

# The Plot to Kill a Queen

A Royal  
Spy Story



in Three  
Acts

✦ Also including ✦

**The Princess Saves the Cakes**

*A One-Act Play to Perform with a Company of Friends*

**DEBORAH HOPKINSON**



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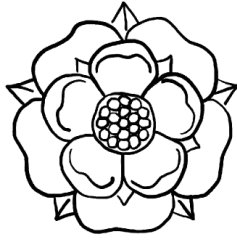
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Illustration, page i—Elizabeth I (1533–1603).

Illustration, page iii—Elizabeth I coronation portrait; unknown artist, around 1600; probably a copy of lost original from 1559.



# *One*



## **Act I, Scene 1, A deserted storeroom in Whitehall Palace, late September, 1582**

“This is a bad choice, Emilia,” said Horace. “A very bad choice. I wanted to come, but now I can’t get away. Why plunge ahead without me? Can’t you wait till I have a free afternoon?”

“And when will that be?” I demanded, reaching out to brush a speck of flour off his cheek. “You work under cooks with tempers like blazing fires. They treat you horribly, despite your talents. Why, Queen Elizabeth herself loves your gingerbread.

“Besides, winter will be here soon and I might not get another chance, so it has to be today,” I went on (though that wasn’t the whole truth). “Horace, I know you can understand how much this means to me better than

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almost anyone,” I continued. “Why, look at how devoted you are to learning to cook! And I won’t be alone, will I, Mouse?”

*Woof!* My frisky long-eared spaniel barked and twirled in a circle. She could always sense when an outside adventure—or a treat—was at hand.

“But I’d better hurry or I’ll be late,” I told Horace. “Because *you’re* late.”

“It’s been so busy since Her Majesty added more guests for tonight’s dinner,” Horace explained. “Also . . .”

“Also, admit it: You got lost,” I teased. I’d asked Horace to meet me in an old storeroom tucked away in a deserted wing of Whitehall Palace’s vast labyrinth of buildings. It was near a little-used rear entrance: I didn’t want to be spotted coming or going.

“It’s easy for you, Em,” Horace protested. “You practically grew up at Whitehall, trailing after your father whenever he played at court.”

“That’s true.” I smiled a little, thinking of Papa. It had been six years since he passed away, but I thought of him every day. I missed his warm brown eyes, which twinkled when he laughed. I missed the sound of his rich voice, singing me gently to sleep. I missed the way he guided my fingers so patiently when he taught me to play the lute.

And, especially lately, I’d been thinking of those

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magical evenings during holiday festivities, when Queen Elizabeth invited the children of courtiers, musicians, and servants to hear music and watch theatricals. I would look up at the musicians' gallery and Papa would smile down at me. How proud I felt!

"Most fathers would've left a motherless little one with a nursemaid, but Papa always brought me along," I told Horace now. "He said I was his bright candle, and he needed me to light his way."

Horace pointed. "That was his lute, wasn't it?"

"Yes, he brought it from Italy and taught me to play on it. He made the wooden carrying case and strap himself. There's even a special pocket inside to hold pages of music," I said, stashing my instrument carefully behind some crates for later. "Now, if you hold Mousekin, I'll take that packet. Did you find everything, even boots?"

"The boots are the best part, Em, fine leather and not too worn," Horace said, batting away Mouse's wet tongue as she tried to lick more flour off his face. My little dog would eat anything.

"I still think it's a bad idea," Horace said again. "You get these notions in your head, Em, and you forge ahead without thinking things through. Remember that time we got caught sneaking into the tiltyard to try on armor and . . ."

"It will be *fine*," I cut him off. "And don't worry; if I'm

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found out, I won't let on who got me the disguise. I don't want you to lose your place."

Horace had worked in the palace kitchens ever since I'd known him. He'd never shared anything about his family or past. I only knew that, like me, he was thirteen. And I knew he dreamed of being a master cook someday.

As for my dreams, well, this day was part of making them happen. And I had made up my mind to go, whether Horace joined me or not.

"Will you be back in time to perform?" Horace asked.

"Aye, the Bell Savage Inn is just on Ludgate Hill. I'll come back here to change, then join my cousin Arthur and his musicians in plenty of time," I said, tearing open the parcel. "Oh, marvelous!"

Horace had found a boy's cap, a short walking cloak, hose, a pair of breeches, and just as he'd said, a very fine pair of boots made for work or walking—boots far sturdier than my fancy velvet pumps with soft leather soles.

"Emilia, what if Sir Francis finds out?"

"Horace, stop fretting. No one will find out!" I snapped, slipping behind some stacked barrels to change. "I'm not even sure I'll tell Fannie."

"You won't tell Fannie? I thought Frances Walsingham was like a sister to you," Horace protested.

"She is. But . . . but there's no sense taking the chance she'll

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tell her parents,” I said. “I know they wouldn’t approve. And I don’t want to anger my benefactors: I owe Sir Francis and Lady Walsingham a lot for taking me in after Papa died and letting me study with Fannie’s tutor.

“I love my Bassano cousins, but if I had to live with Cousin Arthur and his wife, I’d never read another book again, Horace. They already have three children under five. Why, I’d spend my days wiping babies’ bottoms!”

“You can’t be sure Sir Francis won’t find out, Emilia,” Horace argued. “They say he knows *everything* that goes on in England and has a network of intelligence gatherers as vast as stars in the sky.”

“I can well believe it. His office is in the house and we see all sorts of people coming and going from Seething Lane, day and night,” I said as I wriggled into my disguise. “Fannie worries her father is working himself to death trying to protect the queen from plots against her life.”

I folded my own clothes and placed them in the bottom of my leather satchel. It felt strange not to have petticoats and a long gown floating around me. Strange, but wonderful. *I can even run if I want to—or have to*, I thought.

“I love these boots! Now, are you ready to see me transformed?” I jumped out.

WOOO! WOOO! Mousekin howled in alarm, lifting her small black muzzle to the sky.

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“Even Mouse doesn’t know you,” Horace laughed. “You look every bit a servant lad. Be careful, though, to keep your long curls tucked under the cap.”

I opened the door and we looked both ways. The corridor was empty. Moments later, we stepped outside.

“I’ve got to get back,” said Horace. “Promise you’ll be careful, Em.”

“I’ll blend into the crowd like a mouse at a great feast. And if anyone does bother me, I have *this* Mouse to protect me.”

“That I’d like to see. Off you go, Mousie.” Horace handed over my favorite bundle of fur. “Be a good girl for your mistress—and don’t you get into trouble either.”



### Act I, Scene 2, On muddy London roads

Once we were on the road heading toward Ludgate Hill, I arranged my walking cloak so only Mouse’s muzzle and eyes stuck out.

“I only have a penny left, and that’s for our entrance fee, Mousie,” I whispered. “So we’ll have to walk—no river ferry today. And we definitely don’t have time for you to stop and sniff.”

London’s roads were so bad, most people got around the city on boats that carried people up and down the River



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Thames. But I'd given Horace nearly all my savings to buy a disguise.

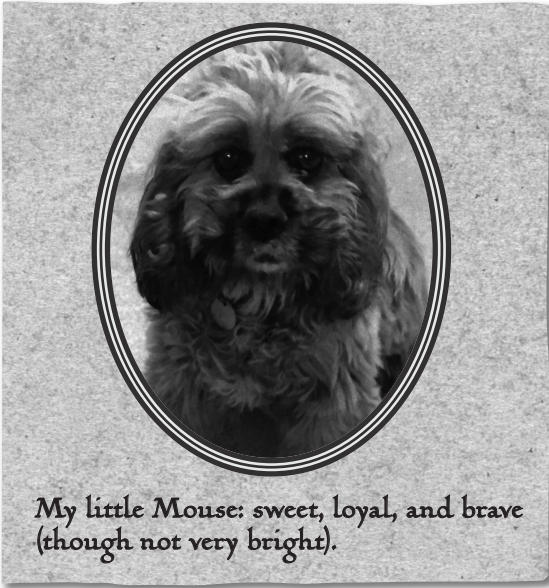
"Now, Mousekin, I'm sorry to tell you, but this also means we have no money for treats. You'll have to do without a hot pie." Despite her small size, Mouse had the appetite of a wolfhound.

It had rained hard in the night and the road was little more than a stream of churned-up mire. Wagon and cart drivers struggled to keep their loads from overturning. I was stepping around a puddle when a man yelled, "Watch out!"



The best way to travel from Whitehall Palace to Ludgate Hill was by boat on the Thames, but I'd spent all my coins on a disguise.

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Whirling, I saw a large bay horse lurching toward me, its hooves slipping in slick mud. It pulled a wagon piled high with cabbages from the countryside. The heavy cart listed to one side like a boat on choppy waters.

“It’s about to tip!” someone shouted.

I jumped out of the way, smashing into a large woman balancing a basket of laundry on her hip. Startled, she shoved me with her other hand. I fell, slipping to one knee in the puddle.

*Woof! Woof!* Mouse howled in fright and squirmed like a wriggling eel. “No!” I yelled, holding her tight. “You’ll be trampled!”

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Thankfully, the wagon righted itself just as a skinny boy leaned close to help me up—close enough to pick the small cloth purse that hung from a leather cord from my belt.



So what set all the events of this tale in motion?

Was it the horse; the cart; my scared, squirming spaniel?

Or perhaps it was me, with all my rushing and scheming—doing whatever it took to get to the Bell Savage Inn that day.

You see, I'd fallen under the spell of the stage. And I couldn't let anything stop me from seeing a play.