

To my darling,

I still can't believe that I'm writing this. My eyes grow weary in the flicker of the candlelight, but the words must be written. How did things come to this? I scratch away, inking my confession, my final farewell to a love that will echo in eternity.

I think back sometimes, to the moment that our eyes first met. Those puppy-dog eyes of yours across the court. The sadness in those eyes - oh, that pain. It makes my heart strain even now to think of it.

I truly believe, 'til this day, that you went into that marriage with the best of intentions. The lonely widower, trying to do your duty, seeking happiness and a mother for your children - betrayed by lust-drunk advisors who painted you a false portrait, fed you false hope. She was such a proud, cold creature. It pained me to stand by her side, feigning kindness, listening to her complain of sorrows she had never earned. What pain could she possibly claim? Not even her pock-marked face had stood in the way of her marrying the most eligible man in Europe - nay, the world.

She would not even warm your bed on your wedding night. A barren match, cold as the sheets. Not like me. I think you knew that - when I caught your eye. Your lip curled at the corner of your mouth, and I confess, I squirmed. I can still feel the flickers in my belly, the oil seeping down my thigh, when I think of it. Even now - trapped behind these bars. What else could I do? You were the most powerful man on earth. And power is an erotic thing.

That's the thing. It is hideously unfair. You - such a fucking hypocrite. One rule for you, another for the rest of us. I should have known. I should have learned, from the fate of my cousin. But I was young, arrogant, barely sixteen. Barely older than your daughters. I thought I knew everything, thought I was cleverer than the world. That I was clever enough to outsmart you.

Do you want to know a secret? I was only flirting with you to make someone else jealous. It was easy. You, an old man, puffed with vanity; me, a coquettish girl. I fluttered my eyelashes, feigned innocence, drew you in like a fisherman reeling a fat worm from the water. It was all such a game, back then. How my heart raced, dancing between Thomas and you, thinking I was playing you against each other. If taunting Tom did not work - then you were my consolation prize. And what better consolation prize than the king himself?

Looking back, I think you knew. I think it flattered you that you could best a virile young buck and charm a teenager. Your pride would never allow the thought that another man had been there first. Not even in your darkest nights would you imagine I might not be pure.

It wasn't Thomas who took my innocence. I wish it had been. My sweet, reckless Thomas. If only he had married me when he had the chance.

No, my innocence was ripped from me long before I knew what innocence even meant.

The first thief was a tutor. A man meant to guide my fingers over strings and notes, who instead guided his hands where they had no right to be. I did not know how to stop him, nor did anyone ever teach me the words. My silence was mistaken for consent, and I carried the stain in secret. That was my first lesson in love: that a girl's silence is taken as an invitation.

Then came Francis. He called me wife when I was barely a woman, pressed gifts into my hands and vows into my ears. He spoke of promises in the dark, and I believed him, because what else was there to believe? For a time, I mistook that prison for comfort. Later, when he returned and demanded a place in my household, I saw it for what it was - a chain I could never shake off. He knew too much of me, and so I kept him close, though I hated him for it. That was my second lesson in love: that what binds you in youth will one day drag you to ruin.

And then Thomas. My sweet, tempestuous Thomas. When I think of him even now, I feel the same heat in my chest. He was everything you were not - young, alive, daring. I wrote to him with a hand that trembled, and yes, I used the word *longed*. How I longed to see him, to steal even a moment's freedom. Perhaps I loved him, perhaps I only loved what he represented - that there was a world outside the cage you had locked me in. That was my third lesson in love: that longing can be as fatal as betrayal.

But it was you, in the end, who taught me disgust. You, with your crown heavy as a millstone, your leg foul with rot, your breath sour, your eyes forever searching for treachery. You called me your jewel, your rose without a thorn. Do you know what it is to lie on your wedding bed with a child's fear in your belly and a man's weight crushing it down? To prick a finger, let the blood stain the sheet, and pray you never notice the difference? You made me a queen, but only so you could own me more completely. That was my final lesson in love: that power wears the mask of desire, but beneath it lies only hunger.

And so here I sit, in this Tower, scribing this confession. The candle has burned low; the wax pools like the blood I spilled to fool you. The bells will toll soon, not for evensong but for my head. They say the block is sharp and the executioner swift, but the waiting gnaws more cruelly than any blade.

And when the bells have tolled and my head is severed, what then? I know what the future will make of me. A verse in a cruel children's rhyme, a notch in the tally of wives. Number five. A jest to be whispered in taverns. A cautionary tale for girls who dared to smile too brightly at the wrong man. Not a soul will remember that I was nineteen, not yet a woman, that I had barely begun. They will strip me of my name, grind me into a number, and laugh as though my blood was spilled for their amusement. That is the legacy you leave me: not love, not honour, but mockery.

I will not let you have this letter. You shall never know my secrets, though they have condemned me. I will feed these pages to the flame, watch the words curl and blacken, and send the smoke up as my only witness.

Let this be my epitaph: that every man who crossed my path claimed me, used me, called me guilty. Yet I was guilty of nothing but being young, and wanting to live.

Goodbye, Henry. Tomorrow I will lose my head, but tonight I keep my soul.  
I will never be yours.

Catherine