

## THE LETTERS

My hands tremble as I turn the pages, though I have read each one many times. When my fingers brush lightly over the heart his quill has carved into the page — something catches in my chest. *Wherever I am, I am yours*, he had written, but I hardened myself to the agony of his yearning.

Instead, I turn my thoughts to the subject of his devotion. I imagine the elation she felt when she received his letters, the excitement. Was it love, or pride over being desired by the most powerful man in England? Or was there already, beneath the excitement, a quiet thread of fear, that instinct women have always had about men who love too fiercely and expect too much in return? Only she knew. My heart is heavy because what I do know, and what she could not, is how their story ends.

I am sitting in the manuscript reading room of the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana — the Pope's private library — and the letter before me belongs to Anne Boleyn.

It is not widely known that the seventeen letters Henry VIII wrote to Anne Boleyn are not held in England. They are here, in Rome, buried in the Vatican archives, where they have remained largely hidden from public view for five hundred years. No one knows with certainty how they came to be here. The most plausible explanation is that they were stolen by agents loyal to Katherine of Aragon — likely spirited to Rome as evidence or leverage.

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Whatever brought them here, their presence is one of history's quiet ironies: the love letters of the man who broke with Rome to marry the woman he wrote them to are locked away within the walls of the very authority he defied.

I had spent months trying to see them.

Since 1883, the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana has been open to what the Vatican delicately terms *qualified readers* — a designation requiring advance approval stringent enough to discourage most casual inquiries. I had been commissioned by a historical journal to report on the condition of the letters. But gaining access required a lengthy correspondence with the head of the manuscript department - conducted entirely on his end in Italian - before I finally received the letter of *Ammissione*.

Along with my friend Jan, a devoted Tudor enthusiast and photographer, I entered St. Peter's Square on a morning of ferocious Roman sunshine, and stood for a moment before the Basilica — finding it more imposing and surreal than any photograph had prepared me for.

Asking for directions in a bookstore, we were sent across the square by a clerk who added, with a note of skepticism: *As if you will get in.*

This, as it turned out, was not entirely without merit.

We located the Porta di Sant'Anna, identifiable by the Swiss Guards who have protected the Vatican without interruption for more than five hundred years. The guards we met were young and blond, immaculate in their blue uniforms, and deeply unimpressed by our documentation. Why was there no date of entry? Why was the letter a computer printout? I had no satisfying answers. What I had was a photo ID, a signed letter, and the heat of a Roman summer pressing down on us. The guard relented — on one condition. “Madam,” he said, eyeing my shoulders, “cover yourself.” I retrieved a pashmina from my bag without comment because we were close, and I was not going

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to lose ground over a bare shoulder. As we passed through, I asked why the Swiss Guard served in Italy. He answered without a flicker of hesitation. “Because we are the best.”

There was no arguing with that either.

At the second checkpoint, a clerk behind glass informed me that my identification was not acceptable. My companion could proceed. I would remain.

I weighed my next words.

“Sir,” I said. “It is my name on that letter. If anyone is proceeding, it is me. My identification is acceptable to the United States and to the Swiss Guard. I would think it sufficient for the Vatican Library.”

A silence followed. Our documents were returned, along with two passes to the pharmacy. “You may leave,” he said.

Jan looked at the passes. “The pharmacy? We're not going to—” I gripped her by the arm and headed for the door. We never found the pharmacy, never looked for it, and proceeded toward the Cortile del Belvedere.

The guard received us graciously and escorted us to an entrance at the far end of the courtyard. A porter guided us to a hallway where we were told to wait. Twenty minutes passed in a silence so complete that the building seemed to be holding its breath. When the heavy doors opened, the man who received us examined my documents, questioned me at length, and finally seemed satisfied. He issued me a Vatican Library card, then placed a thick sheaf of papers into my hands. “These are the rules,” he said. “Read them. Come back tomorrow. Alone.”

No photographic equipment. No pens. No sharp objects. No cellular telephone. No food. And, much more.

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The following morning, I returned alone, shoulders covered, armed with pencils — blunt enough, I hoped, to satisfy the prohibition on sharp objects. When I reached the gate, I raised my card. The guard motioned a group of students aside and waved me through with a small, private smile.

The reading room was large and luminous, its vaulted ceiling centered on an ornate painted medallion, its marble floors cream and white with a deep red border. Three tall windows filled the room with natural light. Statues stood in niches along the opposite wall. At the far end, a thoroughly modern digital clock displayed the time in bright blue numerals — an incongruous detail I found oddly comforting, as though time here still moved in the ordinary direction.

I registered, provided document numbers, and filled in a questionnaire. The librarian studied the screen and looked up, genuinely surprised. “That is a special document,” he said. I agreed.

Fifty-five minutes passed. I memorized the ceiling medallion and the floor tiles. I watched the handsome young priest at the adjacent table turn the pages of what appeared to be ancient sheet music with his bare hands and wondered why he had permission to touch them.

After an additional twenty minutes, a librarian came through a side door pushing a cart. On top lay a thin volume clad in pale blue paper — the kind I remembered from covering schoolbooks as a child.

He picked it up and gestured for me to approach the counter.

“This is what you came for,” he said, handing me the book.

I must have stood there longer than I realized. The weight of the book was negligible. The weight of what was inside it was something else entirely. Someone had taken the letters Henry

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VIII wrote to Anne Boleyn nearly five hundred years ago and placed them — without ceremony, without white gloves, without protective glass between us — directly into my hands.

I carried the book to my seat with the careful attention one gives a sleeping child, and opened it.

And there was Henry's first letter. I thought of Anne.

So much has been made of her in the centuries since — her brilliance, her political instincts, her elegance, her reckless tongue. But when these letters were written, she was simply a young woman basking in the admiration of a man described by his contemporaries as the handsomest prince in Christendom, who had fixed his considerable attention entirely upon her.

I stayed with the letters for a long time, until I returned to the page where he had pressed that small, careful heart into the paper.

*Wherever I am, I am yours.*

She had believed him.

I closed the book with the care it deserved and returned it to the counter. The librarian tucked it under his arm with the casual ease of a man collecting the morning newspaper and disappeared through the door. Just like that, the letters were gone — returned to the dark, to the vault, to five more centuries of waiting.

I had come to report on their condition. I had my notes. What I hadn't anticipated was carrying something else out with me entirely.

The article found its readers, and later another author retraced my steps through the Angel Gate, past the Swiss Guards, and into the manuscript reading room. A book followed. Then lectures. I like to think Anne Boleyn would have approved.

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But the Vatican had seen enough. No further requests from private individuals have been granted since. Whatever door was briefly open has quietly closed again.

Years later, I received questions from the set designers of *The Tudors*, a popular television series. What did the letters actually look like? How close had I been?

I answered as carefully as I could. It seemed the least I could do for the Queen.