-or-other), and shortly thereafter found herself ruler of a country. She was queen for nine days. Then she quite literally lost her head.

Yes, it's a tragedy, if you consider the disengagement of one's head from one's body tragic. (We are merely narrators, and would hate to make assumptions as to what the reader would find tragic.)

We have a different tale to tell.

Pay attention. We've tweaked minor details. We've completely rearranged major details. Some names have been changed to protect the innocent (or not-so-innocent, or simply because we thought a name was terrible and we liked another name better). And we've added a touch of magic to keep things interesting. So really anything could happen.

This is how we think Jane's story *should* have gone.

It begins in England (or an alternate version of England, since we're dealing with the manipulation of history), in the middle of the sixteenth century. It was an uneasy time, especially if you were an Eðian (pronounced eth-ee-uhn for those of you unfamiliar with the term). The Eðians were blessed (or cursed, depending on your point of view) with the ability to switch between a human form and an animal one. For instance, certain members of the general public could turn themselves into cats, which greatly increased the country's tuna-fish consumption, but also cut down on England's rat population. (Then again, other individuals could turn into rats, so nobody really noticed.)

There were those who thought that this animal magic was terrific, but others who saw it as an abomination that needed to be eradicated immediately. That second group (known as Verities) believed that human beings had no business being anything other than human beings. And because Verities were largely in charge of everything, Eðians were persecuted and hunted until most of them died out or went deep into hiding.

Which brings us to one fateful afternoon in the royal court of England, when King Henry VIII, during a fit of rage, transformed into a great lion and devoured the court jester, much to the audience's delight. They clapped enthusiastically, for no one really liked the jester. (Later, the courtiers discovered the incident was not a rehearsed act of artful deception, but indeed an actual lion masticating the jester. When the audience found out the truth they no longer clapped, but they did remark, "That clown had it coming.")

That very night, King Henry, once he'd returned to his human form, decreed that Eðians weren't so bad after all, and henceforth should enjoy the same rights and privileges as Verities. The decision to sanction the ancient magic made waves across Europe. The head of the Verity Church was not pleased with King Henry's decision, but every time Rome sent a missive

denouncing the decree, the Lion King ate the messenger.

Hence the phrase, *Don't eat the messenger*.

When Henry died, his only son, Edward, inherited the throne. Our story begins in the middle of tense times, with an increasing animosity brewing between Eðians and Verities, a teenage king with a tenuous grasp on the throne of England, and a young lord and lady who have no idea their destinies are about to collide.

Totally against their will.

# I Edward

The king, it turned out, was dying.

“When?” he asked Master Boubou, the royal physician.  
“How long do I have?”

Boubou wiped his sweaty brow. He disliked giving bad news to royalty. In his line of business, sometimes it led to the stockades. Or worse.

“Six months, perhaps a year,” he croaked. “At best.”

*Bollocks*, thought Edward. Yes, he’d been sick for several months now, but he was sixteen years old. He couldn’t be dying. He had a cold, was all, a cough that had been hanging on longer than it should, perhaps, a tightness in his chest, a recurrent fever, some headaches, sure, frequent dizzy spells, a funny taste in his mouth sometimes, but dying?

“You’re certain?” he asked.

Boubou nodded. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty. It’s ‘the Affliction.’”

Oh. That.

Edward suppressed a cough. He instantly felt worse than he

had only moments before, like his lungs had overheard the bad news and were shutting down already. He'd known of others with "the Affliction," always hacking into nasty blood-spotted handkerchiefs, acting all faint and trembly, then eventually excusing themselves from court to die a horrible, wheezy death out of view of the ladies.

"You're ... certain?" he asked again.

Boubou fidgeted with his collar. "I can give you tonics for pain, and make sure you remain comfortable until the end, but yes. I am certain."

The end. That sounded ominous.

"But..." There was so much he wanted to do with his life. First off, he wanted to kiss a girl, a pretty girl, the right girl, possibly with tongue. He wanted to throw grand, lavish balls to show off his dancing skills to the nobles. He wanted to finally best the weapons master at swords, because Bash was the only person he knew who forgot to let him win. He wanted to explore his kingdom and travel the world. He wanted to hunt a great beast of some sort and mount its head on his wall. He wanted to climb to the top of Scaffell Pike, get as high up as a person could possibly go in England, and look over the lands stretching below him and know that he was king of all he surveyed.

But apparently none of that was going to happen.

*Untimely* was the word people would use, he thought. *Premature. Tragic.* He could practically hear the ballads the minstrels would sing about him, the great king who had died too soon.

*Poor King Edward, now under the ground.*

*Hacked his lungs out. They've yet to be found.*

"I want a second opinion. A better one," Edward said, his hand curling into a fist where it rested on the arm of the throne. He shivered, suddenly chilled. He pulled his fur-lined robes more tightly around him.

“Of course,” said Boubou, backing away.

Edward saw the fear in the doctor’s eyes and felt the urge to have him thrown into the dungeon for good measure, because he was the king, and the king always got what he wanted, and the king didn’t want to be dying. He fingered the golden dagger at his belt, and Boubou took another step back.

“I’m truly sorry, Your Highness,” the old man mumbled again toward the floor. “Please don’t eat the messenger.”

Edward sighed. He was not his father, who indeed might have assumed his lion form and devoured the man for bearing this dreadful news. Edward didn’t have a secret animal inside of him, so far as he knew. Which had always secretly disappointed him.

“You may go, Boubou,” he said.

The doctor breathed out a sigh of relief and darted for the door, leaving Edward alone to face his impending mortality.

“Bollocks,” he muttered to himself again. “The Affliction” seemed like a terribly inconvenient way for a king to die.

Later, after the news of his upcoming royal demise had spread around the palace, his sisters came to find him. He was sitting in his favourite spot: the window ledge in one of the south turrets of Greenwich Palace, his legs dangling over the edge as he watched the comings and goings of the people in the courtyard below and listened to the steady flow of the River Thames. He thought he finally understood the Meaning of Life now, the Great Secret, which he’d boiled down to this:

Life is short, and then you die.

“Edward,” murmured Bess, her mouth twisting in sympathy as she came to sit beside him on the ledge. “I’m so sorry, brother.”

He tried to smirk at her. Edward was a master of smirking. It was his most finely honed royal skill, really, but this time he

couldn't manage more than a pathetic half-hearted grimace. "So you've heard," he said, trying to keep his voice light. "I do intend to get a second opinion, of course. I don't feel like I'm dying."

"Oh, my dear Eddie," choked out Mary, dabbing a lace-edged handkerchief at the corner of her eye. "Sweet, darling boy. My poor little dove."

He closed his eyes for a moment. He disliked being called Eddie, and he disliked being talked down to like he was a toddler in short tights, but he tolerated it from Mary. He'd always felt a bit sorry for his sisters, what with his father declaring them bastards and all. The year that his father had discovered his animal form – the Year of the Lion, the people called it – King Henry VIII had also decided that the king got to make all the rules, so he'd annulled his marriage to Mary's mother and sent her off to a convent to live out the rest of her days, all so he could marry Bess's mother, one of the more attractive ladies-in-waiting. But when Wife #2 failed to produce a male heir, and rumours started to circulate that Queen Anne was an Eðian who every so often transformed into a black cat so she could slip down the castle stairs into the court minstrel's bedchambers, the king had her head chopped off. Wife #3 (Edward's mother) had done everything right; namely, she'd produced a child with the correct genitalia to be a future ruler of England, and then, because she was never one to stick around to gloat, she'd promptly died. King Henry had gone on to have three more wives (respectively: annulled, beheaded, and the lucky one who'd outlived him, ha), but no more children.

So it had just been the three of them – Mary, Bess, and Edward – as far as royal spawn went, and they'd been their own brand of a mismatched family, since their father was possibly insane and definitely dangerous even when he wasn't a lion, and their mothers were all dead or exiled. They'd always got on fairly well, mainly because there had never been any competition

between them over who was meant to wear the crown. Edward was the clear choice. He had the boy parts.

He'd been king since he was nine years old. He could only faintly remember a time when he wasn't king, in fact, and until today he'd always felt that monarchy rather suited him. But a fat lot of good being king was doing him now, he thought bitterly. He would have rather been born a commoner, a blacksmith's son, perhaps. Then he might have already had a bit of fun before he shuffled off this mortal coil. At least he would have had an opportunity to kiss a girl.

"How are you feeling, really?" Mary asked solemnly. Mary said everything solemnly.

"Afflicted," he answered.

This produced the ghost of a smile from Bess, but Mary just shook her head mournfully. Mary never laughed at his jokes. He and Bess had been calling her Fuddy-Duddy Mary behind her back for years, because she was always so cheerless about everything. The only time he ever saw Mary enjoy herself was when some traitor was beheaded or some poor Eðian got burned at the stake. His sister was surprisingly bloodthirsty when it came to Eðians.

"'The Affliction' took my mother, you know." Mary wrung her handkerchief between her hands fretfully.

"I know." He'd always thought Queen Catherine had died more of a broken heart than any physical malady, although he supposed that a broken heart often led to a broken body.

He wouldn't have a chance to get his heart broken, he thought, a fresh wave of self-pity washing over him. He was never going to fall in love.

"It's a dreadful way to die," Mary continued. "You cough and cough until you cough your lungs right out."

"Thank you. That's very comforting," he said.

Bess, who'd always been a quiet one next to her solemnly loquacious sister, shot Mary a sharp look and laid her gloved

hand over Edward's. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

He shrugged. His eyes burned, and he told himself that he was definitely not going to cry about this whole dying thing, because crying was for girls and wee little babies and not for kings, and besides, crying wouldn't change anything.

Bess squeezed his hand.

He squeezed back, definitely not crying, and recommenced pondering the view outside the window and the Meaning of Life.

Life is short.

And then you die.

Shortly. Six months, a year at best. Which seemed like an awfully small amount of time. Last summer, a famous Italian astrologer had done Edward's horoscope, after which he had announced that the king would live forty more years.

Apparently famous Italian astrologers were big, fat liars.

"But at least you can rest assured knowing that everything will be all right once you've gone," Mary said solemnly.

He turned to look at her. "What?"

"With the kingdom, I mean," she added even more solemnly. "The kingdom will be in good hands."

He hadn't really given much thought to the kingdom. Or any thought, truthfully. He'd been too busy contemplating the idea of coughing his lungs right out, and then being too dead to care.

"Mary," Bess chided. "Now is not the time for politics."

Before Mary could argue (and by the look on her face, she was definitely going to argue that now was always the time for politics), a knock sounded on the door. Edward called, "Come in," and John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland and Lord President of the King's High Privy Council, stuck his great eagle nose into the room.

"Ah, Your Majesty, I thought I'd find you up here," he said when he spotted Edward. His gaze swept hurriedly over Mary and Bess like he couldn't be bothered taking the time to really

see them. “Princess Mary. Princess Elizabeth. You’re both looking well.” He turned to Edward. “Your Majesty, I wonder if I might have a word.”

“You may have several,” Edward said.

“In private,” Lord Dudley clarified. “In the council room.”

Edward stood and brushed off his trousers. He nodded to his sisters, and they dropped into their courtly curtsies. Then he allowed Lord Dudley to lead him down the stairs and across the palace’s long series of hallways into the king’s council chamber, where the king’s advisors normally spent hours each day filling out the appropriate royal paperwork for the running of the country and making all the decisions. The king himself never spent much time in this room, unless there was a document that required his signature, or some other important matter that required his personal attention. Which wasn’t often.

Dudley closed the door behind them.

Edward, winded from the walk, sank into his royal, extra-cushy red velvet throne at the head of the half circle of chairs (usually occupied by the other thirty members of the Privy Council). Dudley produced a handkerchief for him, which Edward pressed to his lips while he rode out a coughing fit.

When he pulled the handkerchief away, there was a spot of pink on it.

Bollocks.

He stared at the spot, and tried to hand the handkerchief back to Dudley, but the duke quickly said, “You keep it, Your Majesty,” and crossed to the other side of the room, where he began to stroke his bearded chin the way he did when he was deep in thought.

“I think,” Dudley began softly, “we should talk about what you’re going to do.”

“Do? It’s ‘the Affliction.’ It’s incurable. There’s nothing for me to do but die, apparently.”

Dudley manufactured a sympathetic smile that didn't look natural on his face, as he wasn't accustomed to smiling. "Yes, Sire, that's true enough, but death comes to us all." He resumed the beard stroking. "This news is unfortunate, of course, but we must make the best of it. There are many things that must be done for the kingdom before you die."

Ah, the kingdom, again. Always the kingdom. Edward nodded. "All right," he said with more courage in his voice than he felt. "Tell me what I should do."

"First we must consider the line of succession. An heir to the throne."

Edward's eyebrows lifted. "You want me to get married and produce an heir in less than a year?"

That could be fun. That would definitely involve kissing with tongue.

Dudley cleared his throat. "Uh ... no, Your Majesty. You're not well enough."

Edward wanted to argue, but then he remembered the spot of pink on the handkerchief, and how exhausting he'd found it simply walking across the palace. He was in no shape to be wooing a wife.

"Well, then," he said. "I suppose that means the throne will go to Mary."

"No, Sire," Lord Dudley said urgently. "We cannot let the throne of England fall into the wrong hands."

Edward frowned. "But she's my sister. She's the eldest. She—"

"She's a Verity," objected Dudley. "Mary's been raised to believe that the animal magic is evil, something to be feared and destroyed. If she became queen, she'd return this country to the Dark Ages. No Eðian would be safe."

Edward sat back, thinking. Everything the duke was saying was true. Mary would not tolerate the Eðians. (She preferred

them extra-crispy, as we mentioned earlier.) Plus Mary had no sense of humour and was completely backward thinking and would be no good at all as ruler.

“So it can’t be Mary,” he agreed. “It can’t be Bess, either.” He twisted the ring with the royal seal around his finger. “Bess would be better than Mary, of course, and both of her parents were Eðians, if you believe the cat thing, but I don’t know where Bess’s allegiance lies concerning the Verities. She’s a bit shifty. Besides,” he said upon further reflection. “The crown can’t go to a woman.”

You might have noticed that Edward was a bit of a sexist. You can’t blame him, really, since all his young life he’d been greatly exalted for simply having been born a boy.

Still, he liked to think of himself as a forward-thinking king. He hadn’t taken after his father as an Eðian (at least, he hadn’t so far), but it was part of his family history, obviously, and he’d been raised to sympathize with the Eðian cause. Lately it seemed that the tension between the two groups had reached a boiling point. Reports had been coming in about a mysterious Eðian group called the Pack, who had been raiding and pillaging from Verity churches and monasteries around the country. Then came more reports of Verities exposing and subsequently inflicting violence upon Eðians. Then reports of revenge attacks against Verities. And so on, and so on.

Dudley was right. They needed a pro-Eðian ruler. Someone who could keep the peace.

“So who do you have in mind?” Edward reached over to a side table, where there was always, by royal decree, a bowl of fresh, chilled blackberries. He loved blackberries. They were rumoured to have powerful healing properties, so he’d been eating a lot of them lately. He popped one into his mouth.

Lord Dudley’s Adam’s apple jerked up and down, and for the first time since Edward had known him, he appeared a tad nervous. “The firstborn son of the Lady Jane Grey, Your Majesty.”

Edward choked on his blackberry.

“Jane has a son?” he sputtered. “I’m fairly certain I would have heard about that.”

“She doesn’t have a son at the moment,” Dudley explained patiently. “But she will. And if you bypass Mary and Elizabeth, the Greys are next in line.”

So Dudley wanted Jane to get married and produce an heir.

Edward couldn’t imagine his cousin Jane with a husband and a child, even though she was sixteen years old and sixteen was a bit spinsterish, by the standards of the day. Books were Jane’s great love: history and philosophy and religion, mostly, but anything she could get her hands on. She actually enjoyed reading Plato in the original Greek, so much so that she did it for fun and not just when her tutors assigned it. She had entire epic poems memorized and could recite them at will. But most of all, she loved stories of Eðians and their animal adventures.

There would be no doubt that Jane would support the Eðians.

It was widely rumoured that Jane’s mother was an Eðian, although no one knew what form she took. When they were children Edward and Jane’s favourite game had been to imagine what animals they would become when they grew up. Edward had always imagined he’d be something powerful and fierce, like a wolf. A great bear. A tiger.

Jane had never been able to decide on her preferred Eðian form; it was between a lynx and a falcon, as he recalled.

“Just think of it, Edward,” he remembered her ten-year-old voice whispering to him as they’d stretched out on their backs on some grassy knoll, finding shapes in the passing clouds. “I could be up there, riding the wind, nobody telling me to sit up straight or complaining about my needlework. I’d be free.”

“Free as a bird,” he’d added.

“Free as a bird!” She’d laughed and jumped to her feet and run down the hill with her long red hair trailing behind her

and her arms spread out, pretending to fly.

A few years later they'd spent an entire afternoon calling each other names, because Jane had read in a book that Eðians often manifested into their animal forms when they were upset. They'd cursed at each other and slapped each other's faces, and Jane had even gone so far as to throw a stone at Edward, which actually did rile him, but they had remained stubbornly human throughout the whole ordeal.

It'd been a great disappointment to them both.

"Sire?" Lord Dudley prompted.

Edward shook off the memories. "You want Jane to get married," he surmised. "Do you have someone in mind?"

He felt a twinge of sadness at the idea. Jane was easily his favourite person in this world. As a child, she'd been sent to live with Katherine Parr (King Henry's Wife #6), and so Jane and Edward had spent hours upon hours in each other's company, even sharing many of the same tutors. It had been in those days that they'd become fast friends. Jane was the only one who Edward felt truly understood him, who didn't treat him like a different species because he was royalty. In the back of his mind he'd been holding on to the idea that perhaps someday he'd be the one to marry Jane.

This was back when it was slightly less frowned upon to marry your cousin.

"Yes, Sire. I have the perfect candidate." Dudley began to pace back and forth across the room, stroking his beard. "Someone with good breeding, a respectable family."

"Of course. Who?" Edward asked.

"Someone with undeniable Eðian magic."

"Yes. Who?"

"Someone who wouldn't mind the red hair."

"Jane's hair isn't so bad," Edward protested. "In some lights it's slightly less red, and rather pretty..."

“Someone who could keep her in line,” Dudley continued.

Well, that made sense, thought Edward. Jane was notoriously willful. She refused to be pranced around court like the other girls of noble birth, and openly defied her mother by bringing a book to certain court functions and passing the time in the corner reading instead of dancing or securing herself a future husband.

“Who?” he asked.

“Someone who can be trusted.”

This was starting to seem like a very tall order indeed. “Who is it?” Edward raised his voice. He disliked having to ask a question more than once, and this was four times now. Plus Dudley’s pacing was making him feel a bit seasick. Edward pounded his fist on the side table. Blackberries went flying. “Who is it? Blast it, Northumberland, just spit it out.”

The duke stopped. He cleared his throat. “Gifford Dudley,” he muttered.

Edward blinked. “Gifford who?”

“My youngest son.”

Edward took a moment to absorb this information, adding up all of the criteria Dudley had given him: someone from a respectable family: check; someone who could be trusted: check; someone with undeniable Eðian magic...

“John,” he blurted out. “Do you have Eðian magic in your family?”

Lord Dudley lowered his gaze. It was a dangerous thing to admit to Eðian blood, even in today’s more civilized age, where you might not get burned at the stake for it. While being an Eðian wasn’t technically illegal any longer, there were still so many people throughout the kingdom who shared Mary’s opinion that the only good Eðian was a dead one.

“I’m not an Eðian, of course,” Dudley said after a long pause. “But my son is.”

An Eðian! This was too good. For a minute Edward forgot that he was dying and marrying off his best friend as some kind of political strategy. “What creature does he become?”

Dudley reddened. “He spends his days as a...” His lips moved as he tried to form the right word, but he failed.

Edward leaned forward. “Yes?”

Dudley struggled to get the words out. “He’s a ... every day he ... he...”

“Come on, man!” Edward urged. “Speak!”

Dudley wet his lips. “He’s a ... member of the equine species.”

“He’s a what?”

“A steed, Your Majesty.”

“A steed?”

“A ... horse.”

Edward fell back, open mouthed for a few seconds. “A horse. Your son spends his days as a horse,” he repeated, just to be sure he’d got it right.

Dudley nodded miserably.

“No wonder I haven’t seen him in court. I’d almost forgotten you had another son besides Stan! Didn’t you tell us that your other son was a half-wit, and that’s why you deemed him inappropriate to appear in social settings?”

“We thought anything was better than the truth,” Dudley admitted.

Edward scooped a blackberry off the table and ate it. “When did this happen? *How* did it happen?”

“Six years ago,” Dudley answered. “I don’t know how. One moment he was a boy of thirteen, throwing a bit of a tantrum. The next he was a...” He didn’t say the word again. “I do believe that he’d be a good match for Jane, Sire, and not simply because he’s my son. He’s a solid boy – excellent bone structure, able-bodied, reasonably intelligent, certainly not a half-wit,

anyway – and obedient enough to suit our purposes.”

Edward considered this for a few minutes. Jane loved all things Eðian. She wouldn't have a problem with marrying one. But...

“He spends every single day as a horse?” Edward asked.

“Every day. From sunrise to sundown.”

“He can't control his change?”

Dudley glanced at the far wall, which bore a large portrait of Henry VIII, and Edward realized how foolish he sounded. His father had never been able to control his lion form. The anger would take him and then the fangs would come out, literally, and he would remain a lion until his anger abated, which often took hours. Sometimes even days. It had always been uncomfortable to watch. Especially when the king decided to use somebody as a chew toy.

“All right, so he can't control it,” Edward acquiesced. “But that would mean that Jane would only have a husband by night. What kind of marriage would that be?”

“Some people would prefer such an arrangement. I know my life would be a lot simpler if I only had to attend to my wife in the hours between dusk and dawn,” said Dudley with a weak laugh.

*It would hardly be like having a marriage at all,* thought Edward. But for someone like Jane, such a marriage could afford her a sense of privacy and the independence she was accustomed to.

It could be ideal.

“Is he handsome?” he asked. Dudley's other son, Stan, had suffered the misfortune of inheriting his father's eagle nose. Edward hated the idea of marrying Jane off to that nose.

Dudley's thin lips tightened. “Gifford is a bit too easy on the eye for his own good, I'm afraid. He tends to attract ... attention from the ladies.”

Jealousy pricked at Edward. He gazed up once more at the portrait of his father. He resembled Henry; he knew that. They had the same reddish-gold hair and the same straight, majestic

nose, the same grey eyes, bracketed by the same smallish ears. Edward had been considered handsome once, but now he was thin and pale, washed out from his bout with the illness.

“...but he will be faithful, of that I can assure you,” Dudley was blathering on. “And when he and Jane produce a son, you will have your Eðian heir. Problem solved.”

Just like that. Problem solved.

Edward rubbed his forehead. “And when should this wedding take place?”

“Saturday, I think,” answered Dudley. “Assuming you approve of the match.”

Edward had a coughing fit.

It was Monday now.

“That soon?” he wheezed when he could breathe again.

“The sooner the better,” Dudley said. “We need an heir.”

Right. Edward cleared his throat. “Very well, then. I approve the match. But Saturday...” That seemed awfully soon. “I don’t even know what my schedule looks like on Saturday. I’ll need to consult—”

“I’ve already checked, Your Majesty. You’re free. Besides, the ceremony must take place after sundown,” added Dudley.

“Right. Because in the daytime, he’s...” Edward made a faint whinnying noise.

“Yes.” Dudley produced a scroll of parchment and unrolled it on the desk upon which all the official court documents were signed and sealed.

“I bet you spend a fortune on hay,” Edward said, finding his smirk at last. He inspected the scroll. It was a royal decree – his permission, technically speaking – that Lady Jane Grey of Suffolk be wed, on this Saturday hence, to Lord Gifford Dudley of Northumberland.

His smirk faded.

Jane.

Of course it had been a fantasy, this notion he'd had of marrying Jane himself. She had very little in the way of political capital – a rich family, to be sure, a title, but nothing that would truly strengthen the position of the kingdom. Edward had always known that he was supposed to marry for England, not himself. All his life he'd had a constant stream of foreign ambassadors trotting out the portraits of the daughters of the various European royalty for him to peruse. He was meant to marry a princess. Not little Jane with her books and her big ideas.

Dudley put a quill in his hand. “We must consider the good of the country, Your Highness. I'll ride for Dudley Castle tonight to fetch him.”

Edward dipped the quill in the ink but then stopped. “I need you to swear that he will be good to her.”

“I swear it, Your Majesty. He'll be a model husband.”

Edward coughed again into the handkerchief Dudley had given him. There was that funny taste in his mouth, something sickly sweet that mixed badly with the lingering blackberries.

“I'm marrying off my cousin to a horse,” he muttered.

Then he put the quill to the paper, sighed, and signed his name.