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PHILIPPA GREGORY



THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL PHILIPPA GREGORY

THE NUMBER 1 BESTSELLER



THE CONSTANT PRINCESS PHILIPPA GREGORY

THE NUMBER 1 BESTSELLER



THE BOLEYN INHERITANCE PHILIPPA GREGORY

THE NUMBER 1 BESTSELLER

PHILIPPA GREGORY

TUDOR COLLECTION VOLUME 1

The Constant Princess
The Other Boleyn Girl
The Boleyn Inheritance

HARPER

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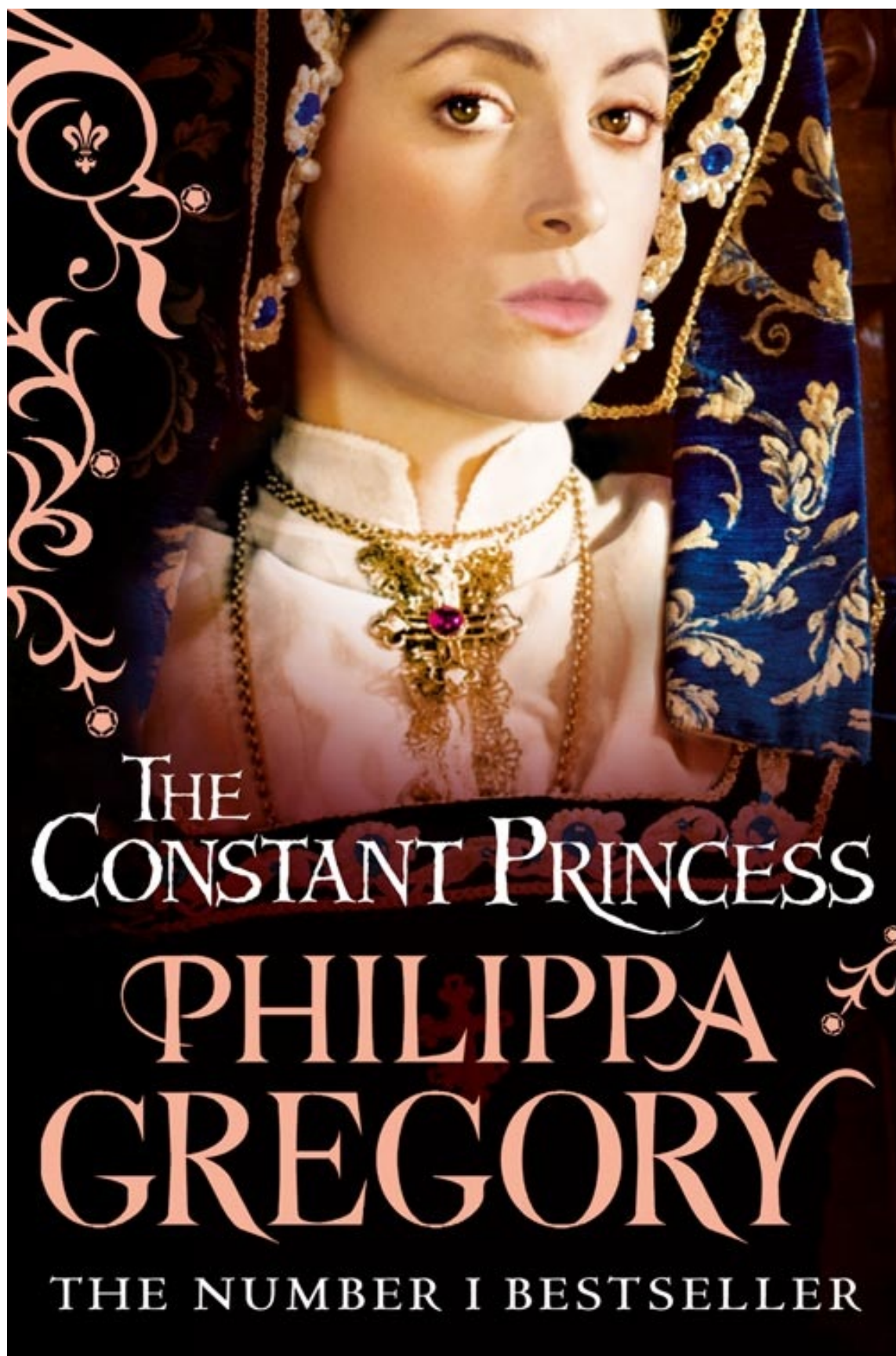
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THE
CONSTANT PRINCESS

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THE CONSTANT PRINCESS

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Author's Note

Letters

They tell me nothing but lies here and they think they
can break my spirit. But I believe what I choose and
say nothing. I am not as simple as I seem.

Katherine

My Lord and dear husband, I commend me unto you. The hour of
my death draweth fast on, and my case being such the tender love I
owe you forceth me, with a few words, to put you in remembrance
of the health and safeguard of your soul which you ought to prefer
before all worldly matters, and before the care and tenderness of
your own body, for the which you have cast me into many miseries
and your self into many cares... For my part I do pardon you all.
Yea, I do wish and devoutly pray God that He will pardon you.

Lastly, I make this vow, that mine eyes desire you above all things.
Farewell.

Katherine of Aragon

Princess of Wales

Granada, 1491

There was a scream, and then the loud roar of fire enveloping silken hangings, then a mounting crescendo of shouts of panic that spread and spread from one tent to another as the flames ran too, leaping from one silk standard to another, running up guy ropes and bursting through muslin doors. Then the horses were neighing in terror and men shouting to calm them, but the terror in their own voices made it worse, until the whole plain was alight with a thousand raging blazes, and the night swirled with smoke and rang with shouts and screams.

The little girl, starting up out of her bed in her fear, cried out in Spanish for her mother and screamed: 'The Moors? Are the Moors coming for us?'

'Dear God, save us, they are firing the camp!' her nurse gasped. 'Mother of God, they will rape me, and spit you on their sickle blades.'

'Mother!' cried the child, struggling from her bed. 'Where is my mother?'

She dashed outside, her nightgown flapping at her legs, the hangings of her tent now alight and blazing up behind her in an inferno of panic. All the thousand, thousand tents in the camp were ablaze, sparks pouring up into the dark night sky like fiery fountains, blowing like a swarm of fireflies to carry the disaster onwards.

'Mother!' She screamed for help.

Out of the flames came two huge, dark horses, like great, mythical beasts moving as one, jet black against the brightness of the fire. High up, higher than one could dream, the child's mother bent down to speak to her daughter who was trembling, her head no higher than the horse's shoulder. 'Stay with your nurse and be a good girl,' the woman commanded, no trace of fear in her voice. 'Your father and I have to ride out and show ourselves.'

'Let me come with you! Mother! I shall be burned. Let me come! The Moors will get me!' The little girl reached her arms up to her mother.

The firelight glinted weirdly off the mother's breastplate, off the embossed greaves of her legs, as if she were a metal woman, a woman of silver and gilt, as she leaned forwards to command. 'If the men don't see me, then they will desert,' she said sternly. 'You don't want that.'

‘I don’t care!’ the child wailed in her panic. ‘I don’t care about anything but you! Lift me up!’

‘The army comes first,’ the woman mounted high on the black horse ruled. ‘I have to ride out.’

She turned her horse’s head from her panic-stricken daughter. ‘I will come back for you,’ she said over her shoulder. ‘Wait there. I have to do this now.’

Helpless, the child watched her mother and father ride away. ‘Madre!’ she whimpered. ‘Madre! Please!’ but the woman did not turn.

‘We will be burned alive!’ Madilla, her servant, screamed behind her. ‘Run! Run and hide!’

‘You can be quiet.’ The child rounded on her with sudden angry spite. ‘If I, the Princess of Wales herself, can be left in a burning campsite, then you, who are nothing but a Morisco anyway, can certainly endure it.’

She watched the two horses go to and fro among the burning tents. Everywhere they went the screams were stilled and some discipline returned to the terrified camp. The men formed lines, passing buckets all the way to the irrigation channel, coming out of terror back into order. Desperately, their general ran among his men, beating them with the side of his sword into a scratch battalion from those who had been fleeing only a moment before, and arrayed them in defence formation on the plain, in case the Moors had seen the pillar of fire from their dark battlements, and sallied out to attack and catch the camp in chaos. But no Moors came that night; they stayed behind the high walls of their castle and wondered what fresh devilry the mad Christians were creating in the darkness, too fearful to come out to the inferno that the Christians had made, suspecting that it must be some infidel trap.

The five-year-old child watched her mother’s determination conquer fire itself, her queenly certainty douse panic, her belief in success overcome the reality of disaster and defeat. The little girl perched on one of the treasure chests, tucked her nightgown around her bare toes, and waited for the camp to settle.

When the mother rode back to her daughter she found her dry-eyed and steady.

‘Catalina, are you all right?’ Isabella of Spain dismounted and turned to her youngest, most precious daughter, restraining herself from pitching to her knees and hugging the little girl. Tenderness would not raise this child as a warrior for Christ, weakness must not be encouraged in a princess.

The child was as iron-spined as her mother. ‘I am all right now,’ she said.

‘You weren’t afraid?’

‘Not at all.’

The woman nodded her approbation. ‘That is good,’ she said. ‘That is what I expect of a princess of Spain.’

‘And Princess of Wales,’ her daughter added.



This is me, this little five-year-old girl, perching on the treasure chest with a face white as marble and blue eyes wide with fear, refusing to tremble, biting my lips so I don't cry out again. This is me, conceived in a camp by parents who are rivals as well as lovers, born in a moment snatched between battles in a winter of torrential floods, raised by a strong woman in armour, on campaign for all of my childhood, destined to fight for my place in the world, to fight for my faith against another, to fight for my word against another's: born to fight for my name, for my faith and for my throne. I am Catalina, Princess of Spain, daughter of the two greatest monarchs the world has ever known: Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon. Their names are feared from Cairo to Baghdad to Constantinople to India and beyond by all the Moors in all their many nations: Turks, Indians, Chinamen; our rivals, admirers, enemies till death. My parents' names are blessed by the Pope as the finest kings to defend the faith against the might of Islam, they are the greatest crusaders of Christendom as well as the first kings of Spain; and I am their youngest daughter, Catalina, Princess of Wales, and I will be Queen of England.

Since I was a child of three I have been betrothed in marriage to Prince Arthur, son of King Henry of England, and when I am fifteen I shall sail to his country in a beautiful ship with my standard flying at the top of the mast, and I shall be his wife and then his queen. His country is rich and fertile – filled with fountains and the sound of dripping water, ripe with warm fruits and scented with flowers; and it will be my country, I shall take care of it. All this has been arranged almost since my birth, I have always known it will be; and though I shall be sorry to leave my mother and my home, after all, I was born a princess, destined to be queen, and I know my duty.

I am a child of absolute convictions. I know that I will be Queen of England because it is God's will, and it is my mother's order. And I believe, as does everyone in my world, that God and my mother are generally of the same mind; and their will is always done.



In the morning the campsite outside Granada was a dank mess of smouldering hangings, destroyed tents, heaps of smoky forage, everything destroyed by one candle carelessly set. There could be nothing but retreat. The Spanish army had ridden out in its pride to set siege to the last great kingdom of the Moors in Spain, and had been burned to nothing. It would have to ride back again, to regroup.

‘No, we don’t retreat,’ Isabella of Spain ruled.

The generals, called to a makeshift meeting under a singed awning, batted away the flies that were swarming around the camp, feasting off the wreckage.

‘Your Majesty, we have lost for this season,’ one of the generals said gently to her. ‘It is not a matter of pride nor of willingness. We have no tents, we have no shelter, we have been destroyed by ill luck. We will have to go back and provision ourselves once more, set the siege again. Your husband –’ he nodded to the dark, handsome man who stood slightly to one side of the group, listening – he knows this. We all know this. We will set the siege again, they will not defeat us. But a good general knows when he has to retreat.’

Every man nodded. Common sense dictated that nothing could be done but release the Moors of Granada from their siege for this season. The battle would keep. It had been coming for seven centuries. Each year had seen generations of Christian kings increase their lands at the cost of the Moors. Every battle had pushed back the time-honoured Moorish rule of al Andalus a little further to the south. Another year would make no difference. The little girl, her back against a damp tent post that smelled of wet embers, watched her mother’s serene expression. It never changed.

‘Indeed it *is* a matter of pride,’ she corrected him. ‘We are fighting an enemy who understands pride better than any other. If we crawl away in our singed clothes, with our burned carpets rolled up under our arms, they will laugh themselves to al-Yanna, to their paradise. I cannot permit it. But more than all of this: it is God’s will that we fight the Moors, it is God’s will that we go forwards. It is not God’s will that we go back. So we must go forwards.’

The child’s father turned his head with a quizzical smile but he did not dissent. When the generals looked to him he made a small gesture with his hand. ‘The queen is right,’ he said. ‘The queen is always right.’

‘But we have no tents, we have no camp!’

He directed the question to her. ‘What do you think?’

‘We shall build one,’ she decided.

‘Your Majesty, we have laid waste to the countryside for miles all around. I daresay we could not sew so much as a kamiz for the Princess of Wales. There is no cloth. There is no canvas. There are no watercourses, no crops in the fields. We have broken the canals and ploughed up the crops. We have laid them waste; but it is we that are destroyed.’

‘So we build in stone. I take it we have stone?’

The king turned a brief laugh into clearing his throat. ‘We are surrounded by a plain of arid rocks, my love,’ he said. ‘One thing we do have is stone.’

‘Then we will build, not a camp, but a city of stone.’

‘It cannot be done!’

She turned to her husband. ‘It will be done,’ she said. ‘It is God’s will and mine.’

He nodded. ‘It will be done.’ He gave her a quick, private smile. ‘It is my duty to see that God’s will is done; and my pleasure to enforce yours.’



The army, defeated by fire, turned instead to the elements of earth and water. They toiled like slaves in the heat of the sun and the chill of the evenings. They worked the fields like peasants where they had thought they would triumphantly advance. Everyone, cavalry officers, generals, the great lords of the country, the cousins of kings, was expected to toil in the heat of the sun and lie on hard, cold ground at night. The Moors, watching from the high, impenetrable battlements of the red fort on the hill above Granada, conceded that the Christians had courage. No-one could say that they were not determined. And equally, everyone knew that they were doomed. No force could take the red fort at Granada, it had never fallen in two centuries. It was placed high on a cliff, overlooking a plain that was itself a wide, bleached bowl. It could not be surprised by a hidden attack. The cliff of red rock that towered up from the plain became imperceptibly the walls of red stone of the castle, rising high and higher; no scaling ladders could reach the top, no party could climb the sheer face.

Perhaps it could be betrayed by a traitor; but what fool could be found who would abandon the steady, serene power of the Moors, with all the known world behind them, with an undeniable faith to support them, to join the rabid madness of the Christian army whose kings owned only a few mountainous acres of Europe and who were hopelessly divided? Who would want to leave al-Yanna,

the garden, which was the image of paradise itself, inside the walls of the most beautiful palace in Spain, the most beautiful palace in Europe, for the rugged anarchy of the castles and fortresses of Castile and Aragon?

Reinforcements would come for the Moors from Africa, they had kin and allies from Morocco to Senegal. Support would come for them from Baghdad, from Constantinople. Granada might look small compared with the conquests that Ferdinand and Isabella had made, but standing behind Granada was the greatest empire in the world – the empire of the Prophet, praise be his name.

But, amazingly, day after day, week after week, slowly, fighting the heat of the spring days and the coldness of the nights, the Christians did the impossible. First there was a chapel built in the round like a mosque, since the local builders could do that most quickly; then, a small house, flat-roofed inside an Arabic courtyard, for King Ferdinand, Queen Isabella and the royal family: the Infante, their precious son and heir, the three older girls, Isabel, Maria, Juana, and Catalina the baby. The queen asked for nothing more than a roof and walls, she had been at war for years, she did not expect luxury. Then there were a dozen stone hovels around them where the greatest lords reluctantly took some shelter. Then, because the queen was a hard woman, there were stables for the horses and secure stores for the gunpowder and the precious explosives for which she had pawned her own jewels to buy from Venice; then, and only then, were built barracks and kitchens, stores and halls. Then there was a little town, built in stone, where once there had been a little camp. No-one thought it could be done; but, bravo! it was done. They called it Santa Fe and Isabella had triumphed over misfortune once again. The doomed siege of Granada by the determined, foolish Christian kings would continue.



Catalina, Princess of Wales, came upon one of the great lords of the Spanish camp in whispered conference with his friends. ‘What are you doing, Don Hernando?’ she asked with all the precocious confidence of a five-year-old who had never been far from her mother’s side, whose father could deny her very little.

‘Nothing, Infanta,’ Hernando Perez del Pulgar said with a smile that told her that she could ask again.

‘You are.’

‘It’s a secret.’

‘I won’t tell.’

‘Oh! Princess! You would tell. It is such a great secret! Too big a secret for a little girl.’

‘I won’t! I really won’t! I truly won’t!’ She thought. ‘I promise upon Wales.’

‘On Wales! On your own country?’

‘On England?’

‘On England? Your inheritance?’

She nodded. ‘On Wales and on England, and on Spain itself.’

‘Well, then. If you make such a sacred promise I will tell you. Swear that you won’t tell your mother?’

She nodded, her blue eyes wide.

‘We are going to get into the Alhambra. I know a gate, a little postern gate, that is not well guarded, where we can force an entry. We are going to go in, and guess what?’

She shook her head vigorously, her auburn plait swinging beneath her veil like a puppy’s plump tail.

‘We are going to say our prayers in their mosque. And I am going to leave an Ave Maria stabbed to the floor with my dagger. What d’you think of that?’

She was too young to realise that they were going to a certain death. She had no idea of the sentries at every gate, of the merciless rage of the Moors. Her eyes lit up in excitement. ‘You are?’

‘Isn’t it a wonderful plan?’

‘When are you going?’

‘Tonight! This very night!’

‘I shan’t sleep till you come back!’

‘You must pray for me, and then go to sleep, and I will come myself, Princess, and tell you and your mother all about it in the morning.’

She swore she would never sleep and she lay awake, quite rigid in her little cot-bed, while her maid tossed and turned on the rug at the door. Slowly, her eyelids drooped until the lashes lay on the round cheeks, the little plump hands unclenched and Catalina slept.

But in the morning, he did not come, his horse was missing from its stall and his friends were absent. For the first time in her life, the little girl had some sense of the danger he had run – mortal danger, and for nothing but glory and to be featured in some song.

‘Where is he?’ she asked. ‘Where is Hernando?’

The silence of her maid, Madilla, warned her. ‘He will come?’ she asked,

suddenly doubtful. 'He will come back?'



Slowly, it dawns on me that perhaps he will not come back, that life is not like a ballad, where a vain hope is always triumphant and a handsome man is never cut down in his youth. But if he can fail and die, then can my father die? Can my mother die? Can I? Even I? Little Catalina, Infanta of Spain and Princess of Wales?

I kneel in the sacred circular space of my mother's newly built chapel; but I am not praying. I am puzzling over this strange world that is suddenly opening up before me. If we are in the right – and I am sure of that; if these handsome young men are in the right – and I am sure of that – if we and our cause are under the especial hand of God, then how can we ever fail?

But if I have misunderstood something, then something is very wrong, and we are all indeed mortal, perhaps we can fail. Even handsome Hernando Perez del Pulgar and his laughing friends, even my mother and father can fail. If Hernando can die, then so too can my mother and father. And if this is so, then what safety is there in the world? If Madre can die, like a common soldier, like a mule pulling a baggage cart, as I have seen men and mules die, then how can the world go on? How could there be a God?



Then it was time for her mother's audience for petitioners and friends, and suddenly he was there, in his best suit, his beard combed, his eyes dancing, and the whole story spilled out: how they had dressed in their Arab clothes so as to pass for townspeople in the darkness, how they had crept in through the postern gate, how they had dashed up to the mosque, how they had kneeled and gabbled an Ave Maria and stabbed the prayer into the floor of the mosque, and then, surprised by guards, they had fought their way, hand to hand, thrust and parry, blades flashing in the moonlight; back down the narrow street, out of the door that they had forced only moments earlier, and were away into the night before the full alarm had been sounded. Not a scratch on them, not a man lost. A triumph for them and a slap in the face for Granada.

It was a great joke to play on the Moors, it was the funniest thing in the

world to take a Christian prayer into the very heart of their holy place. It was the most wonderful gesture to insult them. The queen was delighted, the king too, the princess and her sisters looked at their champion, Hernando Perez del Pulgar, as if he were a hero from the romances, a knight from the time of Arthur at Camelot. Catalina clapped her hands in delight at the story, and commanded that he tell it and re-tell it, over and over again. But in the back of her mind, pushed far away from thought, she remembered the chill she had felt when she had thought that he was not coming back.

Next, they waited for the reply from the Moors. It was certain to happen. They knew that their enemy would see the venture as the challenge that it was, there was bound to be a response. It was not long in coming.

The queen and her children were visiting Zubia, a village near to Granada, so Her Majesty could see the impregnable walls of the fort herself. They had ridden out with a light guard and the commander was white with horror when he came dashing up to them in the little village square and shouted that the gates of the red fort had opened and the Moors were thundering out, the full army, armed for attack. There was no time to get back to camp, the queen and the three princesses could never outrun Moorish horsemen on Arab stallions, there was nowhere to hide, there was nowhere even to make a stand.

In desperate haste Queen Isabella climbed to the flat roof of the nearest house, pulling the little princess by her hand up the crumbling stairs, her sisters running behind. 'I have to see! I have to see!' she exclaimed.

'Madre! You are hurting me!'

'Quiet, child. We have to see what they intend.'

'Are they coming for us?' the child whimpered, her little voice muffled by her own plump hand.

'They may be. I have to see.'

It was a raiding party, not the full force. They were led by their champion, a giant of a man, dark as mahogany, a glint of a smile beneath his helmet, riding a huge black horse as if he were Night riding to overwhelm them. His horse snarled like a dog at the watching guard, its teeth bared.

'Madre, who is that man?' the Princess of Wales whispered to her mother, staring from the vantage point of the flat roof of the house.

'That is the Moor called Yarfe, and I am afraid he has come for your friend, Hernando.'

'His horse looks so frightening, like it wants to bite.'

'He has cut off its lips to make it snarl at us. But we are not made fearful by

such things. We are not frightened children.'

'Should we not run away?' asked the frightened child.

Her mother, watching the Moor parade, did not even hear her daughter's whisper.

'You won't let him hurt Hernando, will you? Madre?'

'Hernando laid the challenge. Yarfe is answering it. We will have to fight,' she said levelly. 'Yarfe is a knight, a man of honour. He cannot ignore the challenge.'

'How can he be a man of honour if he is a heretic? A Moor?'

'They are most honourable men, Catalina, though they are unbelievers. And this Yarfe is a hero to them.'

'What will you do? How shall we save ourselves? This man is as big as a giant.'

'I shall pray,' Isabella said. 'And my champion Garallosco de la Vega will answer Yarfe for Hernando.'

As calmly as if she were in her own chapel at Cordoba, Isabella knelt on the roof of the little house and gestured that her daughters should do the same. Sulkily, Catalina's older sister, Juana, dropped to her knees, the princesses Isabel and Maria, her other two older sisters, followed suit. Catalina saw, peeping through her clasped hands as she knelt in prayer, that Maria was shaking with fear, and that Isabel, in her widow's gown, was white with terror.

'Heavenly Father, we pray for the safety of ourselves, of our cause, and of our army.' Queen Isabella looked up at the brilliantly blue sky. 'We pray for the victory of Your champion, Garallosco de la Vega, at this time of his trial.'

'Amen,' the girls said promptly, and then followed the direction of their mother's gaze to where the ranks of the Spanish guard were drawn up, watchful and silent.

'If God is protecting him...' Catalina started.

'Silence,' her mother said gently. 'Let him do his work, let God do His, and let me do mine.' She closed her eyes in prayer.

Catalina turned to her eldest sister and pulled at her sleeve. 'Isabel, if God is protecting him, then how can he be in danger?'

Isabel looked down at her little sister. 'God does not make the way smooth for those He loves,' she said in a harsh whisper. 'He sends hardships to try them. Those that God loves the best are those who suffer the worst. I know that. I, who lost the only man that I will ever love. You know that. Think about Job, Catalina.'

‘Then how shall we win?’ the little girl demanded. ‘Since God loves Madre, won’t He send her the worst hardships? And so how shall we ever win?’

‘Hush,’ their mother said. ‘Watch. Watch and pray with faith.’

Their small guard and the Moorish raiding party were drawn up opposite each other, ready for battle. Then Yarfe rode forwards on his great black charger. Something white bobbed at the ground, tied to the horse’s glossy black tail. There was a gasp as the soldiers in the front rank recognised what he had. It was the Ave Maria that Hernando had left speared to the floor of the mosque. The Moor had tied it to the tail of his horse as a calculated insult, and now rode the great creature forwards and back before the Christian ranks, and smiled when he heard their roar of rage.

‘Heretic,’ Queen Isabella whispered. ‘A man damned to hell. God strike him dead and scourge his sin.’

The queen’s champion, de la Vega, turned his horse and rode towards the little house where the royal guards ringed the courtyard, the tiny olive tree, the doorway. He pulled up his horse beside the olive tree and doffed his helmet, looking up at his queen and the princesses on the roof. His dark hair was curly and sparkling with sweat from the heat, his dark eyes sparkled with anger. ‘Your Grace, do I have your leave to answer his challenge?’

‘Yes,’ the queen said, never shrinking for a moment. ‘Go with God, Garallosco de la Vega.’

‘That big man will kill him,’ Catalina said, pulling at her mother’s long sleeve. ‘Tell him he must not go. Yarfe is so much bigger. He will murder de la Vega!’

‘It will be as God wills,’ Isabella maintained, closing her eyes in prayer.

‘Mother! Your Majesty! He is a giant. He will kill our champion.’

Her mother opened her blue eyes and looked down at her daughter and saw her little face was flushed with distress and her eyes were filling with tears. ‘It will be as God wills it,’ she repeated firmly. ‘You have to have faith that you are doing God’s will. Sometimes you will not understand, sometimes you will doubt, but if you are doing God’s will you cannot be wrong, you cannot go wrong. Remember it, Catalina. Whether we win this challenge or lose it, it makes no difference. We are soldiers of Christ. You are a soldier of Christ. If we live or die, it makes no difference. We will die in faith, that is all that matters. This battle is God’s battle, He will send a victory, if not today, then tomorrow. And whichever man wins today, we do not doubt that God will win, and we will win in the end.’

‘But de la Vega...’ Catalina protested, her fat lower lip trembling.

‘Perhaps God will take him to His own this afternoon,’ her mother said steadily. ‘We should pray for him.’

Juana made a face at her little sister, but when their mother kneeled again the two girls clasped hands for comfort. Isabel kneeled beside them, Maria beside her. All of them squinted through their closed eyelids to the plain where the bay charger of de la Vega rode out from the line of the Spaniards, and the black horse of the Moor trotted proudly before the Saracens.

The queen kept her eyes closed until she had finished her prayer, she did not even hear the roar as the two men took up their places, lowered their visors, and clasped their lances.

Catalina leapt to her feet, leaning over the low parapet so that she could see the Spanish champion. His horse thundered towards the other, racing legs a blur, the black horse came as fast from the opposite direction. The clash when the two lances smacked into solid armour could be heard on the roof of the little house, as both men were flung from their saddles by the force of the impact, the lances smashed, their breastplates buckled. It was nothing like the ritualised jousts of the court. It was a savage impact designed to break a neck or stop a heart.

‘He is down! He is dead!’ Catalina cried out.

‘He is stunned,’ her mother corrected her. ‘See, he is getting up.’

The Spanish knight staggered to his feet, unsteady as a drunkard from the heavy blow to his chest. The bigger man was up already, helmet and heavy breastplate cast aside, coming for him with a huge sickle sword at the ready, the light flashing off the razor-sharp edge. De la Vega drew his own great weapon. There was a tremendous crash as the swords smacked together and then the two men locked blades and struggled, each trying to force the other down. They circled clumsily, staggering under the weight of their armour and from their concussion; but there could be no doubt that the Moor was the stronger man. The watchers could see that de la Vega was yielding under the pressure. He tried to spring back and get free; but the weight of the Moor was bearing down on him and he stumbled and fell. At once the black knight was on top of him, forcing him downwards. De la Vega’s hand closed uselessly on his long sword, he could not bring it up. The Moor raised his sword to his victim’s throat, ready to give the death blow, his face a black mask of concentration, his teeth gritted. Suddenly he gave a loud cry and fell back. De la Vega rolled up, scrabbled to his feet, crawling on his hands and knees like a rising dog.

The Moor was down, plucking at his breast, his great sword dropped to one

side. In de la Vega's left hand was a short stabbing dagger stained with blood, a hidden weapon used in a desperate riposte. With a superhuman effort the Moor got to his feet, turned his back on the Christian and staggered towards his own ranks. 'I am lost,' he said to the men who ran forwards to catch him. 'We have lost.'

At a hidden signal the great gates of the red fort opened and the soldiers started to pour out. Juana leapt to her feet. 'Madre, we must run!' she screamed. 'They are coming! They are coming in their thousands!'

Isabella did not rise from her knees, even when her daughter dashed across the roof and ran down the stairs. 'Juana, come back,' she ordered in a voice like a whip crack. 'Girls, you will pray.'

She rose and went to the parapet. First she looked to the marshalling of her army, saw that the officers were setting the men into formation ready for a charge as the Moorish army, terrifying in their forward rush, came pouring on. Then she glanced down to see Juana, in a frenzy of fear, peeping around the garden wall, unsure whether to run for her horse or back to her mother.

Isabella, who loved her daughter, said not another word. She returned to the other girls and kneeled with them. 'Let us pray,' she said and closed her eyes.



'She didn't even look!' Juana repeated incredulously that night when they were in their room, washing their hands and changing their dirty clothes, Juana's tear-streaked face finally clean. 'There we are, in the middle of a battle, and she closes her eyes!'

'She knew that she would do more good appealing for the intercession of God than running around crying,' Isabel said pointedly. 'And it gave the army better heart than anything else to see her, on her knees, in full sight of everyone.'

'What if she had been hit by an arrow or a spear?'

'She was not. We were not. And we won the battle. And you, Juana, behaved like a half-mad peasant. I was ashamed of you. I don't know what gets into you. Are you mad or just wicked?'

'Oh, who cares what you think, you stupid widow?'

6th January 1492



Day by day the heart went out of the Moors. The Queen's Skirmish turned out to be their last battle. Their champion was dead, their city encircled, they were starving in the land that their fathers had made fertile. Worse, the promised support from Africa had failed them, the Turks had sworn friendship but the janissaries did not come, their king had lost his nerve, his son was a hostage with the Christians, and before them were the Princes of Spain, Isabella and Ferdinand, with all the power of Christendom behind them, with a holy war declared and a Christian crusade gathering pace with the scent of success. Within a few days of the meeting of the champions, Boabdil, the King of Granada, had agreed terms of peace, and a few days after, in the ceremony planned with all the grace that was typical of the Moors of Spain, he came down on foot to the iron gates of the city with the keys to the Alhambra Palace on a silken pillow and handed them over to the King and Queen of Spain in a complete surrender.

Granada, the red fort that stood above the city to guard it, and the gorgeous palace which was hidden inside the walls – the Alhambra – were given to Ferdinand and to Isabella.

Dressed in the gorgeous silks of their defeated enemy, turbaned, slippered, glorious as caliphs, the Spanish royal family, glittering with the spoils of Spain, took Granada. That afternoon Catalina, the Princess of Wales, walked with her parents up the winding, steep path through the shade of tall trees, to the most beautiful palace in Europe, slept that night in the brilliantly tiled harem and woke to the sound of rippling water in marble fountains, and thought herself a Moorish princess born to luxury and beauty, as well as a Princess of England.



And this is my life, from this day of victory. I had been born as a child of the camp, following the army from siege to battle, seeing things that perhaps no child should see, facing adult fears every day. I had marched past the bodies of dead soldiers rotting in the spring heat because there was no time to bury them, I had ridden behind mules whipped into staggering bloodstained corpses, pulling my father's guns through the high passes of the Sierra. I saw my mother slap a man's face for weeping with exhaustion. I heard children of my own age

crying for their parents burned at the stake for heresy; but at this moment, when we dressed ourselves in embroidered silk and walked into the red fort of Granada and through the gates to the white pearl that is the Alhambra Palace, at this moment I became a princess for the first time.

I became a girl raised in the most beautiful palace in Christendom, protected by an impregnable fort, blessed by God among all others, I became a girl of immense, unshakeable confidence in the God that had brought us to victory, and in my destiny as His most favourite child and my mother's most favourite daughter.

Alhambra proved to me, once and for all, that I was uniquely favoured by God, as my mother had been favoured by God. I was his chosen child, raised in the most beautiful palace in Christendom, and destined for the highest things.



The Spanish family with their officers ahead and the royal guard behind, glorious as Sultans, entered the fort through the enormous square tower known as the Justice Gate. As the shadow of the first arch of the tower fell on Isabella's upturned face the trumpeters played a great shout of defiance, like Joshua before the walls of Jericho, as if they would frighten away the lingering devils of the infidel. At once there was an echo to the blast of sound, a shuddering sigh, from everyone gathered inside the gateway, pressed back against the golden walls, the women half-veiled in their robes, the men standing tall and proud and silent, watching, to see what the conquerors would do next. Catalina looked above the sea of heads and saw the flowing shapes of Arabic script engraved on the gleaming walls.

'What does that say?' she demanded of Madilla, her nursemaid.

Madilla squinted upwards. 'I don't know,' she said crossly. She always denied her Moorish roots. She always tried to pretend that she knew nothing of the Moors or their lives though she had been born and bred a Moor herself and only converted – according to Juana – for convenience.

'Tell us, or we'll pinch you,' Juana offered sweetly.

The young woman scowled at the two sisters. 'It says: "May God allow the justice of Islam to prevail within."'

Catalina hesitated for a moment, hearing the proud ring of certainty, a determination to match her own mother's voice.

'Well, He hasn't,' Juana said smartly. 'Allah has deserted the Alhambra and

Isabella has arrived. And if you Moors knew Isabella like we do, you would know that the greatest power is coming in and the lesser power going out.'

'God save the queen,' Madilla replied quickly. 'I know Queen Isabella well enough.'

As she spoke the great doors before them, black wood studded with black nails, swung open on their black hammered hinges, and with another blast of trumpets the king and queen strode into the inner courtyard.

Like dancers rehearsed till they were step-perfect, the Spanish guard peeled off to right and left inside the town walls, checking that the place was safe, and no despairing soldiers were preparing a last ambush. The great fort of the Alcazaba, built like the prow of a ship, jutting out over the plain of Granada, was to their left, and the men poured into it, running across the parade square, ringing the walls, running up and down the towers. Finally, Isabella the queen looked up to the sky, shaded her eyes with her hand clinking with Moorish gold bracelets, and laughed aloud to see the sacred banner of St James and the silver cross of the crusade flying where the crescent had been.

Then she turned to see the domestic servants of the palace slowly approaching, their heads bowed. They were led by the Grand Vizier, his height emphasised by his flowing robes, his piercing black eyes meeting hers, scanning King Ferdinand at her side, and the royal family behind them: the prince and the four princesses. The king and the prince were dressed as richly as sultans, wearing rich, embroidered tunics over their trousers, the queen and the princesses were wearing the traditional kamiz tunics made from the finest silks, over white linen trousers, with veils falling from their heads held back by filets of gold.

'Your Royal Highnesses, it is my honour and duty to welcome you to the Alhambra Palace,' the Grand Vizier said, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world to hand over the most beautiful palace in Christendom to armed invaders.

The queen and her husband exchanged one brief glance. 'You can take us in,' she said.

The Grand Vizier bowed and led the way. The queen glanced back at her children. 'Come along, girls,' she said and went ahead of them, through the gardens surrounding the palace, down some steps and into the discreet doorway.

'This is the main entrance?' She hesitated before the small door set in the unmarked wall.

The man bowed. 'Your Highness, it is.'

Isabella said nothing but Catalina saw her raise her eyebrows as if she did not think much of it, and then they all went inside.



But the little doorway is like a keyhole to a treasure chest of boxes, the one opening out from another. The man leads us through them like a slave opening doors to a treasury. Their very names are a poem: the Golden Chamber, the Courtyard of the Myrtles, the Hall of the Ambassadors, the Courtyard of the Lions, or the Hall of the Two Sisters. It will take us weeks to find our way from one exquisitely tiled room to another. It will take us months to stop marvelling at the pleasure of the sound of water running down the marble gulleys in the rooms, flowing to a white marble fountain that always spills over with the cleanest, freshest water of the mountains. And I will never tire of looking through the white stucco tracery to the view of the plain beyond, the mountains, the blue sky and golden hills. Every window is like a frame for a picture, they are designed to make you stop, look and marvel. Every window frame is like white-work embroidery – the stucco is so fine, so delicate, it is like sugar-work by confectioners, not like anything real.

We move into the harem as the easiest and most convenient rooms for my three sisters and me, and the harem servants light the braziers in the cool evenings, and scatter the scented herbs as if we were the sultanas who lived secluded behind the screens for so long. We have always worn Moorish dress at home and sometimes at great state occasions so still there is the whisper of silks and the slap of slippers on marble floors, as if nothing has changed. Now, we study where the slave girls read, we walk in the gardens that were planted to delight the favourites of the sultan. We eat their fruits, we love the taste of their sherbets, we tie their flowers into garlands for our own heads, and we run down their allées where the heavy scent of roses and honeysuckle is sweet in the cool of the morning.

We bathe in the hammam, standing stock still while the servants lather us all over with a rich soap that smells of flowers. Then they pour golden ewer after golden ewer of hot water over us, splashing from head to toe, to wash us clean. We are soothed with rose oil, wrapped in fine sheets and lie, half-drunk with sensual pleasure, on the warm marble table that dominates the entire room, under the golden ceiling where the star-shaped openings admit dazzling rays of sunlight into the shadowy peace of the place. One girl manicures our toes while

another works on our hands, shaping the nails and painting delicate patterns of henna. We let the old woman pluck our eyebrows, paint our eyelashes. We are served as if we are sultanas, with all the riches of Spain and all the luxury of the East, and we surrender utterly to the delight of the palace. It captivates us, we swoon into submission; the so-called victors.

Even Isabel, grieving for the loss of her husband, starts to smile again. Even Juana, who is usually so moody and so sulky, is at peace. And I become the pet of the court, the favourite of the gardeners who let me pick my own peaches from the trees, the darling of the harem where I am taught to play and dance and sing, and the favourite of the kitchen where they let me watch them preparing the sweet pastries and dishes of honey and almonds of Arabia.

My father meets with foreign emissaries in the Hall of the Ambassadors, he takes them to the bath house for talks, like any leisurely sultan. My mother sits cross-legged on the throne of the Nasrids who have ruled here for generations, her bare feet in soft leather slippers, the drapery of her kamiz falling around her. She listens to the emissaries of the Pope himself, in a chamber that is walled with coloured tiles and dancing with pagan light. It feels like home to her, she was raised in the Alcazar in Seville, another Moorish palace. We walk in their gardens, we bathe in their hammam, we step into their scented leather slippers and we live a life that is more refined and more luxurious than they could dream of in Paris or London or Rome. We live graciously. We live, as we have always aspired to do, like Moors. Our fellow Christians herd goats in the mountains, pray at roadside cairns to the Madonna, are terrified by superstition and lousy with disease, live dirty and die young. We learn from Moslem scholars, we are attended by their doctors, study the stars in the sky which they have named, count with their numbers which start at the magical zero, eat of their sweetest fruits and delight in the waters which run through their aqueducts. Their architecture pleases us, at every turn of every corner we know that we are living inside beauty. Their power now keeps us safe; the Alcazabar is, indeed, invulnerable to attack once more. We learn their poetry, we laugh at their games, we delight in their gardens, in their fruits, we bathe in the waters they have made flow. We are the victors but they have taught us how to rule. Sometimes I think that we are the barbarians, like those who came after the Romans or the Greeks, who could invade the palaces and capture the aqueducts, and then sit like monkeys on a throne, playing with beauty but not understanding it.

We do not change our faith, at least. Every palace servant has to give lip

service to the beliefs of the One True Church. The horns of the mosque are silenced, there is to be no call to prayer in my mother's hearing. And anyone who disagrees can either leave for Africa at once, convert at once, or face the fires of the Inquisition. We do not soften under the spoils of war, we never forget that we are victors and that we won our victory by force of arms and by the will of God. We made a solemn promise to poor King Boabdil, that his people, the Moslems, should be as safe under our rule as the Christians were safe under his. We promise the *convivencia* – a way of living together – and they believe that we will make a Spain where anyone, Moor or Christian or Jew, can live quietly and with self-respect since all of us are 'People of the Book'. Their mistake is that they meant that truce, and they trusted that truce, and we – as it turns out – do not.

We betray our word in three months, expelling the Jews and threatening the Moslems. Everyone must convert to the True Faith and then, if there is any shadow of doubt, or any suspicion against them, their faith will be tested by the Holy Inquisition. It is the only way to make one nation: through one faith. It is the only way to make one people out of the great varied diversity which had been *al Andalus*. My mother builds a chapel in the council chamber and where it had once said 'Enter and ask. Do not be afraid to seek justice for here you will find it,' in the beautiful shapes of Arabic, she prays to a sterner, more intolerant God than Allah; and no-one comes for justice any more.

But nothing can change the nature of the palace. Not even the stamp of our soldiers' feet on the marble floors can shake the centuries-old sense of peace. I make Madilla teach me what the flowing inscriptions mean in every room, and my favourite is not the promises of justice, but the words written in the Courtyard of the Two Sisters which says: 'Have you ever seen such a beautiful garden?' and then answers itself: 'We have never seen a garden with greater abundance of fruit, nor sweeter, nor more perfumed.'

It is not truly a palace, not even as those we had known at Cordoba or Toledo. It is not a castle, nor a fort. It was built first and foremost as a garden with rooms of exquisite luxury so that one could live outside. It is a series of courtyards designed for flowers and people alike. It is a dream of beauty: walls, tiles, pillars melting into flowers, climbers, fruit and herbs. The Moors believe that a garden is a paradise on earth, and they have spent fortunes over the centuries to make this '*al-Yanna*': the word that means garden, secret place, and paradise.

I know that I love it. Even as a little child I know that this is an exceptional

place; that I will never find anywhere more lovely. And even as a child I know that I cannot stay here. It is God's will and my mother's will that I must leave al-Yanna, my secret place, my garden, my paradise. It is to be my destiny that I should find the most beautiful place in all the world when I am just six years old, and then leave it when I am fifteen; as homesick as Boabdil, as if happiness and peace for me will only ever be short-lived.

Dogmersfield Palace, Hampshire, Autumn 1501

‘I say, you cannot come in! If you were the King of England himself – you could not come in.’

‘I *am* the King of England,’ Henry Tudor said, without a flicker of amusement. ‘And she can either come out right now, or I damned well will come in and my son will follow me.’

‘The Infanta has already sent word to the king that she cannot see him,’ the duenna said witheringly. ‘The noblemen of her court rode out to explain to him that she is in seclusion, as a lady of Spain. Do you think the King of England would come riding down the road when the Infanta has refused to receive him? What sort of a man do you think he is?’

‘Exactly like this one,’ he said and thrust his fist with the great gold ring towards her face. The Count de Cabra came into the hall in a rush, and at once recognised the lean forty-year-old man threatening the Infanta’s duenna with a clenched fist, a few aghast servitors behind him, and gasped out: ‘The king!’

At the same moment the duenna recognised the new badge of England, the combined roses of York and Lancaster, and recoiled. The count skidded to a halt and threw himself into a low bow.

‘It is the king,’ he hissed, his voice muffled by speaking with his head on his knees. The duenna gave a little gasp of horror and dropped into a deep curtsy.

‘Get up,’ the king said shortly. ‘And fetch her.’

‘But she is a princess of Spain, Your Grace,’ the woman said, rising but with her head still bowed low. ‘She is to stay in seclusion. She cannot be seen by you before her wedding day. This is the tradition. Her gentlemen went out to explain to you...’

‘It’s *your* tradition. It’s not *my* tradition. And since she is my daughter-in-law in my country, under my laws, she will obey my tradition.’

‘She has been brought up most carefully, most modestly, most properly...’

‘Then she will be very shocked to find an angry man in her bedroom. Madam, I suggest that you get her up at once.’

‘I will not, Your Grace. I take my orders from the Queen of Spain herself

and she charged me to make sure that every respect was shown to the Infanta and that her behaviour was in every way...’

‘Madam, you can take your working orders from me; or your marching orders from me. I don’t care which. Now send the girl out or I swear on my crown I will come in and if I catch her naked in bed then she won’t be the first woman I have ever seen in such a case. But she had better pray that she is the prettiest.’

The Spanish duenna went quite white at the insult.

‘Choose,’ the king said stonily.

‘I cannot fetch the Infanta,’ she said stubbornly.

‘Dear God! That’s it! Tell her I am coming in at once.’

She scuttled backwards like an angry crow, her face blanched with shock. Henry gave her a few moments to prepare, and then called her bluff by striding in behind her.

The room was lit only by candles and firelight. The covers of the bed were turned back as if the girl had hastily jumped up. Henry registered the intimacy of being in her bedroom, with her sheets still warm, the scent of her lingering in the enclosed space, before he looked at her. She was standing by the bed, one small white hand on the carved wooden post. She had a cloak of dark blue thrown over her shoulders and her white nightgown trimmed with priceless lace peeped through the opening at the front. Her rich auburn hair, plaited for sleep, hung down her back, but her face was completely shrouded in a hastily thrown mantilla of dark lace.

Dona Elvira darted between the girl and the king. ‘This is the Infanta,’ she said. ‘Veiled until her wedding day.’

‘Not on my money,’ Henry Tudor said bitterly. ‘I’ll see what I’ve bought, thank you.’

He stepped forwards. The desperate duenna nearly threw herself to her knees. ‘Her modesty...’

‘Has she got some awful mark?’ he demanded, driven to voice his deepest fear. ‘Some blemish? Is she scarred by the pox and they did not tell me?’

‘No! I swear.’

Silently, the girl put out her white hand and took the ornate lace hem of her veil. Her duenna gasped a protest but could do nothing to stop the princess as she raised the veil, and then flung it back. Her clear blue eyes stared into the lined, angry face of Henry Tudor without wavering. The king drank her in, and then gave a little sigh of relief at the sight of her.

She was an utter beauty: a smooth, rounded face, a straight, long nose, a full, sulky, sexy mouth. Her chin was up, he saw; her gaze challenging. This was no shrinking maiden fearing ravishment. This was a fighting princess standing on her dignity even in this most appalling moment of embarrassment.

He bowed. 'I am Henry Tudor, King of England,' he said.

She curtseyed.

He stepped forwards and saw her curb her instinct to flinch away. He took her firmly at the shoulders, and kissed one warm, smooth cheek and then the other. The perfume of her hair and the warm, female smell of her body came to him and he felt desire pulse in his groin and at his temples. Quickly he stepped back and let her

go.

'You are welcome to England,' he said. He cleared his throat. 'You will forgive my impatience to see you. My son too is on his way to visit you.'

'I beg your pardon,' she said icily, speaking in perfectly phrased French. 'I was not informed until a few moments ago that Your Grace was insisting on the honour of this unexpected visit.'

Henry fell back a little from the whip of her temper. 'I have a right...'

She shrugged, an absolutely Spanish gesture. 'Of course. You have every right over me.'

At the ambiguous, provocative words, he was again aware of his closeness to her: of the intimacy of the small room, the tester bed hung with rich draperies, the sheets invitingly turned back, the pillow still impressed with the shape of her head. It was a scene for ravishment, not for a royal greeting. Again he felt the secret thud-thud of lust.

'I'll see you outside,' he said abruptly, as if it was her fault that he could not rid himself of the flash in his mind of what it would be like to have this ripe little beauty that he had bought. What would it be like if he had bought her for himself, rather than for his son?

'I shall be honoured,' she said coldly.

He got himself out of the room briskly enough, and nearly collided with Prince Arthur, hovering anxiously in the doorway.

'Fool,' he remarked.

Prince Arthur, pale with nerves, pushed his blond fringe back from his face, stood still and said nothing.

'I'll send that duenna home at the first moment I can,' the king said. 'And the rest of them. She can't make a little Spain in England, my son. The country

won't stand for it, and I damned well won't stand for it.'

'People don't object. The country people seem to love the princess,' Arthur suggested mildly. 'Her escort says...'

'Because she wears a stupid hat. Because she is odd: Spanish, rare. Because she is young and –' he broke off – pretty.'

'Is she?' he gasped. 'I mean: is she?'

'Haven't I just gone in to make sure? But no Englishman will stand for any Spanish nonsense once they get over the novelty. And neither will I. This is a marriage to cement an alliance; not to flatter her vanity. Whether they like her or not, she's marrying you. Whether you like her or not, she's marrying you. Whether she likes it or not, she's marrying you. And she'd better get out here now or I won't like her and that will be the only thing that can make a difference.'



I have to go out, I have won only the briefest of reprieves and I know he is waiting for me outside the door to my bedchamber and he has demonstrated, powerfully enough, that if I do not go to him, then the mountain will come to Mohammed and I will be shamed again.

I brush Dona Elvira aside as a duenna who cannot protect me now, and I go to the door of my rooms. My servants are frozen, like slaves enchanted in a fairy tale by this extraordinary behaviour from a king. My heart hammers in my ears and I know a girl's embarrassment at having to step forwards in public, but also a soldier's desire to let battle be joined, the eagerness to know the worst, to face danger rather than evade it.

Henry of England wants me to meet his son, before his travelling party, without ceremony, without dignity as if we were a scramble of peasants. So be it. He will not find a princess of Spain falling back for fear. I grit my teeth, I smile as my mother commanded me.

I nod to my herald, who is as stunned as the rest of my companions. 'Announce me,' I order him.

His face blank with shock, he throws open the door. 'The Infanta Catalina, Princess of Spain and Princess of Wales,' he bellows.

This is me. This is my moment. This is my battle cry.

I step forwards.



The Spanish Infanta – with her face naked to every man’s gaze – stood in the darkened doorway and then walked into the room, only a little flame of colour in both cheeks betraying her ordeal.

At his father’s side, Prince Arthur swallowed. She was far more beautiful than he had imagined, and a million times more haughty. She was dressed in a gown of dark black velvet, slashed to show an undergown of carnation silk, the neck cut square and low over her plump breasts, hung with ropes of pearls. Her auburn hair, freed from the plait, tumbled down her back in a great wave of red-gold. On her head was a black lace mantilla flung determinedly back. She swept a deep curtsy and came up with her head held high, graceful as a dancer.

‘I beg your pardon for not being ready to greet you,’ she said in French. ‘If I had known you were coming I would have been prepared.’

‘I’m surprised you didn’t hear the racket,’ the king said. ‘I was arguing at your door for a good ten minutes.’

‘I thought it was a pair of porters brawling,’ she said coolly.

Arthur suppressed a gasp of horror at her impertinence; but his father was eyeing her with a smile as if a new filly was showing promising spirit.

‘No. It was me; threatening your lady-in-waiting. I am sorry that I had to march in on you.’

She inclined her head. ‘That was my duenna, Dona Elvira. I am sorry if she displeased you. Her English is not good. She cannot have understood what you wanted.’

‘I wanted to see my daughter-in-law, and my son wanted to see his bride, and I expect an English princess to behave like an English princess, and not like some damned sequestered girl in a harem. I thought your parents had beaten the Moors. I didn’t expect to find them set up as your models.’

Catalina ignored the insult with a slight turn of her head. ‘I am sure that you will teach me good English manners,’ she said. ‘Who better to advise me?’ She turned to Prince Arthur and swept him a royal curtsy. ‘My lord.’

He faltered in his bow in return, amazed at the serenity that she could muster in this most embarrassing of moments. He reached into his jacket for her present, fumbled with the little purse of jewels, dropped them, picked them up again and finally thrust them towards her, feeling like a fool.

She took them and inclined her head in thanks, but did not open them. ‘Have you dined, Your Grace?’

‘We’ll eat here,’ he said bluntly. ‘I ordered dinner already.’

‘Then can I offer you a drink? Or somewhere to wash and change your clothes before you dine?’ She examined the long, lean length of him consideringly, from the mud spattering his pale, lined face to his dusty boots. The English were a prodigiously dirty nation, not even a great house such as this one had an adequate hammam or even piped water. ‘Or perhaps you don’t like to wash?’

A harsh chuckle was forced from the king. ‘You can order me a cup of ale and have them send fresh clothes and hot water to the best bedroom and I’ll change before dinner.’ He raised a hand. ‘You needn’t take it as a compliment to you. I always wash before dinner.’

Arthur saw her nip her lower lip with little white teeth as if to refrain from some sarcastic reply. ‘Yes, Your Grace,’ she said pleasantly. ‘As you wish.’ She summoned her lady-in-waiting to her side and gave her low-voiced orders in rapid Spanish. The woman curtsied and led the king from the room.

The princess turned to Prince Arthur.

‘*Et tu?*’ she asked in Latin. ‘And you?’

‘I? What?’ he stammered.

He felt that she was trying not to sigh with impatience.

‘Would you like to wash and change your coat also?’

‘I’ve washed,’ he said. As soon as the words were out of his mouth he could have bitten off his own tongue. He sounded like a child being scolded by a nurse, he thought. ‘I’ve washed,’ indeed. What was he going to do next? Hold out his hands palms-upwards so that she could see he was a good boy?

‘Then will you take a glass of wine? Or ale?’

Catalina turned to the table, where the servants were hastily laying cups and flagons.

‘Wine.’

She raised a glass and a flagon and the two chinked together, and then chink-chink-chinked again. In amazement, he saw that her hands were trembling.

She poured the wine quickly and held it to him. His gaze went from her hand and the slightly rippled surface of the wine to her pale face.

She was not laughing at him, he saw. She was not at all at ease with him. His father’s rudeness had brought out the pride in her, but alone with him she was just a girl, some months older than him, but still just a girl. The daughter of the two most formidable monarchs in Europe; but still just a girl with shaking hands.

‘You need not be frightened,’ he said very quietly. ‘I am sorry about all this.’

He meant – your failed attempt to avoid this meeting, my father’s brusque informality, my own inability to stop him or soften him, and, more than anything else, the misery that this business must be for you: coming far from your home among strangers and meeting your new husband, dragged from your bed under protest.

She looked down. He stared at the flawless pallor of her skin, at the fair eyelashes and pale eyebrows.

Then she looked up at him. ‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘I have seen far worse than this, I have been in far worse places than this, and I have known worse men than your father. You need not fear for me. I am afraid of nothing.’



No-one will ever know what it cost me to smile, what it cost me to stand before your father and not tremble. I am not yet sixteen, I am far from my mother, I am in a strange country, I cannot speak the language and I know nobody here. I have no friends but the party of companions and servants that I have brought with me, and they look to me to protect them. They do not think to help me.

I know what I have to do. I have to be a Spanish princess for the English, and an English princess for the Spanish. I have to seem at ease where I am not, and assume confidence when I am afraid. You may be my husband, but I can hardly see you, I have no sense of you yet. I have no time to consider you, I am absorbed in being the princess that your father has bought, the princess that my mother has delivered, the princess that will fulfil the bargain and secure a treaty between England and Spain.

No-one will ever know that I have to pretend to ease, pretend to confidence, pretend to grace. Of course I am afraid. But I will never, never show it. And, when they call my name I will always step forwards.



The king, having washed and taken a couple of glasses of wine before he came to his dinner, was affable with the young princess, determined to overlook their introduction. Once or twice she caught him glancing at her sideways, as if to get the measure of her, and she turned to look at him, full on, one sandy eyebrow slightly raised as if to interrogate him.

‘Yes?’ he demanded.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said equably. ‘I thought Your Grace needed something. You glanced at me.’

‘I was thinking you’re not much like your portrait,’ he said.

She flushed a little. Portraits were designed to flatter the sitter, and when the sitter was a royal princess on the marriage market, even more so.

‘Better-looking,’ Henry said begrudgingly, to reassure her. ‘Younger, softer, prettier.’

She did not warm to the praise as he expected her to do. She merely nodded as if it were an interesting observation.

‘You had a bad voyage,’ Henry remarked.

‘Very bad,’ she said. She turned to Prince Arthur. ‘We were driven back as we set out from Corunna in August and we had to wait for the storms to pass. When we finally set sail it was still terribly rough, and then we were forced into Plymouth. We couldn’t get to Southampton at all. We were all quite sure we would be drowned.’

‘Well, you couldn’t have come overland,’ Henry said flatly, thinking of the parlous state of France and the enmity of the French king. ‘You’d be a priceless hostage for a king who was heartless enough to take you. Thank God you never fell into enemy hands.’

She looked at him thoughtfully. ‘Pray God I never do.’

‘Well, your troubles are over now,’ Henry concluded. ‘The next boat you are on will be the royal barge when you go down the Thames. How shall you like to become Princess of Wales?’

‘I have been the Princess of Wales ever since I was three years old,’ she corrected him. ‘They always called me Catalina, the Infanta, Princess of Wales. I knew it was my destiny.’ She looked at Arthur, who still sat silently observing the table. ‘I have known we would be married all my life. It was kind of you to write to me so often. It made me feel that we were not complete strangers.’

He flushed. ‘I was ordered to write to you,’ he said awkwardly. ‘As part of my studies. But I liked getting your replies.’

‘Good God, boy, you don’t exactly sparkle, do you?’ asked his father critically.

Arthur flushed scarlet to his ears.

‘There was no need to tell her that you were ordered to write,’ his father ruled. ‘Better to let her think that you were writing of your own choice.’

‘I don’t mind,’ Catalina said quietly. ‘I was ordered to reply. And, as it

happens, I should like us always to speak the truth to each other.'

The king barked out a laugh. 'Not in a year's time you won't,' he predicted. 'You will be all in favour of the polite lie then. The great saviour of a marriage is mutual ignorance.'

Arthur nodded obediently, but Catalina merely smiled, as if his observations were of interest, but not necessarily true. Henry found himself piqued by the girl, and still aroused by her prettiness.

'I daresay your father does not tell your mother every thought that crosses his mind,' he said, trying to make her look at him again.

He succeeded. She gave him a long, slow, considering gaze from her blue eyes. 'Perhaps he does not,' she conceded. 'I would not know. It is not fitting that I should know. But whether he tells her or not: my mother knows everything anyway.'

He laughed. Her dignity was quite delightful in a girl whose head barely came up to his chest. 'She is a visionary, your mother? She has the gift of Sight?'

She did not laugh in reply. 'She is wise,' she said simply. 'She is the wisest monarch in Europe.'

The king thought he would be foolish to bridle at a girl's devotion to her mother, and it would be graceless to point out that her mother might have unified the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon but that she was still a long way from creating a peaceful and united Spain. The tactical skill of Isabella and Ferdinand had forged a single country from the Moorish kingdoms, they had yet to make everyone accept their peace. Catalina's own journey to London had been disrupted by rebellions of Moors and Jews who could not bear the tyranny of the Spanish kings. He changed the subject. 'Why don't you show us a dance?' he demanded, thinking that he would like to see her move. 'Or is that not allowed in Spain either?'

'Since I am an English princess I must learn your customs,' she said. 'Would an English princess get up in the middle of the night and dance for the king after he forced his way into her rooms?'

Henry laughed at her. 'If she had any sense she would.'

She threw him a small, demure smile. 'Then I will dance with my ladies,' she decided, and rose from her seat at the high table and went down to the centre of the floor. She called one by name, Henry noted, Maria de Salinas, a pretty, dark-haired girl who came quickly to stand beside Catalina. Three other young women, pretending shyness but eager to show themselves off, came forwards.

Henry looked them over. He had asked Their Majesties of Spain that their daughter's companions should all be pretty, and he was pleased to see that however blunt and ill-mannered they had found his request, they had acceded to it. The girls were all good-looking but none of them outshone the princess who stood, composed, and then raised her hands and clapped, to order the musicians to play.

He noticed at once that she moved like a sensual woman. The dance was a pavane, a slow ceremonial dance, and she moved with her hips swaying and her eyes heavy-lidded, a little smile on her face. She had been well-schooled, any princess would be taught how to dance in the courtly world where dancing, singing, music and poetry mattered more than anything else; but she danced like a woman who let the music move her, and Henry, who had some experience, believed that women who could be summoned by music were the ones who responded to the rhythms of lust.

He went from pleasure in watching her to a sense of rising irritation that this exquisite piece would be put in Arthur's cold bed. He could not see his thoughtful, scholarly boy teasing and arousing the passion in this girl on the edge of womanhood. He imagined that Arthur would fumble about and perhaps hurt her, and she would grit her teeth and do her duty as a woman and a queen must, and then, like as not, she would die in childbirth; and the whole performance of finding a bride for Arthur would have to be undergone again, with no benefit for himself but only this irritated, frustrated arousal that she seemed to inspire in him. It was good that she was desirable, since she would be an ornament to his court; but it was a nuisance that she should be so very desirable to him.

Henry looked away from her dancing and comforted himself with the thought of her dowry which would bring him lasting benefit and come directly to him, unlike this bride who seemed bound to unsettle him and must go, however mismatched, to his son. As soon as they were married her treasurer would hand over the first payment of her dowry: in solid gold. A year later he would deliver the second part in gold and in her plate and jewels. Having fought his way to the throne on a shoestring and uncertain credit, Henry trusted the power of money more than anything in life; more even than his throne, for he knew he could buy a throne with money, and far more than women, for they are cheaply bought; and far, far more than the joy of a smile from a virgin princess who stopped her dance now, swept him a curtsy and came up smiling.

'Do I please you?' she demanded, flushed and a little breathless.

'Well enough,' he said, determined that she should never know how much.

‘But it’s late now and you should go back to your bed. We’ll ride with you a little way in the morning before we go ahead of you to London.’

She was surprised at the abruptness of his reply. Again, she glanced towards Arthur as if he might contradict his father’s plans; perhaps stay with her for the remainder of the journey, since his father had bragged of their informality. But the boy said nothing. ‘As you wish, Your Grace,’ she said politely.

The king nodded and rose to his feet. The court billowed into deep curtseys and bows as he stalked past them, out of the room. ‘Not so informal, at all,’ Catalina thought as she watched the King of England stride through his court, his head high. ‘He may boast of being a soldier with the manners of the camp, but he insists on obedience and on the show of deference. As indeed, he should,’ added Isabella’s daughter to herself.

Arthur followed behind his father with a quick ‘Goodnight’ to the princess as he left. In a moment all the men in their train had gone too, and the princess was alone but for her ladies.

‘What an extraordinary man,’ she remarked to her favourite, Maria de Salinas.

‘He liked you,’ the young woman said. ‘He watched you very closely, he liked you.’

‘And why should he not?’ she asked with the instinctive arrogance of a girl born to the greatest kingdom in Europe. ‘And even if he did not, it is all already agreed, and there can be no change. It has been agreed for almost all my life.’



He is not what I expected, this king who fought his way to the throne and picked up his crown from the mud of a battlefield. I expected him to be more like a champion, like a great soldier, perhaps like my father. Instead he has the look of a merchant, a man who puzzles over profit indoors, not a man who won his kingdom and his wife at the point of a sword.

I suppose I hoped for a man like Don Hernando, a hero that I could look up to, a man I would be proud to call father. But this king is lean and pale like a clerk, not a knight from the romances at all.

I expected his court to be more grand, I expected a great procession and a formal meeting with long introductions and elegant speeches, as we would have done it in the Alhambra. But he is abrupt; in my view he is rude. I shall have to become accustomed to these northern ways, this scramble to do things, this

brusque ordering. I cannot expect things to be done well or even correctly. I shall have to overlook a lot until I am queen and can change things.

But, anyway, it hardly matters whether I like the king or he likes me. He has engaged in this treaty with my father and I am betrothed to his son. It hardly matters what I think of him, or what he thinks of me. It is not as if we will have to deal much together. I shall live and rule Wales and he will live and rule England, and when he dies it will be my husband on his throne and my son will be the next Prince of Wales, and I shall be queen.

As for my husband-to-be – oh! – he has made a very different first impression. He is so handsome! I did not expect him to be so handsome! He is so fair and slight, he is like a page boy from one of the old romances. I can imagine him waking all night in a vigil, or singing up to a castle window. He has pale, almost silvery skin, he has fine golden hair, and yet he is taller than me and lean and strong like a boy on the edge of manhood.

He has a rare smile, one that comes reluctantly and then shines. And he is kind. That is a great thing in a husband. He was kind when he took the glass of wine from me, he saw that I was trembling, and he tried to reassure me.

I wonder what he thinks of me? I do so wonder what he thinks of me?



Just as the king had ruled, he and Arthur went swiftly back to Windsor the next morning and Catalina's train, with her litter carried by mules, with her trousseau in great travelling chests, her ladies-in-waiting, her Spanish household, and the guards for her dowry treasure, laboured up the muddy roads to London at a far slower pace.

She did not see the prince again until their wedding day, but when she arrived in the village of Kingston-upon-Thames her train halted in order to meet the greatest man in the kingdom, the young Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, and Henry, Duke of York, the king's second son, who were appointed to accompany her to Lambeth Palace.

'I'll come out,' Catalina said hastily, emerging from her litter and walking quickly past the waiting horses, not wanting another quarrel with her strict duenna about young ladies meeting young men before their wedding day. 'Dona Elvira, say nothing. The boy is a child of ten years old. It doesn't matter. Not even my mother would think that it matters.'

'At least wear your veil!' the woman implored. 'The Duke of Buck...Buck...

whatever his name, is here too. Wear your veil when you go before him, for your own reputation, Infanta.'

'Buckingham,' Catalina corrected her. 'The Duke of Buckingham. And call me Princess of Wales. And you know I cannot wear my veil because he will have been commanded to report to the king. You know what my mother said: that he is the king's mother's ward, restored to his family fortunes, and must be shown the greatest respect.'

The older woman shook her head, but Catalina marched out bare-faced, feeling both fearful and reckless at her own daring, and saw the duke's men drawn up in array on the road and before them, a young boy: helmet off, bright head shining in the sunshine.

Her first thought was that he was utterly unlike his brother. While Arthur was fair-haired and slight and serious-looking, with a pale complexion and warm brown eyes, this was a sunny boy who looked as if he had never had a serious thought in his head. He did not take after his lean-faced father, he had the look of a boy for whom life came easily. His hair was red-gold, his face round and still baby-plump, his smile when he first saw her was genuinely friendly and bright, and his blue eyes shone as if he was accustomed to seeing a very pleasing world.

'Sister!' he said warmly, jumped down from his horse with a clatter of armour, and swept her a low bow.

'Brother Henry,' she said, curtsying back to him to precisely the right height, considering that he was only a second son of England, and she was an Infanta of Spain.

'I am so pleased to see you,' he said quickly, his Latin rapid, his English accent strong. 'I was so hoping that His Majesty would let me come to meet you before I had to take you into London on your wedding day. I thought it would be so awkward to go marching down the aisle with you, and hand you over to Arthur, if we hadn't even spoken. And call me Harry. Everyone calls me Harry.'

'I too am pleased to meet you, Brother Harry,' Catalina said politely, rather taken-aback at his enthusiasm.

'Pleased! You should be dancing with joy!' he exclaimed buoyantly. 'Because Father said that I could bring you the horse which was to be one of your wedding-day presents and so we can ride together to Lambeth. Arthur said you should wait for your wedding day, but I said, why should she wait? She won't be able to ride on her wedding day. She'll be too busy getting married. But if I take it to her now we can ride at once.'

'That was kind of you.'

‘Oh, I never take any notice of Arthur,’ Harry said cheerfully.

Catalina had to choke down a giggle. ‘You don’t?’

He made a face and shook his head. ‘Serious,’ he said. ‘You’ll be amazed how serious. And scholarly, of course, but not gifted. Everyone says I am very gifted, languages mostly, but music also. We can speak French together if you wish, I am extraordinarily fluent for my age. I am considered a pretty fair musician. And of course I am a sportsman. Do you hunt?’

‘No,’ Catalina said, a little overwhelmed. ‘At least, I only follow the hunt when we go after boar or wolves.’

‘Wolves? I should so like to hunt wolves. D’you really have bears?’

‘Yes, in the hills.’

‘I should so like to hunt a bear. Do you hunt wolves on foot like boar?’

‘No, on horseback,’ she said. ‘They’re very fast, you have to take very fast dogs to pull them down. It’s a horrid hunt.’

‘I shouldn’t mind that,’ he said. ‘I don’t mind anything like that. Everyone says I am terribly brave about things like that.’

‘I am sure they do,’ she said, smiling.

A handsome man in his mid-twenties came forwards and bowed. ‘Oh, this is Edward Stafford, the Duke of Buckingham,’ Harry said quickly. ‘May I present him?’

Catalina held out her hand and the man bowed again over it. His intelligent, handsome face was warm with a smile. ‘You are welcome to your own country,’ he said in faultless Castilian. ‘I hope everything has been to your liking on your journey? Is there anything I can provide for you?’

‘I have been well cared for indeed,’ Catalina said, blushing with pleasure at being greeted in her own language. ‘And the welcome I have had from people all along the way has been very kind.’

‘Look, here’s your new horse,’ Harry interrupted, as the groom led a beautiful black mare forwards. ‘You’ll be used to good horses, of course. D’you have Barbary horses all the time?’

‘My mother insists on them for the cavalry,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ he breathed. ‘Because they are so fast?’

‘They can be trained as fighting horses,’ she said, going forwards and holding out her hand, palm upwards, for the mare to sniff at and nibble at her fingers with a soft, gentle mouth.

‘Fighting horses?’ he pursued.

‘The Saracens have horses which can fight as their masters do, and the

Barbary horses can be trained to do it too,' she said. 'They rear up and strike down a soldier with their front hooves, and they will kick out behind, too. The Turks have horses that will pick up a sword from the ground and hand it back to the rider. My mother says that one good horse is worth ten men in battle.'

'I should so like to have a horse like that,' Harry said longingly. 'I wonder how I should ever get one?'

He paused, but she did not rise to the bait. 'If only someone would give me a horse like that, I could learn how to ride it,' he said transparently. 'Perhaps for my birthday, or perhaps next week, since it is not me getting married, and I am not getting any wedding gifts. Since I am quite left out, and quite neglected.'

'Perhaps,' said Catalina, who had once seen her own brother get his way with exactly the same wheedling.

'I should be trained to ride properly,' he said. 'Father has promised that though I am to go into the church I shall be allowed to ride at the quintain. But My Lady the King's Mother says I may not joust. And it's really unfair. I should be allowed to joust. If I had a proper horse I could joust, I am sure I would beat everyone.'

'I am sure you would,' she said.

'Well, shall we go?' he asked, seeing that she would not give him a horse for asking.

'I cannot ride, I do not have my riding clothes unpacked.'

He hesitated. 'Can't you just go in that?'

Catalina laughed. 'This is velvet and silk. I can't ride in it. And besides, I can't gallop around England looking like a mummer.'

'Oh,' he said. 'Well, shall you go in your litter then? Won't it make us very slow?'

'I am sorry for that, but I am ordered to travel in a litter,' she said. 'With the curtains drawn. I can't think that even your father would want me to charge around the country with my skirts tucked up.'

'Of course the princess cannot ride today,' the Duke of Buckingham ruled. 'As I told you. She has to go in her litter.'

Harry shrugged. 'Well, I didn't know. Nobody told me what you were going to wear. Can I go ahead then? My horses will be so much faster than the mules.'

'You can ride ahead but not out of sight,' Catalina decided. 'Since you are supposed to be escorting me you should be with me.'

'As I said,' the Duke of Buckingham observed quietly and exchanged a little smile with the princess.

‘I’ll wait at every crossroads,’ Harry promised. ‘I am escorting you, remember. And on your wedding day I shall be escorting you again. I have a white suit with gold slashing.’

‘How handsome you will look,’ she said, and saw him flush with pleasure.

‘Oh, I don’t know...’

‘I am sure everyone will remark what a handsome boy you are,’ she said, as he looked pleased.

‘Everyone always cheers most loudly for me,’ he confided. ‘And I like to know that the people love me. Father says that the only way to keep a throne is to be beloved by the people. That was King Richard’s mistake, Father says.’

‘My mother says that the way to keep the throne is to do God’s work.’

‘Oh,’ he said, clearly unimpressed. ‘Well, different countries, I suppose.’

‘So we shall travel together,’ she said. ‘I will tell my people that we are ready to move on.’

‘I will tell them,’ he insisted. ‘It is me who escorts you. I shall give the orders and you shall rest in your litter.’ He gave one quick sideways glance at her. ‘When we get to Lambeth Palace you shall stay in your litter till I come for you. I shall draw back the curtains and take you in, and you should hold my hand.’

‘I should like that very much,’ she assured him, and saw his ready rush of colour once again.

He bustled off and the duke bowed to her with a smile. ‘He is a very bright boy, very eager,’ he said. ‘You must forgive his enthusiasm. He has been much indulged.’

‘His mother’s favourite?’ she asked, thinking of her own mother’s adoration for her only son.

‘Worse still,’ the duke said with a smile. ‘His mother loves him as she should; but he is the absolute apple of his grandmother’s eye, and it is she who rules the court. Luckily he is a good boy, and well-mannered. He has too good a nature to be spoiled, and the king’s mother tempers her treats with lessons.’

‘She is an indulgent woman?’ she asked.

He gave a little gulp of laughter. ‘Only to her son,’ he said. ‘The rest of us find her – er – more majestic than motherly.’

‘May we talk again at Lambeth?’ Catalina asked, tempted to know more about this household that she was to join.

‘At Lambeth and London, I shall be proud to serve you,’ the young man said, his eyes warm with admiration. ‘You must command me as you wish. I shall be

your friend in England, you can call on me.'



I must have courage, I am the daughter of a brave woman and I have prepared for this all my life. When the young duke spoke so kindly to me there was no need for me to feel like weeping, that was foolish. I must keep my head up and smile. My mother said to me that if I smile no-one will know that I am homesick or afraid, I shall smile and smile however odd things seem.

And though this England seems so strange now, I will become accustomed. I will learn their ways and feel at home here. Their odd ways will become my ways, and the worst things – the things that I utterly cannot bear – those I shall change when I am queen. And anyway, it will be better for me than it was for Isabel, my sister. She was only married a few months and then she had to come home, a widow. Better for me than for Maria, who had to follow in Isabel's footsteps to Portugal, better for me than for Juana, who is sick with love for her husband Philip. It must be better for me than it was for Juan, my poor brother, who died so soon after finding happiness. And always better for me than for my mother, whose childhood was lived on a knife edge.

My story won't be like hers, of course. I have been born to less exciting times. I shall hope to make terms with my husband Arthur and with his odd, loud father, and with his sweet little braggart brother. I shall hope that his mother and his grandmother will love me or at the very least teach me how to be a Princess of Wales, a Queen of England. I shall not have to ride in desperate dashes by night from one besieged fortress to another, as my mother did. I shall not have to pawn my own jewels to pay mercenary soldiers, as she did. I shall not have to ride out in my own armour to rally my troops. I shall not be threatened by the wicked French on one side and the heretic Moors on the other, as my mother was. I shall marry Arthur and when his father dies – which must be soon, for he is so very old and so very bad-tempered – then we shall be King and Queen of England and my mother will rule in Spain as I rule in England and she will see me keep England in alliance with Spain as I have promised her, she will see me hold my country in an unbreakable treaty with hers, she will see I shall be safe forever.

London, 14th November 1501



On the morning of her wedding day Catalina was called early; but she had been awake for hours, stirring as soon as the cold, wintry sun had started to light the pale sky. They had prepared a great bath – her ladies told her that the English were amazed that she was going to wash before her wedding day and that most of them thought that she was risking her life. Catalina, brought up in the Alhambra where the bath houses were the most beautiful suite of rooms in the palace, centres of gossip, laughter and scented water, was equally amazed to hear that the English thought it perfectly adequate to bathe only occasionally, and that the poor people would bathe only once a year. She had already realised that the scent of musk and ambergris which had wafted in with the king and Prince Arthur had underlying notes of sweat and horse, and that she would live for the rest of her life among people who did not change their underwear from one year to the next. She had seen it as another thing that she must learn to endure, as an angel from heaven endures the privations of earth. She had come from al Yanna – the garden, the paradise – to the ordinary world. She had come from the Alhambra Palace to England, she had anticipated some disagreeable changes.

‘I suppose it is always so cold that it does not matter,’ she said uncertainly to Dona Elvira.

‘It matters to us,’ the duenna said. ‘And you shall bathe like an Infanta of Spain though all the cooks in the kitchen have had to stop what they are doing to boil up water.’

Dona Elvira had commanded a great tureen from the flesh kitchen which was usually deployed to scald beast carcasses, had it scoured by three scullions, lined it with linen sheets and filled it to the brim with hot water scattered with rose petals and scented with oil of roses brought from Spain. She lovingly supervised the washing of Catalina’s long white limbs, the manicuring of her toes, the filing of her fingernails, the brushing of her teeth and finally the three-rinse washing of her hair. Time after time the incredulous English maids toiled to the door to receive another ewer of hot water from exhausted page boys, and tipped it in the tub to keep the temperature of the bath hot.

‘If only we had a proper bath house,’ Dona Elvira mourned. ‘With steam and a tepidarium and a proper clean marble floor! Hot water on tap and somewhere for you to sit and be properly scrubbed.’

‘Don’t fuss,’ Catalina said dreamily as they helped her from the bath and

patted her all over with scented towels. One maid took her hair, squeezed out the water and rubbed it gently with red silk soaked in oil to give it shine and colour.

‘Your mother would be so proud of you,’ Dona Elvira said as they led the Infanta towards her wardrobe and started to dress her in layer after layer of shifts and gowns. ‘Pull that lace tighter, girl, so that the skirt lies flat. This is her day, as well as yours, Catalina. She said that you would marry him whatever it cost her.’



Yes, but she did not pay the greatest price. I know they bought me this wedding with a king’s ransom for my dowry, and I know that they endured long and hard negotiations, and I survived the worst voyage anyone has ever taken, but there was another price paid that we never speak of – wasn’t there? And the thought of that price is in my mind today, as it has been on the journey, as it was on the voyage, as it has been ever since I first heard of it.

There was a man of only twenty-four years old, Edward Plantagenet, the Duke of Warwick and a son of the kings of England, with – truth be told – a better claim to the throne of England than that of my father-in-law. He was a prince, nephew to the king, and of blood royal. He committed no crime, he did nothing wrong, but he was arrested for my sake, taken to the Tower for my benefit, and finally killed, beheaded on the block, for my gain, so that my parents could be satisfied that there were no pretenders to the throne that they had bought for me.

My father himself told King Henry himself that he would not send me to England while the Duke of Warwick was alive, and so I am like Death himself, carrying the scythe. When they ordered the ship for me to come to England: Warwick was a dead man.

They say he was a simpleton. He did not really understand that he was under arrest, he thought that he was housed in the Tower as a way of giving him honour. He knew he was the last of the Plantagenet princes, and he knew that the Tower has always been royal lodgings as well as a prison. When they put a pretender, a cunning man who had tried to pass himself off as a royal prince, into the room next door to poor Warwick, he thought it was for company. When the other man invited him to escape, he thought it was a clever thing to do, and like the innocent he was, he whispered of their plans where his guards could hear. That gave them the excuse they needed for a charge of treason. They

trapped him very easily, they beheaded him with little protest from anyone.

The country wants peace and the security of an unchallenged king. The country will wink at a dead claimant or two. I am expected to wink at it also. Especially as it is done for my benefit. It was done at my father's request, for me. To make my way smooth.

When they told me that he was dead, I said nothing, for I am an Infanta of Spain. Before anything else, I am my mother's daughter. I do not weep like a girl and tell all the world my every thought. But when I was alone in the gardens of the Alhambra in the evening with the sun going down and leaving the world cool and sweet, I walked beside a long canal of still water, hidden by the trees, and I thought that I would never walk in the shade of trees again and enjoy the flicker of hot sunshine through cool green leaves without thinking that Edward, Duke of Warwick, will see the sun no more, so that I might live my life in wealth and luxury. I prayed then that I might be forgiven for the death of an innocent man.

My mother and father have fought down the length of Castile and Aragon, have ridden the breadth of Spain to make justice run in every village, in the smallest of hamlets – so that no Spaniard can lose his life on the whim of another. Even the greatest lords cannot murder a peasant; they have to be ruled by the law. But when it came to England and to me, they forgot this. They forgot that we live in a palace where the walls are engraved with the promise: 'Enter and ask. Do not be afraid to seek justice for here you will find it.' They just wrote to King Henry and said that they would not send me until Warwick was dead, and in a moment, at their expressed wish, Warwick was killed.

And sometimes, when I do not remember to be Infanta of Spain nor Princess of Wales but just the Catalina who walked behind her mother through the great gate into the Alhambra Palace, and knew that her mother was the greatest power the world had ever known; sometimes I wonder childishly, if my mother has not made a great mistake? If she has not driven God's will too far? Farther even than God would want? For this wedding is launched in blood, and sails in a sea of innocent blood. How can such a wedding ever be the start of a good marriage? Must it not – as night follows sunset – be tragic and bloody too? How can any happiness ever come to Prince Arthur and to me that has been bought at such a terrible price? And if we could be happy would it not be an utterly sinfully-selfish joy?



Prince Harry, the ten-year-old Duke of York, was so proud of his white taffeta suit that he scarcely glanced at Catalina until they were at the west doors of St Paul's Cathedral and then he turned and stared, trying to see her face through the exquisite lace of the white mantilla. Ahead of them stretched a raised pathway, lined with red cloth, studded with golden nails, running at head height from the great doorway of the church where the citizens of London crowded to get a better view, up the long aisle to the altar where Prince Arthur stood, pale with nerves, six hundred slow ceremonial paces away.

Catalina smiled at the young boy at her side, and he beamed with delight. Her hand was steady on his proffered arm. He paused for a moment more, until everyone in the enormous church realised that the bride and prince were at the doorway, waiting to make their entrance, a hush fell, everyone craned to see the bride, and then, at the precise, most theatrical moment, he led her forwards.

Catalina felt the congregation murmur around her feet as she went past them, high on the stage that King Henry had ordered to be built so that everyone should see the flower of Spain meet the rosebush of England. The prince turned as she came towards him, but was blinded for a moment by irritation at the sight of his brother, leading the princess as if he himself were the bridegroom, glancing around as he walked, acknowledging the doffing of caps and the whispering of curtsies with his smug little smile, as if it were him that everyone had come to see.

Then they were both at Arthur's side and Harry had to step back, however reluctantly, as the princess and prince faced the archbishop together and kneeled together on the specially embroidered white taffeta cushions.

'Never has a couple been more married,' King Henry thought sourly, standing in the royal pew with his wife and his mother. 'Her parents trusted me no further than they would a snake, and my view of her father has always been that of a half-Moor huckster. Nine times they have been betrothed. This will be a marriage that nothing can break. Her father cannot wriggle from it, whatever second thoughts he has. He will protect me against France now; this is his daughter's inheritance. The very thought of our alliance will frighten the French into peace with me, and we must have peace.'

He glanced at his wife at his side. Her eyes were filled with tears, watching her son and his bride as the archbishop raised their clasped hands and wrapped them in his holy stole. Her face, beautiful with emotion, did not stir him. Who ever knew what she was thinking behind that lovely mask? Of her own marriage, the union of York and Lancaster which put her as a wife on the throne that she

could have claimed in her own right? Or was she thinking of the man she would have preferred as a husband? The king scowled. He was never sure of his wife, Elizabeth. In general, he preferred not to consider her.

Beyond her, his flint-faced mother, Margaret Beaufort, watched the young couple with a glimmer of a smile. This was England's triumph, this was her son's triumph, but far more than that, this was *her* triumph – to have dragged this base-born bastard family back from disaster, to challenge the power of York, to defeat a reigning king, to capture the very throne of England against all the odds. This was her making. It was her plan to bring her son back from France at the right moment to claim his throne. They were her alliances who gave him the soldiers for the battle. It was her battle plan which left the usurper Richard to despair on the field at Bosworth, and it was her victory that she celebrated every day of her life. And this was the marriage that was the culmination of that long struggle. This bride would give her a grandson, a Spanish-Tudor king for England, and a son after him, and after him: and so lay down a dynasty of Tudors that would be never-ending.

Catalina repeated the words of the marriage vow, felt the weight of a cold ring on her finger, turned her face to her new husband and felt his cool kiss, in a daze. When she walked back down that absurd walkway and saw the smiling faces stretching from her feet to the walls of the cathedral she started to realise that it was done. And when they went from the cool dark of the cathedral to the bright wintry sunlight outside and heard the roar of the crowd for Arthur and his bride, the Prince and Princess of Wales, she realised that she had done her duty finally and completely. She had been promised to Arthur from childhood, and now, at last, they were married. She had been named the Princess of Wales since she was three years old and now, at last, she had taken her name, and taken her place in the world. She looked up and smiled and the crowd, delighted with the free wine, with the prettiness of the young girl, with the promise of safety from civil war that could only come with a settled royal succession, roared their approval.



They were husband and wife; but they did not speak more than a few words to each other for the rest of the long day. There was a formal banquet, and though they were seated side by side, there were healths to be drunk and speeches to be attended to, and musicians playing. After the long dinner of many courses there

was an entertainment with poetry and singers and a tableau. No-one had ever seen so much money flung at a single occasion. It was a greater celebration than the king's own wedding, greater even than his own coronation. It was a redefinition of the English kingly state, and it told the world that this marriage of the Tudor rose to the Spanish princess was one of the greatest events of the new age. Two new dynasties were proclaiming themselves by this union: Ferdinand and Isabella of the new country that they were forging from al Andalus, and the Tudors who were making England their own.

The musicians played a dance from Spain and Queen Elizabeth, at a nod from her mother-in-law, leaned over and said quietly to Catalina, 'It would be a great pleasure for us all if you would dance.'

Catalina, quite composed, rose from her chair and went to the centre of the great hall as her ladies gathered around her, formed a circle and held hands. They danced the pavane, the same dance that Henry had seen at Dogmersfield, and he watched his daughter-in-law through narrowed eyes. Undoubtedly, she was the most beddable young woman in the room. A pity that a cold fish like Arthur would be certain to fail to teach her the pleasures that could be had between sheets. If he let them both go to Ludlow Castle she would either die of boredom or slip into complete frigidity. On the other hand, if he kept her at his side she would delight his eyes, he could watch her dance, he could watch her brighten the court. He sighed. He thought he did not dare.

'She is delightful,' the queen remarked.

'Let's hope so,' he said sourly.

'My lord?'

He smiled at her look of surprised inquiry. 'No, nothing. You are right, delightful indeed. And she looks healthy, doesn't she? As far as you can tell?'

'I am sure she is, and her mother assured me that she is most regular in her habits.'

He nodded. 'That woman would say anything.'

'But surely not; nothing that would mislead us? Not on a matter of such importance?' she suggested.

He nodded and let it go. The sweetness of his wife's nature and her faith in others was not something he could change. Since she had no influence on policy, her opinions did not matter. 'And Arthur?' he said. 'He seems to be growing and strong? I would to God he had the spirits of his brother.'

They both looked at young Harry who was standing, watching the dancers, his face flushed with excitement, his eyes bright.

‘Oh, Harry,’ his mother said indulgently. ‘But there has never been a prince more handsome and more full of fun than Harry.’

The Spanish dance ended and the king clapped his hands. ‘Now Harry and his sister,’ he commanded. He did not want to force Arthur to dance in front of his new bride. The boy danced like a clerk, all gangling legs and concentration. But Harry was raring to go and was on the floor with his sister Princess Margaret in a moment. The musicians knew the young royals’ taste in music and struck up a lively galliard. Harry tossed his jacket to one side and threw himself into the dance, stripped down to his shirtsleeves like a peasant.

There was a gasp from the Spanish grandees at the young prince’s shocking behaviour, but the English court smiled with his parents at his energy and enthusiasm. When the two had romped their way through the final turns and gallop, everyone applauded, laughing. Everyone but Prince Arthur, who was staring into the middle distance, determined not to watch his brother dance. He came to with a start only when his mother put her hand on his arm.

‘Please God he’s daydreaming of his wedding night,’ his father remarked to Lady Margaret his mother. ‘Though I doubt it.’

She gave a sharp laugh. ‘I can’t say I think much of the bride,’ she said critically.

‘You don’t?’ he asked. ‘You saw the treaty yourself.’

‘I like the price but the goods are not to my taste,’ she said with her usual sharp wit. ‘She is a slight, pretty thing, isn’t she?’

‘Would you rather a strapping milkmaid?’

‘I’d like a girl with the hips to give us sons,’ she said bluntly. ‘A nursery-full of sons.’

‘She looks well enough to me,’ he ruled. He knew that he would never be able to say how well she looked to him. Even to himself he should never even think it.



Catalina was put into her wedding bed by her ladies, Maria de Salinas kissed her goodnight, and Dona Elvira gave her a mother’s blessing; but Arthur had to undergo a further round of backslapping ribaldry, before his friends and companions escorted him to her door. They put him into bed beside the princess, who lay still and silent as the strange men laughed and bade them goodnight, and then the archbishop came to sprinkle the sheets with holy water and pray over

the young couple. It could not have been a more public bedding unless they had opened the doors for the citizens of London to see the young people side by side, awkward as bolsters, in their marital bed. It seemed like hours to both of them until the doors were finally closed on the smiling, curious faces and the two of them were quite alone, seated upright against the pillows, frozen like a pair of shy dolls.

There was silence.

‘Would you like a glass of ale?’ Arthur suggested in a voice thin with nerves.

‘I don’t like ale very much,’ Catalina said.

‘This is different. They call it wedding ale, it’s sweetened with mead and spices. It’s for courage.’

‘Do we need courage?’

He was emboldened by her smile and got out of bed to fetch her a cup. ‘I should think we do,’ he said. ‘You are a stranger in a new land, and I have never known any girls but my sisters. We both have much to learn.’

She took the cup of hot ale from him and sipped the heady drink. ‘Oh, that is nice.’

Arthur gulped down a cup and took another. Then he came back to the bed. Raising the cover and getting in beside her seemed an imposition; the idea of pulling up her night shift and mounting her was utterly beyond him.

‘I shall blow out the candle,’ he announced.

The sudden dark engulfed them, only the embers of the fire glowed red.

‘Are you very tired?’ he asked, longing for her to say that she was too tired to do her duty.

‘Not at all,’ she said politely, her disembodied voice coming out of the darkness. ‘Are you?’

‘No.’

‘Do you want to sleep now?’ he asked.

‘I know what we have to do,’ she said abruptly. ‘All my sisters have been married. I know all about it.’

‘I know as well,’ he said, stung.

‘I didn’t mean that you don’t know, I meant that you need not be afraid to start. I know what we have to do.’

‘I am not afraid, it is just that I...’

To his absolute horror he felt her hand pull his nightshirt upwards, and touch the bare skin of his belly.

‘I did not want to frighten you,’ he said, his voice unsteady, desire rising up

even though he was sick with fear that he would be incompetent.

‘I am not afraid,’ said Isabella’s daughter. ‘I have never been afraid of anything.’

In the silence and the darkness he felt her take hold of him and grasp firmly. At her touch he felt his desire well up so sharply that he was afraid he would come in her hand. With a low groan he rolled over on top of her and found she had stripped herself naked to the waist, her nightgown pulled up. He fumbled clumsily and felt her flinch as he pushed against her. The whole process seemed quite impossible, there was no way of knowing what a man was supposed to do, nothing to help or guide him, no knowing the mysterious geography of her body, and then she gave a little cry of pain, stifled with her hand, and he knew he had done it. The relief was so great that he came at once, a half-painful, half-pleasurable rush which told him that, whatever his father thought of him, whatever his brother Harry thought of him, the job was done and he was a man and a husband; and the princess was his wife and no longer a virgin untouched.

Catalina waited till he was asleep and then she got up and washed herself in her privy chamber. She was bleeding but she knew it would stop soon, the pain was no worse than she had expected, Isabel her sister had said it was not as bad as falling from a horse, and she had been right. Margot, her sister-in-law, had said that it was paradise; but Catalina could not imagine how such deep embarrassment and discomfort could add up to bliss – and concluded that Margot was exaggerating, as she often did.

Catalina came back to the bedroom. But she did not go back to the bed. Instead she sat on the floor by the fire, hugging her knees and watching the embers.



‘Not a bad day,’ I say to myself, and I smile; it is my mother’s phrase. I want to hear her voice so much that I am saying her words to myself. Often, when I was little more than a baby, and she had spent a long day in the saddle, inspecting the forward scouting parties, riding back to chivvy up the slower train, she would come into her tent, kick off her riding boots, drop down to the rich Moorish rugs and cushions by the fire in the brass brazier and say: ‘Not a bad day.’

‘Is there ever a bad day?’ I once asked her.

‘Not when you are doing God’s work,’ she replied seriously. ‘There are days

when it is easy and days when it is hard. But if you are on God's work then there are never bad days.'

I don't for a moment doubt that bedding Arthur, even my brazen touching him and drawing him into me, is God's work. It is God's work that there should be an unbreakable alliance between Spain and England. Only with England as a reliable ally can Spain challenge the spread of France. Only with English wealth, and especially English ships, can we Spanish take the war against wickedness to the very heart of the Moorish empires in Africa and Turkey. The Italian princes are a muddle of rival ambitions, the French are a danger to every neighbour, it has to be England who joins the crusade with Spain to maintain the defence of Christendom against the terrifying might of the Moors; whether they be black Moors from Africa, the bogeymen of my childhood, or light-skinned Moors from the dreadful Ottoman Empire. And once they are defeated, then the crusaders must go on, to India, to the East, as far as they have to go to challenge and defeat the wickedness that is the religion of the Moors. My great fear is that the Saracen kingdoms stretch forever, to the end of the world and even Cristóbal Colón does not know where that is.

'What if there is no end to them?' I once asked my mother, as we leaned over the sun-warmed walls of the fort and watched the despatch of a new group of Moors leaving the city of Granada, their baggage loaded on mules, the women weeping, the men with their heads bowed low, the flag of St James now flying over the red fort where the crescent had rippled for seven centuries, the bells ringing for Mass where once horns had blown for heretic prayers. 'What if now we have defeated these, they just go back to Africa and in another year, they come again?'

'That is why you have to be brave, my Princess of Wales,' my mother had answered. 'That is why you have to be ready to fight them whenever they come, wherever they come. This is war till the end of the world, till the end of time when God finally ends it. It will take many shapes. It will never cease. They will come again and again, and you will have to be ready in Wales as we will be ready in Spain. I bore you to be a fighting princess as I am a Queen Militant. Your father and I placed you in England as Maria is placed in Portugal, as Juana is placed with the Hapsburgs in the Netherlands. You are there to defend the lands of your husbands, and to hold them in alliance with us. It is your task to make England ready and keep it safe. Make sure that you never fail your country, as your sisters must never fail theirs, as I have never failed mine.'



Catalina was awakened in the early hours of the morning by Arthur gently pushing between her legs. Resentfully, she let him do as he wanted, knowing that this was the way to get a son and make the alliance secure. Some princesses, like her mother, had to fight their way in open warfare to secure their kingdom. Most princesses, like her, had to endure painful ordeals in private. It did not take long, and then he fell asleep. Catalina lay as still as a frozen stone in order not to wake him again.

He did not stir until daybreak, when his grooms of the bedchamber rapped brightly on the door. He rose up with a slightly embarrassed ‘Good morning’ to her; and went out. They greeted him with cheers and marched him in triumph to his own rooms. Catalina heard him say, vulgarly, boastfully, ‘Gentlemen, this night I have been in Spain,’ and heard the yell of laughter that applauded his joke. Her ladies came in with her gown and heard the men’s laughter. Dona Elvira raised her thin eyebrows to heaven at the manners of these English.

‘I don’t know what your mother would say,’ Dona Elvira remarked.

‘She would say that words count less than God’s will, and God’s will has been done,’ Catalina said firmly.



It was not like this for my mother. She fell in love with my father on sight and she married him with great joy. When I grew older I began to understand that they felt a real desire for each other – it was not just a powerful partnership of a great king and queen. My father might take other women as his lovers; but he needed his wife, he could not be happy without her. And my mother could not even see another man. She was blind to anybody but my father. Alone, of all the courts in Europe, the court of Spain had no tradition of love-play, of flirtation, of adoration of the queen in the practice of courtly love. It would have been a waste of time. My mother simply did not notice other men and when they sighed for her and said her eyes were as blue as the skies she simply laughed and said, ‘What nonsense,’ and that was an end to it.

When my parents had to be apart they wrote every day, he would not move one step without telling her of it, and asking for her advice. When he was in danger she hardly slept.

He could not have got through the Sierra Nevada if she had not been sending him men and digging teams to level the road for him. No-one else could have driven a road through there. He would have trusted no-one else to support him, to hold the kingdom together as he pushed forwards. She could have conquered the mountains for no-one else, he was the only one that could have attracted her support. What looked like a remarkable unity of two calculating players was deceptive – it was their passion which they played out on the political stage. She was a great queen because that was how she could evoke his desire. He was a great general in order to match her. It was their love, their lust, which drove them; almost as much as God.

We are a passionate family. When Isabel, my sister, now with God, came back from Portugal a widow she swore that she had loved her husband so much that she would never take another. She had been with him for only six months but she said that without him, life had no meaning. Juana, my second sister, is so in love with her husband Philip that she cannot bear to let him out of her sight, when she learns that he is interested in another woman she swears that she will poison her rival, she is quite mad with love for him. And my brother...my darling brother Juan...simply died of love. He and his beautiful wife Margot were so passionate, so besotted with each other, that his health failed, he was dead within six months of their wedding. Is there anything more tragic than a young man dying six months into his marriage? I come from passionate stock – but what about me? Shall I ever fall in love?

Not with this clumsy boy, for a certainty. My early liking for him has quite melted away. He is too shy to speak to me, he mumbles and pretends he cannot think of the words. He forced me to command in the bedroom, and I am ashamed that I had to be the one to make the first move. He makes me into a woman without shame, a woman of the marketplace when I want to be wooed like a lady in a romance. But if I had not invited him – what could he have done? I feel a fool now, and I blame him for my embarrassment. ‘In Spain,’ indeed! He would have got no closer than the Indies if I had not showed him how to do it. Stupid puppy.

When I first saw him I thought he was as beautiful as a knight from the romances, like a troubadour, like a poet. I thought I could be like a lady in a tower and he could sing beneath my window and persuade me to love him. But although he has the looks of a poet he doesn’t have the wit. I can never get more than two words out of him, and I begin to feel that I demean myself in trying to please him.

Of course, I will never forget that it is my duty to endure this youth, this Arthur. My hope is always for a child, and my destiny is to keep England safe against the Moors. I shall do that; whatever else happens, I shall be Queen of England and protect my two countries: the Spain of my birth and the England of my marriage.

London, Winter 1501

Arthur and Catalina, standing stiffly side by side on the royal barge, but not exchanging so much as one word, led a great fleet of gaily painted barges downriver to Baynard's Castle, which would be their London home for the next weeks. It was a huge, rectangular palace of a house overlooking the river, with gardens running down to the water's edge. The Mayor of London, the councillors, and all the court followed the royal barge; and musicians played as the heirs to the throne took up residence in the heart of the City.

Catalina noticed that the Scots envoys were much in attendance, negotiating the marriage of her new sister-in-law, Princess Margaret. King Henry was using his children as pawns in his game for power, as every king must do. Arthur had made the vital link with Spain, Margaret, though only twelve years old, would make Scotland into a friend, rather than the enemy that it had been for generations. Princess Mary also would be married, when her time came, either to the greatest enemy that the country faced, or the greatest friend that they hoped to keep. Catalina was glad that she had known from childhood that she should be the next Queen of England. There had been no changes of policy and no shifting alliances. She had been Queen of England-to-be almost from birth. It made the separation from her home and from her family so much easier.

She noticed that Arthur was very restrained in his greeting when he met the Scots lords at dinner at the Palace of Westminster.

'The Scots are our most dangerous enemies,' Edward Stafford, the Duke of Buckingham, told Catalina in whispered Castilian, as they stood at the back of the hall, waiting for the company to take their seats. 'The king and the prince hope that this marriage will make them our friend forever, will bind the Scots to us. But it is hard for any of us to forget how they have constantly harried us. We have all been brought up to know that we have a most constant and malignant enemy to the north.'

'Surely they are only a poor little kingdom,' she queried. 'What harm can they do us?'

'They always ally with France,' he told her. 'Every time we have a war with

France they make an alliance and pour over our northern borders. And, they may be small and poor but they are the doorway for the terrible danger of France to invade us from the north. I think Your Grace knows from your own childhood that even a small country on your frontier can be a danger.'

'Well, the Moors had only a small country at the end,' she observed. 'My father always said that the Moors were like a disease. They might be a small irritation but they were always there.'

'The Scots are our plague,' he agreed. 'Once every three years or so, they invade and make a little war, and we lose an acre of land or win it back again. And every summer they harry the border countries and steal what they cannot grow or make themselves. No northern farmer has ever been safe from them. The king is determined to have peace.'

'Will they be kind to the Princess Margaret?'

'In their own rough way.' He smiled. 'Not as you have been welcomed, Infanta.'

Catalina beamed in return. She knew that she was warmly welcomed in England. Londoners had taken the Spanish princess to their hearts, they liked the gaudy glamour of her train, the oddness of her dress, and they liked the way the princess always had a smile for a waiting crowd. Catalina had learned from her mother that the people are a greater power than an army of mercenaries and she never turned her head away from a cheer. She always waved, she always smiled, and if they raised a great bellow of applause she would even bob them a pretty little curtsy.

She glanced over to where the Princess Margaret, a vain, precocious girl, was smoothing down her dress and pushing back her headdress before going into the hall.

'Soon you will be married and going away, as I have done,' Catalina remarked pleasantly in French. 'I do hope it brings you happiness.'

The younger girl looked at her boldly. 'Not as you have done, for you have come to the finest kingdom in Europe, whereas I have to go far away into exile,' she said.

'England may be fine to you; but it is still strange to me,' Catalina said, trying not to flare up at the rudeness of the girl. 'And if you had seen my home in Spain you would be surprised at how fine our palace is there.'

'There is nowhere better than England,' Margaret said with the serene conviction of one of the spoiled Tudor children. 'But it will be good to be queen. While you are still only a princess, I shall be queen. I shall be the equal of my

mother.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Indeed, I shall be the equal of your mother.’

The colour rushed into Catalina’s face. ‘You would never be the equal of my mother,’ she snapped. ‘You are a fool to even say it.’

Margaret gasped.

‘Now, now, Your Royal Highnesses,’ the duke interrupted quickly. ‘Your father is ready to take his place. Will you please to follow him into the hall?’

Margaret turned and flounced away from Catalina.

‘She is very young,’ the duke said soothingly. ‘And although she would never admit to it, she is afraid to leave her mother and her father and go so far away.’

‘She has a lot to learn,’ Catalina said through gritted teeth. ‘She should learn the manners of a queen if she is going to be one.’ She turned to find Arthur at her side, ready to conduct her into the hall behind his parents.

The royal family took their seats. The king and his two sons sat at the high table under the canopy of state, facing out over the hall, to their right sat the queen and the princesses. My Lady, the King’s Mother, Margaret Beaufort, was seated beside the king, between him and his wife.

‘Margaret and Catalina were having cross words as they came in,’ she observed to him with grim satisfaction. ‘I thought that the Infanta would irritate our Princess Margaret. She cannot bear to have too much attention shown to another, and everyone makes such a fuss over Catalina.’

‘Margaret will soon be gone,’ Henry said shortly. ‘Then she can have her own court, and her own honeymoon.’

‘Catalina has become the very centre of the court,’ his mother complained. ‘The palace is crowded out with people coming to watch her dine. Everyone wants to see her.’

‘She’s a novelty only, a seven-day wonder. And anyway, I want people to see her.’

‘She has charm of a sort,’ the older woman noted. The groom of the ewer presented a golden bowl filled with scented water and Lady Margaret dipped her fingertips and then wiped them on the napkin.

‘I think her very pleasing,’ Henry said as he dried his own hands. ‘She went through the wedding without one wrong step, and the people like her.’

His mother made a small, dismissive gesture. ‘She is sick with her own vanity, she has not been brought up as I would bring up a child of mine. Her will has not been broken to obedience. She thinks that she is something special.’

Henry glanced across at the princess. She had bent her head to listen to something being said by the youngest Tudor princess, Princess Mary; and he saw her smile and reply. 'D'you know? I think she is something special,' he said.



The celebrations continued for days and days, and then the court moved on to the new-built, glamorous palace of Richmond, set in a great and beautiful park. To Catalina, in a swirl of strange faces and introductions, it felt as if one wonderful joust and fete merged into another, with herself at the very centre of it all, a queen as celebrated as any sultana with a country devoted to her amusement. But after a week the party was concluded with the king coming to the princess and telling her that it was time for her Spanish companions to go home.

Catalina had always known that the little court which had accompanied her through storms and near-shipwreck to present her to her new husband would leave her once the wedding was done and the first half of the dowry paid; but it was a gloomy couple of days while they packed their bags and said goodbye to the princess. She would be left with her small domestic household, her ladies, her chamberlain, her treasurer, and her immediate servants, but the rest of her entourage must leave. Even knowing as she did that this was the way of the world, that the wedding party always left after the wedding, did not make her feel any less bereft. She sent them with messages to everyone in Spain and with a letter for her mother.

From her daughter, Catalina, Princess of Wales, to Her Royal Highness of Castile and Aragon, and most dearest Madre,

Oh, Madre!

As these ladies and gentlemen will tell you, the prince and I have a good house near the river. It is called Baynard's Castle although it is not a castle but a palace and newly built. There are no bath houses, for either ladies or men. I know what you are thinking. You cannot imagine it.

Dona Elvira has had the blacksmith make a great cauldron which they heat up on the fire in the kitchen and six serving men heave it to my room for my bath. Also, there are no pleasure gardens with flowers, no streams, no fountains, it is quite extraordinary. It all looks as if it is not yet built. At

best, they have a tiny court which they call a knot garden where you can walk round and round until you are dizzy. The food is not good and the wine very sour. They eat nothing but preserved fruit and I believe they have never heard of vegetables.

You must not think that I am complaining, I wanted you to know that even with these small difficulties I am content to be the princess. Prince Arthur is kind and considerate to me when we meet, which is generally at dinner. He has given me a very beautiful mare of Barbary stock mixed with English, and I ride her every day. The gentlemen of the court joust (but not the princes); my champion is often the Duke of Buckingham who is very kind to me, he advises me as to the court and tells me how to go on. We all often dine in the English style, men and women together. The women have their own rooms but men visitors and male servants come and go out of them as if they were public, there is no seclusion for women at all. The only place I can be sure to be alone is if I lock myself in the necessary house – otherwise there are people everywhere.

Queen Elizabeth, though very quiet, is very kind to me when we meet and I like being in her company. My Lady the King's Mother is very cold; but I think she is like that with everyone except the king and the princes. She dotes on her son and grandsons. She rules the court as if she were queen herself. She is very devout and very serious. I am sure she is very admirable in every way.

You will want to know if I am with child. There are no signs yet. You will want to know that I read my Bible or holy books for two hours every day, as you ordered, and that I go to Mass three times a day and I take communion every Sunday also. Father Alessandro Geraldini is well, and as great a spiritual guide and advisor in England as he was in Spain, and I trust to him and to God to keep me strong in the faith to do God's work in England as you do in Spain. Dona Elvira keeps my ladies in good order and I obey her as I would you. Maria de Salinas is my best friend, here as at home, though nothing here is like Spain, and I cannot bear her to talk of home at all.

I will be the princess that you want me to be. I shall not fail you or God. I will be queen and I will defend England against the Moors.

Please write to me soon and tell me how you are. You seemed so sad and low when I left, I hope that you are better now. I am sure that the darkness that you saw in your mother will pass over you, and not rest on

your life as it did on hers. Surely, God would not inflict sadness on you, who has always been His favourite? I pray for you and for Father every day. I hear your voice in my head, advising me all the time. Please write soon to your daughter who loves you so much,

Catalina

PS Although I am glad to be married, and to be called to do my duty for Spain and God, I miss you very much. I know you are a queen before a mother but I would be so glad to have one letter from you. C



The court bade a cheerful farewell to the Spanish but Catalina found it hard to smile and wave. After they had gone she went down to the river to see the last of the barges shrink and then disappear in the distance and King Henry found her there, a lonely figure, on the pier looking downstream, as if she wished she were going too.

He was too skilled with women to ask her what was wrong. He knew very well what was wrong: loneliness, and homesickness natural enough in a young woman of nearly sixteen years old. He had been an exile from England for almost all his own life, he knew very well the rise and fall of yearning that comes with an unexpected scent, the change of seasons, a farewell. To invite an explanation would only trigger a flood of tears and achieve nothing. Instead, he tucked her cold little hand under his arm and said that she must see his library which he had newly assembled at the palace and she could borrow books to read at any time. He threw an order over his shoulder to one of his pages as he led the princess to the library and walked her round the beautiful shelves, showing her not only the classical authors and the histories that were his own interest, but also the stories of romance and heroism which he thought more likely to divert her.

She did not complain, he noticed with pleasure, and she had rubbed her eyes dry as soon as she had seen him coming towards her. She had been raised in a hard school. Isabella of Spain had been a soldier's wife and a soldier herself, she did not raise any of her girls to be self-indulgent. He thought there was not a young woman in England who could match this girl for grit. But there were shadows under the princess's blue eyes and though she took the proffered volumes with a word of thanks she still did not smile.

'And do you like maps?' he asked her.

She nodded. 'Of course,' she said. 'In my father's library we have maps of the whole world, and Cristóbal Colón made him a map to show him the Americas.'

'Does your father have a large library?' he asked, jealous of his reputation as a scholar.

Her polite hesitation before she replied told him everything, told him that his library here, of which he had been so proud, was nothing to the learning of the Moors of Spain. 'Of course my father has inherited many books, they are not all his own collection,' Catalina said tactfully. 'Many of them are Moorish authors, from Moorish scholars. You know that the Arabs translated the Greek authors before they were ever made into French or Italian, or English. The Arabs had all the sciences and all the mathematics when they were forgotten in Christendom. He has all the Moorish translations of Aristotle and Sophocles and everyone.'

He could feel his longing for the new learning like a hunger. 'He has many books?'

'Thousands of volumes,' she said. 'Hebrew and Arabic, Latin, and all the Christian languages too. But he doesn't read them all, he has Arab scholars to study them.'

'And the maps?' he asked.

'He is advised mostly by Arab navigators and map-makers,' she said. 'They travel so far overland, they understand how to chart their way by the stars. The sea voyages are just the same to them as a journey through the desert. They say that a watery waste is the same as a plain of sand, they use the stars and the moon to measure their journey in both.'

'And does your father think that much profit will come from his discoveries?' the king asked curiously. 'We have all heard of these great voyages of Cristóbal Colón and the treasures he has brought back.'

He admired how her eyelashes swept down to hide the gleam. 'Oh, I could not say.' Cleverly, she avoided the question. 'Certainly, my mother thinks that there are many souls to save for Jesus.'

Henry opened the great folder with his collection of maps and spread them before her. Beautifully illuminated sea monsters frolicked in the corners. He traced for her the coastline of England, the borders of the Holy Roman Empire, the handful of regions of France, the new widening borders of her own country of Spain and the papal lands in Italy. 'You see why your father and I have to be friends,' he said to her. 'We both face the power of France on our doorstep. We cannot even trade with each other unless we can keep France out of the narrow

seas.'

'If Juana's son inherits the Hapsburg lands then he will have two kingdoms,' she indicated. 'Spain and also the Netherlands.'

'And your son will have all of England, an alliance with Scotland, and all our lands in France,' he said, making a sweep with his spread palm. 'They will be a powerful pair of cousins.'

She smiled at the thought of it, and Henry saw the ambition in her. 'You would like to have a son who would rule half of Christendom?'

'What woman would not?' she said. 'And my son and Juana's son could surely defeat the Moors, could drive them back and back beyond the Mediterranean Sea?'

'Or perhaps you might find a way to live in peace,' he suggested. 'Just because one man calls Him Allah, and another calls him God is no reason for believers to be enemies, surely?'

At once Catalina shook her head. 'It will have to be a war forever, I think. My mother says that it is the great battle between Good and Evil which will go on until the end of time.'

'Then you will be in danger forever,' he started, when there was a tap on the great wooden door of the library. It was the page that Henry had sent running, bringing a flustered goldsmith who had been waiting for days to show his work to the king and was rather surprised to be summoned in a moment.

'Now,' Henry said to his daughter-in-law, 'I have a treat for you.'

She looked up at him. 'Good God,' he thought. 'It would be a man of stone who did not want this little flower in his bed. I swear that I could make her smile, and at any rate, I would enjoy trying.'

'Have you?'

Henry gestured to the man who flapped out a cloth of maroon velvet from his pocket, and then spilled the contents of his knapsack on to the scarlet background. A tumble of jewels, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, pearls, chains, lockets, earrings and brooches was swiftly spread before Catalina's widening gaze.

'You shall have your pick,' Henry said, his voice warm and intimate. 'It is my private gift to you, to bring the smile back to your pretty face.'

She hardly heard him, she was at the table in a moment, the goldsmith holding up one rich item after another. Henry watched her indulgently. So she might be a princess with a pure blood line of Castilian aristocrats, while he was the grandson of a working man; but she was a girl as easily bought as any other.

And he had the means to please her.

‘Silver?’ he asked.

She turned a bright face to him. ‘Not silver,’ she said decisively.

Henry remembered that this was a girl who had seen the treasure of the Incas cast at her feet.

‘Gold then?’

‘I do prefer gold.’

‘Pearls?’

She made a little moue with her mouth.

‘My God, she has a kissable mouth,’ he thought. ‘Not pearls?’ he asked aloud.

‘They are not my greatest favourite,’ she confided. She smiled up at him. ‘What is your favourite stone?’

‘Why, she is flirting with me,’ he said to himself, stunned at the thought. ‘She is playing me like she would an indulgent uncle. She is reeling me in like a fish.’

‘Emeralds?’

She smiled again.

‘No. This,’ she said simply.

She had picked out, in a moment, the most expensive thing in the jeweller’s pack, a collar of deepest blue sapphires with a matching pair of earrings. Charmingly, she held the collar against her smooth cheeks so that he could look from the jewels to her eyes. She took a step closer towards him so that he could smell the scent on her hair, orange-blossom water from the gardens of the Alhambra. She smelled as if she were an exotic flower herself. ‘Do they match my eyes?’ she asked him. ‘Are my eyes as blue as sapphires?’

He took a little breath, surprised at the violence of his response. ‘They are. You shall have them,’ he said, almost choking on his desire for her. ‘You shall have this and anything else you like. You shall name your...your...wish.’

The look she threw up at him was of pure delight. ‘And my ladies too?’

‘Call your ladies, they shall have their pick.’

She laughed with pleasure and ran to the door. He let her go. He did not trust himself to stay in the room without chaperones. Hastily, he took himself out into the hall and met his mother, returning from hearing Mass.

He kneeled and she put her fingers on his head in her blessing. ‘My son.’

‘My lady mother.’

He rose to his feet. She quickly took in the flush of his face and his

suppressed energy. 'Has something troubled you?'

'No!'

She sighed. 'Is it the queen? Is it Elizabeth?' she asked wearily. 'Is she complaining about the Scots' marriage for Margaret again?'

'No,' he said. 'I have not seen her today.'

'She will have to accustom herself,' she said. 'A princess cannot choose whom she marries and when she leaves home. Elizabeth would know that if she had been properly brought up. But she was not.'

He gave his crooked smile. 'That is hardly her fault.'

His mother's disdain was apparent. 'No good would ever have come from her mother,' she said shortly. 'Bad breeding, the Woodvilles.'

Henry shrugged and said nothing. He never defended his wife to his mother – her malice was so constant and so impenetrable that it was a waste of time to try to change her mind. He never defended his mother to his wife; he never had to. Queen Elizabeth never commented on her difficult mother-in-law or her demanding husband. She took him, his mother, his autocratic rule, as if they were natural hazards, as unpleasant and as inevitable as bad weather.

'You should not let her disturb you,' his mother said.

'She has never disturbed me,' he said, thinking of the princess who did.



I am certain now that the king likes me, above all his daughters, and I am so glad of it. I am used to being the favourite daughter, the baby of the family. I like it when I am the favourite of the king, I like to feel special.

When he saw that I was sad at my court going back to Spain and leaving me in England he spent the afternoon with me, showing me his library, talking about his maps, and finally, giving me an exquisite collar of sapphires. He let me pick out exactly what I wanted from the goldsmith's pack, and he said that the sapphires were the colour of my eyes.

I did not like him very well at first, but I am becoming accustomed to his abrupt speech and his quick ways. He is a man whose word is law in this court and in this land and he owes thanks to no-one for anything, except perhaps his Lady Mother. He has no close friends, no intimates but her and the soldiers who fought with him, who are now the great men of his court. He is not tender to his wife nor warm to his daughters, but I like it that he attends to me. Perhaps I will come to love him as a daughter. Already I am glad when he singles me out. In a

court such as this, which revolves around his approval, it makes me feel like a princess indeed when he praises me, or spends time with me.

If it were not for him then I think I would be even more lonely than I am. The prince my husband treats me as if I were a table or a chair. He never speaks to me, he never smiles at me, he never starts a conversation, it is all he can do to find a reply. I think I was a fool when I thought he looked like a troubadour. He looks like a milksop and that is the truth. He never raises his voice above a whisper, he never says anything of any interest. He may well speak French and Latin and half a dozen languages, but since he has nothing to say – what good are they? We live as strangers and if he did not come to my bedchamber at night, once a week as if on duty, I would not know I was married at all.

I show the sapphires to his sister, the Princess Margaret, and she is eaten up with jealousy. I shall have to confess to the sin of vanity and of pride. It is not right for me to flaunt them before her; but if she had ever been kind to me by word or deed then I would not have showed her. I want her to know that her father values me, even if she and her grandmother and her brother do not. But now all I have done is upset her and put myself in the wrong, and I will have to confess and make a penance.

Worst of all, I did not behave with the dignity that a princess of Spain should always show. If she were not such a fishwife's apprentice then I could have been better. This court dances around the king as if nothing matters more in the world than his favour, and I should know better than to join in. At the very least I should not be measuring myself against a girl four years younger than me and only a princess of England, even if she calls herself Queen of Scotland at every opportunity.



The young Prince and Princess of Wales finished their visit to Richmond and started to make their own royal household in Baynard's Castle. Catalina had her rooms at the back of the house, overlooking the gardens and the river, with her household, her Spanish ladies, her Spanish chaplain, and duenna, and Arthur's rooms overlooked the City, with his household, his chaplain, and his tutor. They met formally only once a day for dinner, when the two households sat at opposite sides of the hall and stared at each other with mutual suspicion, more like enemies in the middle of a forced truce than members of a united home.

The castle was run according to the commands of Lady Margaret, the king's

mother. The feast days and fast days, the entertainments and the daily timetable were all commanded by her. Even the nights when Arthur was to visit his wife in her bedchamber had been appointed by her. She did not want the young people becoming exhausted, nor did she want them neglecting their duties. So once a week the prince's household and friends solemnly escorted him to the princess's rooms and left him there overnight. For both young people the experience was an ordeal of embarrassment. Arthur became no more skilled, Catalina endured his silent determination as politely as she could. But then, one day in early December, Catalina's monthly course started and she told Dona Elvira. The duenna at once told the prince's groom of the bedchamber that the prince could not come to the Infanta's bed for a week; the Infanta was indisposed. Within half an hour, everyone from the king at Whitehall to the spit boy at Baynard's Castle knew that the Princess of Wales was having her course and so no child had yet been conceived; and everyone from the king to the spit boy wondered, since the girl was lusty and strong and since she was bleeding – obviously fertile – if Arthur was capable of doing his side of their duty.

In the middle of December, when the court was preparing for the great twelve-day feast of Christmas, Arthur was summoned by his father and ordered to prepare to leave for his castle at Ludlow.

'I suppose you'll want to take your wife with you,' the king said, smiling at his son in an effort to seem unconcerned.

'As you wish, sir,' Arthur replied carefully.

'What would you wish?'

After enduring a week's ban from Catalina's bed, with everyone remarking among themselves that no child had been made – but to be sure, it was early days yet, and it might be nobody's fault – Arthur felt embarrassed and discouraged. He had not gone back to her bedroom and she had sent no message to invite him. He could not expect an invitation – he knew that was ridiculous – a princess of Spain could hardly send for the prince of England; but she had not smiled or encouraged him in any way at all. He had received no message to tell him to resume his visits, and he had no idea how long these mysteries usually took. There was no-one that he could ask, and he did not know what he should do.

'She does not seem very merry,' Arthur observed.

'She's homesick,' his father said briskly. 'It's up to you to divert her. Take her to Ludlow with you. Buy her things. She's a girl like any other. Praise her beauty. Tell her jokes. Flirt with her.'

Arthur looked quite blank. 'In Latin?'

His father barked his harsh laugh. 'Lad. You can do it in Welsh if your eyes are smiling and your cock is hard. She'll know what you mean. I swear it. She's a girl who knows well enough what a man means.'

There was no answering brightness from his son. 'Yes, sir.'

'If you don't want her with you, you're not obliged to take her this year, you know. You were supposed to marry and then spend the first year apart.'

'That was when I was fourteen.'

'Only a year ago.'

'Yes, but...'

'So you do want her with you?'

His son flushed. The father regarded the boy with sympathy. 'You want her, but you are afraid she will make a fool of you?' he suggested.

The blond head drooped, nodded.

'And you think if you and she are far from court and from me, then she will be able to torment you.'

Another small nod. 'And all her ladies. And her duenna.'

'And time will hang heavy on your hands.'

The boy looked up, his face a picture of misery.

'And she will be bored and sulky and she will make your little court at Ludlow a miserable prison for both of you.'

'If she dislikes me...' he started, his voice very low.

Henry rested a heavy hand on his boy's shoulder. 'Oh, my son. It doesn't matter what she thinks of you,' he said. 'Perhaps your mother was not my choice, perhaps I was not hers. When a throne is involved the heart comes in second place if it ever matters at all. She knows what she has to do; and that is all that counts.'

'Oh, she knows all about it!' the boy burst out resentfully. 'She has no...'

His father waited. 'No...what?'

'No shame at all.'

Henry caught his breath. 'She is shameless? She is passionate?' He tried to keep the desire from his voice, a sudden lascivious picture of his daughter-in-law, naked and shameless, in his mind.

'No! She goes at it like a man harnessing a horse,' Arthur said miserably. 'A task to be done.'

Henry choked down a laugh. 'But at least she does it,' he said. 'You don't have to beg her, or persuade her. She knows what she has to do?'

Arthur turned from him to the window and looked out of the arrow slit to the cold river Thames below. 'I don't think she likes me. She only likes her Spanish friends, and Mary, and perhaps Henry. I see her laughing with them and dancing with them as if she were very merry in their company. She chatters away with her own people, she is courteous to everyone who passes by. She has a smile for everyone. I hardly ever see her, and I don't want to see her, either.'

Henry dropped his hand on his son's shoulder. 'My boy, she doesn't know what she thinks of you,' he assured him. 'She's too busy in her own little world of dresses and jewels and those damned gossipy Spanish women. The sooner you and she are alone together, the sooner you two will come to terms. You can take her with you to Ludlow and you can get acquainted.'

The boy nodded, but he did not look convinced. 'If it is your wish, sire,' he said formally.

'Shall I ask her if she wants to go?'

The colour flooded into the young man's cheeks. 'What if she says no?' he asked anxiously.

His father laughed. 'She won't,' he promised. 'You'll see.'



Henry was right. Catalina was too much of a princess to say either yes or no to a king. When he asked her if she would like to go to Ludlow with the prince she said that she would do whatever the king wished.

'Is Lady Margaret Pole still at the castle?' she asked, her voice a little nervous.

He scowled at her. Lady Margaret was now safely married to Sir Richard Pole, one of the solid Tudor warhorses, and warden of Ludlow Castle. But Lady Margaret had been born Margaret Plantagenet, beloved daughter of the Duke of Clarence, cousin to King Edward and sister to Edward of Warwick whose claim to the throne had been so much greater than Henry's own.

'What of it?'

'Nothing,' she said hastily.

'You have no cause to avoid her,' he said gruffly. 'What was done, was done in my name, by my order. You don't bear any blame for it.'

She flushed as if they were talking of something shameful. 'I know.'

'I can't have anyone challenging my right to the throne,' he said abruptly. 'There are too many of them, Yorks and Beauforts, and Lancasters too, and

endless others who fancy their chances as pretenders. You don't know this country. We're all married and intermarried like so many coneys in a warren.' He paused to see if she would laugh, but she was frowning, following his rapid French. 'I can't have anyone claiming by their pretended right what I have won by conquest,' he said. 'And I won't have anyone else claiming by conquest either.'

'I thought you were the true king,' Catalina said hesitantly.

'I am now,' said Henry Tudor bluntly. 'And that's all that matters.'

'You were anointed.'

'I am now,' repeated with a grim smile.

'But you are of the royal line?'

'I have royal blood in my veins,' he said, his voice hard. 'No need to measure how much or how little. I picked up my crown off the battlefield, literally, it was at my feet in the mud. So I knew; everyone knew – everyone saw God give me the victory because I was his chosen king. The archbishop anointed me because he knew that too. I am as much king as any in Christendom, and more than most because I did not just inherit as a baby, the fruit of another man's struggle – God gave me my kingdom when I was a man. It is my just desert.'

'But you had to claim it...'

'I claimed my own,' he said finally. 'I won my own. God gave my own to me. That's an end to it.'

She bowed her head to the energy in his words. 'I know, sire.'

Her submissiveness, and the pride that was hidden behind it, fascinated him. He thought that there had never been a young woman whose smooth face could hide her thoughts like this one.

'D'you want to stay here with me?' Henry asked softly, knowing that he should not ask her such a thing, praying, as soon as the words were out of his mouth, that she would say 'no' and silence his secret desire for her.

'Why, I wish whatever Your Majesty wishes,' she said coolly.

'I suppose you want to be with Arthur?' he asked, daring her to deny it.

'As you wish, sire,' she said steadily.

'Tell me! Would you like to go to Ludlow with Arthur, or would you rather stay here with me?'

She smiled faintly, and would not be drawn. 'You are the king,' she said quietly. 'I must do whatever you command.'



Henry knew he should not keep her at court beside him but he could not resist playing with the idea. He consulted her Spanish advisors, and found them hopelessly divided and squabbling among themselves. The Spanish ambassador, who had worked so hard to deliver the intractable marriage contract, insisted that the princess should go with her new husband, and that she should be seen to be a married woman in every way. Her confessor, who alone of all of them seemed to have a tenderness for the little princess, urged that the young couple should be allowed to stay together. Her duenna, the formidable and difficult Dona Elvira, preferred not to leave London. She had heard that Wales was a hundred miles away, a mountainous and rocky land. If Catalina stayed in Baynard's Castle and the household was rid of Arthur, then they would make a little Spanish enclave in the heart of the City, and the duenna's power would be unchallenged, she would rule the princess and the little Spanish court.

The queen volunteered her opinion that Catalina would find Ludlow too cold and lonely in mid-December and suggested that perhaps the young couple could stay together in London until spring.

'You just hope to keep Arthur with you, but he has to go,' Henry said brusquely to her. 'He has to learn the business of kingship and there is no better way to learn to rule England than to rule the Principality.'

'He's still young, and he is shy with her.'

'He has to learn to be a husband too.'

'They will have to learn to deal together.'

'Better that they learn in private then.'

In the end, it was the king's mother who gave the decisive advice. 'Send her,' she said to her son. 'We need a child off her. She won't make one on her own in London. Send her with Arthur to Ludlow.' She laughed shortly. 'God knows, they'll have nothing else to do there.'

'Elizabeth is afraid that she will be sad and lonely,' the king remarked. 'And Arthur is afraid that they will not deal well together.'

'Who cares?' his mother asked. 'What difference does that make? They are married and they have to live together and make an heir.'

He shot her a swift smile. 'She is only just sixteen,' he said, 'and the baby of her family, still missing her mother. You don't make any allowances for her youth, do you?'

'I was married at twelve years old, and gave birth to you in the same year,'

she returned. 'No-one made any allowances for me. And yet I survived.'

'I doubt you were happy.'

'I was not. I doubt that she is. But that, surely, is the last thing that matters?'



Dona Elvira told me that I must refuse to go to Ludlow. Father Geraldini said that it was my duty to go with my husband. Dr de Puebla said that for certain my mother would want me to live with my husband, to do everything to show that the marriage is complete in word and deed. Arthur, the hopeless beanpole, said nothing, and his father seems to want me to decide; but he is a king and I don't trust him.

All I really want to do is to go home to Spain. Whether we are in London or whether we live in Ludlow it will be cold, and it will rain all the time, the very air feels wet, I cannot get anything good to eat, and I cannot understand a word anybody says.

I know I am Princess of Wales and I will be Queen of England. That is true, and it will be true. But, this day, I cannot feel very glad about it.



'We are to go to my castle at Ludlow,' Arthur remarked awkwardly to Catalina. They were seated side by side at dinner, the hall below them, the gallery above and the wide doors crowded with people who had come from the City for the free entertainment of watching the court dine. Most people were observing the Prince of Wales and his young bride.

She bowed her head but did not look at him. 'Is it your father's command?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Then I shall be happy to go,' she said.

'We will be alone, but for the warden of the castle and his wife,' Arthur went on. He wanted to say that he hoped she would not mind, that he hoped she would not be bored, or sad or – worst of all – angry with him.

She looked at him without a smile. 'And so?'

'I hope you will be content,' he stumbled.

'Whatever your father wishes,' she said steadily, as if to remind him that

they were merely prince and princess and had no rights and no power at all.

He cleared his throat. 'I shall come to your room tonight,' he asserted.

She gave him a look from eyes as blue and hard as the sapphires around her neck. 'Whatever you wish,' she said in the same neutral tone.

He came when she was in bed and Dona Elvira admitted him to the room, her face like a stone, disapproval in every gesture. Catalina sat up in bed and watched as his groom of the bedchamber took his gown from his shoulders and went quietly out, closing the door behind him.

'Wine?' Arthur asked. He was afraid his voice quavered slightly.

'No, thank you,' she said.

Awkwardly the young man came to the bed, turned back the sheets, got in beside her. She turned to look at him, and he knew he was blushing beneath her inquiring gaze. He blew out the candle so she could not see his discomfort. A little torchlight from the guard outside flickered through the slats of the shutters, and then was gone as the guard moved on. Arthur felt the bed move as she lay back and pulled her nightdress out of the way. He felt as if he were a thing to her, an object of no importance, something she had to endure in order to be Queen of England.

He threw back the covers and jumped from the bed. 'I'm not staying here. I'm going to my room,' he said tersely.

'What?'

'I shan't stay here. I'm not wanted...'

'Not wanted? I never said you were not...'

'It is obvious. The way you look...'

'It's pitch black! How d'you know how I look? And anyway, you look as if someone forced you here!'

'I? It isn't me who sent a message that half the court heard, that I was not to come to your bed.'

He heard her gasp. 'I did not say you were not to come. I had to tell them to tell you...' She broke off in embarrassment. 'It was my time...you had to know...'

'Your duenna told my steward that I was not to come to your bed. How do you think that made me feel? How d'you think that looked to everyone?'

'How else was I to tell you?' she demanded.

'Tell me yourself!' he raged. 'Don't tell everyone else in the world.'

'How could I? How could I say such a thing? I should be so embarrassed!'

'Instead it is me who is made to look a fool!'

Catalina slipped out of bed and steadied herself, holding the tall carved bedpost. 'My lord, I apologise if I have offended you, I don't know how such things are done here...In future I will do as you wish...'

He said nothing.

She waited.

'I'm going,' he said and went to hammer on the door for his groom to come to him.

'Don't!' The cry was forced out of her.

'What?' He turned.

'Everyone will know,' she said desperately. 'Know that there is something wrong between us. Everyone will know that you have just come to me. If you leave at once, everyone will think...'

'I won't stay here!' he shouted.

Her pride rushed up. 'You will shame us both!' she cried out. 'What do you want people to think? That I disgust you, or that you are impotent?'

'Why not? If both are true?' He hammered on the door even louder.

She gasped in horror and fell back against the bedpost.

'Your Grace?' came a shout from the outer chamber and the door opened to reveal the groom of the bedchamber and a couple of pages, and behind them Dona Elvira and a lady-in-waiting.

Catalina stalked over to the window and turned her back to the room. Uncertainly, Arthur hesitated, glancing back at her for help, for some indication that he could stay after all.

'For shame!' Dona Elvira exclaimed, pushing past Arthur and running to throw a gown around Catalina's shoulders. Once the woman was standing with her arm around Catalina, glaring at him, Arthur could not return to his bride; he stepped over the threshold and went to his own rooms.



I cannot bear him. I cannot bear this country. I cannot live here for the rest of my life. That he should say that I disgust him! That he should dare to speak to me so! Has he run mad like one of their filthy dogs that pant everywhere? Has he forgotten who I am? Has he forgotten himself?

I am so furious with him I should like to take a scimitar and slice his stupid head off. If he thought for a moment he would have known that everyone in the palace, everyone in London, probably everyone in this gross country, will laugh

at us. They will say I am ugly and that I cannot please him.

I am crying with temper, it's not grief. I tuck my head into the pillow of my bed, so that no-one can hear me and tell everyone else that the princess cried herself to sleep because her husband would not bed her. I am choking on tears and temper, I am so angry with him.

After a little while I stop, I wipe my face, I sit up. I am a princess by birth and by marriage, I should not give way. I shall have some dignity even if he has none. He is a young man, a young English man at that – how should he know how to behave? I think of my home in the moonlight, of how the walls and the tracery gleam white and the yellow stone is bleached to cream. That is a palace, where people know how to behave with grace and dignity. I wish with all my heart that I was still there.

I remember that I used to watch a big yellow moon reflected in the water of the sultana's garden. Like a fool, I used to dream of being married.

Oxford, Christmas 1501



They set off a few days before Christmas. Resolutely, they spoke to each other in public with utter courtesy, and ignored each other completely when no-one was watching. The queen had asked that they might at least stay for the twelve-day feast but My Lady the King's Mother had ruled that they should take their Christmas at Oxford, it would give the country a chance to see the prince and the new Princess of Wales, and what the king's mother said was law. Catalina travelled by litter, jolted mercilessly over the frozen roads, her mules foundering in the fords, chilled to the bone however many rugs and furs they packed around her. The king's mother had ruled that she should not ride for fear of a fall. The unspoken hope was that Catalina was carrying a child. Catalina herself said nothing to confirm or deny the hope. Arthur was silence itself.

They had separate rooms on the road to Oxford, and separate rooms at Magdalene College when they arrived. The choristers were ready, the kitchens were ready, the extraordinarily rich hospitality of Oxford was ready to make merry; but the Prince and Princess of Wales were as cold and as dull as the weather.

They dined together, seated at the great table facing down the hall, and as

many of the citizens of Oxford who could get into the gallery took their seats and watched the princess put small morsels of food in her mouth, and turn her shoulder to her husband, while he looked around the hall for companions and conversation, as if he were dining alone.

They brought in dancers and tumblers, mummers and players. The princess smiled very pleasantly but never laughed, gave small purses of Spanish coins to all the entertainers, thanked them for their attendance; but never once turned to her husband to ask him if he was enjoying the evening. The prince walked around the room, affable and pleasant to the great men of the city. He spoke in English, all the time, and his Spanish-speaking bride had to wait for someone to talk to her in French or Latin, if they would. Instead, they clustered around the prince and chatted and joked and laughed, almost as if they were laughing at her, and did not want her to understand the jest. The princess sat alone, stiffly on her hard, carved wooden chair, her head held high and a small, defiant smile on her lips.

At last it was midnight and the long evening could end. Catalina rose from her seat and watched the court sink into bows and curtseys. She dropped a low Spanish curtsey to her husband, her duenna behind her with a face like flint. 'I bid you goodnight, Your Grace,' said the princess in Latin, her voice clear, her accent perfect.

'I shall come to your room,' he said. There was a little murmur of approval; the court wanted a lusty prince.

The colour rose in her cheeks at the very public announcement. There was nothing she could say. She could not refuse him; but the way she rose and left the room did not promise him a warm welcome when they were alone. Her ladies dipped their curtseys and followed her in a little offended flurry, swishing off like a many-coloured veil trailing behind her. The court smiled behind their hands at the high spirits of the bride.

Arthur came to her half an hour later, fired up by drink and resentment. He found her still dressed, waiting by the fire, her duenna at her side, her room ablaze with candles, her ladies still talking and playing cards as if it were the middle of the afternoon. Clearly, she was not a young woman on her way to bed.

'Sire, good evening,' she said and rose and curtseyed as he entered.

Arthur had to check his backwards step, in retreat at the first encounter. He was ready for bed, in his nightgown with only a robe thrown over his shoulders. He was acutely aware of his bare feet and vulnerable toes. Catalina blazed in her evening finery. The ladies all turned and looked at him, their faces unfriendly.

He was acutely conscious of his nightgown and his bare legs and a chuckle of barely suppressed laughter from one of his men behind him.

‘I expected you to be in bed,’ he said.

‘Of course, I can go to bed,’ she returned with glacial courtesy. ‘I was about to go to bed. It is very late. But when you announced so publicly that you would visit me in my rooms I thought you must be planning to bring all the court with you. I thought you were telling everyone to come to my rooms. Why else announce it at the top of your voice so that everybody could hear?’

‘I did not announce it at the top of my voice!’

She raised an eyebrow in wordless contradiction.

‘I shall stay the night,’ he said stubbornly. He marched to her bedroom door. ‘These ladies can go to their beds, it is late.’ He nodded to his men. ‘Leave us.’ He went into her room and closed the door behind him.

She followed him and closed the door behind her, shutting out the bright, scandalised faces of the ladies. Her back to the door, she watched him throw off his robe and nightgown so he was naked, and climb into her bed. He plumped up the pillows and leaned back, his arms crossed against his narrow bare chest, like a man awaiting an entertainment.

It was her turn to be discomforted. ‘Your Grace...’

‘You had better get undressed,’ he taunted her. ‘As you say, it’s very late.’

She turned one way, and then the other. ‘I shall send for Dona Elvira.’

‘Do. And send for whoever else undresses you. Don’t mind me, please.’

Catalina bit her lip. He could see her uncertainty. She could not bear to be stripped naked in front of him. She turned and went out of the bedchamber.

There was a rattle of irritable Spanish from the room next door. Arthur grinned, he guessed that she was clearing the room of her ladies and undressing out there. When she came back, he saw that he was right. She was wearing a white gown trimmed with exquisite lace and her hair was in a long plait down her back. She looked more like a little girl than the haughty princess she had been only moments before, and he felt his desire rise up with some other feeling: a tenderness.

She glanced at him, her face unfriendly. ‘I will have to say my prayers,’ she said. She went to the prie-dieu and kneeled before it. He watched her bow her head over her clasped hands and start to whisper. For the first time his irritation left him, and he thought how hard it must be for her. Surely, his unease and fear must be nothing to hers: alone in a strange land, at the beck and call of a boy a few months younger than her, with no real friends and no family, far away from

everything and everyone she knew.

The bed was warm. The wine he had drunk to give him courage now made him feel sleepy. He leaned back on the pillow. Her prayers were taking a long time but it was good for a man to have a spiritual wife. He closed his eyes on the thought. When she came to bed he thought he would take her with confidence but with gentleness. It was Christmas, he should be kind to her. She was probably lonely and afraid. He should be generous. He thought warmly of how loving he would be to her, and how grateful she would be. Perhaps they would learn to give each other pleasure, perhaps he would make her happy. His breathing deepened, he gave a tiny little snuffly snore. He slept.

Catalina looked around from her prayers and smiled in pure triumph. Then, absolutely silently, she crept into bed beside him and, carefully arranging herself so that not even the hem of her nightgown could touch him, she composed herself for sleep.



You thought to embarrass me before my women, before all the court. You thought you could shame me and triumph over me. But I am a princess of Spain and I have known things and seen things that you, in this safe little country, in this smug little haven, would never dream of. I am the Infanta, I am the daughter of the two most powerful monarchs in the whole of Christendom who alone have defeated the greatest threat ever to march against it. For seven hundred years the Moors have occupied Spain, an empire mightier than that of the Romans, and who drove them out? My mother! My father! So you needn't think I am afraid of you – you rose-petal prince, or whatever they call you. I shall never stoop to do anything that a princess of Spain should not do. I shall never be petty or spiteful. But if you challenge me, I shall defeat you.



Arthur did not speak to her in the morning, his boy's high pride was utterly cut to the quick. She had shamed him at his father's court by denying him her rooms, and now she had shamed him in private. He felt that she had trapped him, made a fool of him, and was even now laughing at him. He rose up and went out in sullen silence. He went to Mass and did not meet her eyes, he went hunting

and was gone all day. He did not speak to her at night. They watched a play, seated side by side, and not one word was exchanged all evening. A whole week they stayed at Oxford and they did not say more than a dozen words to each other every day. He swore a private bitter oath to himself that he would never, ever speak to her again. He would get a child on her, if he could, he would humiliate her in every way that he could, but he would never say one direct word to her, and he would never, never, never sleep again in her bed.

When the morning came for them to move on to Ludlow the sky was grey with clouds, fat-bellied with snow. Catalina came out of the doorway of the college and recoiled as the icy, damp air hit her in the face. Arthur ignored her.

She stepped out into the yard where the train was all drawn up and waiting for her. She hesitated before the litter. It struck him that she was like a prisoner, hesitating before a cart. She could not choose.

‘Will it not be very cold?’ she asked.

He turned a hard face to her. ‘You will have to get used to the cold, you’re not in Spain now.’

‘So I see.’

She drew back the curtains of the litter. Inside there were rugs for her to wrap around herself and cushions for her to rest on, but it did not look very cosy.

‘It gets far worse than this,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Far colder, it rains or sleets or snows, and it gets darker. In February we have only a couple of hours of daylight at best, and then there are the freezing fogs which turn day into night so it is forever grey.’

She turned and looked up at him. ‘Could we not set out another day?’

‘You agreed to come,’ he taunted her. ‘I would have been happy to leave you at Greenwich.’

‘I did as I was told.’

‘So here we are. Travelling on as we have been ordered to do.’

‘At least you can move about and keep warm,’ she said plaintively. ‘Can I not ride?’

‘My Lady the King’s Mother said you could not.’

She made a little face but she did not argue.

‘It’s your choice. Shall I leave you here?’ he asked briskly, as if he had little time for these uncertainties.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Of course not,’ and climbed into the litter and pulled the rugs over her feet and up around her shoulders.

Arthur led the way out of Oxford, bowing and smiling at the people who had

turned out to cheer him. Catalina drew the curtains of her litter against the cold wind and the curious stares, and would not show her face.

They stopped for dinner at a great house on the way and Arthur went in to dine without even waiting to help her from the litter. The lady of the house, flustered, went out to the litter and found Catalina stumbling out, white-faced and with red eyes.

‘Princess, are you all right?’ the woman asked her.

‘I am cold,’ Catalina said miserably. ‘I am freezing cold. I think I have never been so cold.’

She hardly ate any dinner, they could not make her take any wine. She looked ready to drop with exhaustion; but as soon as they had eaten Arthur wanted to push on, they had twenty more miles to go before the early dusk of winter.

‘Can’t you refuse?’ Maria de Salinas asked her in a quick whisper.

‘No,’ the princess said. She rose from her seat without another word. But when they opened the great wooden door to go out into the courtyard, small flakes of snow swirled in around them.

‘We cannot travel in this, it will soon be dark and we shall lose the road!’ Catalina exclaimed.

‘I shall not lose the road,’ Arthur said, and strode out to his horse. ‘You shall follow me.’

The lady of the house sent a servant flying for a heated stone to put in the litter at Catalina’s feet. The princess climbed in, hunched the rugs around her shoulders, and tucked her hands in deep.

‘I am sure that he is impatient to get you to Ludlow to show you his castle,’ the woman said, trying to put the best aspect on a miserable situation.

‘He is impatient to show me nothing but neglect,’ Catalina snapped; but she took care to say it in Spanish.

They left the warmth and lights of the great house and heard the doors bang behind them as they turned the horses’ heads to the west, and to the white sun which was sinking low on the horizon. It was two hours past noon but the sky was so filled with snow clouds that there was an eerie grey glow over the rolling landscape. The road snaked ahead of them, brown tracks against brown fields, both of them bleaching to whiteness under the haze of swirling snow. Arthur rode ahead, singing merrily, Catalina’s litter laboured along behind. At every step the mules threw the litter to one side and then the other, she had to keep a hand on the edge to hold herself in place, and her fingers became chilled and

then cramped, blue from cold. The curtains kept out the worst of the snowflakes but not the insistent, penetrating draughts. If she drew back a corner to look out at the country she saw a whirl of whiteness as the snowflakes danced and circled the road, the sky seeming greyer every moment.

The sun set white in a white sky and the world grew more shadowy. Snow and clouds closed down around the little cavalcade which wound its way across a white land under a grey sky.

Arthur's horse cantered ahead, the prince riding easily in the saddle, one gloved hand on the reins, the other on his whip. He had stout woollen undergarments under his thick leather jerkin and soft, warm leather boots. Catalina watched him ride forwards. She was too cold and too miserable even to resent him. More than anything else she wished he would ride back to tell her that the journey was nearly over, that they were there.

An hour passed, the mules walked down the road, their heads bowed low against the wind that whirled flakes around their ears and into the litter. The snow was getting thicker now, filling the air and drifting into the ruts of the lane. Catalina had hunched up under the covers, lying like a child, the rapidly cooling stone at her belly, her knees drawn up, her cold hands tucked in, her face ducked down, buried in the furs and rugs. Her feet were freezing cold, there was a gap in the rugs at her back and now and then she shivered at a fresh draught of icy air.

All around, outside the litter, she could hear men chattering and laughing about the cold, swearing that they would eat well when the train got into Burford. Their voices seemed to come from far away; Catalina drifted into a sleep from coldness and exhaustion.

Groggily, she woke when the litter bumped down to the ground and the curtains were swept back. A wave of icy air washed over her and she ducked her head down and cried out in discomfort.

'Infanta?' Dona Elvira asked. The duenna had been riding her mule, the exercise had kept her warm. 'Infanta? Thank God, at last we are here.'

Catalina would not lift her head.

'Infanta, they are waiting to greet you.'

Still Catalina would not look up.

'What's this?' It was Arthur's voice, he had seen the litter put down and the duenna bending over it. He saw that the heap of rugs made no movement. For a moment, with a pang of dismay, he thought that the princess might have been taken ill. Maria de Salinas gave him a reproachful look. 'What's the matter?'

'It is nothing.' Dona Elvira straightened up and stood between the prince and

his young wife, shielding Catalina as he jumped from his horse and came towards her. 'The princess has been asleep, she is composing herself.'

'I'll see her,' he said. He put the woman aside with one confident hand and kneeled down beside the litter.

'Catalina?' he asked quietly.

'I am frozen with cold,' said a little thread of voice. She lifted her head and he saw that she was as white as the snow itself and her lips were blue. 'I am so c...cold that I shall die and then you will be happy. You can b...bury me in this horrible country and m...marry some fat, stupid Englishwoman. And I shall never see...' She broke off into sobs.

'Catalina?' He was utterly bemused.

'I shall never see my m...mother again. But she will know that you killed me with your miserable country and your cruelty.'

'I have not been cruel!' he rejoined at once, quite blind to the gathering crowd of courtiers around them. 'By God, Catalina, it was not me!'

'You have been cruel.' She lifted her face from the rugs. 'You have been cruel because –'

It was her sad, white, tearstained face that spoke to him far more than her words could ever have done. She looked like one of his sisters when their grandmother scolded them. She did not look like an infuriating, insulting princess of Spain, she looked like a girl who had been bullied into tears – and he realised that it was he who had bullied her, he had made her cry, and he had left her in the cold litter for all the afternoon while he had ridden on ahead and delighted in the thought of her discomfort.

He reached into the rugs and pulled out her icy hand. Her fingers were numb with cold. He knew he had done wrong. He took her blue fingertips to his mouth and kissed them, then he held them against his lips and blew his warm breath against them. 'God forgive me,' he said. 'I forgot I was a husband. I didn't know I had to be a husband. I didn't realise that I could make you cry. I won't ever do so again.'

She blinked, her blue eyes swimming in unshed tears. 'What?'

'I was wrong. I was angry but quite wrong. Let me take you inside and we will get warm and I shall tell you how sorry I am and I will never be unkind to you again.'

At once she struggled with her rugs and Arthur pulled them off her legs. She was so cramped and so chilled that she stumbled when she tried to stand. Ignoring the muffled protests of her duenna, he swept her up into his arms and

carried her like a bride across the threshold of the hall.

Gently he put her down before the roaring fire, gently he put back her hood, untied her cloak, chafed her hands. He waved away the servants who would have come to take her cloak, offered her wine. He made a little circle of peace and silence around them, and he watched the colour come back to her pale cheeks.

‘I am sorry,’ he said, heartfelt. ‘I was very, very angry with you but I should not have taken you so far in such bad weather and I should never have let you get cold. It was wrong of me.’

‘I forgive you,’ she whispered, a little smile lighting her face.

‘I didn’t know that I had to take care of you. I didn’t think. I have been like a child, an unkind child. But I know now, Catalina. I will never be unkind to you again.’

She nodded. ‘Oh, please. And you too must forgive me. I have been unkind to you.’

‘Have you?’

‘At Oxford,’ she whispered, very low.

He nodded. ‘And what do you say to me?’

She stole a quick upwards glance at him. He was not making a play of offence. He was a boy still, with a boy’s fierce sense of fairness. He needed a proper apology.

‘I am very, very sorry,’ she said, speaking nothing but the truth. ‘It was not a good thing to do, and I was sorry in the morning, but I could not tell you.’

‘Shall we go to bed now?’ he whispered to her, his mouth very close to her ear.

‘Can we?’

‘If I say that you are ill?’

She nodded, and said nothing more.

‘The princess is unwell from the cold,’ Arthur announced generally. ‘Dona Elvira will take her to her room, and I shall dine there, alone with her, later.’

‘But the people have come to see Your Grace...’ his host pleaded. ‘They have an entertainment for you, and some disputes they would like you to hear...’

‘I shall see them all in the hall now, and we shall stay tomorrow also. But the princess must go to her rooms at once.’

‘Of course.’

There was a flurry around the princess as her ladies, led by Dona Elvira, escorted her to her room. Catalina glanced back at Arthur. ‘Please come to my room for dinner,’ she said clearly enough for everyone to hear. ‘I want to see

you, Your Grace.'

It was everything to him: to hear her publicly avow her desire for him. He bowed at the compliment and then he went to the great hall and called for a cup of ale and dealt very graciously with the half-dozen men who had mustered to see him, and then he excused himself and went to her room.



Catalina was waiting for him, alone by the fireside. She had dismissed her women, her servants, there was no-one to wait on them, they were quite alone. He almost recoiled at the sight of the empty room; the Tudor princes and princesses were never left alone. But she had banished the servants who should wait at the table, she had sent away the ladies who should dine with them. She had even dismissed her duenna. There was no-one to see what she had done to her apartments, nor how she had set the dinner table.

She had swathed the plain wooden furniture in scarves of light cloth in vivid colours, she had even draped scarves from the tapestries to hide the cold walls, so the room was like a beautifully trimmed tent.

She had ordered them to saw the legs of the table down to stumps, so the table sat as low as a footstool, a most ridiculous piece of furniture. She had set big cushions at either end, as if they should recline like savages to eat. The dinner was set out on the table at knee level, drawn up to the warmth of the burning logs like some barbaric feast, there were candles everywhere and a rich smell like incense, as heady as a church on a feast day.

Arthur was about to complain at the wild extravagance of sawing up the furniture; but then he paused. This was, perhaps, not just some girlish folly; she was trying to show him something.

She was wearing a most extraordinary costume. On her head was a twist of the finest silk, turned and knotted like a coronet with a tail hanging down behind which she had tucked nonchalantly in one side of the headdress as if she would pull it over her face like a veil. Instead of a decent gown she wore a simple shift of the finest, lightest silk, smoky blue in colour, so fine that he could almost see through it, to glimpse the paleness of her skin underneath. He could feel his heartbeat thud when he realised she was naked beneath this wisp of silk. Beneath the chemise she was wearing a pair of hose – like men's hose – but nothing like men's hose, for they were billowy leggings which fell from her slim hips where they were tied with a drawstring of gold thread, to her feet where they were tied

again, leaving her feet half bare in dainty crimson slippers worked with a gold thread. He looked her up and down, from barbaric turban to Turkish slippers, and found himself bereft of speech.

‘You don’t like my clothes,’ Catalina said flatly, and he was too inexperienced to recognise the depth of embarrassment that she was ready to feel.

‘I’ve never seen anything like them before,’ he stammered. ‘Are they Arab clothes? Show me!’

She turned on the spot, watching him over her shoulder and then coming back to face him again. ‘We all wear them in Spain,’ she said. ‘My mother too. They are more comfortable than gowns, and cleaner. Everything can be washed, not like velvets and damask.’

He nodded, he noticed now a light rosewater scent which came from the silk.

‘And they are cool in the heat of the day,’ she added.

‘They are...beautiful.’ He nearly said ‘barbaric’ and was so glad that he had not, when her eyes lit up.

‘Do you think so?’

‘Yes.’

At once she raised her arms and twirled again to show him the flutter of the hose and the lightness of the chemise.

‘You wear them to sleep in?’

She laughed. ‘We wear them nearly all the time. My mother always wears them under her armour, they are far more comfortable than anything else, and she could not wear gowns under chain mail.’

‘No...’

‘When we are receiving Christian ambassadors, or for great state occasions, or when the court is at feast, we wear gowns and robes, especially at Christmas when it is cold. But in our own rooms, and always in the summer, and always when we are on campaign, we wear Morisco dress. It is easy to make, and easy to wash, and easy to carry, and best to wear.’

‘You cannot wear it here,’ Arthur said. ‘I am so sorry. But My Lady the King’s Mother would object if she knew you even had them with you.’

She nodded. ‘I know that. My mother was against me even bringing them. But I wanted something to remind me of my home and I thought I might keep them in my cupboard and tell nobody. Then tonight, I thought I might show you. Show you myself, and how I used to be.’

Catalina stepped to one side and gestured to him that he should come to the

table. He felt too big, too clumsy, and on an instinct, he stooped and shucked off his riding boots and stepped on to the rich rugs barefoot. She gave a little nod of approval and beckoned him to sit. He dropped to one of the gold-embroidered cushions.

Serenely, she sat opposite him and passed him a bowl of scented water, with a white napkin. He dipped his fingers and wiped them. She smiled and offered him a gold plate laid with food. It was a dish of his childhood, roasted chicken legs, devilled kidneys, with white manchet bread: a proper English dinner. But she had made them serve only tiny portions on each individual plate, dainty bones artfully arranged. She had sliced apples served alongside the meat, and added some precious spiced meats next to sliced sugared plums. She had done everything she could to serve him a Spanish meal, with all the delicacy and luxury of the Moorish taste.

Arthur was shaken from his prejudice. 'This is...beautiful,' he said, seeking a word to describe it. 'This is...like a picture. You are like...' He could not think of anything that he had ever seen that was like her. Then an image came to him. 'You are like a painting I once saw on a plate,' he said. 'A treasure of my mother's from Persia. You are like that. Strange, and most lovely.'

She glowed at his praise. 'I want you to understand,' she said, speaking carefully in Latin. 'I want you to understand what I am. Cuiusmodi sum.'

'What you are?'

'I am your wife,' she assured him. 'I am the Princess of Wales, I will be Queen of England. I will be an Englishwoman. That is my destiny. But also, as well as this, I am the Infanta of Spain, of al Andalus.'

'I know.'

'You know; but you don't know. You don't know about Spain, you don't know about me. I want to explain myself to you. I want you to know about Spain. I am a princess of Spain. I am my father's favourite. When we dine alone, we eat like this. When we are on campaign, we live in tents and sit before the braziers like this, and we were on campaign for every year of my life until I was seven.'

'But you are a Christian court,' he protested. 'You are a power in Christendom. You have chairs, proper chairs, you must eat your dinner off a proper table.'

'Only at banquets of state,' she said. 'When we are in our private rooms we live like this, like Moors. Oh, we say grace; we thank the One God at the breaking of the bread. But we do not live as you live here in England. We have

beautiful gardens filled with fountains and running water. We have rooms in our palaces inlaid with precious stones and inscribed with gold letters telling beautiful truths in poetry. We have bath houses with hot water to wash in and thick steam to fill the scented room, we have ice houses packed in winter with snow from the sierras so our fruit and our drinks are chilled in summer.'

The words were as seductive as the images. 'You make yourself sound so strange,' he said reluctantly. 'Like a fairy tale.'

'I am only just realising now how strange we are to each other,' Catalina said. 'I thought that your country would be like mine but it is quite different. I am coming to think that we are more like Persians than like Germans. We are more Arabic than Visigoth. Perhaps you thought that I would be a princess like your sisters, but I am quite, quite different.'

He nodded. 'I shall have to learn your ways,' he proposed tentatively. 'As you will have to learn mine.'

'I shall be Queen of England, I shall have to become English. But I want you to know what I was, when I was a girl.'

Arthur nodded. 'Were you very cold today?' he asked. He could feel a strange new feeling, like a weight in his belly. He realised it was discomfort, at the thought of her being unhappy.

She met his look without concealment. 'Yes,' she said. 'I was very cold. And then I thought that I had been unkind to you and I was very unhappy. And then I thought that I was far away from my home and from the heat and the sunshine and my mother and I was very homesick. It was a horrible day, today. I had a horrible day, today.'

He reached his hand out to her. 'Can I comfort you?'

Her fingertips met his. 'You did,' she said. 'When you brought me in to the fire and told me you were sorry. You do comfort me. I will learn to trust that you always will.'

He drew her to him; the cushions were soft and easy, he laid her beside him and he gently tugged at the silk that was wrapped around her head. It slipped off at once and the rich red tresses tumbled down. He touched them with his lips, then her sweet slightly trembling mouth, her eyes with the sandy eyelashes, her light eyebrows, the blue veins at her temples, the lobes of her ears. Then he felt his desire rise and he kissed the hollow at the base of her throat, her thin collarbones, the warm, seductive flesh from neck to shoulder, the hollow of her elbow, the warmth of her palm, the erotically deep-scented armpit, and then he drew her shift over her head and she was naked, in his arms, and she was his

wife, and a loving wife, at last, indeed.



I love him. I did not think it possible, but I love him. I have fallen in love with him. I look at myself in the mirror, in wonderment, as if I am changed, as everything else is changed. I am a young woman in love with my husband. I am in love with the Prince of Wales. I, Catalina of Spain, am in love. I wanted this love, I thought it was impossible, and I have it. I am in love with my husband and we shall be King and Queen of England. Who can doubt now that I am chosen by God for His especial favour? He brought me from the dangers of war to safety and peace in the Alhambra Palace and now He has given me England and the love of the young man who will be its king.

In a sudden rush of emotion I put my hands together and pray: ‘Oh God, let me love him forever, do not take us from each other as Juan was taken from Margot, in their first months of joy. Let us grow old together, let us love each other for ever.’

Ludlow Castle, January 1502



The winter sun was low and red over the rounded hills as they rattled through the great gate that pierced the stone wall around Ludlow. Arthur, who had been riding beside the litter, shouted to Catalina over the noise of the hooves on the cobbles. ‘This is Ludlow, at last!’

Ahead of them the men-at-arms shouted: ‘Make way for Arthur! Prince of Wales!’ and the doors banged open and people tumbled out of their houses to see the procession go by.

Catalina saw a town as pretty as a tapestry. The timbered second storeys of the crowded buildings overhung cobbled streets with prosperous little shops and working yards tucked cosily underneath them on the ground floor. The shopkeepers’ wives jumped up from their stools set outside the shops to wave to her and Catalina smiled, and waved back. From the upper storeys the glovers’ girls and shoemakers’ apprentices, the goldsmiths’ boys and the spinsters leaned

out and called her name. Catalina laughed, and caught her breath as one young lad looked ready to overbalance but was hauled back in by his cheering mates.

They passed a great bull ring with a dark-timbered inn, as the church bells of the half-dozen religious houses, college, chapels and hospital of Ludlow started to peal their bells to welcome the prince and his bride home.

Catalina leaned forwards to see her castle, and noted the unassailable march of the outer bailey. The gate was flung open, they went in, and found the greatest men of the town, the mayor, the church elders, the leaders of the wealthy trades guilds, assembled to greet them.

Arthur pulled up his horse and listened politely to a long speech in Welsh and then in English.

‘When do we eat?’ Catalina whispered to him in Latin and saw his mouth quiver as he held back a smile.

‘When do we go to bed?’ she breathed, and had the satisfaction of seeing his hand tremble on the rein with desire. She gave a little giggle and ducked back into the litter until finally the interminable speeches of welcome were finished and the royal party could ride on through the great gate of the castle to the inner bailey.

It was a neat castle, as sound as any border castle in Spain. The curtain wall marched around the inner bailey high and strong, made in a curious rosy-coloured stone that made the powerful walls more warm and domestic.

Catalina’s eye, sharpened by her training, looked from the thick walls to the well in the outer bailey, the well in the inner bailey, took in how one defensible area led to another, thought that a siege could be held off for years. But it was small, it was like a toy castle, something her father would build to protect a river crossing or a vulnerable road. Something a very minor lord of Spain would be proud to have as his home.

‘Is this it?’ she asked blankly, thinking of the city that was housed inside the walls of her home, of the gardens and the terraces, of the hill and the views, of the teeming life of the town centre, all inside defended walls. Of the long hike for the guards: if they went all around the battlements they would be gone for more than an hour. At Ludlow a sentry would complete the circle in minutes. ‘Is this it?’

At once he was aghast. ‘Did you expect more? What were you expecting?’

She would have caressed his anxious face, if there had not been hundreds of people watching. She made herself keep her hands still. ‘Oh, I was foolish. I was thinking of Richmond.’ Nothing in the world would have made her say that she

was thinking of the Alhambra.

He smiled, reassured. 'Oh, my love. Richmond is new-built, my father's great pride and joy. London is one of the greatest cities of Christendom, and the palace matches its size. But Ludlow is only a town, a great town in the Marches, for sure, but a town. But it is wealthy, you will see, and the hunting is good and the people are welcoming. You will be happy here.'

'I am sure of it,' said Catalina, smiling at him, putting aside the thought of a palace built for beauty, only for beauty, where the builders had thought firstly where the light would fall and what reflections it would make in still pools of marble.

She looked around her and saw, in the centre of the inner bailey, a curious circular building like a squat tower.

'What's that?' she asked, struggling out of the litter as Arthur held her hand.

He glanced over his shoulder. 'It's our round chapel,' he said negligently.

'A round chapel?'

'Yes, like in Jerusalem.'

At once she recognised with delight the traditional shape of the mosque – designed and built in the round so that no worshipper was better placed than any others, because Allah is praised by the poor man as well as the rich. 'It's lovely.'

Arthur glanced at her in surprise. To him it was only a round tower built with the pretty plum-coloured local stone, but he saw that it glowed in the afternoon light, and radiated a sense of peace.

'Yes,' he said, hardly noticing it. 'Now this,' he indicated the great building facing them, with a handsome flight of steps up to the open door, 'this is the great hall. To the left are the council chambers of Wales and, above them, my rooms. To the right are the guest bedrooms and chambers for the warden of the castle and his lady: Sir Richard and Lady Margaret Pole. Your rooms are above, on the top floor.'

He saw her swift reaction. 'She is here now?'

'She is away from the castle at the moment.'

She nodded. 'There are buildings behind the great hall?'

'No. It is set into the outer wall. This is all of it.'

Catalina schooled herself to keep her face smiling and pleasant.

'We have more guest rooms in the outer bailey,' he said defensively. 'And we have a lodge house, as well. It is a busy place, merry. You will like it.'

'I am sure I will,' she smiled. 'And which are my rooms?'

He pointed to the highest windows. 'See up there? On the right-hand side,

matching mine, but on the opposite side of the hall.'

She looked a little daunted. 'But how will you get to my rooms?' she asked quietly.

He took her hand and led her, smiling to his right and to his left, towards the grand stone stairs to the double doors of the great hall. There was a ripple of applause and their companions fell in behind them. 'As My Lady the King's Mother commanded me, four times a month I shall come to your room in a formal procession through the great hall,' he said. He led her up the steps.

'Oh.' She was dashed.

He smiled down at her. 'And all the other nights I shall come to you along the battlements,' he whispered. 'There is a private door that goes from your rooms to the battlements that run all around the castle. My rooms go on to them too. You can walk from your rooms to mine whenever you wish and nobody will know whether we are together or not. They will not even know whose room we are in.'

He loved how her face lit up. 'We can be together, whenever we want?'

'We will be happy here.'



Yes I will, I will be happy here. I will not mourn like a Persian for the beautiful courts of his home and declare that there is nowhere else fit for life. I will not say that these mountains are a desert without oases like a Berber longing for his birthright. I will accustom myself to Ludlow, and I will learn to live here, on the border, and later in England. My mother is not just a queen, she is a soldier, and she raised me to know my duty and to do it. It is my duty to learn to be happy here and to live here without complaining.

I may never wear armour as she did, I may never fight for my country, as she did; but there are many ways to serve a kingdom, and to be a merry, honest, constant queen is one of them. If God does not call me to arms, He may call me to serve as a lawgiver, as a bringer of justice. Whether I defend my people by fighting for them against an enemy or by fighting for their freedom in the law, I shall be their queen, heart and soul, Queen of England.



It was night time, past midnight. Catalina glowed in the firelight. They were in bed, sleepy, but too desirous of each other for sleep.

‘Tell me a story.’

‘I have told you dozens of stories.’

‘Tell me another. Tell me the one about Boabdil giving up the Alhambra Palace with the golden keys on a silk cushion and going away crying.’

‘You know that one. I told it to you last night.’

‘Then tell me the story about Yarfa and his horse that gnashed its teeth at Christians.’

‘You are a child. And his name was Yarfe.’

‘But you saw him killed?’

‘I was there; but I didn’t see him actually die.’

‘How could you not watch it?’

‘Well, partly because I was praying as my mother ordered me to, and because I was a girl and not a bloodthirsty, monstrous boy.’

Arthur tossed an embroidered cushion at her head. She caught it and threw it back at him.

‘Well, tell me about your mother pawning her jewels to pay for the crusade.’

She laughed again and shook her head, making her auburn hair swing this way and that. ‘I shall tell you about my home,’ she offered.

‘All right.’ He gathered the purple blanket around them both and waited.

‘When you come through the first door to the Alhambra it looks like a little room. Your father would not stoop to enter a palace like that.’

‘It’s not grand?’

‘It’s the size of a little merchant’s hall in the town here. It is a good hall for a small house in Ludlow, nothing more.’

‘And then?’

‘And then you go into the courtyard and from there into the golden chamber.’

‘A little better?’

‘It is filled with colour, but still it is not much bigger. The walls are bright with coloured tiles and gold leaf and there is a high balcony, but it is still only a little space.’

‘And then, where shall we go today?’

‘Today we shall turn right and go into the Court of the Myrtles.’

He closed his eyes, trying to remember her descriptions. ‘A courtyard in the shape of a rectangle, surrounded by high buildings of gold.’

‘With a huge, dark wooden doorway framed with beautiful tiles at the far end.’

‘And a lake, a lake of a simple rectangle shape, and on either side of the water, a hedge of sweet-scented myrtle trees.’

‘Not a hedge like you have,’ she demurred, thinking of the ragged edges of the Welsh fields in their struggle of thorn and weed.

‘Like what, then?’ he asked, opening his eyes.

‘A hedge like a wall,’ she said. ‘Cut straight and square, like a block of green marble, like a living green sweet-scented statue. And the gateway at the end is reflected back in the water, and the arch around it, and the building that it is set in. So that the whole thing is mirrored in ripples at your feet. And the walls are pierced with light screens of stucco, as airy as paper, like white on white embroidery. And the birds...’

‘The birds?’ he asked, surprised, for she had not told him of them before.

She paused while she thought of the word. ‘*Apodes?*’ she said in Latin.

‘*Apodes?* Swifts?’

She nodded. ‘They flow like a turbulent river of birds just above your head, round and round the narrow courtyard, screaming as they go, as fast as a cavalry charge, they go like the wind, round and round, as long as the sun shines on the water they go round, all day. And at night –’

‘At night?’

She made a little gesture with her hands, like an enchantress. ‘At night they disappear, you never see them settle or nest. They just disappear – they set with the sun, but at dawn they are there again, like a river, like a flood.’ She paused. ‘It is hard to describe,’ she said in a small voice. ‘But I see it all the time.’

‘You miss it,’ he said flatly. ‘However happy I may make you, you will always miss it.’

She made a little gesture. ‘Of course. It is to be expected. But I never forget who I am. Who I was born to be.’

Arthur waited.

She smiled at him, her face was warmed by her smile, her blue eyes shining. ‘The Princess of Wales,’ she said. ‘From my childhood I knew it. They always called me the Princess of Wales. And so Queen of England, as destined by God. Catalina, Infanta of Spain, Princess of Wales.’

He smiled in reply and drew her closer to him, they lay back together, her head on his shoulder, her dark red hair a veil across his chest.

‘I knew I would marry you almost from the moment I was born,’ he said

reflectively. 'I can't remember a time when I was not betrothed to you. I can't remember a time when I was not writing letters to you and taking them to my tutor for correction.'

'Lucky that I please you, now I am here.'

He put his finger under her chin and turned her face up towards him for a kiss. 'Even luckier, that I please you,' he said.

'I would have been a good wife anyway,' she insisted. 'Even without this...'

He pulled her hand down beneath the silky sheets to touch him where he was growing big again.

'Without this, you mean?' he teased.

'Without this...joy,' she said and closed her eyes and lay back, waiting for his touch.



Their servants woke them at dawn and Arthur was ceremonially escorted from her bed. They saw each other again at Mass but they were seated at opposite sides of the round chapel, each with their own household, and could not speak.



The Mass should be the most important moment of my day, and it should bring me comfort – I know that. But I always feel lonely during Mass. I do pray to God and thank Him for His especial care of me, but just being in this chapel – shaped like a tiny mosque – reminds me so much of my mother. The smell of incense is as evocative of her as if it were her perfume, I cannot believe that I am not kneeling beside her as I have done four times a day for almost every day of my life. When I say 'Hail Mary, full of grace' it is my mother's round, smiling, determined face that I see. And when I pray for courage to do my duty in this strange land with these dour, undemonstrative people, it is my mother's strength that I need.

I should give thanks for Arthur but I dare not even think of him when I am on my knees to God. I cannot think of him without the sin of desire. The very image of him in my mind is a deep secret, a pagan pleasure. I am certain that this is not the holy joy of matrimony. Such intense pleasure must be a sin. Such dark, deep desire and satisfaction cannot be the pure conception of a little prince that is the

whole point and purpose of this marriage. We were put to bed by an archbishop but our passionate coupling is as animal as a pair of sun-warmed snakes twisted all around in their pleasure. I keep my joy in Arthur a secret from everyone, even from God.

I could not confide in anyone, even if I wanted to. We are expressly forbidden from being together as we wish. His grandmother, My Lady the King's Mother, has ordered this, as she orders everything, even everything here in the Welsh Marches. She has said that he should come to my room once a week every week, except for the time of my courses, he should arrive before ten of the clock and leave by six. We obey her of course, everybody obeys her. Once a week, as she has commanded, he comes through the great hall, like a young man reluctantly obedient, and in the morning he leaves me in silence and goes quietly away as a young man who has done his duty, not one that has been awake all night in breathless delight. He never boasts of pleasure, when they come to fetch him from my chamber he says nothing, nobody knows the joy we take in each other's passion. No-one will ever know that we are together every night. We meet on the battlements which run from his rooms to mine at the very top of the castle, grey-blue sky arching above us, and we consort like lovers in secret, concealed by the night, we go to my room, or to his, and we make a private world together, filled with hidden joy.

Even in this crowded small castle filled with busybodies and the king's mother's spies, nobody knows that we are together, and nobody knows how much we are in love.



After Mass the royal pair went to break their fast in their separate rooms, though they would rather have been together. Ludlow Castle was a small reproduction of the formality of the king's court. The king's mother had commanded that after breakfast Arthur must work with his tutor at his books or at sports as the weather allowed; and Catalina must work with her tutor, sew, or read, or walk in the garden.

'A garden!' Catalina whispered under her breath in the little patch of green with the sodden turf bench on one side of a thin border, set in the corner of the castle walls. 'I wonder if she has ever seen a real garden?'

In the afternoon they might ride out together to hunt in the woods around the castle. It was a rich countryside, the river fast-flowing through a wide valley

with old thick woodlands on the sides of the hills. Catalina thought she would grow to love the pasture lands around the River Teme and, on the horizon, the way the darkness of the hills gave way to the sky. But in the mid-winter weather it was a landscape of grey and white, only the frost or the snow bringing brightness to the blackness of the cold woods. The weather was often too bad for the princess to go out at all. She hated the damp fog or when it drizzled with icy sleet. Arthur often rode alone.

‘Even if I stayed behind I would not be allowed to be with you,’ he said mournfully. ‘My grandmother would have set me something else to do.’

‘So go!’ she said, smiling, though it seemed a long, long time until dinner and she had nothing to do but to wait for the hunt to come home.

They went out into the town once a week, to go to St Laurence’s Church for Mass, or to visit the little chapel by the castle wall, to attend a dinner organised by one of the great guilds, or to see a cockfight, a bull baiting, or players. Catalina was impressed by the neat prettiness of the town; the place had escaped the violence of the wars between York and Lancaster that had finally been ended by Henry Tudor.

‘Peace is everything to a kingdom,’ she observed to Arthur.

‘The only thing that can threaten us now is the Scots,’ he said. ‘The Yorkist line are my forebears, the Lancasters too, so the rivalry ends with me. All we have to do is keep the north safe.’

‘And your father thinks he has done that with Princess Margaret’s marriage?’

‘Pray God he is right, but they are a faithless lot. When I am king I shall keep the border strong. You shall advise me, we’ll go out together and make sure the border castles are repaired.’

‘I shall like that,’ she said.

‘Of course, you spent your childhood with an army fighting for border lands, you would know better than I what to look for.’

She smiled. ‘I am glad it is a skill of mine that you can use. My father always complained that my mother was making Amazons, not princesses.’

They dined together at dusk, and thankfully, dusk came very early on those cold winter nights. At last they could be close, seated side by side at the high table looking down the hall of the castle, the great hearth heaped with logs on the side wall. Arthur always put Catalina on his left, closest to the fire, and she wore a cloak lined with fur, and had layer upon layer of linen shifts under her ornate gown. Even so, she was still cold when she came down the icy stairs from her warm rooms to the smoky hall. Her Spanish ladies, Maria de Salinas, her duenna

Dona Elvira and a few others, were seated at one table, the English ladies who were supposed to be her companions at another and her retinue of Spanish servants were seated at another. The great lords of Arthur's council, his chamberlain, Sir Richard Pole, warden of the castle, Bishop William Smith of Lincoln, his physician, Dr Bereworth, his treasurer Sir Henry Vernon, the steward of his household, Sir Richard Croft, his groom of the privy chamber, Sir William Thomas of Carmarthen, and all the leading men of the Principality, were seated in the body of the hall. At the back and in the gallery every nosy parker, every busybody in Wales could pile in to see the Spanish princess take her dinner, and speculate if she pleased the young prince or no.

There was no way to tell. Most of them thought that he had failed to bed her. For see! The Infanta sat like a stiff little doll and rarely leaned towards her young husband. The Prince of Wales spoke to her as if by rote, every ten minutes. They were little patterns of good behaviour, and they scarcely even looked at each other. The gossips said that he went to her rooms, as ordered, but only once a week and never of his own choice. Perhaps the young couple did not please each other. They were young, perhaps too young for marriage.

No-one could tell that Catalina's hands were gripped tight in her lap to stop herself from touching her husband, nor that every half-hour or so he glanced at her, apparently indifferent, and whispered so low that only she could hear: 'I want you right now.'

After dinner there would be dancing and perhaps mummers or a storyteller, a Welsh bard or strolling players to watch. Sometimes the poets would come in from the high hills and tell old, strange tales in their own tongue that Arthur could follow only with difficulty, but which he would try to translate for Catalina.

*'When the long yellow summer comes and victory comes to us,
And the spreading of the sails of Brittany,
And when the heat comes and when the fever is kindled
There are portents that victory will be given to us.'*

'What is that about?' she asked him.

'The long yellow summer is when my father decided to invade from Brittany. His road took him to Bosworth and victory.'

She nodded.

'It was hot, that year, and the troops came with the Sweat, a new disease, which now curses England as it does Europe with the heat of every summer.'

She nodded again. A new poet came forwards, played a chord on his harp and sang.

‘And this?’

‘It’s about a red dragon that flies over the Principality,’ he said. ‘It kills the boar.’

‘What does it mean?’ Catalina asked.

‘The dragon is the Tudors: us,’ he said. ‘You’ll have seen the red dragon on our standard. The boar is the usurper, Richard. It’s a compliment to my father, based on an old tale. All their songs are ancient songs. They probably sang them in the ark.’ He grinned. ‘Songs of Noah.’

‘Do they give you Tudors credit for surviving the flood? Was Noah a Tudor?’

‘Probably. My grandmother would take credit for the Garden of Eden itself,’ he returned. ‘This is the Welsh border, we come from Owen ap Tudor, from Glendower, we are happy to take the credit for everything.’

As Arthur predicted, when the fire burned low they would sing the old Welsh songs of magical doings in dark woods that no man could know. And they would tell of battles and glorious victories won by skill and courage. In their strange tongue they would tell stories of Arthur and Camelot, and Merlin the prince, and Guinevere: the queen who betrayed her husband for a guilty love.

‘I should die if you took a lover,’ he whispered to her as a page shielded them from the hall and poured wine.

‘I can never even see anyone else when you are here,’ she assured him. ‘All I see is you.’

Every evening there was music or some entertainment for the Ludlow court. The king’s mother had ruled that the prince should keep a merry house – it was a reward for the loyalty of Wales that had put her son Henry Tudor on an uncertain throne. Her grandson must pay the men who had come out of the hills to fight for the Tudors and remind them that he was a Welsh prince, and he would go on counting on their support to rule the English, whom no-one could count on at all. The Welsh must join with England and together, the two of them could keep out the Scots, and manage the Irish.

When the musicians played the slow formal dances of Spain, Catalina would dance with one of her ladies, conscious of Arthur’s gaze on her, keeping her face prim, like a little mummer’s mask of respectability; though she longed to twirl around and swing her hips like a woman in the seraglio, like a Moorish slave girl dancing for a sultan. But My Lady the King’s Mother’s spies watched

everything, even in Ludlow, and would be quick to report any indiscreet behaviour by the young princess. Sometimes, Catalina would slide a glance at her husband and see his eyes on her, his look that of a man in love. She would snap her fingers as if part of the dance, but in fact to warn him that he was staring at her in a way that his grandmother would not like; and he would turn aside and speak to someone, tearing his gaze away from her.

Even after the music was over and the entertainers gone away, the young couple could not be alone. There were always men who sought council with Arthur, who wanted favours or land or influence, and they would approach him and talk low-voiced, in English, which Catalina did not yet fully understand, or in Welsh, which she thought no-one could ever understand. The rule of law barely ran in the border lands, each landowner was like a war-lord in his own domain. Deeper in the mountains there were people who still thought that Richard was on the throne, who knew nothing of the changed world, who spoke no English, who obeyed no laws at all.

Arthur argued, and praised, and suggested that feuds should be forgiven, that trespasses should be made good, that the proud Welsh chieftains should work together to make their land as prosperous as their neighbour England, instead of wasting their time in envy. The valleys and coastal lands were dominated by a dozen petty lords, and in the high hills the men ran in clans like wild tribes. Slowly, Arthur was determined to make the law run throughout the land.

‘Every man has to know that the law is greater than his lord,’ Catalina said. ‘That is what the Moors did in Spain, and my mother and father followed them. The Moors did not trouble themselves to change people’s religions nor their language, they just brought peace and prosperity and imposed the rule of law.’

‘Half of my lords would think that was heresy,’ he teased her. ‘And your mother and father are now imposing their religion, they have driven out the Jews already, the Moors will be next.’

She frowned. ‘I know,’ she said. ‘And there is much suffering. But their intention was to allow people to practise their own religion. When they won Granada that was their promise.’

‘D’you not think that to make one country, the people must always be of one faith?’ he asked.

‘Heretics can live like that,’ she said decidedly. ‘In al Andalus the Moors and Christians and Jews lived in peace and friendship alongside one another. But if you are a Christian king, it is your duty to bring your subjects to God.’

Catalina would watch Arthur as he talked with one man and then another,

and then, at a sign from Dona Elvira, she would curtsy to her husband and withdraw from the hall. She would read her evening prayers, change into her robe for the night, sit with her ladies, go to her bedroom and wait, and wait and wait.

‘You can go, I shall sleep alone tonight,’ she said to Dona Elvira.

‘Again?’ The duenna frowned. ‘You have not had a bed companion since we came to the castle. What if you wake in the night and need some service?’

‘I sleep better with no-one else in the room,’ Catalina would say. ‘You can leave me now.’

The duenna and the ladies would bid her goodnight and leave, the maids would come and unlace her bodice, unpin her headdress, untie her shoes and pull off her stockings. They would hold out her warmed linen nightgown and she would ask for her cape and say she would sit by the fire for a few moments, and then send them away.

In the silence, as the castle settled for the night, she would wait for him. Then, at last she would hear the quiet sound of his footfall at the outer door of her room, where it opened on to the battlements that ran between his tower and hers. She would fly to the door and unbolt it, he would be pink-cheeked from the cold, his cape thrown over his own nightshirt as he tumbled in, the cold wind blowing in with him as she threw herself into his arms.



‘Tell me a story.’

‘Which story tonight?’

‘Tell me about your family.’

‘Shall I tell you about my mother when she was a girl?’

‘Oh yes. Was she a princess of Castile like you?’

Catalina shook her head. ‘No, not at all. She was not protected or safe. She lived in the court of her brother, her father was dead, and her brother did not love her as he should. He knew that she was his only true heir. He favoured his daughter; but everyone knew that she was a bastard, palmed off on him by his queen. She was even nicknamed by the name of the queen’s lover. They called her La Beltraneja after her father. Can you think of anything more shameful?’

Arthur obediently shook his head. ‘Nothing.’

‘My mother was all but a prisoner at her brother’s court; the queen hated her, of course, the courtiers were unfriendly and her brother was plotting to disinherit

her. Even their own mother could not make him see reason.'

'Why not?' he asked, and then caught her hand when he saw the shadow cross her face. 'Ah, love, I am sorry. What is the matter?'

'Her mother was sick,' she said. 'Sick with sadness. I don't understand quite why, or why it was so very bad. But she could hardly speak or move. She could only cry.'

'So your mother had no protector?'

'No, and then the king her brother ordered that she should be betrothed to Don Pedro Giron.' She sat up a little and clasped her hands around her knees. 'They said he had sold his soul to the devil, a most wicked man. My mother swore that she would offer her soul to God and God would save her, a virgin, from such a fate. She said that surely no merciful God would take a girl like her, a princess, who had survived long years in one of the worst courts of Europe, and then throw her at the end into the arms of a man who wanted her ruin, who desired her only because she was young and untouched, who wanted to despoil her?'

Arthur hid a grin at the romantic rhythm of the story. 'You do this awfully well,' he said. 'I hope it ends happily.'

Catalina raised her hand like a troubadour calling for silence. 'Her greatest friend and lady-in-waiting Beatriz had taken up a knife and sworn that she would kill Don Pedro before he laid hands on Isabella; but my mother kneeled before her prie-dieu for three days and three nights and prayed without ceasing to be spared this rape.'

'He was on his journey towards her, he would arrive the very next day. He ate well and drank well, telling his companions that tomorrow he would be in the bed of the highest-born virgin of Castile.'

'But that very night he died.' Catalina's voice dropped to an awed whisper. 'Died before he had finished his wine from dinner. Dropped dead as surely as if God had reached down from the heavens and pinched the life out of him as a good gardener pinches out a greenfly.'

'Poison?' asked Arthur, who knew something of the ways of determined monarchs, and who thought Isabella of Castile quite capable of murder.

'God's will,' Catalina answered seriously. 'Don Pedro found, as everyone else has found, that God's will and my mother's desires always run together. And if you knew God and my mother as I know them, you would know that their will is always done.'

He raised his glass and drank a toast to her. 'Now that is a good story,' he

said. 'I wish you could tell it in the hall.'

'And it is all true,' she reminded him. 'I know it is. My mother told me it herself.'

'So she fought for her throne too,' he said thoughtfully.

'First for her throne, and then to make the kingdom of Spain.'

He smiled. 'For all that they tell us that we are of royal blood, we both come from a line of fighters. We have our thrones by conquest.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'I come from royal blood,' she said. 'My mother has her throne by right.'

'Oh yes. But if your mother had not fought for her place in the world she would have been Dona whatever his name was –'

'Giron.'

'Giron. And you would have been born a nobody.'

Catalina shook her head. The idea was quite impossible for her to grasp. 'I should have been the daughter of the sister of the king whatever happened. I should always have had royal blood in my veins.'

'You would have been a nobody,' he said bluntly. 'A nobody with royal blood. And so would I if my father had not fought for his throne. We are both from families who claim their own.'

'Yes,' she conceded reluctantly.

'We are both the children of parents who claim what rightfully belongs to others.' He went further.

Her head came up at once. 'They do not! At least my mother did not. She was the rightful heir.'

Arthur disagreed. 'Her brother made his daughter his heir, he recognised her. Your mother had the throne by conquest. Just as my father won his.'

Her colour rose. 'She did not,' she insisted. 'She is the rightful heir to the throne. All she did was defend her right from a pretender.'

'Don't you see?' he said. 'We are all pretenders until we win. When we win, we can rewrite the history and rewrite the family trees, and execute our rivals, or imprison them, until we can argue that there was always only one true heir: ourselves. But before then, we are one of many claimants. And not even always the best claimant with the strongest claim.'

She frowned. 'What are you saying?' she demanded. 'Are you saying that I am not the true princess? That you are not the true heir to England?'

He took her hand. 'No, no. Don't be angry with me,' he soothed her. 'I am saying that we have and we hold what we claim. I am saying that we make our

own inheritance. We claim what we want, we say that we are Prince of Wales, Queen of England. That we decide the name and the title we go by. Just like everyone else does.'

'You are wrong,' she said. 'I was born Infanta of Spain and I will die Queen of England. It is not a matter of choice, it is my destiny.'

He took her hand and kissed it. He saw there was no point pursuing his belief that a man or a woman could make their own destiny with their own conviction. He might have his doubts; but with her the task was already done. She had complete conviction, her destiny was made. He had no doubt that she would indeed defend it to death. Her title, her pride, her sense of self were all one. 'Katherine, Queen of England,' he said, kissing her fingers, and saw her smile return.



I love him so deeply, I did not know that I could ever love anyone like this. I can feel myself growing in patience and wisdom, just through my love for him. I step back from irritability and impatience, I even bear my homesickness without complaint. I can feel myself becoming a better woman, a better wife, as I seek to please him and make him proud of me. I want him always to be glad that he married me. I want us always to be as happy as we are today. There are no words to describe him...there are no words.



A messenger came from the king's court bringing the newlyweds some gifts: a pair of deer from the Windsor forest, a parcel of books for Catalina, letters from Elizabeth the queen, and orders from My Lady the King's Mother who had heard, though no-one could imagine how, that the prince's hunt had broken down some hedges, and who commanded Arthur to make sure that they were restored and the landowner compensated.

He brought the letter to Catalina's room when he came at night. 'How can she know everything?' he demanded.

'The man will have written to her,' she said ruefully.

'Why not come direct to me?'

'Because he knows her? Is he her liege man?'

‘Could be,’ he said. ‘She has a network of alliances like spider threads across the country.’

‘You should go to see him,’ Catalina decided. ‘We could both go. We could take him a present, some meat or something, and pay what we owe.’

Arthur shook his head at the power of his grandmother. ‘Oh yes, we can do that. But how can she know everything?’

‘It’s how you rule,’ she said. ‘Isn’t it? You make sure that you know everything and that anyone with a trouble comes to you. Then they take the habit of obedience and you take the habit of command.’

He chuckled. ‘I can see I have married another Margaret Beaufort,’ he said. ‘God help me with another one in the family.’

Catalina smiled. ‘You should be warned,’ she admitted. ‘I am the daughter of a strong woman. Even my father does as he is bid by her.’

He put down the letter and gathered her to him. ‘I have longed for you all day,’ he said into the warm crook of her neck.

She opened the front of his nightshirt so she could lay her cheek against his sweet-smelling skin. ‘Oh, my love.’

With one accord they moved to the bed. ‘Oh, my love.’



‘Tell me a story.’

‘What shall I tell you tonight?’

‘Tell me about how your father and mother were married. Was it arranged for them, as it was for us?’

‘Oh no,’ she exclaimed. ‘Not at all. She was quite alone in the world, and though God had saved her from Don Pedro she was still not safe. She knew that her brother would marry her to anyone who would guarantee to keep her from inheriting his throne.’

‘They were dark years for her, she said that when she appealed to her mother it was like talking to the dead. My grandmother was lost in a world of her own sorrow, she could do nothing to help her own daughter.’

‘My mother’s cousin, her only hope, was the heir to the neighbouring kingdom: Ferdinand of Aragon. He came to her in disguise. Without any servants, without any soldiers, he rode through the night and came to the castle where she was struggling to survive. He had himself brought in, and threw off his hat and cape so she saw him, and knew him at once.’

Arthur was rapt. 'Really?'

Catalina smiled. 'Isn't it like a romance? She told me that she loved him at once, fell in love on sight like a princess in a poem. He proposed marriage to her then and there, and she accepted him then and there. He fell in love with her that night, at first sight, which is something that no princess can expect. My mother, my father, were blessed by God. He moved them to love and their hearts followed their interests.'

'God looks after the kings of Spain,' Arthur remarked, half-joking.

She nodded. 'Your father was right to seek our friendship. We are making our kingdom from al Andalus, the lands of the Moorish princes. We have Castile and Aragon, now we have Granada and we will have more. My father's heart is set on Navarre, and he will not stop there. I know he is determined to have Naples. I don't think he will be satisfied until all the south and western regions of France are ours. You will see. He has not made the borders he wants for Spain yet.'

'They married in secret?' he asked, still amazed at this royal couple who had taken their lives into their own hands and made their own destiny.

She looked slightly sheepish. 'He told her he had a dispensation, but it was not properly signed. I am afraid that he tricked her.'

He frowned. 'Your wonderful father lied to his saintly wife?'

She gave a little rueful smile. 'Indeed, he will do anything to get his own way. You quickly learn it when you have dealings with him. He always thinks ahead, two, perhaps three, steps ahead. He knew my mother was devout and would not marry without the dispensation and *ole!* – there is a dispensation in her hand.'

'But they put it right later?'

'Yes, and though his father and her brother were angry, it was the right thing to do.'

'How could it be the right thing to do? To defy your family? To disobey your own father? That's a sin. It breaks a commandment. It is a cardinal sin. No Pope could bless such a marriage.'

'It was God's will,' she said confidently. 'None of them knew that it was God's will. But my mother knew. She always knows what God wills.'

'How can she be so sure? How could she be so sure then, when she was only a girl?'

She chuckled. 'God and my mother have always thought alike.'

He laughed and tweaked the lock of her hair. 'She certainly did the right

thing in sending you to me.'

'She did,' Catalina said. 'And we shall do the right thing by the country.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I have such plans for us when we come to the throne.'

'What shall we do?'

Arthur hesitated. 'You will think me a child, my head filled with stories from books.'

'No I shan't. Tell me!'

'I should like to make a council, like the first Arthur did. Not like my father's council, which is just filled with his friends who fought for him, but a proper council of all the kingdom. A council of knights, one for each county. Not chosen by me because I like their company, but chosen by their own county – as the best of men to represent them. And I should like them to come to the table and each of them should know what is happening in their own county, they should report. And so if a crop is going to fail and there is going to be hunger we should know in time and send food.'

Catalina sat up, interested. 'They would be our advisors. Our eyes and ears.'

'Yes. And I should like each of them to be responsible for building defences, especially the ones in the north and on the coasts.'

'And for mustering troops once a year, so we are always ready for attack,' she added. 'They will come, you know.'

'The Moors?'

She nodded. 'They are defeated in Spain for now, but they are as strong as ever in Africa, in the Holy Lands, in Turkey and the lands beyond. When they need more land they will move again into Christendom. Once a year in the spring, the Ottoman sultan goes to war, like other men plough the fields. They will come against us. We cannot know when they will come, but we can be very certain that they will do so.'

'I want defences all along the south coast against France, and against the Moors,' Arthur said. 'A string of castles, and beacons behind them, so that when we come under attack in – say – Kent, we can know about it in London, and everyone can be warned.'

'You will need to build ships,' she said. 'My mother commissioned fighting ships from the dockyard in Venice.'

'We have our own dockyards,' he said. 'We can build our own ships.'

'How shall we raise the money for all these castles and ships?' Isabella's daughter asked the practical question.

'Partly from taxing the people,' he said. 'Partly from taxing the merchants

and the people who use the ports. It is for their safety, they should pay. I know people hate the taxes but that is because they don't see what is done with the money.'

'We will need honest tax collectors,' Catalina said. 'My father says that if you can collect the taxes that are due and not lose half of them along the way it is better than a regiment of cavalry.'

'Yes, but how d'you find men that you can trust?' Arthur thought aloud. 'At the moment, any man who wants to make a fortune gets himself a post of collecting taxes. They should work for us, not for themselves. They should be paid a wage and not collect on their own account.'

'That has never been achieved by anyone but the Moors,' she said. 'The Moors in al Andalus set up schools and even universities for the sons of poor men, so that they had clerks that they could trust. And their great offices of court are always done by the young scholars, sometimes the young sons of their king.'

'Shall I take a hundred wives to get a thousand clerks for the throne?' he teased her.

'Not another single one.'

'But we have to find good men,' he said thoughtfully. 'You need loyal servants to the crown, those who owe their salary to the crown and their obedience to the crown. Otherwise they work for themselves and they take bribes and all their families become over-mighty.'

'The church could teach them,' Catalina suggested. 'Just as the imam teaches the boys for the Moors. If every parish church was as learned as a mosque with a school attached to it, if every priest knew he had to teach reading and writing, then we could found new colleges at the universities, so that boys could go on and learn more.'

'Is it possible?' he asked. 'Not just a dream?'

She nodded. 'It could be real. To make a country is the most real thing anyone can do. We will make a kingdom that we can be proud of, just as my mother and father did in Spain. We can decide how it is to be, and we can make it happen.'

'Camelot,' he said simply.

'Camelot,' she repeated.

Ludlow Castle, Spring 1502

It snowed for a sennight in February, and then came a thaw and the snow turned to slush and now it is raining again. I cannot walk in the garden, nor go out on a horse, nor even ride out into the town by mule. I have never seen such rain in my life before. It is not like our rain that falls on the hot earth and yields a rich, warm smell as the dust is laid and the plants drink up the water. But this is cold rain on cold earth, and there is no perfume and only standing pools of water with dark ice on it like a cold skin.

I miss my home with an ache of longing in these cold dark days. When I tell Arthur about Spain and the Alhambra it makes me yearn that he should see it for himself, and meet my mother and father. I want them to see him, and know our happiness. I keep wondering if his father would not allow him out of England... but I know I am dreaming. No king would ever let his precious son and heir out of his lands.

Then I start to wonder if I might go home for a short visit on my own. I cannot bear to be without Arthur for even a night, but then I think that unless I go to Spain alone I will never see my mother again, and the thought of that, never feeling the touch of her hand on my hair or seeing her smile at me – I don't know how I would bear to never see her again.

I am glad and proud to be Princess of Wales and the Queen of England-to-be, but I did not think, I did not realise – I know, how silly this is of me – but I did not quite understand that it would mean that I would live here forever, that I would never come home again. Somehow, although I knew I would be married to the Prince of Wales and one day be Queen of England, I did not fully understand that this would be my home now and forever; and that I may never see my mother or my father or my home again.

I expected at least that we would write, I thought I would hear from her often. But it is as she was with Isabel, with Maria, with Juana; she sends instructions through the ambassador, I have my orders as a princess of Spain. But as a mother to her daughter, I hear from her only rarely.

I don't know how to bear it. I never thought such a thing could happen. My

sister Isabel came home to us after she was widowed, though she married again and had to leave again. And Juana writes to me that she will go home on a visit with her husband. It isn't fair that she should go and I not be allowed to. I am only just sixteen. I am not ready to live without my mother's advice. I am not old enough to live without a mother. I look for her every day to tell me what I should do – and she is not there.

My husband's mother, Queen Elizabeth, is a cipher in her own household. She cannot be a mother to me, she cannot command her own time, how should she advise me? It is the king's mother, Lady Margaret, who rules everything; and she is a most well-thought-of, hard-hearted woman. She cannot be a mother to me, she couldn't be a mother to anyone. She worships her son because thanks to him she is the mother of the king; but she does not love him, she has no tenderness. She does not even love Arthur and if a woman could not love him she must be utterly without a heart. Actually, I am quite sure that she dislikes me, though I don't know why she should.

And anyway, I am sure my mother must miss me as I miss her? Surely, very soon, she will write to the king and ask him if I can come home for a visit? Before it gets much colder here? And it is terribly cold and wet already. I am sure I cannot stay here all the long winter. I am sure I will be ill. I am sure she must want me to come home...



Catalina, seated at the table before the window, trying to catch the failing light of a grey February afternoon, took up her letter, asking her mother if she could come for a visit to Spain, and tore it gently in half and then in half again and fed the pieces into the fire in her room. It was not the first letter she had written to her mother asking to come home, but – like the others – it would never be sent. She would not betray her mother's training by turning tail and running from grey skies and cold rain and people whose language no-one could ever understand and whose joys and sorrows were a mystery.

She was not to know that even if she had sent the letter to the Spanish ambassador in London, then that wily diplomat would have opened it, read it, and torn it up himself, and then reported the whole to the King of England. Rodrigo Gonsalvi de Puebla knew, though Catalina did not yet understand, that her marriage had forged an alliance between the emerging power of Spain and the emerging power of England against the emerging power of France. No

homesick princess wanting her mother would be allowed to unbalance that.



‘Tell me a story.’

‘I am like Scheherazade, you want a thousand stories from me.’ ‘Oh yes!’ he said. ‘I will have a thousand and one stories. How many have you told me already?’

‘I have told you a story every night since we were together, that first night, at Burford,’ she said.

‘Forty-nine days,’ he said.

‘Only forty-nine stories. If I was Scheherazade I would have nine hundred and fifty-two to go.’

He smiled at her. ‘Do you know, Catalina, I have been happier in these forty-nine days than ever in my life before?’

She took his hand and put it to her lips.

‘And the nights!’

Her eyes darkened with desire. ‘Yes, the nights,’ she said quietly.

‘I long for every nine hundred and fifty-two more,’ he said. ‘And then I will have another thousand after that.’

‘And a thousand after that?’

‘And a thousand after that forever and ever until we are both dead.’

She smiled. ‘Pray God we have long years together,’ she said tenderly.

‘So what will you tell me tonight?’

She thought. ‘I shall tell you of a Moor’s poem.’

Arthur settled back against the pillows as she leaned forwards and fixed her blue gaze on the curtains of the bed, as if she could see beyond them, to somewhere else.

‘He was born in the deserts of Arabia,’ she explained. ‘So when he came to Spain he missed everything about his home. He wrote this poem.

*“A palm tree stands in the middle of Rusafa,
Born in the west, far from the land of palms.
I said to it: How like me you are, far away and in exile
In long separation from your family and friends.
You have sprung from soil in which you are a stranger
And I, like you, am far from home.”*”

He was silent, taking in the simplicity of the poem. 'It is not like our poetry,' he said.

'No,' she replied quietly. 'They are a people who have a great love of words, they love to say a true thing simply.'

He opened his arms to her and she slid alongside him so that they were lying, thigh to thigh, side to side. He touched her face, her cheek was wet.

'Oh my love! Tears?'

She said nothing.

'I know that you miss your home,' he said softly, taking her hand in his and kissing the fingertips. 'But you will become accustomed to your life here, to your thousand, thousand days here.'

'I am happy with you,' Catalina said quickly. 'It is just...' Her voice trailed away. 'My mother,' she said, her voice very small. 'I miss her. And I worry about her. Because...I am the youngest, you see. And she kept me with her as long as she could.'

'She knew you would have to leave.'

'She's been much...tried. She lost her son, my brother, Juan, and he was our only heir. It is so terrible to lose a prince, you cannot imagine how terrible it is to lose a prince. It is not just the loss of him, but the loss of everything that might have been. His life has gone, but his reign and his future have gone too. His wife will no longer be queen, everything that he hoped for will not happen. And then the next heir, little Miguel, died at only two years old. He was all we had left of my sister Isabel, his mother, and then it pleased God to take him from us too. Poor Maria died far away from us in Portugal, she went away to be married and we never saw her again. It was natural that my mother kept me with her for comfort. I was her last child to leave home. And now I don't know how she will manage without me.'

Arthur put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. 'God will comfort her.'

'She will be so lonely,' she said in a little voice.

'Surely she, of all women in the world, feels God's comfort?'

'I don't think she always does,' Catalina said. 'Her own mother was tormented by sadness, you know. Many of the women of our family can get quite sick with sorrow. I know that my mother fears sinking into sadness just like her mother: a woman who saw things so darkly that she would rather have been blind. I know she fears that she will never be happy again. I know that she liked to have me with her so that I could make her happy. She said that I was a

child born for joy, that she could tell that I would always be happy.'

'Does your father not comfort her?'

'Yes,' she said uncertainly. 'But he is often away from her. And anyway, I should like to be with her. But you must know how I feel. Didn't you miss your mother when you were first sent away? And your father and your sisters and your brother?'

'I miss my sisters; but not my brother,' he said so decidedly that she had to laugh.

'Why not? I thought he was such fun.'

'He is a braggart,' Arthur said irritably. 'He is always pushing himself forwards. Look at our wedding, he had to be at the centre of the stage all the time, look at our wedding feast when he had to dance so that all eyes were on him. Pulling Margaret up to dance and making a performance of himself.'

'Oh no! It was just that your father told him to dance, and he was merry. He's just a boy.'

'He wants to be a man. He tries to be a man, he makes a fool of all of us when he tries. And nobody ever checks him! Did you not see how he looked at you?'

'I saw nothing at all,' she said truthfully. 'It was all a blur for me.'

'He fancies himself in love with you, and dreamed that he was walking you up the aisle on his own account.'

She laughed. 'Oh! How silly!'

'He's always been like that,' he said resentfully. 'And because he is the favourite of everyone he is allowed to say and do exactly as he wants. I have to learn the law, and languages, and I have to live here and prepare myself for the crown; but Harry stays at Greenwich or Whitehall at the centre of court as if he were an ambassador; not an heir who should be trained. He has to have a horse when I have a horse – though I had been kept on a steady palfrey for years. He has a falcon when I have my first falcon – nobody makes him train a kestrel and then a goshawk for year after year, then he has to have my tutor and tries to outstrip me, tries to outshine me whenever he can, and always takes the eye.'

Catalina saw he was genuinely irritated. 'But he is only a second son,' she observed.

'He is everyone's favourite,' Arthur said glumly. 'He has everything for the asking and everything comes easily to him.'

'He is not the Prince of Wales,' she pointed out. 'He may be liked; but he is not important. He only stays at court because he is not important enough to be

sent here. He does not have his own Principality. Your father will have plans for him. He will probably be married and sent away. A second son is no more important than a daughter.'

'He is to go into the church,' he said. 'He is to be a priest. Who would marry him? So he will be in England forever. I daresay I shall have to endure him as my archbishop, if he does not manage to make himself Pope.'

Catalina laughed at the thought of the flushed-faced blond, bright boy as Pope. 'How grand we shall all be when we are grown up,' she said. 'You and me, King and Queen of England, and Harry, archbishop; perhaps even a cardinal.'

'Harry won't ever grow up,' he insisted. 'He will always be a selfish boy. And because my grandmother – and my father – have always given him whatever he wanted, just for the asking, he will be a greedy, difficult boy.'

'Perhaps he will change,' she said. 'When my oldest sister, poor Isabel, went away to Portugal the first time, you would have thought her the vainest, most worldly girl you could imagine. But when her husband died and she came home she cared for nothing but to go into a convent. Her heart was quite broken.'

'Nobody will break Harry's heart,' his older brother asserted. 'He hasn't got one.'

'You'd have thought the same of Isabel,' Catalina argued. 'But she fell in love with her husband on her wedding day and she said she would never love again. She had to marry for the second time, of course. But she married unwillingly.'

'And did you?' he asked, his mood suddenly changing.

'Did I what? Marry unwillingly?'

'No! Fall in love with your husband on your wedding day?'

'Certainly not on my wedding day,' she said. 'Talk about a boastful boy! Harry is nothing to you! I heard you tell them all the next morning that having a wife was very good sport.'

Arthur had the grace to look abashed. 'I may have said something in jest.'

'That you had been in Spain all night?'

'Oh, Catalina. Forgive me. I knew nothing. You are right, I was a boy. But I am a man now, your husband. And you did fall in love with your husband. So don't deny it.'

'Not for days and days,' she said dampeningly. 'It was not love at first sight at all.'

'I know when it was, so you can't tease me. It was the evening at Burford

when you had been crying and I kissed you for the first time properly, and I wiped your tears away with my sleeves. And then that night I came to you, and the house was so quiet that it was as if we were the only people alive in the whole world.'

She snuggled closer into his arms. "And I told you my first story,' she said. 'But do you remember what it was?'

'It was the story of the fire at Santa Fe,' he said. 'When the luck was against the Spanish for once.'

She nodded. 'Normally, it was us who brought fire and the sword. My father has a reputation of being merciless.'

'Your father was merciless? Though it was land he was claiming for his own? How did he hope to bring the people to his will?'

'By fear,' she said simply. 'And anyway, it was not his will. It was God's will, and sometimes God is merciless. This was not an ordinary war, it was a crusade. Crusades are cruel.'

He nodded.

'They had a song about my father's advance. The Moors had a song.'

She threw back her head and in a haunting, low voice, translating the words into French, she sang to him:

*'Riders gallop through the Elvira gate, up to the Alhambra,
Fearful tidings they bring the king,
Ferdinand himself leads an army, flower of Spain,
Along the banks of the Jenil; with him comes
Isabel, Queen with the heart of a man.'*

Arthur was delighted. 'Sing it again!'

She laughed and sang again.

'And they really called her that: "Queen with the heart of a man"?'

'Father says that when she was in camp it was better than two battalions for strengthening our troops and frightening the Moors. In all the battles they fought, she was never defeated. The army never lost a battle when she was there.'

'To be a king like that! To have them write songs about you.'

'I know,' Catalina said. 'To have a legend for a mother! It's not surprising I miss her. In those days she was never afraid of anything. When the fire would have destroyed us, she was not afraid then. Not of the flames in the night and not of defeat. Even when my father and all the advisors agreed that we would have to pull back to Toledo and re-arm, come again next year, my mother said no.'

‘Does she argue with him in public?’ Arthur asked, fascinated at the thought of a wife who was not a subject.

‘She does not exactly argue,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘She would never contradict him or disrespect him. But he knows very well when she doesn’t agree with him. And mostly, they do it her way.’

He shook his head.

‘I know what you’re thinking, a wife should obey. She would say so herself. But the difficulty is that she’s always right,’ said her daughter. ‘All the times I can think of, whenever it has been a great question as to whether the army should go on, or whether something can be done. It’s as if God advises her, it really is; she knows best what should be done. Even Father knows that she knows best.’

‘She must be an extraordinary woman.’

‘She is queen,’ Catalina said simply. ‘Queen in her own right. Not a mere queen by marriage, not a commoner raised to be queen. She was born a princess of Spain like me. Born to be a queen. Saved by God from the most terrible dangers to be Queen of Spain. What else should she do but command her kingdom?’



That night I dream I am a bird, an apus, a swift, flying high and fearless over the kingdom of new Castile, south from Toledo, over Cordoba, south to the kingdom of Granada; the ground below me laid out like a tawny carpet, woven from the gold-fleeced sheep of the Berbers, the brass earth pierced by bronze cliffs, the hills so high that not even olive trees can cling to their steep slopes. On I fly, my little bird-heart thudding until I see the rosy walls of the Alcazar, the great fort which encloses the palace of the Alhambra, and flying low and fast, I skim the brutal squareness of the watchtower where the flag of the sickle moon once waved, to plunge down towards the Court of Myrtles to fly round and around in the warm air, enclosed by dainty buildings of stucco and tile, looking down on the mirror of water, and seeing at last the one I am looking for: my mother, Isabella of Spain, walking in the warm evening air, and thinking of her daughter in faraway England.

Ludlow Castle, March 1502



‘I want to ask you to meet a lady who is a good friend of mine and is ready to be a friend of yours,’ Arthur said, choosing his words with care.

Catalina’s ladies-in-waiting, bored on a cold afternoon with no entertainment, craned forwards to listen while trying to appear engaged in their needlework.

At once she blanched as white as the linen she was embroidering. ‘My lord?’ she asked anxiously. He had said nothing of this in the early hours of the morning when they had woken and made love. She had not expected to see him until dinner. His arrival in her rooms signalled that something had happened. She was wary, waiting to know what was going on.

‘A lady? Who is she?’

‘You may have heard of her from others, but I beg you to remember that she is eager to be your friend, and she has always been a good friend to me.’

Catalina’s head flew up, she took a breath. For a moment, for a dreadful moment, she thought that he was introducing a former mistress into her court, begging a place among ladies-in-waiting for some woman who had been his lover, so that they might continue their affair.



If this is what he is doing, I know what part I must play. I have seen my mother haunted by the pretty girls that my father, God forgive him, cannot resist. Again and again we would see him pay attention to some new face at court. Each time my mother behaved as if she had noticed nothing, dowered the girl handsomely, married her off to an eligible courtier, and encouraged him to take his new bride far, far away. It was such a common occurrence that it became a joke: that if a girl wanted to marry well with the queen’s blessing, and travel to some remote province, all she had to do was to catch the eye of the king, and in no time she would find herself riding away from the Alhambra on a fine new horse with a set of new clothes.

I know that a sensible woman looks the other way and tries to bear her hurt and humiliation when her husband chooses to take another woman to his bed. What she must not do, what she absolutely must never do, is behave like my sister Juana, who shames herself and all of us by giving way to screaming fits,

hysterical tears, and threats of revenge.

‘It does no good,’ my mother once told me when one of the ambassadors relayed to us some awful scene at Philip’s court in the Netherlands: Juana threatening to cut off the woman’s hair, attacking her with a pair of scissors, and then swearing she would stab herself.

‘It only makes it worse to complain. If a husband goes astray you will have to take him back into your life and into your bed, whatever he has done; there is no escape from marriage. If you are queen and he is king you have to deal together. If he forgets his duty to you, that is no reason to forget yours to him. However painful, you are always his queen and he is always your husband.’

‘Whatever he does?’ I asked her. ‘However he behaves? He is free though you are bound?’

She shrugged. ‘Whatever he does cannot break the marriage bond. You are married in the sight of God: he is always your husband, you are always queen. Those whom God has joined together, no man can put asunder. Whatever pain your husband brings you, he is still your husband. He may be a bad husband; but he is still your husband.’

‘What if he wants another?’ I asked, sharp in my young girl’s curiosity.

‘If he wants another he can have her or she can refuse him, that is between them. That is for her and her conscience,’ my mother had said steadily. ‘What must not change is you. Whatever he says, whatever she wants: you are still his wife and his queen.’



Catalina summoned this bleak counsel and faced her young husband. ‘I am always glad to meet a friend of yours, my lord,’ she said levelly, hoping that her voice did not quaver at all. ‘But, as you know, I have only a small household. Your father was very clear that I am not allowed any more companions than I have at present. As you know, he does not pay me any allowance. I have no money to pay another lady for her service. In short, I cannot add any lady, even a special friend of yours, to my court.’

Arthur flinched at the reminder of his father’s mean haggling over her train. ‘Oh no, you mistake me. It is not a friend who wants a place. She would not be one of your ladies-in-waiting,’ he said hastily. ‘It is Lady Margaret Pole, who is waiting to meet you. She has come home here at last.’



Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us. This is worse than if it was his mistress. I knew I would have to face her one day. This is her home, but she was away when we got here and I thought she had deliberately snubbed me by being away and staying away. I thought she was avoiding me out of hatred, as I would avoid her from shame. Lady Margaret Pole is sister to that poor boy, the Duke of Warwick, beheaded to make the succession safe for me, and for my line. I have been dreading the moment when I would have to meet her. I have been praying to the saints that she would stay away, hating me, blaming me, but keeping her distance.



Arthur saw her quick gesture of rejection, but he had known of no way to prepare her for this. 'Please,' he said hurriedly. 'She has been away caring for her children or she would have been here with her husband to welcome you to the castle when we first arrived. I told you she would return. She wants to greet you now. We all have to live together here. Sir Richard is a trusted friend of my father, the lord of my council and the warden of this castle. We will all have to live together.'

Catalina put out a shaking hand to him and at once he came closer, ignoring the fascinated attention of her ladies.

'I cannot meet her,' she whispered. 'Truly, I can't. I know that her brother was put to death for my sake. I know my parents insisted on it, before they would send me to England. I know he was innocent, innocent as a flower, kept in the Tower by your father so that men should not gather round him and claim the throne in his name. He could have lived there in safety all his life but for my parents demanding his death. She must hate me.'

'She doesn't hate you,' he said truthfully. 'Believe me, Catalina, I would not expose you to anyone's unkindness. She does not hate you, she doesn't hate me, she doesn't even hate my father who ordered the execution. She knows that these things happen. She is a princess, she knows as well as you do that it is not choice but policy that governs us. It was not your choice, nor mine. She knows that your father and mother had to be sure that there were no rival princes to claim the throne, that my father would clear my way, whatever it cost him. She is

resigned.'

'Resigned?' she gasped incredulously. 'How can a woman be resigned to the murder of her brother, the heir of the family? How can she greet me with friendship when he died for my convenience? When we lost my brother our world ended, our hopes died with him. Our future was buried with him. My mother, who is a living saint, still cannot bear it. She has not been happy since the day of his death. It is unbearable to her. If he had been executed for some stranger I swear she would have taken a life in return. How could Lady Margaret lose her brother and bear it? How can she bear me?'

'She has resignation,' he said simply. 'She is a most spiritual woman and if she looked for reward, she has one in that she is married to Sir Richard Pole, a man most trusted by my father, and she lives here in the highest regard and she is my friend and I hope will be yours.'

He took her hand and felt it tremble. 'Come, Catalina. This isn't like you. Be brave, my love. She won't blame you.'

'She must blame me,' she said in an anguished whisper. 'My parents insisted that there should be no doubt over your inheritance. I know they did. Your own father promised that there would be no rival princes. They knew what he meant to do. They did not tell him to leave an innocent man with his life. They let him do it. They wanted him to do it. Edward Plantagenet's blood is on my head. Our marriage is under the curse of his death.'

Arthur recoiled, he had never before seen her so distressed. 'My God, Catalina, you cannot call us accursed.'

She nodded miserably.

'You have never spoken of this.'

'I could not bear to say it.'

'But you have thought it?'

'From the moment they told me that he was put to death for my sake.'

'My love, you cannot really think that we are accursed?'

'In this one thing.'

He tried to laugh off her intensity. 'No. You must know we are blessed.' He drew closer and said very quietly, so that no-one else could hear, 'Every morning when you wake in my arms, do you feel accursed then?'

'No,' she said unwillingly. 'No, I don't.'

'Every night when I come to your rooms, do you feel the shadow of sin upon you?'

'No,' she conceded.

‘We are not cursed,’ he said firmly. ‘We are blessed with God’s favour. Catalina, my love, trust me. She has forgiven my father, she certainly would never blame you. I swear to you, she is a woman with a heart as big as a cathedral. She wants to meet you. Come with me and let me present her to you.’

‘Alone then,’ she said, still fearing some terrible scene.

‘Alone. She is in the castle warden’s rooms now. If you come at once, we can leave them all here, and go quietly by ourselves and see her.’

She rose from her seat and put her hand on the crook of his arm. ‘I am walking alone with the princess,’ Arthur said to her ladies. ‘You can all stay here.’

They looked surprised to be excluded, and some of them were openly disappointed. Catalina went past them without looking up.

Once out of the door he preceded her down the tight spiral staircase, one hand on the central stone post, one on the wall. Catalina followed him, lingering at every deep-set arrowslit window, looking down into the valley where the Teme had burst its banks and was like a silver lake over the water meadows. It was cold, even for March in the Borders, and Catalina shivered as if a stranger was walking on her grave.

‘My love,’ he said, looking back up the narrow stairs towards her. ‘Courage. Your mother would have courage.’

‘She ordered this thing,’ she said crossly. ‘She thought it was for my benefit. But a man died for her ambition, and now I have to face his sister.’

‘She did it for you,’ he reminded her. ‘And nobody blames you.’ They came to the floor below the princess’s suite of rooms and without hesitation, Arthur tapped on the thick wooden door of the warden’s apartments and went in.

The square room overlooking the valley was the match of Catalina’s presence chamber upstairs, panelled with wood and hung with bright tapestries. There was a lady waiting for them, seated by the fireside, and when the door opened she rose. She was dressed in a pale grey gown with a grey hood on her hair. She was about thirty years of age; she looked at Catalina with friendly interest, and then she sank into a deep, respectful curtsy.

Disobeying the nip of his bride’s fingers, Arthur withdrew his arm and stepped back as far as the doorway. Catalina looked back at him reproachfully and then bobbed a small curtsy to the older woman. They rose up together.

‘I am so pleased to meet you,’ Lady Pole said sweetly. ‘And I am sorry not to have been here to greet you. But one of my children was ill and I went to make sure that he was well nursed.’

‘Your husband has been very kind,’ Catalina managed to say.

‘I hope so, for I left him a long list of commandments; I so wanted your rooms to be warm and comfortable. You must tell me if there is anything you would like. I don’t know Spain, so I didn’t know what things would give you pleasure.’

‘No! It is all...absolutely.’

The older woman looked at the princess. ‘Then I hope you will be very happy here with us,’ she said.

‘I hope to...’ Catalina breathed. ‘But I...I...’

‘Yes?’

‘I was very sorry to hear of the death of your brother.’ Catalina dived in. Her face, which had been white with discomfort, now flushed scarlet. She could feel her ears burning, and to her horror she heard her voice tremble. ‘Indeed, I was very sorry. Very...’

‘It was a great loss to me, and to mine,’ the woman said steadily. ‘But it is the way of the world.’

‘I am afraid that my coming...’

‘I never thought that it was any choice or any fault of yours, Princess. When our dear Prince Arthur was to be married his father was bound to make sure that his inheritance was secured. I know that my brother would never have threatened the peace of the Tudors, but they were not to know that. And he was ill-advised by a mischievous young man, drawn into some foolish plot...’ She broke off as her voice shook; but rapidly she recovered herself. ‘Forgive me. It still grieves me. He was an innocent, my brother. His silly plotting was proof of his innocence, not of his guilt. There is no doubt in my mind that he is in God’s keeping now, with all innocents.’

She smiled at the princess. ‘In this world, we women often find that we have no power over what men do. I am sure you would have wished my brother no harm, and indeed, I am sure that he would not have stood against you or against our dearest prince here – but it is the way of the world that harsh measures are sometimes taken. My father made some bad choices in his life, and God knows he paid for them in full. His son, though innocent, went the way of his father. A turn of the coin and it could all have been different. I think a woman has to learn to live with the turn of the coin even when it falls against her.’

Catalina was listening intently. ‘I know my mother and father wanted to be sure that the Tudor line was without challenge,’ she breathed. ‘I know that they told the king.’ She felt as if she had to make sure that this woman knew the

depth of her guilt.

‘As I might have done if I had been them,’ Lady Margaret said simply. ‘Princess, I do not blame you, nor your mother or father. I do not blame our great king. Were I any one of them, I might have behaved just as they have done, and explained myself only to God. All I have to do, since I am not one of these great people but merely the humble wife to a fine man, is to take care how I behave, and how I will explain myself to God.’

‘I felt that I came to this country with his death on my conscience,’ Catalina admitted in a sudden rush.

The older woman shook her head. ‘His death is not on your conscience,’ she said firmly. ‘And it is wrong to blame yourself for another’s doing. Indeed, I would think your confessor would tell you: it is a form of pride. Let that be the sin that you confess, you need not take the blame for the sins of others.’

Catalina looked up for the first time and met the steady eyes of Lady Pole, and saw her smile. Cautiously she smiled back, and the older woman stretched out her hand, as a man would offer to shake on a bargain. ‘You see,’ she said pleasantly. ‘I was a Princess Royal myself once. I was the last Plantagenet princess, raised by King Richard in his nursery with his son. Of all the women in the world, I should know that there is more to life than a woman can ever control. There is the will of your husband, and of your parents, and of your king, and of your God. Nobody could blame a princess for the doings of a king. How could one ever challenge it? Or make any difference? Our way has to be obedience.’

Catalina, her hand in the warm, firm grasp, felt wonderfully reassured. ‘I am afraid I am not always very obedient,’ she confessed.

The older woman laughed. ‘Oh yes, for one would be a fool not to think for oneself,’ she allowed. ‘True obedience can only happen when you secretly think you know better, and you choose to bow your head. Anything short of that is just agreement, and any ninny-in-waiting can agree. Don’t you think?’

And Catalina, giggling with an English woman for the first time, laughed aloud and said: ‘I never wanted to be a ninny-in-waiting.’

‘Neither did I,’ gleamed Margaret Pole, who had been a Plantagenet, a Princess Royal and was now a mere wife buried in the fastness of the Tudor Borders. ‘I always know that I am myself, in my heart, whatever title I am given.’



I am so surprised to find that the woman whose presence I have dreaded is making the castle at Ludlow feel like a home for me. Lady Margaret Pole is a companion and friend to comfort me for the loss of my mother and sisters. I realise now that I have always lived in a world dominated by women: the queen my mother, my sisters, our ladies- and maids-in-waiting, and all the women servants of the seraglio. In the Alhambra we lived almost withdrawn from men, in rooms built for the pleasure and comfort of women. We lived almost in seclusion, in the privacy of the cool rooms, and ran through the courtyards and leaned on the balconies secure in the knowledge that half the palace was exclusively in the ownership of us women.

We would attend the court with my father, we were not hidden from sight; but the natural desire of women for privacy was served and emphasised by the design of the Alhambra where the prettiest rooms and the best gardens were reserved for us.

It is strange to come to England and find the world dominated by men. Of course I have my rooms and my ladies, but any man can come and ask for admittance at any time. Sir Richard Pole or any other of Arthur's gentlemen can come to my rooms without notice and think that they are paying me a compliment. The English seem to think it right and normal that men and women should mix. I have not yet seen a house with rooms that are exclusive to women, and no woman goes veiled as we sometimes did in Spain, not even when travelling, not even among strangers.

Even the royal family is open to all. Men, even strangers, can stroll through the royal palaces as long as they are smart enough for the guards to admit them. They can wait around in the queen's presence chamber and see her any time she walks by, staring at her as if they were family. The great hall, the chapel, the queen's public rooms are open to anyone who can find a good hat and a cape and pass as gentry. The English treat women as if they are boys or servants, they can go anywhere, they can be looked at by anyone. For a while I thought this was a great freedom, and for a while I revelled in it; then I realised the English women may show their faces but they are not bold like men, they are not free like boys; they still have to remain silent and obey.

Now with Lady Margaret Pole returned to the warden's rooms it feels as if this castle has come under the rule of women. The evenings in the hall are less hearty, even the food at dinner has changed. The troubadours sing of love and less of battles, there is more French spoken and less Welsh.

My rooms are above, and hers are on the floor below, and we go up and down stairs all day to see each other. When Arthur and Sir Richard are out hunting, the castle's mistress is still at home and the place does not feel empty any more. Somehow, she makes it a lady's castle, just by being here. When Arthur is away, the life of the castle is not silent, waiting for his return. It is a warm, happy place, busy in its own day's work.

I have missed having an older woman to be my friend. Maria de Salinas is a girl as young and silly as I am, she is a companion, not a mentor. Dona Elvira was nominated by my mother the queen to stand in a mother's place for me; but she is not a woman I can warm to, though I have tried to love her. She is strict with me, jealous of her influence over me, ambitious to run the whole court. She and her husband, who commands my household, want to dominate my life. Since that first evening at Dogmersfield when she contradicted the king himself, I have doubted her judgement. Even now she continually cautions me against becoming too close with Arthur, as if it were wrong to love a husband, as if I could resist him! She wants to make a little Spain in England, she wants me to still be the Infanta. But I am certain that my way ahead in England is to become English.

Dona Elvira will not learn English. She affects not to be able to understand French when it is spoken with an English accent. The Welsh she treats with absolute contempt as barbarians on the very edge of civilisation, which is not very comfortable when we are visiting the townspeople of Ludlow. To be honest, sometimes she behaves more grandly than any woman I have ever known, she is prouder than my mother herself. She is certainly grander than me. I have to admire her, but I cannot truly love her.

But Margaret Pole was educated as the niece of a king and is as fluent in Latin as me. We speak French easily together, she is teaching me English, and when we come across a word we don't know in any of our shared languages, we compose great mimes that set us wailing with giggles. I made her cry with laughing when I tried to demonstrate indigestion, and the guards came running, thinking we were under attack when she used all the ladies of the court and their maidservants to demonstrate to me the correct protocol for an English hunt in the field.



With Margaret, Catalina thought she could raise the question of her future, and her father-in-law of whom she was frankly nervous.

‘He was displeased before we came away,’ she said. ‘It is the question of the dowry.’

‘Oh, yes?’ Margaret replied. The two women were seated in a window, waiting for the men to come back from hunting. It was bitterly cold and damp outside, neither of them had wanted to go out. Margaret thought it better to volunteer nothing about the vexed question of Catalina’s dowry; she had already heard from her husband that the Spanish king had perfected the art of double dealing. He had agreed a substantial dowry for the Infanta, but then sent her to England with only half the money. The rest, he suggested, could be made up with the plate and treasure that she brought as her household goods. Outraged, King Henry had demanded the full amount. Sweetly Ferdinand of Spain replied that the Infanta’s household had been supplied with the very best, Henry could take his pick.

It was a bad way to start a marriage that was, in any case, founded only on greed and ambition, and a shared fear of France. Catalina was caught between the determination of two cold-hearted men. Margaret guessed that one of the reasons that Catalina had been sent to Ludlow Castle with her husband was to force her to use her own household goods and so diminish their value. If King Henry had kept her at court in Windsor or Greenwich or Westminster, she would have eaten off his plates and her father could have argued that the Spanish plate was as good as new, and must be taken as the dowry. But now, every night they ate from Catalina’s gold plates and every scrape of a careless knife knocked a little off the value. When it was time to pay the second half of the dowry, the King of Spain would find he would have to pay cash. King Ferdinand might be a hard man and a cunning negotiator but he had met his match in Henry Tudor of England.

‘He said that I should be a daughter to him,’ Catalina started carefully. ‘But I cannot obey him as a daughter should, if I am to obey my own father. My father tells me not to use my plate and to give it to the king. But he won’t accept it. And since the dowry is unpaid the king sends me away with no provision, he doesn’t even pay my allowance.’

‘Does the Spanish ambassador not advise you?’

Catalina made a little face. ‘He is the king’s own man,’ she said. ‘No help to me. I don’t like him. He is a Jew, but converted. An adaptable man. A Spaniard, but he has lived here for years. He is become a man for the Tudors, not for Aragon. I shall tell my father that he is poorly served by Dr de Puebla, but in the meantime, I have no good advice, and in my household Dona Elvira and my

treasurer never stop quarrelling. She says that my goods and my treasure must be loaned to the goldsmiths to raise money, he says he will not let them out of his sight until they are paid to the king.'

'And have you not asked the prince what you should do?'

Catalina hesitated. 'It is a matter between his father and my father,' she said cautiously. 'I didn't want to let it disturb us. He has paid for all my travelling expenses here. He is going to have to pay for my ladies' wages at midsummer, and soon I will need new gowns. I don't want to ask him for money. I don't want him to think me greedy.'

'You love him, don't you?' Margaret asked, smiling, and watched the younger woman's face light up.

'Oh yes,' the girl breathed. 'I do love him so.'

The older woman smiled. 'You are blessed,' she said gently. 'To be a princess and to find love with the husband you are ordered to marry. You are blessed, Catalina.'

'I know. I do think it is a sign of God's especial favour to me.'

The older woman paused at the grandness of the claim, but did not correct her. The confidence of youth would wear away soon enough without any need for warnings. 'And do you have any signs?'

Catalina looked puzzled.

'Of a child coming? You do know what to look for?'

The young woman blushed. 'I do know. My mother told me. There are no signs yet.'

'It's early days,' Lady Margaret said comfortingly. 'But if you had a child on the way I think there would be no difficulty with a dowry. I think nothing would be too good for you if you were carrying the next Tudor prince.'

'I ought to be paid my allowance whether I have a child or not,' Catalina observed. 'I am Princess of Wales, I should have an allowance to keep my state.'

'Yes,' said Margaret drily. 'But who is going to tell the king that?'



'Tell me a story.'

They were bathed in the dappled gold of candlelight and firelight. It was midnight and the castle was silent but for their low voices, all the lights were out but for the blaze of Catalina's chambers where the two young lovers were resisting sleep.

‘What shall I tell you about?’

‘Tell me a story about the Moors.’

She thought for a moment, throwing a shawl around her bare shoulders against the cold. Arthur was sprawled across the bed but when she moved he gathered her to him so her head rested on his naked chest. He ran his hand through her rich red hair and gathered it into his fist.

‘I will tell you a story about one of the sultanas,’ she said. ‘It is not a story. It is true. She was in the harem; you know that the women live apart from the men in their own rooms?’

He nodded, watching the candlelight flicker on her neck, on the hollow at her collarbone.

‘She looked out of the window and the tidal river beneath her window was at low ebb. The poor children of the town were playing in the water. They were on the slipway for the boats and they had spread mud all around and they were slipping and sliding, skating in the mud. She laughed while she watched them and she said to her ladies how she wished that she could play like that.’

‘But she couldn’t go out?’

‘No, she could never go out. Her ladies told the eunuchs who guarded the harem and they told the Grand Vizier and he told the sultan, and when she left the window and went to her presence chamber, guess what?’

He shook his head, smiling. ‘What?’

‘Her presence chamber was a great marble hall. The floor was made of rose-veined marble. The sultan had ordered them to bring great flasks of perfumed oils and pour them on the floor. All the perfumiers in the town had been ordered to bring oil of roses to the palace. They had brought rose petals and sweet-smelling herbs and they had made a thick paste of oil of roses and rose petals and herbs and spread it, one foot thick, all across the floor of her presence chamber. The sultana and her ladies stripped to their chemises and slid and played in the mud, threw rose water and petals and all the afternoon played like the mudlarks.’

He was entranced. ‘How glorious.’

She smiled up at him. ‘Now it is your turn. You tell me a story.’

‘I have no stories like that. It is all fighting and winning.’

‘Those are the stories you like best when I tell them,’ she pointed out.

‘I do. And now your father is going to war again.’

‘He is?’

‘Did you not know?’

Catalina shook her head. 'The Spanish ambassador sometimes sends me a note with the news, but he has told me nothing. Is it a crusade?'

'You are a bloodthirsty soldier of Christ. I should think the infidels shake in their sandals. No, it is not a crusade. It is a far less heroic cause. Your father, rather surprisingly to us, has made an alliance with King Louis of France. Apparently they plan to invade Italy together and share the spoils.'

'King Louis?' she asked in surprise. 'Never! I had thought they would be enemies until death.'

'Well, it seems that the French king does not care who he allies with. First the Turks and now your father.'

'Well, better that King Louis makes alliance with my father than with the Turks,' she said stoutly. 'Anything is better than they are invited in.'

'But why would your father join with our enemy?'

'He has always wanted Naples,' she confided to him. 'Naples and Navarre. One way or another he will have them. King Louis may think he has an ally but there will be a high price to pay. I know him. He plays a long game but he usually gets his own way. Who sent you the news?'

'My father. I think he is vexed not to be in their counsel. He fears the French worse only than the Scots. It is a disappointment for us that your father would ally with them on anything.'

'On the contrary, your father should be pleased that my father is keeping the French busy in the south. My father is doing him a service.'

He laughed at her. 'You are a great help.'

'Will your father not join with them?'

Arthur shook his head. 'Perhaps, but his one great desire is to keep England at peace. War is a terrible thing for a country. You are a soldier's daughter and you should know. My father says it is a terrible thing to see a country at war.'

'Your father only fought one big battle,' she said. 'Sometimes you have to fight. Sometimes you have to beat your enemy.'

'I wouldn't fight to gain land,' he said. 'But I would fight to defend our borders. And I think we will have to fight against the Scots unless my sister can change their very nature.'

'And is your father prepared for war?'

'He has the Howard family to keep the north for him,' he said. 'And he has the trust of every northern landlord. He has reinforced the castles and he keeps the Great North Road open so that he can get his soldiers up there if needs be.'

Catalina looked thoughtful. 'If he has to fight he would do better to invade

them,' she said. 'Then he can choose the time and the place to fight and not be forced into defence.'

'Is that the better way?'

She nodded. 'My father would say so. It is everything to have your army moving forwards and confident. You have the wealth of the country ahead of you, for your supplies; you have the movement forwards: soldiers like to feel that they are making progress. There is nothing worse than being forced to turn and fight.'

'You are a tactician,' he said. 'I wish to God I had your childhood and knew the things you know.'

'You do have,' she said sweetly. 'For everything I know is yours, and everything I am is yours. And if you and our country ever need me to fight for you then I will be there.'



It has become colder and colder and the long week of rain has turned into showers of hail and now snow. Even so it is not bright, cold wintry weather but a low, damp mist with swirling cloud and flurries of slush which clings in clumps to trees and turrets and sits in the river like old sherbet.

When Arthur comes to my room he slips along the battlements like a skater and this morning, as he went back to his room, we were certain we would be discovered because he slid on fresh ice and fell and cursed so loud that the sentry on the next tower put his head out and shouted 'Who goes there?' and I had to call back that it was only me, feeding the winter birds. So Arthur whistled at me and told me it was the call of a robin and we both laughed so much that we could barely stand. I am certain that the sentry knew anyway, but it was so cold he did not come out.

Now today Arthur has gone out riding with his council, who want to look at a site for a new corn mill while the river is in spate and partly blocked by snow and ice, and Lady Margaret and I are staying at home and playing cards.

It is cold and grey, it is wet all the time, even the walls of the castle weep with icy moisture, but I am happy. I love him, I would live with him anywhere, and spring will come and then summer. I know we will be happy then too.



The tap on the door came late at night. She threw it open.

‘Ah love, my love! Where have you been?’

He stepped into the room and kissed her. She could taste the wine on his breath. ‘They would not leave,’ he said. ‘I have been trying to get away to be with you for three hours at the very least.’

He picked her up off her feet and carried her to the bed. ‘But Arthur, don’t you want...?’

‘I want you.’



‘Tell me a story.’

‘Are you not sleepy now?’

‘No. I want you to sing me the song about the Moors losing the battle of Malaga.’

Catalina laughed. ‘It was the battle of Alhama. I shall sing you some of the verses; but it goes on and on.’

‘Sing me all of them.’

‘We would need all night,’ she protested.

‘We have all night, thank God,’ he said, joy in his voice. ‘We have all night and we have every night for the rest of our lives, thank God for it.’

‘It is a forbidden song,’ she said. ‘Forbidden by my mother herself.’

‘So how did you learn it?’ Arthur demanded, instantly diverted.

‘Servants,’ she said carelessly. ‘I had a nursemaid who was a Morisco and she would forget who I was, and who she was, and sing to me.’

‘What’s a Morisco? And why was the song banned?’ he asked curiously.

‘A Morisco means “little Moor” in Spanish,’ she explained. ‘It’s what we call the Moors who live in Spain. They are not really Moors like those in Africa. So we call them little Moors, or Moros. As I left, they were starting to call themselves Mudajjan – one allowed to remain.’

‘One allowed to remain?’ he asked. ‘In their own land?’

‘It’s not their land,’ she said instantly. ‘It’s ours. Spanish land.’

‘They had it for seven hundred years,’ he pointed out. ‘When you Spanish were doing nothing but herding goats in the mountains, they were building roads and castles and universities. You told me so yourself.’

‘Well, it’s ours now,’ she said flatly.

He clapped his hands like a sultan. ‘Sing the song, Scheherazade. And sing it

in French, you barbarian, so I can understand it.'

Catalina put her hands together like a woman about to pray and bowed low to him.

'Now that is good,' Arthur said, revelling in her. 'Did you learn that in the harem?'

She smiled at him and tipped up her head and sang.

*"An old man cries to the king: Why comes this sudden calling? – Alas!
Alhama!*

*Alas my friends, Christians have won Alhama – Alas! Alhama! A white-
bearded imam answers: This has thou merited, oh King! – Alas!
Alhama!*

*In an evil hour thou slewest the Abencerrages, flower of Granada – Alas!
Alhama!*

Not Granada, not kingdom, not thy life shall long remain – Alas! Alhama!'

She fell silent. 'And it was true,' she said. 'Poor Boabdil came out of the Alhambra Palace, out of the red fort that they said would never fall, with the keys on a silk cushion, bowed low and gave them to my mother and my father and rode away. They say that at the mountain pass he looked back at his kingdom, his beautiful kingdom, and wept, and his mother told him to weep like a woman for what he could not hold as a man.'

Arthur let out a boyish crack of laughter. 'She said what?'

Catalina looked up, her face grave. 'It was very tragic.'

'It is just the sort of thing my grandmother would say,' he said delightedly. 'Thank God my father won his crown. My grandmother would be just as sweet in defeat as Boabdil's mother. Good God: "weep like a woman for what you cannot hold as a man." What a thing to say to a man as he walks away in defeat!'

Catalina laughed too. 'I never thought of it like that,' she said. 'It isn't very comforting.'

'Imagine going into exile with your mother, and she so angry with you!'

'Imagine losing the Alhambra, never going back there!'

He pulled her to him and kissed her face. 'No regrets!' he commanded.

At once she smiled for him. 'Then divert me,' she ordered. 'Tell me about your mother and father.'

He thought for a moment. 'My father was born an heir to the Tudors, but there were dozens in line for the throne before him,' he said. 'His father wanted him called Owen, Owen Tudor, a good Welsh name, but his father died before his birth, in the war. My grandmother was only a child of twelve when he was

born, but she had her way and called him Henry – a royal name. You can see what she was thinking even then, even though she was little more than a child herself, and her husband was dead.

‘My father’s fortunes soared up and down with every battle of the civil war. One time he was a son of the ruling family, the next they were on the run. His uncle Jasper Tudor – you remember him – kept faith with my father and with the Tudor cause, but there was a final battle and our cause was lost, and our king executed. Edward came to the throne and my father was the last of the line. He was in such danger that Uncle Jasper broke out of the castle where they were being held and fled with him out of the country to Brittany.’

‘To safety?’

‘Of a sort. He told me once that he woke every morning expecting to be handed over to Edward. And once, King Edward said that he should come home and there would be a kind welcome and a wedding arranged for him. My father pretended to be ill on the road and escaped. He would have come home to his death.’

Catalina blinked. ‘So he was a pretender too, in his time.’

He grinned at her. ‘As I said. That is why he fears them so much. He knows what a pretender can do if the luck is with him. If they had caught him they would have brought him home to his death in the Tower. Just like he did to Warwick. My father would have been put to death the moment King Edward had him. But he pretended to be ill and got away, over the border into France.’

‘They didn’t hand him back?’

Arthur laughed. ‘They supported him. He was the greatest challenge to the peace of England, of course they encouraged him. It suited the French to support him then: when he was not king but pretender.’

She nodded, she was a child of a prince praised by Machiavelli himself. Any daughter of Ferdinand was born to double-dealing. ‘And then?’

‘Edward died young, in his prime, with only a young son to inherit. His brother Richard first held the throne in trust and then claimed it for himself and put his own nephews, Edward’s sons, the little princes, in the Tower of London.’

She nodded, this was a history she had been taught in Spain, and the greater story – of deadly rivalry for a throne – was a common theme for both young people.

‘They went into the Tower and never came out again,’ Arthur said bleakly. ‘God bless their souls, poor boys, no-one knows what happened to them. The people turned against Richard, and summoned my father from France.’

‘Yes?’

‘My grandmother organised the great lords one after another, she was an arch-plotter. She and the Duke of Buckingham put their heads together and had the nobles of the kingdom in readiness. That’s why my father honours her so highly: he owes her his throne. And he waited until he could get a message to my mother to tell her that he would marry her if he won the throne.’

‘Because he loved her?’ Catalina asked hopefully. ‘She is so beautiful.’

‘Not he. He hadn’t even seen her. He had been in exile for most of his life, remember. It was a marriage cobbled together because his mother knew that if she could get those two married then everyone would see that the heir of York had married the heir of Lancaster and the war could be over. And her mother saw it as her only way out to safety. The two mothers brokered the deal together like a pair of crones over a cauldron. They’re both women you wouldn’t want to cross.’

‘He didn’t love her?’ She was disappointed.

Arthur smiled. ‘No. It’s not a romance. And she didn’t love him. But they knew what they had to do. When my father marched in and beat Richard and picked the crown of England out of the bodies and the wreckage of the battlefield, he knew that he would marry the princess, take the throne, and found a new line.’

‘But wasn’t she next heir to the throne anyway?’ she asked, puzzled. ‘Since it was her father who had been King Edward? And her uncle who had died in the battle, and her brothers were dead?’

He nodded. ‘She was the oldest princess.’

‘So why didn’t she claim the throne for herself?’

‘Aha, you are a rebel!’ he said. He took a handful of her hair and pulled her face towards him. He kissed her mouth, tasting of wine and sweetmeats. ‘A Yorkist rebel, which is worse.’

‘I just thought she should have claimed the throne for herself.’

‘Not in this country,’ Arthur ruled. ‘We don’t have reigning queens in this England. Girls don’t inherit. They cannot take the throne.’

‘But if a king had only a daughter?’

He shrugged. ‘Then it would be a tragedy for the country. You have to give me a boy, my love. Nothing else will do.’

‘But if we only had a girl?’

‘She would marry a prince and make him King Consort of England, and he would rule alongside her. England has to have a king. Like your mother did. She

reigns alongside her husband.'

'In Aragon she does, but in Castile he rules alongside her. Castile is her country and Aragon his.'

'We'd never stand for it in England,' Arthur said.

She drew away from him in indignation. She was only half-pretending. 'I tell you this, if we have only one child and she is a girl then she will rule as queen and she will be a queen as good as any man can be king.'

'Well, she will be a novelty,' he said. 'We don't believe a woman can defend the country as a king needs to do.'

'A woman can fight,' she said instantly. 'You should see my mother in armour. Even I could defend the country. I have seen warfare, which is more than you have done. I could be as good a king as any man.'

He smiled at her, shaking his head. 'Not if the country was invaded. You couldn't command an army.'

'I could command an army. Why not?'

'No English army would be commanded by a woman. They wouldn't take orders from a woman.'

'They would take orders from their commander,' she flashed out. 'And if they don't then they are no good as soldiers and they have to be trained.'

He laughed. 'No Englishman would obey a woman,' he said. He saw by her stubborn face that she was not convinced.

'All that matters is that you win the battle,' she said. 'All that matters is that the country is defended. It doesn't matter who leads the army as long as they follow.'

'Well, at any rate, my mother had no thought of claiming the throne for herself. She would not have dreamed of it. She married my father and became Queen of England through marriage. And because she was the York Princess and he was the Lancaster heir my grandmother's plan succeeded. My father may have won the throne by conquest and acclaim; but we will have it by inheritance.'

Catalina nodded. 'My mother said there was nothing wrong with a man who is new-come to the throne. What matters is not the winning but the keeping of it.'

'We shall keep it,' he said with certainty. 'We shall make a great country here, you and me. We shall build roads and markets, churches and schools. We shall put a ring of forts around the coastline and build ships.'

'We shall create courts of justice as my mother and father have done in

Spain,' she said, settling back into the pleasure of planning a future on which they could agree. 'So that no man can be cruelly treated by another. So that every man knows that he can go to the court and have his case heard.'

He raised his glass to her. 'We should start writing this down,' he said. 'And we should start planning how it is to be done.'

'It will be years before we come to our thrones.'

'You never know. I don't wish it – God knows, I honour my father and my mother and I would want nothing before God's own time. But you never know. I am Prince of Wales, you are Princess. But we will be King and Queen of England. We should know who we will have at our court, we should know what advisors we will choose, we should know how we are going to make this country truly great. If it is a dream, then we can talk of it together at nighttime, as we do. But if it is a plan, we should write it in the daytime, take advice on it, think how we might do the things we want.'

Her face lit up. 'When we have finished our lessons for the day, perhaps we could do it then. Perhaps your tutor would help us, and my confessor.'

'And my advisors,' he said. 'And we could start here. In Wales. I can do what I want, within reason. We could make a college here, and build some schools. We could even commission a ship to be built here. There are shipwrights in Wales, we could build the first of our defensive ships.'

She clapped her hands like the girl she was. 'We could start our reign!' she said.

'Hail Queen Katherine! Queen of England!' Arthur said playfully, but at the ring of the words he stopped and looked at her more seriously. 'You know, you will hear them say that, my love. Vivat! Vivat Catalina Regina, Queen Katherine, Queen of England.'



It is like an adventure, wondering what sort of country we can make, what sort of king and queen we will be. It is natural we should think of Camelot. It was my favourite book in my mother's library and I found Arthur's own well-thumbed copy in his father's library.

I know that Camelot is a story, an ideal, as unreal as the love of a troubadour, or a fairy-tale castle or legends about thieves and treasure and genies. But there is something about the idea of ruling a kingdom with justice, with the consent of the people, which is more than a fairy tale.

Arthur and I will inherit great power, his father has seen to that. I think we will inherit a strong throne and a great treasure. We will inherit with the goodwill of the people; the king is not loved but he is respected, and nobody wants a return to endless battles. These English have a horror of civil war. If we come to the throne with this power, this wealth, and this goodwill, there is no doubt in my mind that we can make a great country here.

And it shall be a great country in alliance with Spain. My parents' heir is Juana's son, Charles. He will be Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain. He will be my nephew and we will have the friendship of kinsmen. What a powerful alliance this will be: the great Holy Roman Empire and England. Nobody will be able to stand against us, we might divide France, we might divide most of Europe. Then we will stand, the empire and England against the Moors, then we will win and the whole of the East, Persia, the Ottomans, the Indies, even China will be laid open to us.



The routine of the castle changed. In the days which were starting to become warmer and brighter the young Prince and Princess of Wales set up their office in her rooms, dragged a big table over to the window for the afternoon light, and pinned up maps of the Principality on the linenfold panelling.

‘You look as if you are planning a campaign,’ Lady Margaret Pole said pleasantly.

‘The princess should be resting,’ Dona Elvira remarked resentfully to no-one in particular.

‘Are you unwell?’ Lady Margaret asked quickly.

Catalina smiled and shook her head, she was becoming accustomed to the obsessive interest in her health. Until she could say that she was carrying England's heir she would have no peace from people asking her how she did.

‘I don't need to rest,’ she said. ‘And tomorrow, if you will take me, I should like to go out and see the fields.’

‘The fields?’ asked Lady Margaret, rather taken aback. ‘In March? They won't plough for another week or so, there is almost nothing to see.’

‘I have to learn,’ Catalina said. ‘Where I live, it is so dry in summer that we have to build little ditches in every field, to the foot of every tree, to channel water to the plants to make sure that they can drink and live. When we first rode through this country and I saw the ditches in your fields, I was so ignorant I

thought they were bringing water in.’ She laughed aloud at the memory. “And then the prince told me they were drains to take the water away. I could not believe it! So we had better ride out and you must tell me everything.’

‘A queen does not need to know about fields,’ Dona Elvira said in muted disapproval from the corner. ‘Why should she know what the farmers grow?’

‘Of course a queen needs to know,’ Catalina replied, irritated. ‘She should know everything about her country. How else can she rule?’

‘I am sure you will be a very fine Queen of England,’ Lady Margaret said, making the peace.

Catalina glowed. ‘I shall be the best Queen of England that I can be,’ she said. ‘I shall care for the poor and assist the church, and if we are ever at war I shall ride out and fight for England just as my mother did for Spain.’



Planning for the future with Arthur, I forget my homesickness for Spain. Every day we think of some improvement we could make, of some law that should be changed. We read together, books of philosophy and politics, we talk about whether people can be trusted with their freedom, of whether a king should be a good tyrant or should step back from power. We talk about my home: of my parents’ belief that you make a country by one church, one language, and one law. Or whether it could be possible to do as the Moors did: to make a country with one law but with many faiths and many languages, and assume that people are wise enough to choose the best.

We argue, we talk. Sometimes we break up in laughter, sometimes we disagree. Arthur is my lover always, my husband, undeniably. And now he is becoming my friend.



Catalina was in the little garden of Ludlow Castle, which was set along the east wall, in earnest conversation with one of the castle gardeners. In neat beds around her were the herbs that the cooks used, and some herbs and flowers with medicinal properties grown by Lady Margaret. Arthur, seeing Catalina as he walked back from confession in the round chapel, glanced up to the great hall to check that no-one would prevent him, and slipped off to be with her. As he drew

up she was gesturing, trying to describe something. Arthur smiled.

‘Princess,’ he said formally in greeting.

She swept him a low curtsy, but her eyes were warm with pleasure at the sight of him. ‘Sire.’

The gardener had dropped to his knees in the mud at the arrival of the prince. ‘You can get up,’ Arthur said pleasantly. ‘I don’t think you will find many pretty flowers at this time of year, Princess.’

‘I was trying to talk to him about growing salad vegetables,’ she said. ‘But he speaks Welsh and English and I have tried Latin and French and we don’t understand each other at all.’

‘I think I am with him. I don’t understand either. What is salad?’

She thought for a moment. ‘*Acetaria*.’

‘*Acetaria*?’ he queried.

‘Yes, salad.’

‘What is it, exactly?’

‘It is vegetables that grow in the ground and you eat them without cooking them,’ she explained. ‘I was asking if he could plant some for me.’

‘You eat them raw? Without boiling?’

‘Yes, why not?’

‘Because you will be dreadfully ill, eating uncooked food in this country.’

‘Like fruit, like apples. You eat them raw.’

He was unconvinced. ‘More often cooked, or preserved or dried. And anyway, that is a fruit and not leaves. But what sorts of vegetables do you want?’

‘*Lactuca*,’ she said.

‘*Lactuca*?’ he repeated. ‘I have never heard of it.’

She sighed. ‘I know. You none of you seem to know anything of vegetables. *Lactuca* is like...’ She searched her mind for the truly terrible vegetable that she had been forced to eat, boiled into a pulp at one dinner at Greenwich. ‘Samphire,’ she said. ‘The closest thing you have to *lactuca* is probably samphire. But you eat *lactuca* without cooking and it is crisp and sweet.’

‘Vegetables? Crisp?’

‘Yes,’ she said patiently.

‘And you eat this in Spain?’

She nearly laughed at his appalled expression. ‘Yes. You would like it.’

‘And can we grow it here?’

‘I think he is telling me: no. He has never heard of such a thing. He has no seeds. He does not know where we would find such seeds. He does not think it

would grow here.' She looked up at the blue sky with the scudding rain clouds. 'Perhaps he is right,' she said, a little weariness in her voice. 'I am sure that it needs much sunshine.'

Arthur turned to the gardener. 'Ever heard of a plant called *lactuca*?'

'No, Your Grace,' the man said, his head bowed. 'I'm sorry, Your Grace. Perhaps it is a Spanish plant. It sounds very barbaric. Is Her Royal Highness saying they eat grass there? Like sheep?'

Arthur's lip quivered. 'No, it is a herb, I think. I will ask her.'

He turned to Catalina and took her hand and tucked it in the crook of his arm. 'You know sometimes in summer, it is very sunny and very hot here. Truly. You would find the midday sun was too hot. You would have to sit in the shade.'

She looked disbelievingly from the cold mud to the thickening clouds.

'Not now, I know; but in summer. I have leaned against this wall and found it warm to the touch. You know, we grow strawberries and raspberries and peaches. All the fruit that you grow in Spain.'

'Oranges?'

'Well, perhaps not oranges,' he conceded.

'Lemons? Olives?'

He bridled. 'Yes, indeed.'

She looked suspiciously at him. 'Dates?'

'In Cornwall,' he asserted, straight-faced. 'Of course it is warmer in Cornwall.'

'Sugar cane? Rice? Pineapples?'

He tried to say yes, but he could not repress the giggles and she crowed with laughter, and fell on him.

When they were steady again he glanced around the inner bailey and said, 'Come on, nobody will miss us for a while,' and led her down the steps to the little sally-port and let them out of the hidden door.

A small path led them to the hillside which fell away steeply from the castle down to the river. A few lambs scampered off as they approached, a lad wandering after them. Arthur slid his arm around her waist and she let herself fall into pace with him.

'We do grow peaches,' he assured her. 'Not the other things, of course. But I am sure we can grow your *lactuca*, whatever it is. All we need is a gardener who can bring the seeds and who has already grown the things you want. Why don't you write to the gardener at the Alhambra and ask him to send you someone?'

'Could I send for a gardener?' she asked incredulously.

‘My love, you are going to be Queen of England. You can send for a regiment of gardeners.’

‘Really?’

Arthur laughed at the delight dawning on her face. ‘At once. Did you not realise it?’

‘No! But where should he garden? There is no room against the castle wall, and if we are to grow fruit as well as vegetables...’

‘You are Princess of Wales! You can plant your garden wherever you please. You shall have all of Kent if you want it, my darling.’

‘Kent?’

‘We grow apples and hops there, I think we might have a try at *lactuca*.’

Catalina laughed with him. ‘I didn’t think. I didn’t dream of sending for a gardener. If only I had brought one in the first place. I have all these useless ladies-in-waiting and I need a gardener.’

‘You could swap him for Dona Elvira.’

She gurgled with laughter.

‘Ah God, we are blessed,’ he said simply. ‘In each other and in our lives. You shall have anything you want, always. I swear it. Do you want to write to your mother? She can send you a couple of good men and I will get some land turned over at once.’

‘I will write to Juana,’ she decided. ‘In the Netherlands. She is in the north of Christendom like me. She must know what will grow in this weather. I shall write to her and see what she has done.’

‘And we shall eat *lactuca*!’ he said, kissing her fingers. ‘All day. We shall eat nothing but *lactuca*, like sheep grazing grass, whatever it is.’



‘Tell me a story.’

‘No, you tell me something.’

‘If you will tell me about the fall of Granada, again.’

‘I will tell you. But you have to explain something to me.’

Arthur stretched out and pulled her so that she was lying across the bed, her head on his shoulder. She could feel the rise and fall of his smooth chest as he breathed and hear the gentle thud of his heartbeat, constant as love.

‘I shall explain everything.’ She could hear the smile in his voice. ‘I am extraordinarily wise today. You should have heard me after dinner tonight

dispensing justice.'

'You are very fair,' she conceded. 'I do love it when you give a judgement.'

'I am a Solomon,' he said. 'They will call me Arthur the Good.'

'Arthur the Wise,' she suggested.

'Arthur the Magnificent.'

Catalina giggled. 'But I want you to explain to me something that I heard about your mother.'

'Oh yes?'

'One of the English ladies-in-waiting told me that she had been betrothed to the tyrant Richard. I thought I must have misunderstood her. We were speaking French and I thought I must have had it wrong.'

'Oh, that story,' he said with a little turn of the head.

'Is it not true? I hope I have not offended you?'

'No, not at all. It's a tale often told.'

'It cannot be true?'

'Who knows? Only my mother and Richard the tyrant can know what took place. And one of them is dead and the other is silent as the grave.'

'Will you tell me?' she asked tentatively. 'Or should we not speak of it at all?'

He shrugged. 'There are two stories. The well-known one, and its shadow. The story that everyone knows is that my mother fled into sanctuary with her mother and sisters, they were hiding in a church all together. They knew if they left they would be arrested by Richard the Usurper and would disappear into the Tower like her young brothers. No-one knew if the princes were alive or dead, but nobody had seen them, everyone feared they were dead. My mother wrote to my father – well, she was ordered to by her mother – she told him that if he would come to England, a Tudor from the Lancaster line, then she, a York princess, would marry him, and the old feud between the two families would be over forever. She told him to come and save her, and know her love. He received the letter, he raised an army, he came to find the princess, he married her and brought peace to England.'

'That is what you told me before. It is a very good story.'

Arthur nodded.

'And the story you don't tell?'

Despite himself he giggled. 'It's rather scandalous. They say that she was not in sanctuary at all. They say that she left the sanctuary and her mother and sisters. She went to court. King Richard's wife was dead and he was looking for

another. She accepted the proposal of King Richard. She would have married her uncle, the tyrant, the man who murdered her brothers.'

Catalina's hand stole over her mouth to cover her gasp of shock, her eyes were wide. 'No!'

'So they say.'

'The queen, your mother?'

'Herself,' he said. 'Actually, they say worse. That she and Richard were betrothed as his wife lay dying. That is why there is always such enmity between her and my grandmother. My grandmother does not trust her; but she will never say why.'

'How could she?' she demanded.

'How could she not?' he returned. 'If you look at it from her point of view, she was a princess of York, her father was dead, her mother was the enemy of the king trapped in sanctuary, as much in prison as if she was in the Tower. If she wanted to live, she would have to find some way into the favour of the king. If she wanted to be acknowledged as a princess at all, she would have to have his recognition. If she wanted to be Queen of England she would have to marry him.'

'But surely, she could have...' she began and then she fell silent.

'No.' He shook his head. 'You see? She was a princess, she had very little choice. If she wanted to live she would have to obey the king. If she wanted to be queen she would have to marry him.'

'She could have raised an army on her own account.'

'Not in England,' he reminded her. 'She would have to marry the King of England to be its queen. It was her only way.'

Catalina was silent for a moment. 'Thank God that for me to be queen I had to marry you, that my destiny brought me so easily here.'

He smiled. 'Thank God we are happy with our destiny. For we would have married, and you would have been Queen of England, whether you had liked me or not. Wouldn't you?'

'Yes,' she said. 'There is never a choice for a princess.'

He nodded.

'But your grandmother, My Lady the King's Mother, must have planned your mother's wedding to your father. Why does she not forgive her? She was part of the plan.'

'Those two powerful women, my father's mother and my mother's mother, brokered the deal between them like a pair of washerwomen selling stolen

linen.'

She gave a little squeak of shock.

Arthur chuckled, he found that he dearly loved surprising her. 'Dreadful, isn't it?' he replied calmly. 'My mother's mother was probably the most hated woman in England at one time.'

'And where is she now?'

He shrugged. 'She was at court for a while, but My Lady the King's Mother disliked her so much she got rid of her. She was famously beautiful, you know, and a schemer. My grandmother accused her of plotting against my father and he chose to believe her.'

'She is never dead? They never executed her!'

'No. He put her into a convent and she never comes to court.'

She was aghast. 'Your grandmother had the queen's own mother confined in a convent?'

He nodded, his face grave. 'Truly. You be warned by this, beloved. My grandmother welcomes no-one to court that might distract from her own power. Make sure you never cross her.'

Catalina shook her head. 'I never would. I am absolutely terrified of her.'

'So am I!' he laughed. 'But I know her, and I warn you. She will stop at nothing to maintain the power of her son, and of her family. Nothing will distract her from this. She loves no-one but him. Not me, not her husbands, no-one but him.'

'Not you?'

He shook his head. 'She does not even love him, as you would understand it. He is the boy that she decided was born to be king. She sent him away when he was little more than a baby for his safety. She saw him survive his boyhood. Then she ordered him into the face of terrible danger to claim the throne. She could only love a king.'

She nodded. 'He is her pretender.'

'Exactly. She claimed the throne for him. She made him king. He is king.'

He saw her grave face. 'Now, enough of this. You have to sing me your song.'

'Which one?'

'Is there another one about the fall of Granada?'

'Dozens, I should think.'

'Sing me one,' he commanded. He piled a couple of extra cushions behind his head, and she knelt up before him, tossed back her mane of red hair and

began to sing in a low sweet voice:

‘There was crying in Granada when the sun was going down Some calling on the Trinity, some calling on Mahoun, Here passed away the Koran and therein the Cross was borne, And here was heard the Christian bell and there the Moorish horn.

Te Deum Laudamus! Was up the Alcala sung: Down from the Alhambra minarets were all the crescents flung, The arms thereon of Aragon, they with Castile display One king comes in in triumph, one weeping goes away.’

He was silent for long minutes. She stretched out again beside him on her back, looking, without seeing, the embroidered tester of the bed over their heads.

‘It’s always like that, isn’t it?’ he remarked. ‘The rise of one is the fall of another. I shall be king but only at my father’s death. And at my death, my son will reign.’

‘Shall we call him Arthur?’ she asked. ‘Or Henry for your father?’

‘Arthur is a good name,’ he said. ‘A good name for a new royal family in Britain. Arthur for Camelot, and Arthur for me. We don’t want another Henry; my brother is enough for anyone. Let’s call him Arthur, and his older sister will be called Mary.’

‘Mary? I wanted to call her Isabella, for my mother.’

‘You can call the next girl Isabella. But I want our first-born to be called Mary.’

‘Arthur must be first.’

He shook his head. ‘First we will have Mary so that we learn how to do it all with a girl.’

‘How to do it all?’

He gestured. ‘The christening, the confinement, the birthing, the whole fuss and worry, the wet nurse, the rockers, the nursemaids. My grandmother has written a great book to rule how it shall be done. It is dreadfully complicated. But if we have our Mary first then our nursery is all ready, and in your next confinement we shall put our son and heir into the cradle.’

She rose up and turned on him in mock indignation. ‘You would practise being a father on my daughter!’ she exclaimed.

‘You wouldn’t want to start with my son,’ he protested. ‘This will be the rose of the rose of England. That’s what they call me, remember: “the rose of

England". I think you should deal with my little rosebud, my little blossom, with great respect.'

'She is to be Isabella then,' Catalina stipulated. 'If she comes first, she shall be Isabella.'

'Mary, for the queen of heaven.'

'Isabella for the Queen of Spain.'

'Mary, to give thanks for you coming to me. The sweetest gift that heaven could have given me.'

Catalina melted into his arms. 'Isabella,' she said as he kissed her.

'Mary,' he whispered into her ear. 'And let us make her now.'



It is morning. I lie awake, it is dawn and I can hear the birds slowly starting to sing. The sun is coming up and through the lattice window I can see a glimpse of blue sky. Perhaps it will be a warm day, perhaps the summer is coming at last.

Beside me, Arthur is breathing quietly and steadily. I can feel my heart swell with love for him, I put my hand on the fair curls of his head and wonder if any woman has ever loved a man as I love him.

I stir and put my other hand on the warm roundness of my belly. Can it be possible that last night we made a child? Is there already, safe in my belly, a baby who will be called Mary, Princess Mary, who will be the rose of the rose of England?

I hear the footsteps of the maid moving about in my presence chamber, bringing wood for the fire, raking up the embers. Still Arthur does not stir. I put a gentle hand on his shoulder. 'Wake up, sleepyhead,' I say, my voice warm with love. 'The servants are outside, you must go.'

He is damp with sweat, the skin of his shoulder is cold and clammy.

'My love?' I ask. 'Are you well?'

He opens his eyes and smiles at me. 'Don't tell me it's morning already. I am so weary I could sleep for another day.'

'It is.'

'Oh, why didn't you wake me earlier? I love you so much in the morning and now I can't have you till tonight.'

I put my face against his chest. 'Don't. I slept late too. We keep late hours. And you will have to go now.'

Arthur holds me close, as if he cannot bear to let me go; but I can hear the

groom of the chamber open the outside door to bring hot water. I draw myself away from him. It is like tearing off a layer of my own skin. I cannot bear to move away from him.

Suddenly, I am struck by the warmth of his body, the tangled heat of the sheets around us. 'You are so hot!'

'It is desire,' he says, smiling. 'I shall have to go to Mass to cool down.'

He gets out of bed and throws his gown around his shoulders. He gives a little stagger.

'Beloved, are you all right?' I ask.

'A little dizzy, nothing more,' he says. 'Blind with desire, and it is all your fault. See you in chapel. Pray for me, sweetheart.'

I get up from bed, and unbolt the battlements door to let him out. He sways a little as he goes up the stone steps, then I see him straighten his shoulders to breathe in the fresh air. I close the door behind him, and then go back to my bed. I glance round the room, nobody could know that he has been here. In a moment, Dona Elvira taps on my door and comes in with the maid-in-waiting and behind them a couple of maids with the jug of hot water, and my dress for the day.

'You slept late, you must be overtired,' Dona Elvira says disapprovingly; but I am so peaceful and so happy that I cannot even be troubled to reply.



In the chapel they could do no more than exchange hidden smiles. After Mass, Arthur went riding and Catalina went to break her fast. After breakfast was her time to study with her chaplain and Catalina sat at the table in the window with him, their books before them, and studied the letters of St Paul.

Margaret Pole came in as Catalina was closing her book. 'The prince begs your attendance in his rooms,' she said.

Catalina rose to her feet. 'Has something happened?'

'I think he is unwell. He has sent away everyone but the grooms of the body and his servers.'

Catalina left at once, followed by Dona Elvira and Lady Margaret. The prince's rooms were crowded by the usual hangers-on of the little court: men seeking favour or attention, petitioners asking for justice, the curious come to stare, and the host of lesser servants and functionaries. Catalina went through them all to the double doors of Arthur's private chamber, and went in.

He was seated in a chair by the fire, his face very pale. Dona Elvira and Lady Margaret waited at the door as Catalina went quickly towards him.

‘Are you ill, my love?’ she asked quickly.

He managed a smile but she saw it was an effort. ‘I have taken some kind of chill, I think,’ he said. ‘Come no closer, I don’t want to pass it to you.’

‘Are you hot?’ she asked fearfully, thinking of the Sweat which came on like a fever and left a corpse.

‘No, I feel cold.’

‘Well, it is not surprising in this country where it either snows or rains all the time.’

He managed another smile.

Catalina looked around and saw Lady Margaret. ‘Lady Margaret, we must call the prince’s physician.’

‘I sent my servants to find him already,’ she said, coming forwards.

‘I don’t want a fuss made,’ Arthur said irritably. ‘I just wanted to tell you, Princess, that I cannot come to dinner.’

Her eyes went to his. ‘How shall we be alone?’ was the unspoken question.

‘May I dine in your rooms?’ she asked. ‘Can we dine alone, privately, since you are ill?’

‘Yes, let’s,’ he ruled.

‘See the doctor first,’ Lady Margaret advised. ‘If Your Grace permits. He can advise what you should eat, and if it is safe for the princess to be with you.’

‘He has no disease,’ Catalina insisted. ‘He says he just feels tired. It is just the cold air here, or the damp. It was cold yesterday and he was riding half the day.’

There was a tap on the door and a voice called out. ‘Dr Bereworth is here, Your Grace.’

Arthur raised his hand in permission, Dona Elvira opened the door and the man came into the room.

‘The prince feels cold and tired.’ Catalina went to him at once, speaking rapidly in French. ‘Is he ill? I don’t think he’s ill. What do you think?’

The doctor bowed low to her and to the prince. He bowed to Lady Margaret and Dona Elvira.

‘I am sorry, I don’t understand,’ he said uncomfortably in English to Lady Margaret. ‘What is the princess saying?’

Catalina clapped her hands together in frustration. ‘The prince...’ she began in English.

Margaret Pole came to her side. 'His Grace is unwell,' she said.

'May I speak with him alone?' he asked.

Arthur nodded. He tried to rise from the chair but he almost staggered. The doctor was at once at his side, supporting him, and led him into his bedchamber.

'He cannot be ill.' Catalina turned to Dona Elvira and spoke to her in Spanish. 'He was well last night. Just this morning he felt hot. But he said he was only tired. But now he can hardly stand. He cannot be ill.'

'Who knows what illness a man might take in this rain and fog?' the duenna replied dourly. 'It's a wonder that you are not sick yourself. It is a wonder that any of us can bear it.'

'He is not sick,' Catalina said. 'He is just overtired. He rode for a long time yesterday. And it was cold, there was a very cold wind. I noticed it myself.'

'A wind like this can kill a man,' Dona Elvira said gloomily. 'It blows so cold and so damp.'

'Stop it!' Catalina said, clapping her hands to her ears. 'I won't hear another word. He is just tired, overtired. And perhaps he has taken a chill. There is no need to speak of killing winds and damp.'

Lady Margaret stepped forwards and gently took Catalina's hands. 'Be patient, Princess,' she counselled. 'Dr Bereworth is a very good doctor, and he has known the prince from childhood. The prince is a strong young man and his health is good. It is probably nothing to worry about at all. If Dr Bereworth is concerned we will send for the king's own physician from London. We will soon have him well again.'

Catalina nodded, and turned to sit by the window and look out. The sky had clouded over, the sun was quite gone. It was raining again, the raindrops chasing down the small panes of glass. Catalina watched them. She tried to keep her mind from the death of her brother who had loved his wife so much, who had been looking forward to the birth of their son. Juan had died within days of taking sick, and no-one had ever known what was wrong with him.

'I shan't think of him, not of poor Juan,' Catalina whispered to herself. 'The cases are not alike at all. Juan was always slight, little; but Arthur is strong.'

The physician seemed to take a long time and when he came out of the bedchamber, Arthur was not with him. Catalina who had risen from her seat as soon as the door opened, peeped around him to see Arthur lying on the bed, half-undressed, half-asleep.

'I think his grooms of the body should prepare him for bed,' the doctor said. 'He is very weary. He would be better for rest. If they take care, they can get him

into bed without waking him.'

'Is he ill?' Catalina demanded speaking slowly in Latin. '*Aegrotat?* Is he very ill?'

The doctor spread his hands. 'He has a fever,' he said cautiously in slow French. 'I can give him a draught to bring down his fever.'

'Do you know what it is?' Lady Margaret asked, her voice very low. 'It's not the Sweat, is it?'

'Please God it is not. And there are no other cases in the town, as far as I know. But he should be kept quiet and allowed to rest. I shall go and make up this draught and I will come back.'

The low-voiced English was incomprehensible to Catalina. 'What does he say? What did he say?' she demanded of Lady Margaret.

'Nothing more than you heard,' the older woman assured her. 'He has a fever and needs rest. Let me get his men to undress him and put him properly to bed. If he is better tonight, you can dine with him. I know he would like that.'

'Where is he going?' Catalina cried out as the doctor bowed and went to the door. 'He must stay and watch the prince!'

'He is going to make a draught to bring down his fever. He will be back at once. The prince will have the best of care, Your Grace. We love him as you do. We will not neglect him.'

'I know you would not...it is only...Will the doctor be long?'

'He will be as quick as he can. And see, the prince is asleep. Sleep will be his best medicine. He can rest and grow strong and dine with you tonight.'

'You think he will be better tonight?'

'If it is just a little fever and fatigue then he will be better in a few days,' Lady Margaret said firmly.

'I will watch over his sleep,' Catalina said.

Lady Margaret opened the door and beckoned to the prince's chief gentlemen. She gave them their orders and then she drew the princess through the crowd to her own rooms. 'Come, Your Grace,' she said. 'Come for a walk in the inner bailey with me and then I shall go back to his rooms and see that everything is comfortable for him.'

'I shall go back now,' Catalina insisted. 'I shall watch over his sleep.'

Margaret glanced at Dona Elvira. 'You should stay away from his rooms in case he does have a fever,' she said speaking slowly and clearly in French, so that the duenna could understand her. 'Your health is most important, Princess. I would not forgive myself if anything happened to either of you.'

Dona Elvira stepped forwards and narrowed her lips. Lady Margaret knew she could be relied on to keep the princess from danger.

‘But you said he only had a slight fever. I can go to him?’

‘Let us wait to see what the doctor has to say.’ Lady Margaret lowered her voice. ‘If you should be with child, dear Princess, we would not want you to take his fever.’

‘But I will dine with him.’

‘If he is well enough.’

‘But he will want to see me!’

‘Depend upon it,’ Lady Margaret smiled. ‘When his fever has broken and he is better this evening and sitting up and eating his dinner he will want to see you. You have to be patient.’

Catalina nodded. ‘If I go now, do you swear that you will stay with him all the time?’

‘I will go back now, if you will walk outside and then go to your room and read or study or sew.’

‘I’ll go!’ said Catalina, instantly obedient. ‘I’ll go to my rooms if you will stay with him.’

‘At once,’ Lady Margaret promised.



This small garden is like a prison yard, I walk round and round in the herb garden, and the rain drizzles over everything like tears. My rooms are no better, my privy chamber is like a cell, I cannot bear to have anyone with me, and yet I cannot bear to be alone. I have made the ladies sit in the presence chamber, their unending chatter makes me want to scream with irritation. But when I am alone in my room I long for company. I want someone to hold my hand and tell me that everything will be all right.

I go down the narrow stone stairs and across the cobbles to the round chapel. A cross and a stone altar is set in the rounded wall, a light burning before it. It is a place of perfect peace; but I can find no peace. I fold my cold hands inside my sleeves and hug myself and I walk around the circular wall, it is thirty-six steps to the door and then I walk the circle again, like a donkey on a treadmill. I am praying; but I have no faith that I am heard.

‘I am Catalina, Princess of Spain and of Wales,’ I remind myself. ‘I am Catalina, beloved of God, especially favoured by God. Nothing can go wrong for

me. Nothing as bad as this could ever go wrong for me. It is God's will that I should marry Arthur and unite the kingdoms of Spain and England. God will not let anything happen to Arthur nor to me. I know that He favours my mother and me above all others. This fear must be sent to try me. But I will not be afraid because I know that nothing will ever go wrong for me.'



Catalina waited in her rooms, sending her women every hour to ask how her husband did. The first few hours they said he was still sleeping, the doctor had made his draught and was standing by his bed, waiting for him to wake. Then, at three in the afternoon, they said that he had wakened but was very hot and feverish. He had taken the draught and they were waiting to see his fever cool. At four he was worse, not better, and the doctor was making up a different prescription.

He would take no dinner, he would just drink some cool ale and the doctor's cures for fever.

'Go and ask him if he will see me?' Catalina ordered one of her English women. 'Make sure you speak to Lady Margaret. She promised me that I should dine with him. Remind her.'

The woman went and came back with a grave face. 'Princess, they are all very anxious,' she said. 'They have sent for a physician from London. Dr Bereworth, who has been watching over him, does not know why the fever does not cool down. Lady Margaret is there and Sir Richard Pole, Sir William Thomas, Sir Henry Vernon, Sir Richard Croft, they are all waiting outside his chamber and you cannot be admitted to see him. They say he is wandering in his mind.'

'I must go to the chapel. I must pray,' Catalina said instantly.

She threw a veil over her head and went back to the round chapel. To her dismay, Prince Arthur's confessor was at the altar, his head bowed low in supplication, some of the greatest men of the town and castle were seated around the wall, their heads bowed. Catalina slipped into the room, and fell to her knees. She rested her chin on her hands and scrutinised the hunched shoulders of the priest for any sign that his prayers were being heard. There was no way of telling. She closed her eyes.



Dearest God, spare Arthur, spare my darling husband, Arthur. He is only a boy, I am only a girl, we have had no time together, no time at all. You know what a kingdom we will make if he is spared. You know what plans we have for this country, what a holy castle we will make from this land, how we shall hammer the Moors, how we shall defend this kingdom from the Scots. Dear God, in your mercy spare Arthur and let him come back to me. We want to have our children: Mary, who is to be the rose of the rose, and our son Arthur who will be the third Holy Roman Catholic Tudor king for England. Let us do as we have promised. Oh dear Lord, be merciful and spare him. Dear Lady, intercede for us, and spare him. Sweet Jesus, spare him. It is I, Catalina, who asks this, and I ask in the name of my mother, Queen Isabella, who has worked all her life in your service, who is the most Christian queen, who has served on your crusades. She is beloved of You, I am beloved of You. Do not, I beg You, disappoint me.



It grew dark as Catalina prayed but she did not notice. It was late when Dona Elvira touched her gently on the shoulder and said, ‘Infanta, you should have some dinner and go to bed.’

Catalina turned a white face to her duenna. ‘What word?’ she asked.

‘They say he is worse.’



Sweet Jesus, spare him, sweet Jesus, spare me, sweet Jesus, spare England. Say that Arthur is no worse.



In the morning they said that he had passed a good night, but the gossip among the servers of the body was that he was sinking. The fever had reached such a height that he was wandering in his mind, sometimes he thought he was in his nursery with his sisters and his brother, sometimes he thought he was at his wedding, dressed in brilliant white satin, and sometimes, most oddly, he thought

he was in a fantastic palace. He spoke of a courtyard of myrtles, a rectangle of water like a mirror reflecting a building of gold, and a circular sweep of flocks of swifts who went round and round all the sunny day long.

‘I shall see him,’ Catalina announced to Lady Margaret at noon.

‘Princess, it may be the Sweat,’ her ladyship said bluntly. ‘I cannot allow you to go close to him. I cannot allow you to take any infection. I should be failing in my duty if I let you go too close to him.’

‘Your duty is to me!’ Catalina snapped.

The woman, a princess herself, never wavered. ‘My duty is to England,’ she said. ‘And if you are carrying a Tudor heir then my duty is to that child, as well as to you. Do not quarrel with me please, Princess. I cannot allow you to go closer than the foot of his bed.’

‘Let me go there, then,’ Catalina said, like a little girl. ‘Please just let me see him.’

Lady Margaret bowed her head and led the way to the royal chambers. The crowds in the presence chamber had swollen in numbers as the word had gone around the town that their prince was fighting for his life; but they were silent, silent as a crowd in mourning. They were waiting and praying for the rose of England. A few men saw Catalina, her face veiled in her lace mantilla, and called out a blessing on her, then one man stepped forwards and dropped to his knee. ‘God bless you, Princess of Wales,’ he said. ‘And may the prince rise from his bed and be merry with you again.’

‘Amen,’ Catalina said through cold lips, and went on.

The double doors to the inner chamber were thrown open and Catalina went in. A makeshift apothecary’s room had been set up in the prince’s privy chamber, a trestle table with large glass jars of ingredients, a pestle and mortar, a chopping board, and half a dozen men in the gaberdine gowns of physicians were gathered together. Catalina paused, looking for Dr Bereworth.

‘Doctor?’

He came towards her at once, and dropped to his knee. His face was grave. ‘Princess.’

‘What news of my husband?’ she said, speaking slowly and clearly for him in French.

‘I am sorry, he is no better.’

‘But he is not worse,’ she suggested. ‘He is getting better.’

He shook his head. ‘*Il est très malade*,’ he said simply.

Catalina heard the words but it was as if she had forgotten the language. She

could not translate them. She turned to Lady Margaret. 'He says that he is better?' she asked.

Lady Margaret shook her head. 'He says that he is worse,' she said honestly.

'But they will have something to give him?' She turned to the doctor. '*Vous avez un médicament?*'

He gestured at the table behind him, at the apothecary.

'Oh, if only we had a Moorish doctor!' Catalina cried out. 'They have the greatest skill, there is no-one like them. They had the best universities for medicines before...If only I had brought a doctor with me! Arab medicine is the finest in the world!'

'We are doing everything we can,' the doctor said stiffly.

Catalina tried to smile. 'I am sure,' she said. 'I just so wish...Well! Can I see him?'

A quick glance between Lady Margaret and the doctor showed that this had been a matter of some anxious discussion.

'I will see if he is awake,' he said, and went through the door.

Catalina waited. She could not believe that only yesterday morning Arthur had slipped from her bed complaining that she had not woken him early enough to make love. Now, he was so ill that she could not even touch his hand.

The doctor opened the door. 'You can come to the threshold, Princess,' he said. 'But for the sake of your own health, and for the health of any child you could be carrying, you should come no closer.'

Catalina stepped up quickly to the door. Lady Margaret pressed a pomander stuffed with cloves and herbs in her hand. Catalina held it to her nose. The acrid smell made her eyes water as she peered into the darkened room.

Arthur was sprawled on the bed, his nightgown pulled down for modesty, his face flushed with fever. His blond hair was dark with sweat, his face gaunt. He looked much older than his fifteen years. His eyes were sunk deep into his face, the skin beneath his eyes stained brown.

'Your wife is here,' the doctor said quietly to him.

Arthur's eyes fluttered open and she saw them narrow as he tried to focus on the bright doorway and Catalina, standing before him, her face white with shock.

'My love,' he said. '*Amo te.*'

'*Amo te,*' she whispered. 'They say I cannot come closer.'

'Don't come closer,' he said, his voice a thread. 'I love you.'

'I love you too!' She could hear that her voice was strained with tears. 'You will be well?'

He shook his head, too weary to speak.

‘Arthur?’ she said, demanding. ‘You will get better?’

He rested his head back on his hot pillow, gathering his strength. ‘I will try, beloved. I will try so hard. For you. For us.’

‘Is there anything you want?’ she asked. ‘Anything I can get for you?’ She glanced around. There was nothing that she could do for him. There was nothing that would help. If she had brought a Moorish doctor with her, if her parents had not destroyed the learning of the Arab universities, if the church had allowed the study of medicine, and not called knowledge heresy...

‘All I want is to live with you,’ he said, his voice a thin thread.

She gave a little sob. ‘And I you.’

‘The prince should rest now, and you should not linger here.’ The doctor stepped forwards.

‘Please, let me stay!’ she cried in a whisper. ‘Please allow me. I beg you. Please let me be with him.’

Lady Margaret put a hand around her waist and drew her back. ‘You shall come again, if you leave now,’ she promised. ‘The prince needs to rest.’

‘I shall come back,’ Catalina called to him, and saw the little gesture of his hand which told her that he had heard her. ‘I shall not fail you.’



Catalina went to the chapel to pray for him, but she could not pray. All she could do was think of him, his white face on the white pillows. All she could do was feel the throb of desire for him. They had been married only one hundred and forty days, they had been passionate lovers for only ninety-four nights. They had promised that they would have a lifetime together, she could not believe that she was on her knees now, praying for his life.



This cannot be happening, he was well only yesterday. This is some terrible dream and in a moment I will wake up and he will kiss me and call me foolish. Nobody can take sick so quickly, nobody can go from strength and beauty to being so desperately ill in such a short time. In a moment I will wake up. This cannot be happening. I cannot pray, but it does not matter that I cannot pray

because it is not really happening. A dream prayer would mean nothing. A dream illness means nothing. I am not a superstitious heathen to fear dreams. I shall wake up in a moment and we will laugh at my fears.



At dinner time she rose up, dipped her finger in the holy water, crossed herself, and with the water still wet on her forehead went back to his chambers, with Dona Elvira following, close behind.

The crowds in the halls outside the rooms and in the presence chamber were thicker than ever, women as well as men, silent with inarticulate grief. They made way for the princess without a word but a quiet murmur of blessings. Catalina went through them, looking neither to left nor right, through the presence chamber, past the apothecary bench, to the very door of his bedchamber.

The guard stepped to one side. Catalina tapped lightly on the door and pushed it open.

They were bending over him on the bed. Catalina heard him cough, a thick cough as though his throat was bubbling with water.

‘*Madre de Dios,*’ she said softly. ‘Holy Mother of God, keep Arthur safe.’

The doctor turned at her whisper. His face was pale. ‘Keep back!’ he said urgently. ‘It is the Sweat.’

At that most feared word Dona Elvira stepped back and laid hold of Catalina’s gown as if she would drag her from danger.

‘Loose me!’ Catalina snapped and tugged her gown from the duenna’s hands. ‘I will come no closer, but I have to speak with him,’ she said steadily.

The doctor heard the resolution in her voice. ‘Princess, he is too weak.’

‘Leave us,’ she said.

‘Princess.’

‘I have to speak to him. This is the business of the kingdom.’

One glance at her determined face told him that she would not be denied. He went past her with his head low, his assistants following behind him. Catalina made a little gesture with her hand and Dona Elvira retreated. Catalina stepped over the threshold and pushed the door shut on them.

She saw Arthur stir in protest.

‘I won’t come any closer,’ she assured him. ‘I swear it. But I have to be with you. I cannot bear...’ She broke off.

His face when he turned it to her was shiny with sweat, his hair as wet as when he came in from hunting in the rain. His young round face was strained as the disease leached the life out of him.

'Amo te,' he said through lips that were cracked and dark with fever.

'Amo te,' she replied.

'I am dying,' he said bleakly.

Catalina did not interrupt nor deny him. He saw her straighten a little, as if she had staggered beneath a mortal blow.

He took a rasping breath. *'But you must still be Queen of England.'*

'What?'

He took a shaky breath. *'Love – obey me. You have sworn to obey me.'*

'I will do anything.'

'Marry Harry. Be queen. Have our children.'

'What?' She was dizzy with shock. She could hardly make out what he was saying.

'England needs a great queen,' he said. *'Especially with him. He's not fit to rule. You must teach him. Build my forts. Build my navy. Defend against the Scots. Have my daughter Mary. Have my son Arthur. Let me live through you.'*

'My love –'

'Let me do it,' he whispered longingly. *'Let me keep England safe through you. Let me live through you.'*

'I am your wife,' she said fiercely. *'Not his.'*

He nodded. *'Tell them you are not.'*

She staggered at that, and felt for the door to support her.

'Tell them I could not do it.' A hint of a smile came to his drained face. *'Tell them I was unmanned. Then marry Harry.'*

'You hate Harry!' she burst out. *'You cannot want me to marry him. He is a child! And I love you.'*

'He will be king,' he said desperately. *'So you will be queen. Marry him. Please. Beloved. For me.'*

The door behind her opened a crack and Lady Margaret said quietly, *'You must not exhaust him, Princess.'*

'I have to go,' Catalina said desperately to the still figure in the bed.

'Promise me...'

'I will come back. You will get better.'

'Please.'

Lady Margaret opened the door wider and took Catalina's hand. *'For his*

own good,' she said quietly. 'You have to leave him.'

Catalina turned away from the room, she looked back over her shoulder. Arthur lifted a hand a few inches from the rich coverlet. 'Promise,' he said. 'Please. For my sake. Promise. Promise me now, beloved.'

'I promise,' burst out of her.

His hand fell, she heard him give a little sigh of relief.

They were the last words they said to each other.

Ludlow Castle, 2nd April 1502



At six o'clock, Vespers, Arthur's confessor, Dr Eldenham, administered extreme unction and Arthur died soon after. Catalina knelt on the threshold as the priest anointed her husband with the oil and bowed her head for the blessing. She did not rise from her knees until they told her that her boy-husband was dead and she was a widow of sixteen years old.

Lady Margaret on one side and Dona Elvira on the other half-carried and half-dragged Catalina to her bedchamber. Catalina slipped between the cold sheets of her bed and knew that however long she waited there, she would not hear Arthur's quiet footstep on the battlements outside her room, and his tap on the door. She would never again open her door and step into his arms. She would never again be snatched up and carried to her bed, having wanted all day to be in his arms.

'I cannot believe it,' she said brokenly.

'Drink this,' Lady Margaret said. 'The physician left it for you. It is a sleeping draught. I will wake you at noon.'

'I cannot believe it.'

'Princess, drink.'

Catalina drank it down, ignoring the bitter taste. More than anything else she wanted to be asleep and never wake again.



That night I dreamed I was on the top of the great gateway of the red fort that

guards and encircles the Alhambra palace. Above my head the standards of Castile and Aragon were flapping like the sails on Cristóbal Colón's ships. Shading my eyes from the autumn sun, looking out over the great plain of Granada, I saw the simple, familiar beauty of the land, the tawny soil intersected by a thousand little ditches carrying water from one field to another. Below me was the white-walled town of Granada, even now, ten years on from our conquest, still, unmistakably a Moorish town: the houses all arranged around shady courtyards, a fountain splashing seductively in the centre, the gardens rich with the perfume of late flowering roses, and the boughs of the trees heavy with fruit.

Someone was calling for me: 'Where is the Infanta?'

And in my dream I answered: 'I am Katherine, Queen of England. That is my name now.'



They buried Arthur, Prince of Wales, on St George's Day, this first prince of all England, after a nightmare journey from Ludlow to Worcester when the rain lashed down so hard that they could barely make way. The lanes were awash, the water meadows knee-high in flood water and the Teme had burst its banks and they could not get through the fords. They had to use bullock carts for the funeral procession, horses could not have made their way through the mire on the lanes, and all the plumage and black cloth was sodden by the time they finally straggled into Worcester.

Hundreds turned out to see the miserable cortege go through the streets to the cathedral. Hundreds wept for the loss of the rose of England. After they lowered his coffin into the vault beneath the choir, the servants of his household broke their staves of office and threw them into the grave with their lost master. It was over for them. Everything they had hoped for, in the service of such a young and promising prince was finished. It was over for Arthur. It felt as if everything was over and could never be set right again.



No, no, no.



For the first month of mourning Catalina stayed in her rooms. Lady Margaret and Dona Elvira gave out that she was ill, but not in danger. In truth they feared for her reason. She did not rave or cry, she did not rail against fate or weep for her mother's comfort, she lay in utter silence, her face turned towards the wall. Her family tendency to despair tempted her like a sin. She knew she must not give way to weeping and madness, for if she once let go she would never be able to stop. For the long month of seclusion Catalina gritted her teeth and it took all her willpower and all her strength to stop herself from screaming out in grief.

When they woke her in the morning she said she was tired. They did not know that she hardly dared to move for fear that she would moan aloud. After they had dressed her, she would sit on her chair like a stone. As soon as they allowed it, she would go back to bed, lie on her back, and look up at the brightly coloured tester that she had seen with eyes half-closed by love, and know that Arthur would never pull her into the crook of his arm again.

They summoned the physician, Dr Bereworth, but when she saw him her mouth trembled and her eyes filled with tears. She turned her head away from him and she went swiftly into her bedchamber and closed the door on them all. She could not bear to see him, the doctor who had let Arthur die, the friends who had watched it happen. She could not bear to speak to him. She felt a murderous rage at the sight of the doctor who had failed to save the boy. She wished him dead, and not Arthur.

'I am afraid her mind is affected,' Lady Margaret said to the doctor as they heard the latch click on the privy chamber door. 'She does not speak, she does not even weep for him.'

'Will she eat?'

'If food is put before her and if she is reminded to eat.'

'Get someone, someone familiar – her confessor perhaps – to read to her. Encouraging words.'

'She will see no-one.'

'Might she be with child?' he whispered. It was the only question that now mattered.

'I don't know,' she replied. 'She has said nothing.'

'She is mourning him,' he said. 'She is mourning like a young woman, for the young husband she has lost. We should let her be. Let her grieve. She will have to rise up soon enough. Is she to go back to court?'

‘The king commands it,’ Lady Margaret said. ‘The queen is sending her own litter.’

‘Well, when it comes she will have to change her ways then,’ he said comfortably. ‘She is only young. She will recover. The young have strong hearts. And it will help her to leave here, where she has such sad memories. If you need any advice please call me. But I will not force myself into her presence, poor child.’



No, no, no.



But Catalina did not look like a poor child, Lady Margaret thought. She looked like a statue, like a stone princess carved from grief. Dona Elvira had dressed her in her new dark clothes of mourning, and persuaded her to sit in the window where she could see the green trees and the hedges creamy with may blossom, the sun on the fields, and hear the singing of the birds. The summer had come as Arthur had promised her that it would, it was warm as he had sworn it would be; but she was not walking by the river with him, greeting the swifts as they flew in from Spain. She was not planting salad vegetables in the gardens of the castle and persuading him to try them. The summer was here, the sun was here, Catalina was here, but Arthur was cold in the dark vault of Worcester Cathedral.

Catalina sat still, her hands folded on the black silk of her gown, her eyes looking out of the window, but seeing nothing, her mouth folded tight over her gritted teeth as if she were biting back a storm of words.

‘Princess,’ Lady Margaret started tentatively.

Slowly, the head under the heavy black hood turned towards her. ‘Yes, Lady Margaret?’ Her voice was hoarse.

‘I would speak with you.’

Catalina inclined her head.

Dona Elvira stepped back and went quietly out of the room.

‘I have to ask you about your journey to London. The royal litter has arrived and you will have to leave here.’

There was no flicker of animation in Catalina’s deep blue eyes. She nodded

again, as if they were discussing the transport of a parcel.

‘I don’t know if you are strong enough to travel.’

‘Can I not stay here?’ Catalina asked.

‘I understand the king has sent for you. I am sorry for it. They write that you may stay here until you are well enough to travel.’

‘Why, what is to become of me?’ Catalina asked, as if it was a matter of absolute indifference. ‘When I get to London?’

‘I don’t know.’ The former princess did not pretend for one moment that a girl of a royal family could choose her future. ‘I am sorry. I do not know what is planned. My husband has been told nothing except to prepare for your journey to London.’

‘What do you think might happen? When my sister’s husband died, they sent her back to us from Portugal. She came home to Spain again.’

‘I would expect that they will send you home,’ Lady Margaret said.

Catalina turned her head away once more. She looked out of the window but her eyes saw nothing. Lady Margaret waited, she wondered if the princess would say anything more.

‘Does a Princess of Wales have a house in London as well as here?’ she asked. ‘Shall I go back to Baynard’s Castle?’

‘You are not the Princess of Wales,’ Lady Margaret started. She was going to explain but the look that Catalina turned on her was so darkly angry that she hesitated. ‘I beg your pardon,’ she said. ‘I thought perhaps you did not understand...’

‘Understand what?’ Catalina’s white face was slowly flushing pink with temper.

‘Princess?’

‘Princess of what?’ Catalina snapped.

Lady Margaret dropped into a curtsey, and stayed low.

‘Princess of what?’ Catalina shouted loudly, and the door opened behind them and Dona Elvira came quickly into the room and then checked as she saw Catalina on her feet, her cheeks burning with temper, and Lady Margaret on her knees. She went out again without a word.

‘Princess of Spain,’ Lady Margaret said very quietly.

There was intense silence.

‘I am the Princess of Wales,’ Catalina said slowly. ‘I have been the Princess of Wales all my life.’

Lady Margaret rose up and faced her. ‘Now you are the Dowager Princess.’

Catalina clapped a hand over her mouth to hold back a cry of pain.

‘I am sorry, Princess.’

Catalina shook her head, beyond words, her fist at her mouth muffling her whimpers of pain. Lady Margaret’s face was grim. ‘They will call you Dowager Princess.’

‘I will never answer to it.’

‘It is a title of respect. It is only the English word for widow.’

Catalina gritted her teeth and turned away from her friend to look out of the window. ‘You can get up,’ she said through her teeth. ‘There is no need for you to kneel to me.’

The older woman rose to her feet and hesitated. ‘The queen writes to me. They want to know of your health. Not only if you feel well, and strong enough to travel; they really need to know if you might be with child.’

Catalina clenched her hands together, turned away her face so that Lady Margaret should not see her cold rage.

‘If you are with child and that child is a boy then he will be the Prince of Wales, and then King of England, and you would be My Lady the King’s Mother,’ Lady Margaret reminded her quietly.

‘And if I am not with child?’

‘Then you are the Dowager Princess, and Prince Harry is Prince of Wales.’

‘And when the king dies?’

‘Then Prince Harry becomes king.’

‘And I?’

Lady Margaret shrugged in silence. ‘Next to nothing’, said the gesture. Aloud she said, ‘You are the Infanta still.’ Lady Margaret tried to smile. ‘As you will always be.’

‘And the next Queen of England?’

‘Will be the wife of Prince Harry.’

The anger went out of Catalina, she walked to the fireplace, took hold of the high mantelpiece and steadied herself with it. The little fire burning in the grate threw out no heat that she could feel through the thick black skirt of her mourning gown. She stared at the flames as if she would understand what had happened to her.

‘I am become again what I was, when I was a child of three,’ she said slowly. ‘The Infanta of Spain, not the Princess of Wales. A baby. Of no importance.’

Lady Margaret, whose own royal blood had been carefully diluted by a lowly

marriage so that she could pose no threat to the Tudor throne of England, nodded. 'Princess, you take the position of your husband. It is always thus for all women. If you have no husband and no son, then you have no position. You have only what you were born to.'

'If I go home to Spain as a widow, and they marry me to an archduke, I will be Archduchess Catalina, and not a princess at all. Not Princess of Wales, and never Queen of England.'

Lady Margaret nodded. 'Like me,' she said.

Catalina turned her head. 'You?'

'I was a Plantagenet princess, King Edward's niece, sister to Edward of Warwick, the heir to King Richard's throne. If King Henry had lost the battle at Bosworth Field it would have been King Richard on the throne now, my brother as his heir and Prince of Wales, and I should be Princess Margaret, as I was born to be.'

'Instead you are Lady Margaret, wife to the warden of a little castle, not even his own, on the edge of England.'

The older woman nodded her assent to the bleak description of her status.

'Why did you not refuse?' Catalina asked rudely.

Lady Margaret glanced behind her to see that the door to the presence chamber was shut and none of Catalina's women could hear.

'How could I refuse?' she asked simply. 'My brother was in the Tower of London, simply for being born a prince. If I had refused to marry Sir Richard, I should have joined him. My brother put his dear head down on the block for nothing more than bearing his name. As a girl, I had the chance to change my name. So I did.'

'You had the chance to be Queen of England!' Catalina protested.

Lady Margaret turned away from the younger woman's energy. 'It is as God wills,' she said simply. 'My chance, such as it was, has gone. Your chance has gone too. You will have to find a way to live the rest of your life without regrets, Infanta.'

Catalina said nothing, but the face that she showed to her friend was closed and cold. 'I will find a way to fulfil my destiny,' she said. 'Ar –' She broke off, she could not name him, even to her friend. 'I once had a conversation about claiming one's own,' she said. 'I understand it now. I shall have to be a pretender to myself. I shall insist on what is mine. I know what is my duty and what I have to do. I shall do as God wills, whatever the difficulties for me.'

The older woman nodded. 'Perhaps God wills that you accept your fate.'

Perhaps it is God's will that you be resigned,' she suggested.

'He does not,' Catalina said firmly.



I will tell no-one what I promised. I will tell no-one that in my heart I am still Princess of Wales, I will always be Princess of Wales until I see the wedding of my son and see my daughter-in-law crowned. I will tell no-one that I understand now what Arthur told me: that even a princess born may have to claim her title.

I have told no-one whether or not I am with child. But I know, well enough. I had my course in April, there is no baby. There is no Princess Mary, there is no Prince Arthur. My love, my only love, is dead and there is nothing left of him for me, not even his unborn child.

I will say nothing, though people constantly pry and want to know. I have to consider what I am to do, and how I am to claim the throne that Arthur wanted for me. I have to think how to keep my promise to him, how to tell the lie that he wanted me to tell. How I can make it convincing, how I can fool the king himself, and his sharp-witted, hard-eyed mother.

But I have made a promise, I do not retract my word. He begged me for a promise and he dictated the lie I must tell, and I said 'yes'. I will not fail him. It is the last thing he asked of me, and I will do it. I will do it for him, and I will do it for our love.

Oh my love, if you knew how much I long to see you.



Catalina travelled to London with the black-trimmed curtains of the litter closed against the beauty of the countryside, as it came into full bloom. She did not see the people doff their caps or curtsy as the procession wound through the little English villages. She did not hear the men and women call 'God bless you, Princess!' as the litter jolted slowly down the village streets. She did not know that every young woman in the land crossed herself and prayed that she should not have the bad luck of the pretty Spanish princess who had come so far for love and then lost her man after only five months.

She was dully aware of the lush green of the countryside, of the fertile swelling of the crops in the fields and the fat cattle in the water-meadows. When

their way wound through the thick forests, she noticed the coolness of the green shade, and the thick interleaving of the canopy of boughs over the road. Herds of deer vanished into the dappled shade and she could hear the calling of a cuckoo and the rattle of a woodpecker. It was a beautiful land, a wealthy land, a great inheritance for a young couple. She thought of Arthur's desire to protect this land of his against the Scots, against the Moors. Of his will to reign here better and more justly than it had ever been done before.

She did not speak to her hosts on the road who attributed her silence to grief, and pitied her for it. She did not speak to her ladies, not even to Maria who was at her side in silent sympathy, nor to Dona Elvira who, at this crisis in Spanish affairs, was everywhere; her husband organising the houses on the road, she herself ordering the princess's food, her bedding, her companions, her diet. Catalina said nothing and let them do as they wished with her.

Some of her hosts thought her sunk so deep in grief that she was beyond speech, and prayed that she should recover her wits again, and go back to Spain and make a new marriage that would bring her a new husband to replace the old. What they did not know was that Catalina was holding her grief for her husband in some hidden place deep inside her. Deliberately, she delayed her mourning until she had the safety to indulge in it. While she jolted along in the litter she was not weeping for him, she was racking her brains how to fulfil his dream. She was wondering how to obey him, as he had demanded. She was thinking how she should fulfil her deathbed promise to the only young man she had ever loved.



I shall have to be clever. I shall have to be more cunning than King Henry Tudor, more determined than his mother. Faced with those two, I don't know that I can get away with it. But I have to get away with it. I have given my promise, I will tell my lie. England shall be ruled as Arthur wanted. The rose will live again, I shall make the England that he wanted.

I wish I could have brought Lady Margaret with me to advise me, I miss her friendship, I miss her hard-won wisdom. I wish I could see her steady gaze and hear her counsel to be resigned, to bow to my destiny, to give myself to God's will. I would not follow her advice – but I wish I could hear it.

Summer 1502

Croydon, May 1502

The princess and her party arrived at Croydon Palace and Dona Elvira led Catalina to her private rooms. For once, the girl did not go to her bedchamber and close the door behind her, she stood in the sumptuous presence chamber, looking around her. 'A chamber fit for a princess,' she said.

'But it is not your own,' Dona Elvira said, anxious for her charge's status. 'It has not been given to you. It is just for your use.'

The young woman nodded. 'It is fitting,' she said.

'The Spanish ambassador is in attendance,' Dona Elvira told her. 'Shall I tell him that you will not see him?'

'I will see him,' Catalina said quietly. 'Tell him to come in.'

'You don't have to...'

'He may have word from my mother,' she said. 'I should like her advice.'

The duenna bowed and went to find the ambassador. He was deep in conversation in the gallery outside the presence chamber with Father Alessandro Geraldini, the princess's chaplain. Dona Elvira regarded them both with dislike. The chaplain was a tall, handsome man, his dark good looks in stark contrast to those of his companion. The ambassador, Dr de Puebla, was tiny beside him, leaning against a chair to support his misshaped spine, his damaged leg tucked behind the other, his bright little face alight with excitement.

'She could be with child?' the ambassador confirmed in a whisper. 'You are certain?'

'Pray God it is so. She is certainly in hopes of it,' the confessor confirmed.

'Dr de Puebla!' the duenna snapped, disliking the confidential air between the two men. 'I shall take you to the princess now.'

De Puebla turned and smiled at the irritable woman. 'Certainly, Dona Elvira,' he said equably. 'At once.'

Dr de Puebla limped into the room, his richly trimmed black hat already in his hand, his small face wreathed in an unconvincing smile. He bowed low with

a flourish, and came up to inspect the princess.

At once he was struck by how much she had changed in such a short time. She had come to England a girl, with a girl's optimism. He had thought her a spoilt child, one who had been protected from the harshness of the real world. In the fairy-tale palace of the Alhambra this had been the petted youngest daughter of the most powerful monarchs in Christendom. Her journey to England had been the first real discomfort she had been forced to endure, and she had complained about it bitterly, as if he could help the weather. On her wedding day, standing beside Arthur and hearing the cheers for him, had been the first time she had taken second place to anyone but her heroic parents.

But before him now was a girl who had been hammered by unhappiness into a fine maturity. This Catalina was thinner, and paler, but with a new spiritual beauty, honed by hardship. He drew his breath. This Catalina was a young woman with a queenly presence. She had become through grief not only Arthur's widow, but her mother's daughter. This was a princess from the line that had defeated the most powerful enemy of Christendom. This was the very bone of the bone and blood of the blood of Isabella of Castile. She was cool, she was hard. He hoped very much that she was not going to be difficult.

De Puebla gave her a smile that he meant to be reassuring and saw her scrutinise him with no answering warmth in her face. She gave him her hand and then she sat in a straight-backed wooden chair before the fire. 'You may sit,' she said graciously, gesturing him to a lower chair, further away.

He bowed again, and sat.

'Do you have any messages for me?'

'Of sympathy, from the king and Queen Elizabeth and from My Lady the King's Mother, and from myself of course. They will invite you to court when you have recovered from your journey and are out of mourning.'

'How long am I to be in mourning?' Catalina inquired.

'My Lady the King's Mother has said that you should be in seclusion for a month after the burial. But since you were not at court during that time, she has ruled that you will stay here until she commands you to return to London. She is concerned for your health...'

He paused, hoping that she would volunteer whether or not she was with child, but she let the silence stretch.

He thought he would ask her directly. 'Infanta...'

'You should call me princess,' she interrupted. 'I am the Princess of Wales.'

He hesitated, thrown off course. 'Dowager Princess,' he corrected her

quietly.

Catalina nodded. 'Of course. It is understood. Do you have any letters from Spain?'

He bowed and gave her the letter he was carrying in the hidden pocket in his sleeve. She did not snatch it from him like a child and open it, then and there. She nodded her head in thanks and held it.

'Do you not want to open it now? Do you not want to reply?'

'When I have written my reply, I will send for you,' she said simply, asserting her power over him. 'I shall send for you when I want you.'

'Certainly, Your Grace.' He smoothed the velvet nap of his black breeches to hide his irritation but inwardly he thought it an impertinence that the Infanta, now a widow, should command where before the Princess of Wales had politely requested. He thought he perhaps did not like this new, finer Catalina, after all.

'And have you heard from Their Majesties in Spain?' she asked. 'Have they advised you as to their wishes?'

'Yes,' he said, wondering how much he should tell her. 'Of course, Queen Isabella is anxious that you are not unwell. She asked me to inquire after your health and to report to her.'

A secretive shadow crossed Catalina's face. 'I shall write to the queen my mother and tell her my news,' she said.

'She was anxious to know...' he began, probing for the answer to the greatest question: was there an heir? Was the princess with child?

'I shall confide in no-one but my mother.'

'We cannot proceed to the settlement of your jointure and your arrangements until we know,' he said bluntly. 'It makes a difference to everything.'

She did not flare up as he had thought she would do. She inclined her head, she had herself under tight control. 'I shall write to my mother,' she repeated, as if his advice did not much matter.

He saw he would get nothing more from her. But at least the chaplain had told him she could be with child, and he should know. The king would be glad to know that there was at least a possibility of an heir. At any rate she had not denied it. There might be capital to make from her silence. 'Then I will leave you to read your letter.' He bowed.

She made a casual gesture of dismissal and turned to look at the flames of the little summertime fire. He bowed again and, since she was not looking at him, scrutinised her figure. She had no bloom of early pregnancy but some women took it badly in the first months. Her pallor could be caused by morning

sickness. It was impossible for a man to tell. He would have to rely on the confessor's opinion, and pass it on with a caution.



I open my mother's letter with hands that are trembling so much that I can hardly break the seals. The first thing I see is the shortness of the letter, only one page.

'Oh, Madre,' I breathe. 'No more?'

Perhaps she was in haste; but I am bitterly hurt to see that she has written so briefly! If she knew how much I want to hear her voice she would have written at twice the length. As God is my witness I don't think I can do this without her; I am only sixteen and a half, I need my mother.

I read the short letter through once, and then, almost incredulously, I read it through again.

It is not a letter from a loving mother to her daughter. It is not a letter from a woman to her favourite child, and that child on the very edge of despair. Coldly, powerfully, she has written a letter from a queen to a princess. She writes of nothing but business. We could be a pair of merchants concluding a sale.

She says that I am to stay in whatever house is provided for me until I have had my next course and I know that I am not with child. If that is the case I am to command Dr de Puebla to demand my jointure as Dowager Princess of Wales and as soon as I have the full money and not before (underlined so there can be no mistake), I am to take ship for Spain.

If, on the other hand, God is gracious, and I am with child, then I am to assure Dr de Puebla that the money for my dowry will be paid in cash and at once, he is to secure me my allowance as Dowager Princess of Wales, and I am to rest and hope for a boy.

I am to write to her at once and tell her if I think I am with child. I am to write to her as soon as I am certain, one way or the other, and I am to confide also in Dr de Puebla and to maintain myself under the chaperonage of Dona Elvira.

I fold the letter carefully, matching the edges one to another as if tidiness matters very much. I think that if she knew of the despair that laps at the edges of my mind like a river of darkness she would have written to me more kindly. If she knew how very alone I am, how grieved I am, how much I miss him, she would not write to me of settlements and jointures and titles. If she knew how

much I loved him and how I cannot bear to live without him she would write and tell me that she loves me, that I am to go home to her at once, without delay.

I tuck the letter into the pocket at my waist, and I stand up, as if reporting for duty. I am not a child any more. I will not cry for my mother. I see that I am not in the especial care of God since he could let Arthur die. I see that I am not in the especial love of my mother, since she can leave me alone, in a strange land.

She is not only a mother, she is Queen of Spain, and she has to ensure that she has a grandson, or failing a grandson, a watertight treaty. I am not just a young woman who has lost the man she loves. I am a Princess of Spain and I have to produce a grandson, or failing that a watertight treaty. And in addition, I am now bound by a promise. I have promised that I will be Princess of Wales again, and Queen of England. I have promised this to the young man to whom I promised everything. I will perform it for him, whatever anyone else wants.

The Spanish ambassador did not report at once to Their Majesties of Spain. Instead, playing his usual double game, he took the chaplain's opinion first to the King of England.

‘Her confessor says that she is with child,’ he remarked.

For the first time in days King Henry felt his heart lighten. ‘Good God, if that were so, it would change everything.’

‘Please God it is so. I should be glad of it,’ de Puebla agreed. ‘But I cannot guarantee it. She shows no sign of it.’

‘Could be early days,’ Henry agreed. ‘And God knows, and I know, a child in the cradle is not a prince on the throne. It’s a long road to the crown. But it would be a great comfort to me if she was with child – and to the queen,’ he added as an afterthought.

‘So she must stay here in England until we know for sure,’ the ambassador concluded. ‘And if she is not with child we shall settle our accounts, you and I, and she shall go home. Her mother asks for her to be sent home at once.’

‘We’ll wait and see,’ Henry said, conceding nothing. ‘Her mother will have to wait like the rest of us. And if she is anxious to have her daughter home she had better pay the rest of the dowry.’

‘You would not delay the return of the princess to her mother over a matter of money,’ the ambassador suggested.

‘The sooner everything is settled the better,’ the king said smoothly. ‘If she is with child then she is our daughter and the mother of our heir; nothing would be too good for her. If she is not, then she can go home to her mother as soon as

her dowry is paid.'



I know that there is no Mary growing in my womb, there is no Arthur; but I shall say nothing until I know what to do. I dare say nothing until I am sure what I should do. My mother and father will be planning for the good of Spain, King Henry will be planning for the good of England. Alone, I will have to find a way to fulfil my promise. Nobody will help me. Nobody can even know what I am doing. Only Arthur in heaven will understand what I am doing and I feel far, far away from him. It is so painful, a pain I could not imagine. I have never needed him more than now, now that he is dead, and only he can advise me how to fulfil my promise to him.



Catalina had spent less than a month of seclusion at Croydon Palace when the king's chamberlain came to tell her that Durham House in the Strand had been prepared for her and she could go there at her convenience.

'Is this where a Princess of Wales would stay?' Catalina demanded urgently of de Puebla, who had been immediately summoned to her privy chamber. 'Is Durham House where a princess would be housed? Why am I not to live in Baynard's Castle again?'

'Durham House is perfectly adequate,' he stammered, taken aback by her fervour. 'And your household is not diminished at all. The king has not asked you to dismiss anyone. You are to have an adequate court. And he will pay you an allowance.'

'My jointure as the prince's widow?'

He avoided her gaze. 'An allowance at this stage. He has not been paid your dowry from your parents, remember, so he will not pay your jointure. But he will give you a good sum, one that will allow you to keep your state.'

'I should have my jointure.'

He shook his head. 'He will not pay it until he has the full dowry. But it is a good allowance, you will keep a good state.'

He saw that she was immensely relieved. 'Princess, there is no question but that the king is respectful of your position,' he said carefully. 'You need have no

fears of that. Of course, if he could be assured as to your health...'

Again the shuttered look closed down Catalina's face. 'I don't know what you mean,' she said shortly. 'I am well. You can tell him that I am well. Nothing more.'



I am buying time, letting them think that I am with child. It is such agony, knowing that my time of the month has come and gone, that I am ready for Arthur's seed, but he is cold and gone and he will never come to my bed again, and we will never make his daughter Mary and his son Arthur.

I cannot bear to tell them the truth: I am barren, without a baby to raise for him. And while I say nothing they have to wait too. They will not send me home to Spain while they hope that I might still be My Lady the Mother of the Prince of Wales. They have to wait.

And while they wait I can plan what I shall say, and what I shall do. I have to be wise as my mother would be, and cunning as the fox, my father. I have to be determined like her, and secretive like him. I have to think how and when I shall start to tell this lie, Prince Arthur's great lie. If I can tell it so that it convinces everyone, if I can place myself so that I fulfil my destiny, then Arthur, beloved Arthur, can do as he wished. He can rule England through me, I can marry his brother and become queen. Arthur can live through the child I conceive with his brother, we can make the England we swore that we would make, despite misfortune, despite his brother's folly, despite my own despair.

I shall not give myself to heartbreak, I shall give myself to England. I shall keep my promise. I shall be constant to my husband and to my destiny. And I shall plan and plot and consider how I shall conquer this misfortune and be what I was born to be. How I shall be the pretender who becomes the queen.

London, June 1502



The little court moved to Durham House in late June and the remainder of Catalina's court straggled in from Ludlow Castle, speaking of a town in silence

and a castle in mourning. Catalina did not seem particularly pleased at the change of scene, though Durham House was a pretty palace with lovely gardens running down to the river, with its own stairs and a pier for boats. The ambassador came to visit and found her in the gallery at the front of the house, which overlooked the front courtyard below and Ivy Lane beyond.

She let him stand before her.

‘Her Grace, the queen your mother, is sending an emissary to escort you home as soon as your widow’s jointure is paid. Since you have not told us that you are with child she is preparing for your journey.’

De Puebla saw her press her lips together as if to curb a hasty reply. ‘How much does the king have to pay me, as his son’s widow?’

‘He has to pay you a third of the revenues of Wales, Cornwall and Chester,’ he said. ‘And your parents are now asking, in addition, that King Henry return all of your dowry.’

Catalina looked aghast. ‘He never will,’ she said flatly. ‘No emissary will be able to convince him. King Henry will never pay such sums to me. He didn’t even pay my allowance when his son was alive. Why should he repay the dowry and pay a jointure when he has nothing to gain from it?’

The ambassador shrugged his shoulders. ‘It is in the contract.’

‘So too was my allowance, and you failed to make him pay that,’ she said sharply.

‘You should have handed over your plate as soon as you arrived.’

‘And eat off what?’ she blazed out.

Insolently, he stood before her. He knew, as she did not yet understand, that she had no power. Every day that she failed to announce she was with child her importance diminished. He was certain that she was barren. He thought her a fool now; she had bought herself a little time by her discretion – but for what? Her disapproval of him mattered very little; she would soon be gone. She might rage but nothing would change.

‘Why did you ever agree to such a contract? You must have known he would not honour it.’

He shrugged. The conversation was meaningless. ‘How should we think there would ever be such a tragic occurrence? Who could have imagined that the prince would die, just as he entered into adult life? It is so very sad.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Catalina. She had promised herself she would never cry for Arthur in front of anyone. The tears must stay back. ‘But now, thanks to this contract, the king is deep in debt to me. He has to return the dowry that he has

been paid, he cannot have my plate, and he owes me this jointure. Ambassador, you must know that he will never pay this much. And clearly he will never give me the rents of – where? – Wales and, and Cornwall? – forever.'

'Only until you remarry,' he observed. 'He has to pay your jointure until you remarry. And we must assume that you will remarry soon. Their Majesties will want you to return home in order to arrange a new marriage for you. I imagine that the emissary is coming to fetch you home just for that. They probably have a marriage contract drawn up for you already. Perhaps you are already betrothed.'

For one moment de Puebla saw the shock in her face then she turned abruptly from him to stare out of the window on the courtyard before the palace and the open gates to the busy streets outside.

He watched the tightly stretched shoulders and the tense turn of her neck, surprised that his shot at her second marriage had hit her so hard. Why should she be so shocked at the mention of marriage? Surely she must know that she would go home only to be married again?

Catalina let the silence grow as she watched the street beyond the Durham House gate. It was so unlike her home. There were no dark men in beautiful gowns, there were no veiled women. There were no street sellers with rich piles of spices, no flower sellers staggering under small mountains of blooms. There were no herbalists, physicians, or astronomers, plying their trade as if knowledge could be freely available to anyone. There was no silent movement to the mosque for prayer five times a day, there was no constant splash of fountains. Instead there was the bustle of one of the greatest cities in the world, the relentless, unstoppable buzz of prosperity and commerce, and the ringing of the bells of hundreds of churches. This was a city bursting with confidence, rich on its own trade, exuberantly wealthy.

'This is my home now,' she said. Resolutely she put aside the pictures in her mind of a warmer city, of a smaller community, of an easier, more exotic world. 'The king should not think that I will go home and remarry as if none of this has happened. My parents should not think that they can change my destiny. I was brought up to be Princess of Wales and Queen of England. I shall not be cast off like a bad debt.'

The ambassador, from a race who had known disappointment, so much older and wiser than the girl who stood at the window, smiled at her unseeing back. 'Of course it shall be as you wish,' he lied easily. 'I shall write to your father and mother and say that you prefer to wait here, in England, while your future is decided.'

Catalina rounded on him. 'No, I shall decide my future.'

He had to bite the inside of his cheeks to hide his smile. 'Of course you will, Infanta.'

'Dowager Princess.'

'Dowager Princess.'

She took a breath; but when it came, her voice was quite steady. 'You may tell my father and mother, and you shall tell the king, that I am not with child.'

'Indeed,' he breathed. 'Thank you for informing us. That makes everything much clearer.'

'How so?'

'The king will release you. You can go home. He would have no claim on you, no interest in you. There can be no reason for you to stay. I shall have to make arrangements but your jointure can follow you. You can leave at once.'

'No,' she said flatly.

De Puebla was surprised. 'Dowager Princess, you can be released from this failure. You can go home. You are free to go.'

'You mean the English think they have no use for me?'

He gave the smallest of shrugs, as if to ask: what was she good for, since she was neither maid nor mother?

'What else can you do here? Your time here is over.'

She was not yet ready to show him her full plan. 'I shall write to my mother,' was all she would reply. 'But you are not to make arrangements for me to leave. It may be that I shall stay in England for a little while longer. If I am to be remarried, I could be remarried in England.'

'To whom?' he demanded.

She looked away from him. 'How should I know? My parents and the king should decide.'



I have to find a way to put my marriage to Harry into the mind of the king. Now that he knows I am not with child surely it will occur to him that the resolution for all our difficulties is to marry me to Harry?

If I trusted Dr de Puebla more, I should ask him to hint to the king that I could be betrothed to Harry. But I do not trust him. He muddled my first marriage contract, I don't want him muddling this one.

If I could get a letter to my mother without de Puebla seeing it then I could

tell her of my plan, of Arthur's plan.

But I cannot. I am alone in this. I do feel so fearfully alone.



‘They are going to name Prince Harry as the new Prince of Wales,’ Dona Elvira said quietly to the princess as she was brushing her hair in the last week of June. ‘He is to be Prince Harry, Prince of Wales.’

She expected the girl to break down at this last severing of her links with the past but Catalina did nothing but look around the room. ‘Leave us,’ she said shortly to the maids who were laying out her nightgown and turning down the bed.

They went out quietly and closed the door behind them. Catalina tossed back her hair and met Dona Elvira’s eyes in the mirror. She handed her the hairbrush again and nodded for her to continue.

‘I want you to write to my parents and tell them that my marriage with Prince Arthur was not consummated,’ she said, smoothly. ‘I am a virgin as I was when I left Spain.’

Dona Elvira was stunned, the hairbrush suspended in mid-air, her mouth open. ‘You were bedded in the sight of the whole court,’ she said.

‘He was impotent,’ Catalina said, her face as hard as a diamond.

‘You were together once a week.’

‘With no effect,’ she said, unwavering. ‘It was a great sadness to him, and to me.’

‘Infanta, you never said anything. Why did you not tell me?’

Catalina’s eyes were veiled. ‘What should I say? We were newly wed. He was very young. I thought it would come right in time.’

Dona Elvira did not even pretend to believe her. ‘Princess, there is no need for you to say this. Just because you have been a wife need not damage your future. Being a widow is no obstacle to a good marriage. They will find someone for you. They will find a good match for you, you do not have to pretend...’

‘I don’t want “someone”,’ Catalina said fiercely. ‘You should know that as well as me. I was born to be Princess of Wales and Queen of England. It was Arthur’s greatest wish that I should be Queen of England.’ She pulled herself back from thinking of him, or saying more. She bit her lip; she should not have tried to say his name. She forced down the tears and took a breath. ‘I am a virgin untouched, now, as I was in Spain. You shall tell them that.’

‘But we need say nothing, we can go back to Spain, anyway,’ the older woman pointed out.

‘They will marry me to some lord, perhaps an archduke,’ Catalina said. ‘I don’t want to be sent away again. Do you want to run my household in some little Spanish castle? Or Austria? Or worse? You will have to come with me, remember. Do you want to end up in the Netherlands, or Germany?’

Dona Elvira’s eyes darted away, she was thinking furiously. ‘No-one would believe us if we say you are a virgin.’

‘They would. You have to tell them. No-one would dare to ask me. You can tell them. It has to be you to tell them. They will believe you because you are close to me, as close as a mother.’

‘I have said nothing so far.’

‘And that was right. But you will speak now. Dona Elvira, if you don’t seem to know, or if you say one thing and I say another, then everyone will know that you are not in my confidence, that you have not cared for me as you should. They will think you are negligent of my interests, that you have lost my favour. I should think that my mother would recall you in disgrace if she thought that I was a virgin and you did not even know. You would never serve in a royal court again if they thought you had neglected me.’

‘Everyone saw that he was in love with you.’

‘No they didn’t. Everyone saw that we were together, as a prince and princess. Everyone saw that he came to my bedroom only as he had been ordered. No more. No-one can say what went on behind the bedroom door. No-one but me. And I say that he was impotent. Who are you to deny that? Do you dare to call me a liar?’

The older woman bowed her head to gain time. ‘If you say so,’ she said carefully. ‘Whatever you say, Infanta.’

‘Princess.’

‘Princess,’ the woman repeated.

‘And I do say it. It is my way ahead. Actually, it is your way ahead too. We can say this one, simple thing and stay in England; or we can return to Spain in mourning and become next to nobody.’

‘Of course, I can tell them what you wish. If you wish to say your husband was impotent and you are still a maid then I can say that. But how will this make you queen?’

‘Since the marriage was not consummated, there can be no objection to me marrying Prince Arthur’s brother Harry,’ Catalina said in a hard, determined

voice.

Dona Elvira gasped with shock at this next stage.

Catalina pressed on. 'When this new emissary comes from Spain you may inform him that it is God's will and my desire that I be Princess of Wales again, as I always have been. He shall speak to the king. He shall negotiate, not my widow's jointure, but my next wedding.'

Dona Elvira gaped. 'You cannot make your own marriage!'

'I can,' Catalina said fiercely. 'I will, and you will help me.'

'You cannot think that they will let you marry Prince Harry?'

'Why should they not? The marriage with his brother was not consummated. I am a virgin. The dowry to the king is half-paid. He can keep the half he already has and we can give him the rest of it. He need not pay my jointure. The contract has been signed and sealed, they need only change the names, and here I am in England already. It is the best solution for everyone. Without it I become nothing; you certainly are nobody. Your ambition, your husband's ambition, will all come to nothing. But if we can win this then you will be the mistress of a royal household, and I will be as I should be: Princess of Wales and Queen of England.'

'They will not let us!' Dona Elvira gasped, appalled at her charge's ambition.

'They will let us,' Catalina said fiercely. 'We have to fight for it. We have to be what we should be; nothing less.'

Princess in Waiting

Winter 1503

King Henry and his queen, driven by the loss of their son, were expecting another child, and Catalina, hoping for their favour, was sewing an exquisite layette of baby clothes before a small fire in the smallest room of Durham Palace in the early days of February 1503. Her ladies, hemming seams according to their abilities, were seated at a distance; Dona Elvira could speak privately.

‘This should be your baby’s layette,’ the duenna said resentfully under her breath. ‘A widow for a year, and no progress made. What is going to become of you?’

Catalina looked up from her delicate black-thread work. ‘Peace, Dona Elvira,’ she said quietly. ‘It will be as God and my parents and the king decide.’

‘Seventeen, now,’ Dona Elvira said, stubbornly pursuing her theme, her head down. ‘How long are we to stay in this Godforsaken country, neither a bride nor a wife? Neither at court nor elsewhere? With bills mounting up and the jointure still not paid?’

‘Dona Elvira, if you knew how much your words grieve me, I don’t think you would say them,’ Catalina said clearly. ‘Just because you mutter them into your sewing like a cursing Egyptian doesn’t mean I don’t hear them. If I knew what was to happen, I would tell you myself at once. You will not learn any more by whispering your fears.’

The woman looked up and met Catalina’s clear gaze.

‘I think of you,’ she said bluntly. ‘Even if no-one else does. Even if that fool ambassador and that idiot the emissary does not. If the king does not order your marriage to the prince then what is to become of you? If he will not let you go, if your parents do not insist on your return, then what is going to happen? Is he just going to keep you forever? Are you a princess or a prisoner? It is nearly a year. Are you a hostage for the alliance with Spain? How long can you wait? You are seventeen, how long can you wait?’

‘I am waiting,’ Catalina said calmly. ‘Patiently. Until it is resolved.’

The duenna said nothing more, Catalina did not have the energy to argue. She knew that during this year of mourning for Arthur, she had been steadily

pushed more and more to the margins of court life. Her claim to be a virgin had not produced a new betrothal as she had thought it would; it had made her yet more irrelevant. She was only summoned to court on the great occasions, and then she was dependent on the kindness of Queen Elizabeth.

The king's mother, Lady Margaret, had no interest in the impoverished Spanish princess. She had not proved readily fertile, she now said she had never even been bedded, she was widowed and brought no more money into the royal treasury. She was of no use to the house of Tudor except as a bargaining counter in the continuing struggle with Spain. She might as well stay at her house in the Strand, as be summoned to court. Besides, My Lady the King's Mother did not like the way that the new Prince of Wales looked at his widowed sister-in-law.

Whenever Prince Harry met her, he fixed his eyes on her with puppy-like devotion. My Lady the King's Mother had privately decided that she would keep them apart. She thought that the girl smiled on the young prince too warmly, she thought she encouraged his boyish adoration to serve her own foreign vanity. My Lady the King's Mother was resentful of anyone's influence on the only surviving son and heir. Also, she mistrusted Catalina. Why would the young widow encourage a brother-in-law who was nearly six years her junior? What did she hope to gain from his friendship? Surely she knew that he was kept as close as a child: bedded in his father's rooms, chaperoned night and day, constantly supervised? What did the Spanish widow hope to achieve by sending him books, teaching him Spanish, laughing at his accent and watching him ride at the quintain, as if he were in training as her knight errant?

Nothing would come of it. Nothing could come of it. But My Lady the King's Mother would allow no-one to be intimate with Harry but herself, and she ruled that Catalina's visits to court were to be rare and brief.

The king himself was kind enough to Catalina when he saw her, but she felt him eye her as if she were some sort of treasure that he had purloined. She always felt with him as if she were some sort of trophy – not a young woman of seventeen years old, wholly dependent on his honour, his daughter by marriage.

If she could have brought herself to speak of Arthur to her mother-in-law or to the king then perhaps they would have sought her out to share their grief. But she could not use his name to curry favour with them. Even a year since his death, she could not think of him without a tightness in her chest which was so great that she thought it could stop her breathing for very grief. She still could not say his name out loud. She certainly could not play on her grief to help her at court.

‘But what will happen?’ Dona Elvira continued.

Catalina turned her head away. ‘I don’t know,’ she said shortly.

‘Perhaps if the queen has another son with this baby, the king will send us back to Spain,’ the duenna pursued.

Catalina nodded. ‘Perhaps.’

The duenna knew her well enough to recognise Catalina’s silent determination. ‘Your trouble is, that you still don’t want to go,’ she whispered. ‘The king may keep you as a hostage against the dowry money, your parents may let you stay; but if you insisted you could get home. You still think you can make them marry you to Harry; but if that was going to happen you would be betrothed by now. You have to give up. We have been here a year now and you make no progress. You will trap us all here while you are defeated.’

Catalina’s sandy eyelashes swept down to veil her eyes. ‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘I don’t think that.’

There was a sharp rap at the door. ‘Urgent message for the Dowager Princess of Wales!’ the voice called out.

Catalina dropped her sewing and rose to her feet. Her ladies sprang up too. It was so unusual for anything to happen in the quiet court of Durham House that they were thrown into a flutter.

‘Well, let him in!’ Catalina exclaimed.

Maria de Salinas flung open the door and one of the royal grooms of the chamber came in and knelt before the princess. ‘Grave news,’ he said shortly. ‘A son, a prince, has been born of the queen and has died. Her Grace the Queen has died too. God pray for His Grace in his kingly grief.’

‘What?’ demanded Dona Elvira, trying to take in the astounding rush of events.

‘God save her soul,’ Catalina replied correctly. ‘God save the King.’



‘Heavenly Father, take Your daughter Elizabeth into Your keeping. You must love her, she was a woman of great gentleness and grace.’

I sit back on my heels and abandon the prayer. I think the queen’s life, ended so tragically, was one of sorrow. If Arthur’s version of the scandal were true, then she had been prepared to marry King Richard, however despicable a tyrant. She had wanted to marry him and be his queen. Her mother and My Lady the King’s Mother and the victory of Bosworth had forced her to take King

Henry. She had been born to be Queen of England, and she had married the man who could give her the throne.

I thought that if I had been able to tell her of my promise then she would have known the pain that seeps through me like ice every time I think of Arthur, and know that I promised him I would marry Harry. I thought that she might have understood if you are born to be Queen of England you have to be Queen of England, whoever is king. Whoever your husband will have to be.

Without her quiet presence at court I feel that I am more at risk, further from my goal. She was kind to me, she was a loving woman. I was waiting out my year of mourning and trusting that she would help me into marriage with Harry, because he would be a refuge for me, and because I would be a good wife to him. I was trusting that she knew one could marry a man for whom one feels nothing but indifference and still be a good wife.

But now the court will be ruled by My Lady the King's Mother and she is a formidable woman, no friend to anyone but her own cause, no affection for anyone but her son Henry, and his son, Prince Harry.

She will help no-one but she will serve the interests of her own family first. She will consider me as only one candidate among many for his hand in marriage. God forgive her, she might even look to a French bride for him and then I will have failed not only Arthur but my own mother and father too, who need me to maintain the alliance between England and Spain and the enmity between England and France.

This year has been hard for me, I had expected a year of mourning and then a new betrothal; I have been growing more and more anxious since no-one seems to be planning such a thing. And now I am afraid that it will get worse. What if King Henry decides to surrender the second part of the dowry and sends me home? What if they betroth Harry, that foolish boy, to someone else? What if they just forget me? Hold me as a hostage to the good behaviour of Spain but neglect me? Leave me at Durham House, a shadow princess over a shadow court, while the real world goes on elsewhere?

I hate this time of year in England, the way the winter lingers on and on in cold mists and grey skies. In the Alhambra the water in the canals will be released from frost and starting to flow again, icy cold, rushing deep with melt-water from the snows of the sierra. The earth will be starting to warm in the gardens, the men will be planting flowers and young saplings, the sun will be warm in the mornings and the thick hangings will be taken down from the windows so the warm breezes can blow through the palace again.

The birds of summer will come back to the high hills and the olive trees will shimmer their leaves of green and grey. Everywhere the farmers will be turning over the red soil, and there will be the scent of life and growth.

I long to be home; but I will not leave my post. I am not a soldier who forgets his duty, I am a sentry who wakes all night. I will not fail my love. I said 'I promise', and I do not forget it. I will be constant to him. The garden that is immortal life, al-Yanna, will wait for me, the rose will wait for me in al-Yanna, Arthur will wait for me there. I will be Queen of England as I was born to be, as I promised him I would be. The rose will bloom in England as well as in heaven.



There was a great state funeral for Queen Elizabeth, and Catalina was in mourning black again. Through the dark lace of her mantilla she watched the orders of precedence, the arrangements for the service, she saw how everything was commanded by the great book of the king's mother. Even her own place was laid down, behind the princesses, but before all the other ladies of the court.

Lady Margaret, the king's mother, had written down all the procedures to be followed at the Tudor court, from birth chambers to lying in state, so that her son and the generations which she prayed would come after him would be prepared for every occasion, so that each occasion would match another, and so that every occasion, however distant in the future, would be commanded by her.

Now her first great funeral, for her unloved daughter-in-law, went off with the order and grace of a well-planned masque at court, and as the great manager of everything she stepped up visibly, unquestionably, to her place as the greatest lady at court.

2nd April 1503



It was a year to the day that Arthur had died and Catalina spent the day alone in the chapel of Durham House. Father Geraldini held a memorial Mass for the young prince at dawn and Catalina stayed in the little church, without breaking her fast, without taking so much as a cup of small ale, all the day.

Some of the time she kneeled before the altar, her lips moving in silent prayer, struggling with the loss of him with a grief which was as sharp and as raw as the day that she had stood on the threshold of his room and learned that they could not save him, that he would die, that she would have to live without him.

For some of the long hours, she prowled around the empty chapel, pausing to look at the devotional pictures on the walls or the exquisite carving of the pews and the rood screen. Her horror was that she was forgetting him. There were mornings when she woke and tried to see his face, and found that she could see nothing beneath her closed eyelids, or worse, all she could see was some rough sketch of him, a poor likeness: the simulacrum and no longer the real thing. Those mornings she would sit up quickly, clench her knees up to her belly, and hold herself tight so that she did not give way to her agonising sense of loss.

Then, later in the day she would be talking to her ladies, or sewing, or walking by the river, and someone would say something, or she would see the sun on the water and suddenly he would be there before her, as vivid as if he were alive, lighting up the afternoon. She would stand quite still for a moment, silently drinking him in, and then she would go on with the conversation, or continue her walk, knowing that she would never forget him. Her eyes had the print of him on their lids, her body had the touch of him on her skin, she was his, heart and soul, till death: not – as it turned out – till his death; but till her death. Only when the two of them were gone from this life would their marriage in this life be over.

But on this, the anniversary of his death, Catalina had promised herself that she should be alone, she would allow herself the indulgence of mourning, of railing at God for taking him.



‘You know, I shall never understand Your purpose,’ I say to the statue of the crucified Christ, hanging by His bloodstained palms over the altar. ‘Can you not give me a sign? Can you not show me what I should do?’

I wait but He says nothing. I have to wonder if the God who spoke so clearly to my mother is sleeping, or gone away. Why should He direct her, and yet remain silent for me? Why should I, raised as a fervently Christian child, a passionately Roman Catholic child, have no sense of being heard when I pray

from my deepest grief? Why should God desert me, when I need Him so much?

I return to the embroidered kneeler before the altar but I do not kneel on it in a position of prayer, I turn it around and sit on it, as if I were at home, a cushion pulled up to a warm brazier, ready to talk, ready to listen. But no-one speaks to me now. Not even my God.

'I know it is Your will that I should be queen,' I say thoughtfully, as if He might answer, as if He might suddenly reply in a tone as reasonable as my own. 'I know that it is my mother's wish too. I know that my darling –' I cut short the end of the sentence. Even now, a year on, I cannot take the risk of saying Arthur's name, even in an empty chapel, even to God. I still fear an outpouring of tears, the slide into hysteria and madness. Behind my control is a passion for Arthur like a deep mill pond held behind a sluice gate. I dare not let one drop of it out. There would be a flood of sorrow, a torrent.

'I know that he wished I should be queen. On his deathbed, he asked for a promise. In Your sight, I gave him that promise. In Your name I gave it. I meant it. I am sworn to be queen. But how am I to do it? If it is Your will, as well as his, as I believe, if it is Your will as well as my mother's, as I believe, then, God: hear this. I have run out of stratagems. It has to be You. You have to show me the way to do it.'



I have been demanding this of God with more and more urgency for a year now; while the endless negotiations about the repayment of the dowry and the payment of the jointure drag on and on. Without one clear word from my mother I have come to think that she is playing the same game as me. Without doubt, I know that my father will have some long tactical play in mind. If only they would tell me what I should do! In their discreet silence I have to guess that they are leaving me here as bait for the king. They are leaving me here until the king sees, as I see, as Arthur saw, that the best resolution of this difficulty would be for me to marry Prince Harry.

The trouble is, that as every month goes by, Harry grows in stature and status at the court: he becomes a more attractive prospect. The French king will make a proposal for him, the hundred princelings of Europe with their pretty daughters will make offers, even the Holy Roman Emperor has an unmarried daughter Margaret, who might suit. We have to bring this to a decision now, this very month of April, as my first year of widowhood ends. Now that I am free

from my year of waiting. But the balance of power has changed. King Henry is in no hurry, his heir is young – a boy of only eleven. But I am seventeen years old. It is time I was married. It is time I was Princess of Wales once more.

Their Majesties of Spain are demanding the moon: full restitution of their investment, and the return of their daughter, the full widow's jointure to be paid for an indefinite period. The great cost of this is designed to prompt the King of England to find another way. My parents' patience with negotiation allows England to keep both me and the money. They show that they expect the return of neither me nor the money. They are hoping that the King of England will see that he need return neither the dowry nor me.

But they underestimate him. King Henry does not need them to hint him to it. He will have seen perfectly well for himself. Since he is not progressing, he must be resisting both demands. And why should he not? He is in possession. He has half the dowry, and he has me.

And he is no fool. The calmness of the new emissary, Don Gutierre Gomez de Fuensalida, and the slowness of the negotiations has alerted this most acute king to the fact that my mother and father are content to leave me in his hands, in England. It does not take a Machiavelli to conclude that my parents hope for another English marriage – just as when Isabel was widowed they sent her back to Portugal to marry her brother-in-law. These things happen. But only if everyone is in agreement. In England, where the king is new-come to his throne and filled with ambition, it may take more skill than we can deploy to bring it about.

My mother writes to me to say she has a plan but it will take some time to come to fruition. In the meantime she tells me to be patient and never to do anything to offend the king or his mother.

'I am Princess of Wales,' I reply to her. 'I was born to be Princess of Wales and Queen of England. You raised me in these titles. Surely, I should not deny my own upbringing? Surely, I can be Princess of Wales and Queen of England, even now?'

'Be patient,' she writes back to me, in a travel-stained note which takes weeks to get to me and which has been opened; anyone can have read it. 'I agree that your destiny is to be Queen of England. It is your destiny, God's will, and my wish. Be patient.'

'How long must I be patient?' I ask God, on my knees to Him in His chapel on the anniversary of Arthur's death. 'If it is Your will, why do You not do it at once? If it is not Your will, why did You not destroy me with Arthur? If You are

listening to me now – why do I feel so terribly alone?’



Late in the evening a rare visitor was announced in the quiet presence chamber of Durham House. ‘Lady Margaret Pole,’ said the guard at the door. Catalina dropped her Bible and turned her pale face to see her friend hesitating shyly in the doorway.

‘Lady Margaret!’

‘Dowager Princess!’ She curtsied low and Catalina went swiftly across the room to her, raised her up and fell into her arms.

‘Don’t cry,’ Lady Margaret said quietly into her ear. ‘Don’t cry or I swear I shall weep.’

‘I won’t, I won’t, I promise I won’t.’ Catalina turned to her ladies. ‘Leave us,’ she said.

They went reluctantly, a visitor was a novelty in the quiet house, and besides there were no fires burning in any of the other chambers. Lady Margaret looked around the shabby room.

‘What is this?’

Catalina shrugged and tried to smile. ‘I am a poor manager, I am afraid. And Dona Elvira is no help. And in truth, I have only the money the king gives me and that is not much.’

‘I was afraid of this,’ the older woman said. Catalina drew her to the fire and sat her down on her own chair.

‘I thought you were still at Ludlow?’

‘We were. We have been. Since neither the king nor the prince comes to Wales all the business has fallen on my husband. You would think me a princess again to see my little court there.’

Catalina again tried to smile. ‘Are you grand?’

‘Very. And mostly Welsh-speaking. Mostly singing.’

‘I can imagine.’

‘We came for the queen’s funeral, God bless her, and then I wanted to stay for a little longer and my husband said that I might come and see you. I have been thinking of you all day, today.’

‘I have been in the chapel,’ Catalina said inconsequently. ‘It doesn’t seem like a year.’

‘It doesn’t, does it?’ Lady Margaret agreed, though privately she thought that

the girl had aged far more than one year. Grief had refined her girlish prettiness, she had the clear, decided looks of a woman who had seen her hopes destroyed. 'Are you well?'

Catalina made a little face. 'I am well enough. And you? And the children?'

Lady Margaret smiled. 'Praise God, yes. But do you know what plans the king has for you? Are you to...' She hesitated. 'Are you to go back to Spain? Or stay here?'

Catalina drew a little closer. 'They are talking, about the dowry, about my return. But nothing gets done. Nothing is decided. The king is holding me and holding my dowry, and my parents are letting him do it.'

Lady Margaret looked concerned. 'I had heard that they might consider betrothing you to Prince Harry,' she said. 'I did not know.'

'It is the obvious choice. But it does not seem obvious to the king,' Catalina said wryly. 'What do you think? Is he a man to miss an obvious solution, d'you think?'

'No,' said Lady Margaret, whose life had been jeopardised by the king's awareness of the obvious fact of her family's claim on his throne.

'Then I must assume that he has thought of this choice and is waiting to see if it is the best he can make,' Catalina said. She gave a little sigh. 'God knows, it is weary work, waiting.'

'Now your mourning is over, no doubt he will make arrangements,' her friend said hopefully.

'No doubt,' Catalina replied.



After weeks spent alone, mourning for his wife, the king returned to the court at Whitehall Palace, and Catalina was invited to dine with the royal family and seated with the Princess Mary and the ladies of the court. The young Harry, Prince of Wales, was placed securely between his father and grandmother. Not for this Prince of Wales the cold journey to Ludlow Castle and the rigorous training of a prince in waiting. Lady Margaret had ruled that this prince, their only surviving heir, should be brought up under her own eye, in ease and comfort. He was not to be sent away, he was to be watched all the time. He was not even allowed to take part in dangerous sports, jousting or fighting, though he was quite wild to take part, and a boy who loved activity and excitement. His grandmother had ruled that he was too precious to risk.

He smiled at Catalina and she shot him a look that she hoped was discreetly warm. But there was no opportunity to exchange so much as one word. She was firmly anchored further down the table and she could hardly see him thanks to My Lady the King's Mother, who plied him with the best of all foods from her own plate, and interposed her broad shoulder between him and the ladies.

Catalina thought that it was as Arthur had said, that the boy was spoiled by this attention. His grandmother leaned back for a moment to speak to one of the ushers and Catalina saw Harry's gaze flick towards her. She gave him a smile and then cast down her eyes. When she glanced up, he was still looking at her and then he blushed red to be caught. 'A child.' She shot a sideways little smile even as she silently criticised him. 'A child of eleven. All boasting and boyishness. And why should this plump, spoilt boy be spared when Arthur...' At once she stopped the thought. To compare Arthur with his brother was to wish the little boy dead, and she would not do that. To think of Arthur in public was to risk breaking down and she would never do that.

'A woman could rule a boy like that,' she thought. 'A woman could be a very great queen if she married such a boy. For the first ten years he would know nothing, and by then, perhaps he might be in such a habit of obedience that he would let his wife continue to rule. Or he might be, as Arthur told me, a lazy boy. A young man wasted. He might be so lazy that he could be diverted by games and hunting and sports and amusements, so that the business of the kingdom could be done by his wife.'

Catalina never forgot that Arthur had told her that the boy fancied himself in love with her. 'If they give him everything that he wants, perhaps he might be the one who chooses his bride,' she thought. 'They are in the habit of indulging him. Perhaps he could beg to marry me and they would feel obliged to say "yes".'

She saw him blush even redder, even his ears turned pink. She held his gaze for a long moment, she took in a little breath and parted her lips as if to whisper a word to him. She saw his blue eyes focus on her mouth and darken with desire, and then, calculating the effect, she looked down. 'Stupid boy,' she thought.

The king rose from the table and all the men and women on the crowded benches of the hall rose too, and bowed their heads.

'Give you thanks for coming to greet me,' King Henry said. 'Comrades in war and friends in peace. But now forgive me, as I wish to be alone.'

He nodded to Harry, he offered his mother his hand, and the royal family went through the little doorway at the back of the great hall to their privy

chamber.

‘You should have stayed longer,’ the king’s mother remarked as they settled into chairs by the fire and the groom of the ewery brought them wine. ‘It looks bad, to leave so promptly. I had told the Master of Horse you would stay, and there would be singing.’

‘I was weary,’ Henry said shortly. He looked over to where Catalina and the Princess Mary were sitting together. The younger girl was red-eyed, the loss of her mother had hit her hard. Catalina was – as usual – cool as a stream. He thought she had great power of self-containment. Even this loss of her only real friend at court, her last friend in England, did not seem to distress her.

‘She can go back to Durham House tomorrow,’ his mother remarked, following the direction of his gaze. ‘It does no good for her to come to court. She has not earned her place here with an heir, and she has not paid for her place here with her dowry.’

‘She is constant,’ he said. ‘She is constant in her attendance on you, and on me.’

‘Constant like the plague,’ his mother returned.

‘You are hard on her.’

‘It is a hard world,’ she said simply. ‘I am nothing but just. Why don’t we send her home?’

‘Do you not admire her at all?’

She was surprised by the question. ‘What is there to admire in her?’

‘Her courage, her dignity. She has beauty, of course, but she also has charm. She is educated, she is graceful. I think, in other circumstances, she could have been merry. And she has borne herself, under this disappointment, like a queen.’

‘She is of no use to us,’ she said. ‘She was our Princess of Wales; but our boy is dead. She is of no use to us now, however charming she may seem to be.’

Catalina looked up and saw them watching her. She gave a small, controlled smile and inclined her head. Henry rose, went to a window bay on his own, and crooked his finger for her. She did not jump to come to him, as any of the women of court would have jumped. She looked at him, she raised an eyebrow as if she were considering whether or not to obey, and then she gracefully rose to her feet and strolled towards him.

‘Good God, she is desirable,’ he thought to himself. ‘No more than seventeen. Utterly in my power, and yet still she walks across the room as if she were Queen of England crowned.’

‘You will miss the queen, I daresay,’ he said abruptly in French as she came

up to him.

‘I shall,’ she replied clearly. ‘I grieve for you in the loss of your wife. I am sure my mother and father would want me to give you their commiserations.’

He nodded, never taking his eyes from her face. ‘We share a grief now,’ he observed. ‘You have lost your partner in life and I have lost mine.’

He saw her gaze sharpen. ‘Indeed,’ she said steadily. ‘We do.’

He wondered if she was trying to unravel his meaning. If that quick mind was working behind that clear lovely face there was no sign of it. ‘You must teach me the secret of your resignation,’ he said.

‘Oh, I don’t think I resign myself.’

Henry was intrigued. ‘You don’t?’

‘No. I think I trust in God that He knows what is right for all of us, and His will shall be done.’

‘Even when His ways are hidden, and we sinners have to stumble about in the dark?’

‘I know my destiny,’ Catalina said calmly. ‘He has been gracious to reveal it to me.’

‘Then you’re one of the very few,’ he said, thinking to make her laugh at herself.

‘I know,’ she said without a glimmer of a smile. He realised that she was utterly serious in her belief that God had revealed her future to her. ‘I am blessed.’

‘And what is this great destiny that God has for you?’ he said sarcastically. He hoped so much that she would say that she should be Queen of England, and then he could ask her, or draw close to her, or let her see what was in his mind.

‘To do God’s will, of course, and bring His kingdom to earth,’ she said cleverly, and evaded him once more.



I speak very confidently of God’s will, and I remind the king that I was raised to be Princess of Wales, but in truth God is silent to me. Since the day of Arthur’s death I can have no genuine conviction that I am blessed. How can I call myself blessed when I have lost the one thing that made my life complete? How can I be blessed when I do not think I will ever be happy again? But we live in a world of believers – I have to say that I am under the especial protection of God, I have to give the illusion of being sure of my destiny. I am the daughter of Isabella of

Spain. My inheritance is certainty.

But in truth, of course, I am increasingly alone. I feel increasingly alone. There is nothing between me and despair but my promise to Arthur, and the thin thread, like gold wire in a carpet, of my own determination.

May 1503



King Henry did not approach Catalina for one month for the sake of decency, but when he was out of his black jacket he made a formal visit to her at Durham House. Her household had been warned that he would come, and were dressed in their best. He saw the signs of wear and tear in the curtains and rugs and hangings and smiled to himself. If she had the good sense that he thought she had, she would be glad to see a resolution to this awkward position. He congratulated himself on not making it easier for her in this last year. She should know by now that she was utterly in his power and her parents could do nothing to free her.

His herald threw open the double doors to her presence chamber and shouted: 'His Grace, King Henry of England...'

Henry waved aside the other titles and went in to his daughter-in-law.

She was wearing a dark-coloured gown with blue slashings on the sleeve, a richly embroidered stomacher and a dark blue hood. It brought out the amber in her hair and the blue in her eyes and he smiled in instinctive pleasure at the sight of her as she sank into a deep formal curtsy and rose up.

'Your Grace,' she said pleasantly. 'This is an honour indeed.'

He had to force himself not to stare at the creamy line of her neck, at the smooth, unlined face that looked back up at him. He had lived all his life with a beautiful woman of his own age; now here was a girl young enough to be his daughter, with the rich-scented bloom of youth still on her, and breasts full and firm. She was ready for marriage, indeed, she was over-ready for marriage. This was a girl who should be bedded. He checked himself at once, and thought he was part lecher, part lover to look on his dead son's child-bride with such desire.

'Can I offer you some refreshment?' she asked. There was a smile in the back of her eyes.

He thought if she had been an older, a more sophisticated woman he would

have assumed she was playing him, as knowingly as a skilled angler can land a salmon.

‘Thank you. I will take a glass of wine.’

And so she caught him. ‘I am afraid I have nothing fit to offer you,’ she said smoothly. ‘I have nothing left in my cellars at all, and I cannot afford to buy good wine.’

Henry did not show by so much as a flicker that he knew she had trapped him into hearing of her financial difficulties. ‘I am sorry for that, I will have some barrels sent over,’ he said. ‘Your housekeeping must be very remiss.’

‘It is very thin,’ she said simply. ‘Will you take a cup of ale? We brew our own ale very cheaply.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, biting his lip to hide a smile. He had not dreamed that she had so much self-confidence. The year of widowhood had brought out her courage, he thought. Alone in a foreign land she had not collapsed as other girls might have collapsed, she had gathered her power and become stronger.

‘Is My Lady the King’s Mother in good health and the Princess Mary well?’ she asked, as confidently as if she were entertaining him in the gold room of the Alhambra.

‘Yes, thank God,’ he said. ‘And you?’

She smiled and bowed her head. ‘And no need to ask for your health,’ she remarked. ‘You never look any different.’

‘Do I not?’

‘Not since the very first time we met,’ she said. ‘When I had just landed in England and was coming to London and you rode to meet me.’ It cost Catalina a good deal not to think of Arthur as he was on that evening, mortified by his father’s rudeness, trying to talk to her in an undertone, stealing sideways looks at her.

Determinedly she put her young lover from her mind and smiled at his father and said: ‘I was so surprised by your coming, and so startled by you.’

He laughed. He saw that she had conjured the picture of when he first saw her, a virgin by her bed, in a white gown with a blue cape with her hair in a plait down her back, and how he thought then that he had come upon her like a ravisher, he had forced his way into her bedchamber, he could have forced himself on to her.

He turned and took a chair to cover his thoughts, gesturing that she should sit down too. Her duenna, the same sour-faced Spanish mule, he noticed irritably, stood at the back of the room with two other ladies.

Catalina sat perfectly composed, her white fingers interlaced in her lap, her back straight, her entire manner that of a young woman confident of her power to attract. Henry said nothing and looked at her for a moment. Surely she must know what she was doing to him when she reminded him of their first meeting? And yet surely the daughter of Isabella of Spain and the widow of his own son could not be wilfully tempting him to lust?

A servant came in with two cups of small ale. The king was served first and then Catalina took a cup. She took a tiny sip and set it down.

‘D’you still not like ale?’ He was startled at the intimacy in his own voice. Surely to God he could ask his daughter-in-law what she liked to drink?

‘I drink it only when I am very thirsty,’ she replied. ‘But I don’t like the taste it leaves in my mouth.’ She put her hand to her mouth and touched her lower lip. Fascinated, he watched her fingertip brush the tip of her tongue. She made a little face. ‘I think it will never be a favourite of mine,’ she said.

‘What did you drink in Spain?’ He found he could hardly speak. He was still watching her soft mouth, shiny where her tongue had licked her lips.

‘We could drink the water,’ she said. ‘In the Alhambra the Moors had piped clean water all the way from the mountains into the palace. We drank mountain spring water from the fountains, it was still cold. And juices from fruits of course, we had wonderful fruits in summer, and ices, and sherbets and wines as well.’

‘If you come on progress with me this summer we can go to places where you can drink the water,’ he said. He thought he was sounding like a stupid boy, promising her a drink of water as a treat. Stubbornly, he persisted. ‘If you come with me we can go hunting, we can go to Hampshire, beyond, to the New Forest. You remember the country around there? Near where we first met?’

‘I should like that so much,’ she said. ‘If I am still here, of course.’

‘Still here?’ He was startled, he had almost forgotten that she was his hostage, she was supposed to go home by summer. ‘I doubt your father and I will have agreed terms by then.’

‘Why, how can it take so long?’ she asked, her blue eyes wide with assumed surprise. ‘Surely we can come to some agreement?’ She hesitated. ‘Between friends? Surely if we cannot agree about the moneys owed, there is some other way? Some other agreement that can be made? Since we have made an agreement before?’

It was so close to what he had been thinking that he rose to his feet, discomfited. At once she rose too. The top of her pretty blue hood only came to

his shoulder, he thought he would have to bend his head to kiss her, and if she were under him in bed he would have to take care not to hurt her. He felt his face flush hot at the thought of it. 'Come here,' he said thickly and led her to the window embrasure where her ladies could not overhear them.

'I have been thinking what sort of arrangement we might come to,' he said. 'The easiest thing would be for you to stay here. I should certainly like you to stay here.'

Catalina did not look up at him. If she had done so then, he would have been sure of her. But she kept her eyes down, her face downcast. 'Oh, certainly, if my parents agree,' she said, so softly that he could hardly hear.

He felt himself trapped. He felt he could not go forwards while she held her head so delicately to one side and showed him only the curve of her cheek and her eyelashes, and yet he could hardly go back when she had asked him outright if there was not another way to resolve the conflict between him and her parents.

'You will think me very old,' he burst out.

Her blue eyes flashed up at him and were veiled again. 'Not at all,' she said levelly.

'I am old enough to be your father,' he said, hoping she would disagree.

Instead she looked up at him. 'I never think of you like that,' she said.

Henry was silent. He felt utterly baffled by this slim young woman who seemed at one moment so deliciously encouraging and yet at another moment, quite opaque. 'What would you like to do?' he demanded of her.

At last she raised her head and smiled up at him, her lips curving up but no warmth in her eyes. 'Whatever you command,' she said. 'I should like most of all to obey you, Your Grace.'



What does he mean? What is he doing? I thought he was offering me Harry and I was about to say 'yes' when he said that I must think him very old, as old as my father. And of course he is, indeed, he looks far older than my father, that is why I never think of him like a father, a grandfather perhaps, or an old priest. My father is handsome; a terrible womaniser; a brave soldier; a hero on the battlefield. This king has fought one half-hearted battle and put down a dozen unheroic uprisings of poor men too sickened with his rule to endure it any more. So he is not like my father and I spoke only the truth when I said that I never see him like that.

But then he looked at me as if I had said something of great interest, and then he asked me what I wanted. I could not say to his face that I wanted him to overlook my marriage to his oldest son, and marry me anew to his youngest. So I said that I wanted to obey him. There can be nothing wrong with that. But somehow it was not what he wanted. And it did not get me to where I wanted.

I have no idea what he wants. Nor how to turn it to my own advantage.



Henry went back to Whitehall Palace, his face burning and his heart pounding, hammered between frustration and calculation. If he could persuade Catalina's parents to allow the wedding, he could claim the rest of her substantial dowry, be free of their claims for her jointure, reinforce the alliance with Spain at the very moment that he was looking to secure new alliances with Scotland and France, and perhaps, with such a young wife, get another son and heir on her. One daughter on the throne of Scotland, one daughter on the throne of France should lock both nations into peace for a lifetime. The Princess of Spain on the throne of England should keep the most Christian kings of Spain in alliance. He would have bolted the great powers of Christendom into peaceful alliance with England not just for a generation, but for generations to come. They would have heirs in common; they would be safe. England would be safe. Better yet, England's sons might inherit the kingdoms of France, of Scotland, of Spain. England might conceive its way into peace and greatness.

It made absolute sense to secure Catalina; he tried to focus on the political advantage and not think of the line of her neck nor the curve of her waist. He tried to steady his mind by thinking of the small fortune that would be saved by not having to provide her with a jointure nor with her keep, by not having to send a ship, several ships probably, to escort her home. But all he could think was that she had touched her soft mouth with her finger and told him that she did not like the lingering taste of ale. At the thought of the tip of her tongue against her lips he groaned aloud and the groom holding the horse for him to dismount looked up and said: 'Sire?'

'Bile,' the king said sourly.

It did feel like too rich a fare that was sickening him, he decided as he strode to his private apartments, courtiers eddying out of his way with sycophantic smiles. He felt that he must remember that she was little more than a child, she was his own daughter-in-law. If he listened to the good sense that had carried

him so far, he should simply promise to pay her jointure, send her back to her parents, and then delay the payment till they had her married to some other kingly fool elsewhere, and he could get away with paying nothing.

But at the mere thought of her married to another man he had to stop and put his hand out to the oak panelling for support.

‘Your Grace?’ someone asked him. ‘Are you ill?’

‘Bile,’ the king repeated. ‘Something I have eaten.’

His chief groom of the body came to him. ‘Shall I send for your physician, Your Grace?’

‘No,’ the king said. ‘But send a couple of barrels of the best wine to the Dowager Princess. She has nothing in her cellar, and when I have to visit her I should like to drink wine and not ale.’

‘Yes, Your Grace,’ the man said, bowed, and went away. Henry straightened up and went to his rooms. They were crowded with people as usual: petitioners, courtiers, favour-seekers, fortune-hunters, some friends, some gentry, some noblemen attending on him for love or calculation. Henry regarded them all sourly. When he had been Henry Tudor on the run in Brittany he had not been blessed with so many friends.

‘Where is my mother?’ he asked one of them.

‘In her rooms, Your Grace,’ the man replied.

‘I shall visit her,’ he said. ‘Let her know.’

He gave her a few moments to ready herself, and then he went to her chambers. On her daughter-in-law’s death she had moved into the apartment traditionally given to the queen. She had ordered new tapestries and new furniture and now the place was more grandly furnished than any queen had ever had before.

‘I’ll announce myself,’ the king said to the guard at her door, and stepped in without ceremony.

Lady Margaret was seated at a table in the window, the household accounts spread before her, inspecting the costs of the royal court as if it were a well-run farm. There was very little waste and no extravagance allowed in the court run by Lady Margaret, and royal servants who had thought that some of the payments which passed through their hands might leave a little gold on the side were soon disappointed.

Henry nodded his approval at the sight of his mother’s supervision of the royal business. He had never rid himself of his own anxiety that the ostentatious wealth of the throne of England might prove to be hollow show. He had financed

a campaign for the throne on debt and favours; he never wanted to be cap in hand again.

She looked up as he came in. 'My son.'

He kneeled for her blessing as he always did when he first greeted her every day, and felt her fingers gently touch the top of his head.

'You look troubled,' she remarked.

'I am,' he said. 'I went to see the Dowager Princess.'

'Yes?' A faint expression of disdain crossed her face. 'What are they asking for now?'

'We –' He broke off and then started again. 'We have to decide what is to become of her. She spoke of going home to Spain.'

'When they pay us what they owe,' she said at once. 'They know they have to pay the rest of her dowry before she can leave.'

'Yes, she knows that.'

There was a brief silence.

'She asked if there could not be another agreement,' he said. 'Some resolution.'

'Ah, I've been waiting for this,' Lady Margaret said exultantly. 'I knew they would be after this. I am only surprised they have waited so long. I suppose they thought they should wait until she was out of mourning.'

'After what?'

'They will want her to stay,' she said.

Henry could feel himself beginning to smile and deliberately he set his face still. 'You think so?'

'I have been waiting for them to show their hand. I knew that they were waiting for us to make the first move. Ha! That we have made them declare first!'

He raised his eyebrows, longing for her to spell out his desire. 'For what?'

'A proposal from us, of course,' she said. 'They knew that we would never let such a chance go. She was the right match then, and she is the right match now. We had a good bargain with her then, and it is still good. Especially if they pay in full. And now she is more profitable than ever.'

His colour flushed as he beamed at her. 'You think so?'

'Of course. She is here, half her dowry already paid, the rest we have only to collect, we have already rid ourselves of her escort, the alliance is already working to our benefit – we would never have the respect of the French if they did not fear her parents, the Scots fear us too – she is still the best match in

Christendom for us.'

His sense of relief was overwhelming. If his mother did not oppose the plan then he felt he could push on with it. She had been his best and safest advisor for so long that he could not have gone against her will.

'And the difference in age?'

She shrugged. 'It is what? Five, nearly six years? That is nothing for a prince.'

He recoiled as if she had slapped him in the face. 'Six years?' he repeated.

'And Harry is tall for his age and strong. They will not look mismatched,' she said.

'No,' he said flatly. 'No. Not Harry. I did not mean Harry. I was not speaking of Harry!'

The anger in his voice alerted her. 'What?'

'No. No. Not Harry. Damn it! Not Harry!'

'What? Whatever can you mean?'

'It is obvious! Surely it is obvious!'

Her gaze flashed across his face, reading him rapidly, as only she could. 'Not Harry?'

'I thought you were speaking of me.'

'Of you?' She quickly reconsidered the conversation. 'Of you for the Infanta?' she asked incredulously.

He felt himself flush again. 'Yes.'

'Arthur's widow? Your own daughter-in-law?'

'Yes! Why not?'

Lady Margaret stared at him in alarm. She did not even have to list the obstacles.

'He was too young. It was not consummated,' he said, repeating the words that the Spanish ambassador had learned from Dona Elvira, which had been spread throughout Christendom.

She looked sceptical.

'She says so herself. Her duenna says so. The Spanish say so. Everybody says so.'

'And you believe them?' she asked coldly.

'He was impotent.'

'Well...' It was typical of her that she said nothing while she considered it. She looked at him, noting the colour in his cheeks and the trouble in his face. 'They are probably lying. We saw them wedded and bedded and there was no

suggestion then that it had not been done.'

'That is their business. If they all tell the same lie and stick to it, then it is the same as the truth.'

'Only if we accept it.'

'We do,' he ruled.

She raised her eyebrows. 'It is your desire?'

'It is not a question of desire. I need a wife,' Henry said coolly, as though it could be anyone. 'And she is conveniently here, as you say.'

'She would be suitable by birth,' his mother conceded, 'but for her relationship to you. She is your daughter-in-law even if it was not consummated. And she is very young.'

'She is seventeen,' he said. 'A good age for a woman. And a widow. She is ready for a second marriage.'

'She is either a virgin or she is not,' Lady Margaret observed waspishly. 'We had better agree.'

'She is seventeen,' he corrected himself. 'A good age for marriage. She is ready for a full marriage.'

'The people won't like it,' she observed. 'They will remember her wedding to Arthur, we made such a show of it. They took to her. They took to the two of them. The pomegranate and the rose. She caught their fancy in her lace mantilla.'

'Well, he is dead,' he said harshly. 'And she will have to marry someone.'

'People will think it odd.'

He shrugged. 'They will be glad enough if she gives me a son.'

'Oh yes, if she can do that. But she was barren with Arthur.'

'As we have agreed, Arthur was impotent. The marriage was not consummated.'

She pursed her lips but said nothing.

'And it gains us the dowry and removes the cost of the jointure,' he pointed out.

She nodded. She loved the thought of the fortune that Catalina would bring.

'And she is here already.'

'A most constant presence,' she said sourly.

'A constant princess,' he smiled.

'Do you really think her parents would agree? Their Majesties of Spain?'

'It solves their dilemma as well as ours. And it maintains the alliance.' He found he was smiling, and tried to make his face stern, as normal. 'She herself

would think it was her destiny. She believes herself born to be Queen of England.'

'Well then, she is a fool,' his mother remarked smartly.

'She was raised to be queen since she was a child.'

'But she will be a barren queen. No son of hers will be any good. He could never be king. If she has one at all, he will come after Harry,' she reminded him. 'He will even come after Harry's sons. It's a far poorer alliance for her than marriage to a Prince of Wales. The Spanish won't like it.'

'Oh, Harry is still a child. His sons are a long way ahead. Years.'

'Even so. It would weigh on her parents. They will prefer Prince Harry for her. That way, she is queen and her son is king after her. Why would they agree to anything less?'

Henry hesitated. There was nothing he could say to fault her logic, except that he did not wish to follow it.

'Oh. I see. You want her,' she said flatly when the silence extended so long that she realised there was something he could not let himself say. 'It is a matter of your desire.'

He took the plunge. 'Yes,' he confirmed.

Lady Margaret looked at him with calculation in her gaze. He had been taken from her as little more than a baby for safe-keeping. Since then she had always seen him as a prospect, as a potential heir to the throne, as her passport to grandeur. She had hardly known him as a baby, never loved him as a child. She had planned his future as a man, she had defended his rights as a king, she had mapped his campaign as a threat to the House of York – but she had never known tenderness for him. She could not learn to feel indulgent towards him this late in her life; she was hardly ever indulgent to anyone, not even to herself.

'That's very shocking,' she said coolly. 'I thought we were talking of a marriage of advantage. She stands as a daughter to you. This desire is a carnal sin.'

'It is not and she is not,' he said. 'There is nothing wrong in honourable love. She is not my daughter. She is his widow. And it was not consummated.'

'You will need a dispensation, it is a sin.'

'He never even had her!' he exclaimed.

'The whole court put them to bed,' she pointed out levelly.

'He was too young. He was impotent. And he was dead, poor lad, within months.'

She nodded. 'So she says now.'

‘But you do not advise me against it,’ he said.

‘It is a sin,’ she repeated. ‘But if you can get dispensation and her parents agree to it, then –’ She pulled a sour face. ‘Well, better her than many others, I suppose,’ she said begrudgingly. ‘And she can live at court under my care. I can watch over her and command her more easily than I could an older girl, and we know that she behaves herself well. She is obedient. She will learn her duties under me. And the people love her.’

‘I shall speak to the Spanish ambassador today.’

She thought she had never seen such a bright gladness in his face. ‘I suppose I can teach her.’ She gestured to the books before her. ‘She will have much to learn.’

‘I shall tell the ambassador to propose it to Their Majesties of Spain and I shall talk to her tomorrow.’

‘You will go again so soon?’ she asked curiously.

Henry nodded. He would not tell her that even to wait till tomorrow seemed too long. If he had been free to do so, he would have gone back straight away and asked her to marry him that very night, as if he were a humble squire and she a maid, and not King of England and Princess of Spain; father and daughter-in-law.



Henry saw that Dr de Puebla the Spanish ambassador was invited to Whitehall in time for dinner, given a seat at one of the top tables, and plied with the best wine. Some venison, hanged to perfection and cooked in a brandywine sauce, came to the king’s table, he helped himself to a small portion and sent the dish to the Spanish ambassador. De Puebla, who had not experienced such favours since first negotiating the Infanta’s marriage contract, loaded his plate with a heavy spoon and dipped the best manchet bread into the gravy, glad to eat well at court, wondering quietly behind his avid smile what it might mean.

The king’s mother nodded towards him, and de Puebla rose up from his seat to bow to her. ‘Most gracious,’ he remarked to himself as he sat down once more. ‘Extremely. Exceptionally.’

He was no fool, he knew that something would be required for all these public favours. But given the horror of the past year – when the hopes of Spain had been buried beneath the nave in Worcester Cathedral – at least these were straws in a good wind. Clearly, King Henry had a use for him again as

something other than a whipping boy for the failure of the Spanish sovereigns to pay their debts.

De Puebla had tried to defend Their Majesties of Spain to an increasingly irritable English king. He had tried to explain to them in long, detailed letters that it was fruitless asking for Catalina's widow's jointure if they would not pay the remainder of the dowry. He tried to explain to Catalina that he could not make the English king pay a more generous allowance for the upkeep of her household, nor could he persuade the Spanish king to give his daughter financial support. Both kings were utterly stubborn, both quite determined to force the other into a weak position. Neither seemed to care that in the meantime Catalina, only seventeen, was forced to keep house with an extravagant entourage in a foreign land on next to no money. Neither king would take the first step and undertake to be responsible for her keep, fearing that this would commit him to keeping her and her household forever.

De Puebla smiled up at the king, seated on his throne under the canopy of state. He genuinely liked King Henry, he admired the courage with which he had seized and held the throne, he liked the man's direct good sense. And more than that, de Puebla liked living in England, he was accustomed to his good house in London, to the importance conferred on him by representing the newest and most powerful ruling house in Europe. He liked the fact that his Jewish background and recent conversion were utterly ignored in England, since everyone at this court had come from nowhere and changed their name or their affiliation at least once. England suited de Puebla, and he would do his best to remain. If it meant serving the King of England better than the King of Spain, he thought it was a small compromise to make.

Henry rose from the throne and gave the signal that the servers could clear the plates. They swept the board and cleared the trestle tables, and Henry strolled among the diners, pausing for a word here and there, still very much the commander among his men. All the favourites at the Tudor court were the gamblers who had put their swords behind their words and marched into England with Henry. They knew their value to him, and he knew his to them. It was still a victors' camp rather than a softened civilian court.

At length Henry completed his circuit and came to de Puebla's table. 'Ambassador,' he greeted him.

De Puebla bowed low. 'I thank you for your gift of the dish of venison,' he said. 'It was delicious.'

The king nodded. 'I would have a word with you.'

‘Of course.’

‘Privately.’

The two men strolled to a quieter corner of the hall while the musicians in the gallery struck a note and began to play.

‘I have a proposal to resolve the issue of the Dowager Princess,’ Henry said as drily as possible.

‘Indeed?’

‘You may find my suggestion unusual, but I think it has much to recommend it.’

‘At last,’ de Puebla thought to himself. ‘He is going to propose Harry. I thought he was going to let her sink a lot lower before he did that. I thought he would bring her down so that he could charge us double for a second try at Wales. But, so be it. God is merciful.’

‘Ah yes?’ de Puebla said aloud.

‘I suggest that we forget the issue of the dowry,’ Henry started. ‘Her goods will be absorbed into my household. I shall pay her an appropriate allowance, as I did for the late Queen Elizabeth – God bless her. I shall marry the Infanta myself.’

De Puebla was almost too shocked to speak. ‘You?’

‘I. Is there any reason why not?’

The ambassador gulped, drew a breath, managed to say, ‘No, no, at least...I suppose there could be an objection on the grounds of affinity.’

‘I shall apply for a dispensation. I take it that you are certain that the marriage was not consummated?’

‘Certain,’ de Puebla gasped.

‘You assured me of that on her word?’

‘The duenna said...’

‘Then it is nothing,’ the king ruled. ‘They were little more than promised to one another. Hardly man and wife.’

‘I will have to put this to Their Majesties of Spain,’ de Puebla said, desperately trying to assemble some order to his whirling thoughts, striving to keep his deep shock from his face. ‘Does the Privy Council agree?’ he asked, playing for time. ‘The Archbishop of Canterbury?’

‘It is a matter between ourselves at the moment,’ Henry said grandly. ‘It is early days for me as a widower. I want to be able to reassure Their Majesties that their daughter will be cared for. It has been a difficult year for her.’

‘If she could have gone home...’

‘Now there will be no need for her to go home. Her home is England. This is her country,’ Henry said flatly. ‘She shall be queen here, as she was brought up to be.’

De Puebla could hardly speak for shock at the suggestion that this old man, who had just buried his wife, should marry his dead son’s bride. ‘Of course. So, shall I tell Their Majesties that you are quite determined on this course? There is no other arrangement that we should consider?’ De Puebla racked his brains as to how he could bring in the name of Prince Harry, who was surely Catalina’s most appropriate future husband. Finally, he plunged in. ‘Your son, for instance?’

‘My son is too young to be considered for marriage as yet,’ Henry disposed of the suggestion with speed. ‘He is eleven and a strong, forward boy but his grandmother insists that we plan nothing for him for another four years. And by then, the Princess Dowager would be twenty-one.’

‘Still young,’ gasped de Puebla. ‘Still a young woman, and near him in age.’

‘I don’t think Their Majesties would want their daughter to stay in England for another four years without husband or household of her own,’ Henry said with unconcealed threat. ‘They could hardly want her to wait for Harry’s majority. What would she do in those years? Where would she live? Are they proposing to buy her a palace and set up a household for her? Are they prepared to give her an income? A court, appropriate to her position? For four years?’

‘If she could return to Spain to wait?’ de Puebla hazarded.

‘She can leave at once, if she will pay the full amount of her dowry, and find her own fortune elsewhere. Do you really think she can get a better offer than Queen of England? Take her away if you do!’

It was the sticking point that they had reached over and over again in the past year. De Puebla knew he was beaten. ‘I will write to Their Majesties tonight,’ he said.



I dreamed I was a swift, flying over the golden hills of the Sierra Nevada. But this time, I was flying north, the hot afternoon sun was on my left, ahead of me was a gathering of cool cloud. Then suddenly, the cloud took shape, it was Ludlow Castle, and my little bird heart fluttered at the sight of it and at the thought of the night that would come when he would take me in his arms and press down on me, and I would melt with desire for him.

Then I saw it was not Ludlow but the great grey walls were those of Windsor Castle, and the curve of the river was the great grey glass of the river Thames, and all the traffic plying up and down and the great ships at anchor were the wealth and the bustle of the English. I knew I was far from my home, and yet I was at home. This would be my home, I would build a little nest against the grey stone of the towers here, just as I would have done in Spain. And here they would call me a swift; a bird which flies so fast that no-one has ever seen it land, a bird that flies so high that they think it never touches the ground. I shall not be Catalina, the Infanta of Spain. I shall be Katherine of Aragon, Queen of England, just as Arthur named me: Katherine, Queen of England.



‘The king is here again,’ Dona Elvira said, looking out of the window. ‘He has ridden here with just two men. Not even a standard bearer or guards.’ She sniffed. The widespread English informality was bad enough but this king had the manners of a stable boy.

Catalina flew to the window and peered out. ‘What can he want?’ she wondered. ‘Tell them to decant some of his wine.’

Dona Elvira went out of the room in a hurry. In the next moment Henry strolled in, unannounced. ‘I thought I would call on you,’ he said.

Catalina sank into a deep curtsey. ‘Your Grace does me much honour,’ she said. ‘And at least now I can offer you a glass of good wine.’

Henry smiled and waited. The two of them stood while Dona Elvira returned to the room with a Spanish maid-in-waiting carrying a tray of Morisco brassware with two Venetian glasses of red wine. Henry noted the fineness of the workmanship and assumed correctly that it was part of the dowry that the Spanish had withheld.

‘Your health,’ he said, holding up his glass to the princess.

To his surprise she did not simply raise her glass in return, she raised her eyes and gave him a long, thoughtful look. He felt himself tingle, like a boy, as his eyes met hers. ‘Princess?’ he said quietly.

‘Your Grace?’

They both of them glanced towards Dona Elvira, who was standing uncomfortably close, quietly regarding the floorboards beneath her worn shoes.

‘You can leave us,’ the king said.

The woman looked at the princess for her orders, and made no move to

leave.

‘I shall talk in private with my daughter-in-law,’ King Henry said firmly. ‘You may go.’

Dona Elvira curtsied and left, and the rest of the ladies swept out after her.

Catalina smiled at the king. ‘As you command,’ she said.

He felt his pulse speed at her smile. ‘Indeed, I do need to speak to you privately. I have a proposal to put to you. I have spoken to the Spanish ambassador and he has written to your parents.’

‘At last. This is it. At last,’ Catalina thought. ‘He has come to propose Harry for me. Thank God, who has brought me to this day. Arthur, beloved, this day you will see that I shall be faithful to my promise to you.’

‘I need to marry again,’ Henry said. ‘I am still young –’ He thought he would not say his age of forty-six. ‘It may be that I can have another child or two.’

Catalina nodded politely; but she was barely listening. She was waiting for him to ask her to marry Prince Harry.

‘I have been thinking of all the princesses in Europe who would be suitable partners for me,’ he said.

Still the princess before him said nothing.

‘I can find no-one I would choose.’

She widened her eyes to indicate her attention.

Henry ploughed on. ‘My choice has fallen on you,’ he said bluntly, ‘for these reasons. You are here in London already, you have become accustomed to living here. You were brought up to be Queen of England, and you will be queen as my wife. The difficulties with the dowry can be put aside. You will have the same allowance that I paid to Queen Elizabeth. My mother agrees with this.’

At last his words penetrated her mind. She was so shocked that she could barely speak. She just stared at him. ‘Me?’

‘There is a slight objection on the grounds of affinity but I shall ask the Pope to grant a dispensation,’ he went on. ‘I understand that your marriage to Prince Arthur was never consummated. In that case, there is no real objection.’

‘It was not consummated.’ Catalina repeated the words by rote, as if she no longer understood them. The great lie had been part of a plot to take her to the altar with Prince Harry, not with his father. She could not now retract it. Her mind was so dizzy that she could only cling to it. ‘It was not consummated.’

‘Then there should be no difficulty,’ the king said. ‘I take it that you do not object?’

He found that he could hardly breathe, waiting for her answer. Any thought

that she had been leading him on, tempting him to this moment, had vanished when he looked into her bleached, shocked face.

He took her hand. 'Don't look so afraid,' he said, his voice low with tenderness. 'I won't hurt you. This is to resolve all your problems. I will be a good husband to you. I will care for you.' Desperately, he racked his brains for something that might please her. 'I will buy you pretty things,' he said. 'Like those sapphires that you liked so much. You shall have a cupboard full of pretty things, Catalina.'

She knew she had to reply. 'I am so surprised,' she said.

'Surely you must have known that I desired you?'



I stopped my cry of denial. I wanted to say that of course I had not known. But it was not true. I had known, as any young woman would have known, from the way he had looked at me, from the way that I had responded to him. From the very first moment that I met him there was this undercurrent between us. I ignored it. I pretended it was something easier than it was, I deployed it. I have been most at fault.

In my vanity, I thought that I was encouraging an old man to think of me kindly, that I could engage him, delight him, even flirt with him, first as a fond father-in-law and then to prevail upon him to marry me to Harry. I had meant to delight him as a daughter, I had wanted him to admire me, to pet me. I wanted him to dote on me.

This is a sin, a sin. This is a sin of vanity and a sin of pride. I have deployed his lust and covetousness. I have led him to sin through my folly. No wonder God has turned His face from me and my mother never writes to me. I am most wrong.

Dear God, I am a fool, and a childish, vain fool at that. I have not lured the king into a trap of my own satisfaction, but merely baited his trap for me. My vanity and pride in myself made me think that I could tempt him to do whatever I want. Instead, I have tempted him only to his own desires, and now he will do what he wants. And what he wants is me. And it is my own stupid fault.



‘You must have known.’ Henry smiled down at her confidently. ‘You must have known when I came to see you yesterday, and when I sent you the good wine?’

Catalina gave a little nod. She had known something – fool that she was – she had known something was happening; and praised her own diplomatic skills for being so clever as to lead the King of England by the nose. She had thought herself a woman of the world and thought her ambassador an idiot for not achieving this outcome from a king who was so easily manipulated. She had thought she had the King of England dancing to her bidding, when in fact he had his own tune in mind.

‘I desired you from the moment I first saw you,’ he told her, his voice very low.

She looked up. ‘You did?’

‘Truly. When I came into your bedchamber at Dogmersfield.’

She remembered an old man, travel-stained and lean, the father of the man she would marry. She remembered the sweaty male scent as he forced his way into her bedroom and she remembered standing before him and thinking: what a clown, what a rough soldier to push in where he is not wanted. And then Arthur arrived, his blond hair tousled, and with the brightness of his shy smile.

‘Oh yes,’ she said. From somewhere deep inside her own resolution, she found a smile. ‘I remember. I danced for you.’

Henry drew her a little closer and slid his arm around her waist. Catalina forced herself not to pull away. ‘I watched you,’ he said. ‘I longed for you.’

‘But you were married,’ Catalina said primly.

‘And now I am widowed and so are you,’ he said. He felt the stiffness of her body through the hard boning of the stomacher and let her go. He would have to court her slowly, he thought. She might have flirted with him, but now she was startled by the turn that things had taken. She had come from an absurdly sheltered upbringing and her innocent months with Arthur had hardly opened her eyes at all. He would have to take matters slowly with her. He would have to wait until she had permission from Spain, he would leave the ambassador to tell her of the wealth she might command, he would have to let her women urge the benefits of the match upon her. She was a young woman, by nature and experience she was bound to be a fool. He would have to give her time.

‘I will leave you now,’ he said. ‘I will come again tomorrow.’

She nodded, and walked with him to the door of her privy chamber. There she hesitated. ‘You mean it?’ she asked him, her blue eyes suddenly anxious. ‘You mean this as a proposal of marriage, not as a feint in a negotiation? You

truly want to marry me? I will be queen?’

He nodded. ‘I mean it.’ The depth of her ambition began to dawn on him and he smiled as he slowly saw the way to her. ‘Do you want to be queen so very much?’

Catalina nodded. ‘I was brought up to it,’ she said. ‘I want nothing more.’ She hesitated, for a moment she almost thought to tell him that it had been the last thought of his son, but then her passion for Arthur was too great for her to share him with anyone, even his father. And besides, Arthur had planned that she should marry Harry.

The king was smiling. ‘So you don’t have desire, but you do have ambition,’ he observed a little coldly.

‘It is nothing more than my due,’ she said flatly. ‘I was born to be a queen.’

He took her hand and bent over it. He kissed her fingers; and he stopped himself from licking them. ‘Take it slowly,’ he warned himself. ‘This is a girl and possibly a virgin; certainly not a whore.’ He straightened up. ‘I shall make you Katherine of Aragon, Queen of England,’ he promised her, and saw her blue eyes darken with desire at the title. ‘We can marry as soon as we have the dispensation from the Pope.’



Think! Think! I urgently command myself. You were not raised by a fool to be a fool, you were raised by a queen to be a queen. If this is a feint you ought to be able to see it. If it is a true offer you ought to be able to turn it to your advantage.

It is not a true fulfilment of the promise I made to my beloved but it is close. He wanted me to be Queen of England and to have the children that he would have given me. So what if they will be his half-brother and half-sister rather than his niece and nephew? That makes no difference.

I shrink from the thought of marrying this old man, old enough to be my father. The skin at his neck is fine and loose, like that of a turtle. I cannot imagine being in bed with him. His breath is sour, an old man’s breath; and he is thin, and he will feel bony at the hips and shoulders. But I shrink from the thought of being in bed with that child Harry. His face is as smooth and as rounded as a little girl’s. In truth, I cannot bear the thought of being anyone’s wife but Arthur’s; and that part of my life has gone.

Think! Think! This might be the very right thing to do.

Oh God, beloved, I wish you were here to tell me. I wish I could just visit you in the garden for you to tell me what I should do. I am only seventeen, I cannot outwit a man old enough to be my father, a king with a nose for pretenders.

Think!

I will have no help from anyone. I have to think alone.



Dona Elvira waited until the princess's bedtime and until all the maids-in-waiting, the ladies and the grooms of the bedchamber had withdrawn. She closed the door on them all and then turned to the princess, who was seated in her bed, her hair in a neat plait, her pillows plumped behind her.

'What did the king want?' she demanded without ceremony.

'He proposed marriage to me,' Catalina said bluntly in reply. 'For himself.'

For a moment the duenna was too stunned to speak then she crossed herself, as a woman seeing something unclean. 'God save us,' was all she said. Then: 'God forgive him for even thinking it.'

'God forgive you,' Catalina replied smartly. 'I am considering it.'

'He is your father-in-law, and old enough to be your father.'

'His age doesn't matter,' Catalina said truly. 'If I go back to Spain they won't seek a young husband for me but an advantageous one.'

'But he is the father of your husband.'

Catalina nipped her lips together. 'My late husband,' she said bleakly. 'And the marriage was not consummated.'

Dona Elvira swallowed the lie; but her eyes flicked away, just once.

'As you remember,' Catalina said smoothly.

'Even so! It is against nature!'

'It is not against nature,' Catalina asserted. 'There was no consummation of the betrothal, there was no child. So there can be no sin against nature. And anyway, we can get a dispensation.'

Dona Elvira hesitated. 'You can?'

'He says so.'

'Princess, you cannot want this?'

The princess's little face was bleak. 'He will not betroth me to Prince Harry,' she said. 'He says the boy is too young. I cannot wait four years until he is grown. So what can I do but marry the king? I was born to be Queen of England and mother of the next King of England. I have to fulfil my destiny, it is my

God-given destiny. I thought I would have to force myself to take Prince Harry. Now it seems I shall have to force myself to take the king. Perhaps this is God testing me. But my will is strong. I will be Queen of England, and the mother of the king. I shall make this country a fortress against the Moors, as I promised my mother, I shall make it a country of justice and fairness defended against the Scots, as I promised Arthur.'

'I don't know what your mother will think,' the duenna said. 'I should not have left you alone with him, if I had known.'

Catalina nodded. 'Don't leave us alone again.' She paused. 'Unless I nod to you,' she said. 'I may nod for you to leave, and then you must go.'

The duenna was shocked. 'He should not even see you before your wedding day. I shall tell the ambassador that he must tell the king that he cannot visit you at all now.'

Catalina shook her head. 'We are not in Spain now,' she said fiercely. 'D'you still not see it? We cannot leave this to the ambassador, not even my mother can say what shall happen. I shall have to make this happen. I alone have brought it so far, and I alone will make it happen.'



I hoped to dream of you, but I dreamed of nothing. I feel as if you have gone far, far away. I have no letter from my mother so I don't know what she will make of the king's wish. I pray, but I hear nothing from God. I speak very bravely of my destiny and God's will but they feel now quite intertwined. If God does not make me Queen of England then I do not know how I can believe in Him. If I am not Queen of England then I do not know what I am.



Catalina waited for the king to visit her as he had promised. He did not come the next day but Catalina was sure he would come the day after. When three days had elapsed she walked on her own by the river, chafing her hands in the shelter of her cloak. She had been so sure that he would come again that she had prepared herself to keep him interested, but under her control. She planned to lead him on, to keep him dancing at arm's length. When he did not come she realised that she was anxious to see him. Not for desire – she thought she would

never feel desire again – but because he was her only way to the throne of England. When he did not come, she was mortally afraid that he had had second thoughts, and he would not come at all.



‘Why is he not coming?’ I demand of the little waves on the river, washing against the bank as a boatman rows by. ‘Why would he come so passionate and earnest one day, and then not come at all?’

I am so fearful of his mother, she has never liked me and if she turns her face from me, I don’t know that he will go ahead. But then I remember that he said that his mother had given her permission. Then I am afraid that the Spanish ambassador might have said something against the match – but I cannot believe that de Puebla would ever say anything to inconvenience the king, even if he failed to serve me.

‘Then why is he not coming?’ I ask myself. ‘If he was courting in the English way, all rush and informality, then surely he would come every day?’



Another day went past, and then another. Finally, Catalina gave way to her anxiety and sent the king a message at his court, hoping that he was well.

Dona Elvira said nothing, but her stiff back as she supervised the brushing and powdering of Catalina’s gown that night spoke volumes.

‘I know what you are thinking,’ Catalina said, as the duenna waved the maid of the wardrobe from the room and turned to brush Catalina’s hair. ‘But I cannot risk losing this chance.’

‘I am thinking nothing,’ the older woman said coldly. ‘These are English ways. As you tell me, we cannot now abide by decent Spanish ways. And so, I am not qualified to speak. Clearly, my advice is not taken. I am an empty vessel.’

Catalina was too worried to soothe the older woman. ‘It doesn’t matter what you are,’ she said distractedly. ‘Perhaps he will come tomorrow.’



Henry, seeing her ambition as the key to her, had given the girl a few days to consider her position. He thought she might compare the life she led at Durham House, in seclusion with her little Spanish court, her furniture becoming more shabby and no new gowns, with the life she might lead as a young queen at the head of one of the richest courts in Europe. He thought she had the sense to think that through on her own. When he received a note from her, inquiring as to his health, he knew that he had been right; and the next day he rode down the Strand to visit her.

Her porter who kept the gate said that the princess was in the garden, walking with her ladies by the river. Henry went through the back door of the palace to the terrace, and down the steps through the garden. He saw her by the river, walking alone, ahead of her ladies, her head slightly bowed in thought, and he felt an old, familiar sensation in his belly at the sight of a woman he desired. It made him feel young again, that deep pang of lust, and he smiled at himself for feeling a young man's passion, for knowing again a young man's folly.

His page, running ahead, announced him and he saw her head jerk up at his name and she looked across the lawn and saw him. He smiled, he was waiting for that moment of recognition between a woman and a man who loves her – the moment when their eyes meet and they both know that intense moment of joy, that moment when the eyes say: 'Ah, it is you,' and that is everything.

Instead, like a dull blow, he saw at once that there was no leap of her heart at the sight of him. He was smiling shyly, his face lit up with anticipation; but she, in the first moment of surprise, was nothing more than startled. Unprepared, she did not feign emotion, she did not look like a woman in love. She looked up, she saw him – and he could tell at once that she did not love him. There was no shock of delight. Instead, chillingly, he saw a swift expression of calculation cross her face. She was a girl in an unguarded moment, wondering if she could have her own way. It was the look of a huckster, pricing a fool ready for fleecing. Henry, the father of two selfish girls, recognised it in a moment, and knew that whatever the princess might say, however sweetly she might say it, this would be a marriage of convenience to her, whatever it was to him. And more than that, he knew that she had made up her mind to accept him.

He walked across the close-scythed grass towards her and took her hand. 'Good day, Princess.'

Catalina curtseyed. 'Your Grace.'

She turned her head to her ladies. 'You can go inside.' To Dona Elvira she said, 'See that there are refreshments for His Grace when we come in.' Then she

turned back to him. 'Will you walk, sire?'

'You will make a very elegant queen,' he said with a smile. 'You command very smoothly.'

He saw her hesitate in her stride and the tension leave her slim young body as she exhaled. 'Ah, you mean it then,' she breathed. 'You mean to marry me.'

'I do,' he said. 'You will be a most beautiful Queen of England.'

She glowed at the thought of it. 'I still have many English ways to learn.'

'My mother will teach you,' he said easily. 'You will live at court in her rooms and under her supervision.'

Catalina checked a little in her stride. 'Surely I will have my own rooms, the queen's rooms?'

'My mother is occupying the queen's rooms,' he said. 'She moved in after the death of the late queen, God bless her. And you will join her there. She thinks that you are too young as yet to have your own rooms and a separate court. You can live in my mother's rooms with her ladies and she can teach you how things are done.'

He could see that she was troubled, but trying hard not to show it.

'I should think I know how things are done in a royal palace,' Catalina said, trying to smile.

'An English palace,' he said firmly. 'Fortunately my mother has run all my palaces and castles and managed my fortune since I came to the throne. She shall teach you how it is done.'

Catalina closed her lips on her disagreement. 'When do you think we will hear from the Pope?' she asked.

'I have sent an emissary to Rome to inquire,' Henry said. 'We shall have to apply jointly, your parents and myself. But it should be resolved very quickly. If we are all agreed, there can be no real objection.'

'Yes,' she said.

'And we are completely agreed on marriage?' he confirmed.

'Yes,' she said again.

He took her hand and tucked it into his arm. Catalina walked a little closer and let her head brush against his shoulder. She was not wearing a headdress, only the hood of her cape covered her hair, and the movement pushed it back. He could smell the essence of roses on her hair, he could feel the warmth of her head against his shoulder. He had to stop himself from taking her in his arms. He paused and she stood close to him; he could feel the warmth of her, down the whole length of his body.

‘Catalina,’ he said, his voice very low and thick.

She stole a glance and saw desire in his face, and she did not step away. If anything, she came a little closer. ‘Yes, Your Grace?’ she whispered.

Her eyes were downcast but slowly, in the silence, she looked up at him. When her face was upturned to his, he could not resist the unstated invitation, he bent and kissed her on the lips.

There was no shrinking, she took his kiss, her mouth yielded under his, he could taste her, his arms came around her, he pressed her towards him, he could feel his desire for her rising in him so strongly that he had to let her go, that minute, or disgrace himself.

He released her and stood shaking with desire so strong that he could not believe its power as it washed through him. Catalina pulled her hood forwards as if she would be veiled from him, as if she were a girl from a harem with a veil hiding her mouth, only dark, promising eyes showing above the mask. That gesture, so foreign, so secretive, made him long to push back her hood and kiss her again. He reached for her.

‘We might be seen,’ she said coolly, and stepped back from him. ‘We can be seen from the house, and anyone can go by on the river.’

Henry let her go. He could say nothing, for he knew his voice would tremble. Silently, he offered her his arm once more, and silently she took it. They fell into pace with each other, he tempering his longer stride to her steps. They walked in silence for a few moments.

‘Our children will be your heirs?’ she confirmed, her voice cool and steady, following a train of thought very far from his own whirl of sensations.

He cleared his throat. ‘Yes, yes, of course.’

‘That is the English tradition?’

‘Yes.’

‘They will come before your other children?’

‘Our son will inherit before the Princesses Margaret and Mary,’ he said. ‘But our daughters would come after them.’

She frowned a little. ‘How so? Why would they not come before?’

‘It is first on sex, and then on age,’ he said. ‘The first-born boy inherits, then other boys, then girls according to age. Please God there is always a prince to inherit. England has no tradition of ruling queens.’

‘A ruling queen can command as well as a king,’ said the daughter of Isabella of Castile.

‘Not in England,’ said Henry Tudor.

She left it at that. 'But our oldest son would be king when you died,' she pursued.

'Please God I have some years left,' he said wryly.

She was seventeen, she had no sensitivity about age. 'Of course. But when you die, if we had a son, he would inherit?'

'No. The king after me will be Prince Harry, the Prince of Wales.'

She frowned. 'I thought you could nominate an heir? Can you not make it our son?'

He shook his head. 'Harry is Prince of Wales. He will be king after me.'

'I thought he was to go into the church?'

'Not now.'

'But if we have a son? Can you not make Harry king of your French dominions, or Ireland, and make our son King of England?'

Henry laughed shortly. 'No. For that would be to destroy my kingdom, which I have had some trouble to win and to keep together. Harry will have it all by right.' He saw she was disturbed. 'Catalina, you will be Queen of England, one of the finest kingdoms of Europe, the place your mother and father chose for you. Your sons and daughters will be princes and princesses of England. What more could you want?'

'I want my son to be king,' she answered him frankly.

He shrugged. 'It cannot be.'

She turned away slightly, only his grip on her hand kept her close.

He tried to laugh it off. 'Catalina, we are not even married yet. You might not even have a son. We need not spoil our betrothal for a child not yet conceived.'

'Then what would be the point of marriage?' she asked, direct in her self-absorption.

He could have said 'desire'. 'Destiny, so that you shall be queen.'

She would not let it go. 'I had thought to be Queen of England and see my son on the throne,' she repeated. 'I had thought to be a power in the court, like your mother is. I had thought that there are castles to build and a navy to plan and schools and colleges to found. I want to defend against the Scots on our northern borders and against the Moors on our coasts. I want to be a ruling queen in England, these are things I have planned and hoped for. I was named as the next Queen of England almost in my cradle, I have thought about the kingdom I would reign, I have made plans. There are many things that I want to do.'

He could not help himself, he laughed aloud at the thought of this girl, this

child, presuming to make plans for the ruling of his kingdom. ‘You will find that I am before you,’ he said bluntly. ‘This kingdom shall be run as the king commands. This kingdom is run as I command. I did not fight my way to the crown to hand it over to a girl young enough to be my daughter. Your task will be to fill the royal nurseries and your world will start and stop there.’

‘But your mother...’

‘You will find my mother guards her domains as I guard mine,’ he said, still chuckling at the thought of this child planning her future at his court. ‘She will command you as a daughter and you will obey. Make no mistake about it, Catalina. You will come into my court and obey me, you will live in my mother’s rooms and obey her. You will be Queen of England and have the crown on your head. But you will be my wife, and I will have an obedient wife as I have always done.’

He stopped, he did not want to frighten her, but his desire for her was not greater than his determination to hold this kingdom that he had fought so hard to win. ‘I am not a child like Arthur,’ he said to her quietly, thinking that his son, a gentle boy, might have made all sorts of soft promises to a determined young wife. ‘You will not rule beside me. You will be a child-bride to me. I shall love you and make you happy. I swear you will be glad that you married me. I shall be kind to you. I shall be generous to you. I shall give you anything you want. But I shall not make you a ruler. Even at my death you will not rule my country.’



That night I dreamed that I was a queen in a court with a sceptre in one hand and wand in the other and a crown on my head. I raised the sceptre and found it changed in my hand, it was a branch of a tree, the stem of a flower, it was valueless. My other hand was no longer filled with the heavy orb of the sceptre, but with rose petals. I could smell their scent. I put my hand up to touch the crown on my head and I felt a little circlet of flowers. The throne room melted away and I was in the sultana’s garden at the Alhambra, my sisters plaiting circlets of daisies for each other’s heads.

‘Where is the Queen of England?’ someone called from the terrace below the garden.

I rose from the lawn of camomile flowers and smelled the bittersweet perfume of the herb as I tried to run past the fountain to the archway at the end of the garden. ‘I am here!’ I tried to call, but I made no noise above the

splashing of the water in the marble bowl.

‘Where is the Queen of England?’ I heard them call again.

‘I am here!’ I called out silently.

‘Where is Queen Katherine of England?’

‘Here! Here! Here!’



The ambassador, summoned at daybreak to come at once to Durham House, did not trouble himself to get there until nine o'clock. He found Catalina waiting for him in her privy chamber with only Dona Elvira in attendance.

‘I sent for you hours ago,’ the princess said crossly.

‘I was undertaking business for your father and could not come earlier,’ he said smoothly, ignoring the sulky look on her face. ‘Is there something wrong?’

‘I spoke with the king yesterday and he repeated his proposal of marriage,’ Catalina said, a little pride in her voice.

‘Indeed.’

‘But he told me that I would live at court in the rooms of his mother.’

‘Oh.’ The ambassador nodded.

‘And he said that my sons would inherit only after Prince Harry.’

The ambassador nodded again.

‘Can we not persuade him to overlook Prince Harry? Can we not draw up a marriage contract to set him aside in favour of my son?’

The ambassador shook his head. ‘It’s not possible.’

‘Surely, a man can choose his heir?’

‘No. Not in the case of a king come so new to his throne. Not an English king. And even if he could, he would not.’

She leapt from her chair and paced to the window. ‘My son will be the grandson of the kings of Spain!’ she exclaimed. ‘Royal for centuries. Prince Harry is nothing more than the son of Elizabeth of York and a successful pretender.’

De Puebla gave a little hiss of horror at her bluntness and glanced towards the door. ‘You would do better never to call him that. He is the King of England.’

She nodded, accepting the reprimand. ‘But he has not my breeding,’ she pursued. ‘Prince Harry would not be the king that my boy would be.’

‘That is not the question,’ the ambassador observed. ‘The question is of time

and practice. The king's oldest son is always the Prince of Wales. He always inherits the throne. This king, of all the kings in the world, is not going to make a pretender of his own legitimate heir. He has been dogged with pretenders. He is not going to make another.'

As always, Catalina flinched at the thought of the last pretender, Edward of Warwick, beheaded to make way for her.

'Besides,' the ambassador continued, 'any king would rather have a sturdy eleven-year-old son as his heir than a new-born in the cradle. These are dangerous times. A man wants to leave a man to inherit, not a child.'

'If my son is not to be king, then what is the point of me marrying a king?' Catalina demanded.

'You would be queen,' the ambassador pointed out.

'What sort of a queen would I be with My Lady the King's Mother ruling everything? The king would not let me have my way in the kingdom, and she would not let me have my way in the court.'

'You are very young,' he started, trying to soothe her.

'I am old enough to know my own mind,' Catalina stated. 'And I want to be queen in truth as well as in name. But he will never let me be that, will he?'

'No,' de Puebla admitted. 'You will never command while he is alive.'

'And when he is dead?' she demanded, without shrinking.

'Then you would be the Dowager Queen,' de Puebla offered.

'And my parents might marry me once more to someone else, and I might leave England anyway!' she finished, quite exasperated.

'It is possible,' he conceded.

'And Harry's wife would be Princess of Wales, and Harry's wife would be the new queen. She would go before me, she would rule in my place, and all my sacrifice would be for nothing. And her sons would be Kings of England.'

'That is true.'

Catalina threw herself into her chair. 'Then I have to be Prince Harry's wife,' she said. 'I have to be.'

De Puebla was quite horrified. 'I understood you had agreed with the king to marry him! He gave me to believe that you were agreed.'

'I had agreed to be queen,' she said, white-faced with determination. 'Not some cat's-paw. D'you know what he called me? He said I would be his child-bride, and I would live in his mother's rooms, as if I were one of her ladies-in-waiting!'

'The former queen...'

‘The former queen was a saint to put up with a mother-in-law like that one. She stepped back all her life. I can’t do it. It is not what I want, it is not what my mother wants, and it is not what God wants.’

‘But if you have agreed...’

‘When has any agreement been honoured in this country?’ Catalina demanded fiercely. ‘We will break this agreement and make another. We will break this promise and make another. I shall not marry the king, I shall marry another.’

‘Who?’ he asked numbly.

‘Prince Harry, the Prince of Wales,’ she said. ‘So that when King Henry dies I shall be queen in deed as well as name.’

There was a short silence.

‘So you say,’ said de Puebla slowly. ‘Perhaps. But who is going to tell the king?’



God, if You are there, tell me that I am doing the right thing. If You are there, then help me. If it is Thy will that I am Queen of England, then I will need help to achieve it. It has all gone wrong now, and if this has been sent to try me, then see! I am on my knees and shaking with anxiety. If I am indeed blessed by You, destined by You, chosen by You, and favoured by You, then why do I feel so hopelessly alone?



Ambassador Dr de Puebla found himself in the uncomfortable position of having to bring bad news to one of the most powerful and irascible kings in Christendom. He had firm letters of refusal from Their Majesties of Spain in his hand, he had Catalina’s determination to be Princess of Wales, and he had his own shrinking courage, screwed up to the tightest point for this embarrassing meeting.

The king had chosen to see him in the stable yard of Whitehall Palace, he was there looking at a consignment of new Barbary horses, brought in to improve English stock. De Puebla thought of making a graceful reference to foreign blood refreshing native strains, breeding best done between young

animals; but he saw Henry's dark face and realised that there would be no easy way out of this dilemma.

'Your Grace,' he said, bowing low.

'De Puebla,' the king said shortly.

'I have a reply from Their Majesties of Spain to your most flattering proposal; but perhaps I should see you at a more opportune time?'

'Here is well enough. I can imagine from your tiptoeing in what they say.'

'The truth is...' de Puebla prepared to lie. 'They want their daughter home, and they cannot contemplate her marriage to you. The queen is particularly vehement in her refusal.'

'Because?' the king inquired.

'Because she wants to see her daughter, her youngest, sweetest daughter, matched to a prince of her own age. It is a woman's whim –' The diplomat made a little diffident gesture. 'Only a woman's whim. But we have to recognise a mother's wishes, don't we? Your Grace?'

'Not necessarily,' the king said unhelpfully. 'But what does the Dowager Princess say? I thought that she and I had an understanding. She can tell her mother of her preference.' The king's eyes were on the Arab stallion, walking proud-headed around the yard, his ears flickering backwards and forwards, his tail held high, his neck arched like a bow. 'I imagine she can speak for herself.'

'She says that she will obey you, as ever, Your Grace,' de Puebla said tactfully.

'And?'

'But she has to obey her mother.' He fell back at the sudden hard glance that the king threw at him. 'She is a good daughter, Your Grace. She is an obedient daughter to her mother.'

'I have proposed marriage to her and she has indicated that she would accept.'

'She would never refuse a king such as you. How could she? But if her parents do not consent, they will not apply for dispensation. Without dispensation from the Pope, there can be no marriage.'

'I understand that her marriage was not consummated. We barely need a dispensation. It is a courtesy, a formality.'

'We all know that it was not consummated,' de Puebla hastily confirmed. 'The princess is a maid still, fit for marriage. But all the same the Pope would have to grant a dispensation. If Their Majesties of Spain do not apply for such a dispensation, then what can anyone do?'

The king turned a dark, hard gaze on the Spanish ambassador. 'I don't know, now. I thought I knew what we would do. But now I am misled. You tell me. What can anyone do?'

The ambassador drew on the enduring courage of his race, his secret Jewishness which he held to his heart in the worst moments of his life. He knew that he and his people would always, somehow, survive.

'Nothing can be done,' he said. He attempted a sympathetic smile and felt that he was smirking. He rearranged his face into the gravest expression. 'If the Queen of Spain will not apply for dispensation there is nothing that can be done. And she is inveterate.'

'I am not one of Spain's neighbours to be overrun in a spring campaign,' the king said shortly. 'I am no Granada. I am no Navarre. I do not fear her displeasure.'

'Which is why they long for your alliance,' de Puebla said smoothly.

'An alliance how?' the king asked coldly. 'I thought they were refusing me?'

'Perhaps we could avoid all this difficulty by celebrating another marriage,' the diplomat said carefully, watching Henry's dark face. 'A new marriage. To create the alliance we all want.'

'To whom?'

At the banked-down anger in the king's face the ambassador lost his words.

'Sire...I...'

'Who do they want for her now? Now that my son, the rose, is dead and buried? Now she is a poor widow with only half her dowry paid, living on my charity?'

'The prince,' de Puebla plunged in. 'She was brought to the kingdom to be Princess of Wales. She was brought here to be wife to the prince, and later – much later, please God – to be queen. Perhaps that is her destiny, Your Grace. She thinks so, certainly.'

'She thinks!' the king exclaimed. 'She thinks like that filly thinks! Nothing beyond the next minute.'

'She is young,' the ambassador said. 'But she will learn. And the prince is young, they will learn together.'

'And we old men have to stand back, do we? She has told you of no preference, no particular liking for me? Though she gave me clearly to understand that she would marry me? She shows no regret at this turn around? She is not tempted to defy her parents and keep her freely given word to me?'

The ambassador heard the bitterness in the old man's voice. 'She is allowed

no choice,' he reminded the king. 'She has to do as she is bidden by her parents. I think, for herself, there was an attraction, perhaps even a powerful attraction. But she knows she has to go where she is bid.'

'I thought to marry her! I would have made her queen! She would have been Queen of England.' He almost choked on the title, all his life he had thought it the greatest honour that a woman could think of, just as his title was the greatest in his own imagination.

The ambassador paused for a moment to let the king recover.

'You know, there are other, equally beautiful young ladies in her family,' he suggested carefully. 'The young Queen of Naples is a widow now. As King Ferdinand's niece, she would bring a good dowry, and she has the family likeness.' He hesitated. 'She is said to be very lovely, and –' He paused. 'Amorous.'

'She gave me to understand that she loved me. Am I now to think her a pretender?'

The ambassador felt a cold sweat which seeped from every pore of his body at that dreadful word. 'No pretender,' he said, his smile quite ghastly. 'A loving daughter-in-law, an affectionate girl...'

There was an icy silence.

'You know how pretenders fare in this country,' the king said stiffly.

'Yes! But...'

'She will regret it, if she plays with me.'

'No play! No pretence! Nothing!'

The king let the ambassador stand, slightly shaking with anxiety.

'I thought to finish this whole difficulty with the dowry and the jointure,' Henry remarked, at length.

'And so it can be. Once the princess is betrothed to the prince, then Spain will pay the second half of the dowry and the widow's jointure is no more,' de Puebla assured him. He noticed he was talking too rapidly, took a breath, and went slower. 'All difficulties are finished. Their Majesties of Spain would be glad to apply for dispensation for their daughter to marry Prince Harry. It would be a good match for her and she will do as she is ordered. It leaves you free to look around for your wife, Your Grace, and it frees the revenues of Cornwall and Wales and Chester to your own disposal once more.'

King Henry shrugged his shoulders and turned from the schooling ring and the horse. 'So it is over?' he asked coldly. 'She does not desire me, as I thought she did. I mistook her attention to me. She meant to be nothing but filial?' He

laughed harshly at the thought of her kiss by the river. 'I must forget my desire for her?'

'She has to obey her parents as a Princess of Spain,' de Puebla reminded him. 'On her own account, I know there was a preference. She told me so herself.' He thought that Catalina's double-dealing could be covered by this. 'She is disappointed, to tell you the truth. But her mother is adamant. I cannot deny the Queen of Castile. She is utterly determined to have her daughter returned to Spain, or married to Prince Harry. She will brook no other suggestion.'

'So be it,' said the king, his voice like ice. 'I had a foolish dream, a desire. It can finish here.'

He turned and walked away from the stable yard, his pleasure in his horses soured.

'I hope that there is no ill feeling?' the ambassador asked, hobbling briskly behind him.

'None at all,' the king threw over his shoulder. 'None in the world.'

'And the betrothal with Prince Harry? May I assure Their Catholic Majesties that it will go ahead?'

'Oh, at once. I shall make it my first and foremost office.'

'I do hope there is no offence?' de Puebla called to the king's retreating back.

The king turned on his heel and faced the Spanish ambassador, his clenched fists on his hips, his shoulders square. 'She has tried to play me like a fool,' he said through thin lips. 'I don't thank her for it. Her parents have tried to lead me by the nose. I think they will find that they have a dragon, not one of their baited bulls. I won't forget this. You Spaniards, you will not forget it either. And she will regret the day she tried to lead me on as if I were a lovesick boy, as I regret it now.'



'It is agreed,' de Puebla said flatly to Catalina. He was standing before her – 'Like an errand boy!' he thought indignantly – as she was ripping the velvet panels out of a gown to re-model the dress.

'I am to marry Prince Harry,' she said in a tone as dull as his own. 'Has he signed anything?'

'He has agreed. He has to wait for a dispensation. But he has agreed.'

She looked up at him. 'Was he very angry?'

'I think he was even angrier than he showed me. And what he showed me was bad.'

'What will he do?' she asked.

He scrutinised her pale face. She was white but she was not fearful. Her blue eyes were veiled as her father's were veiled when he was planning something. She did not look like a damsel in distress, she looked like a woman trying to outwit a most dangerous protagonist. She was not endearing, as a woman in tears would have been endearing, he thought. She was formidable; but not pleasing.

'I don't know what he will do,' he said. 'His nature is vengeful. But we must give him no advantage. We have to pay your dowry at once. We have to complete our side of the contract to force him to complete his.'

'The plate has lost its value,' she said flatly. 'It is damaged by use. And I have sold some.'

He gasped. 'You have sold it? It is the king's own!'

She shrugged. 'I have to eat, Dr de Puebla. We cannot all go uninvited to court and thrust our way in to the common table. I am not living well, but I do have to live. And I have nothing to live on but my goods.'

'You should have preserved them intact!'

She shrugged 'I should never have been reduced to this. I have had to pawn my own plate to live. Whoever is to blame, it is not me.'

'Your father will have to pay the dowry and pay you an allowance,' he said grimly. 'We must give them no excuse to withdraw. If your dowry is not paid he will not marry you to the prince. Infanta, I must warn you, he will revel in your discomfort. He will prolong it.'

Catalina nodded. 'He is my enemy too then.'

'I fear it.'

'It will happen, you know,' she said inconsequentially.

'What?'

'I will marry Harry. I will be queen.'

'Infanta, it is my dearest wish.'

'Princess,' she replied.

Whitehall, June 1503



‘You are to be betrothed to Catalina of Aragon,’ the king told his son, thinking of the son who had gone before.

The blond boy flushed as pink as a girl. ‘Yes, sire.’

He had been coached perfectly by his grandmother. He was prepared for everything but real life.

‘Don’t think the marriage will happen,’ the king warned him.

The boy’s eyes flashed up in surprise and were then cast down again. ‘No?’

‘No. They have robbed us and cheated us at every turn, they have rolled us over like a bawd in a tavern. They have cozened us and promised one thing after another like a cock-teaser in drink. They say –’ He broke off, his son’s wide-eyed gaze reminding him that he had spoken as a man to a man, and this was a boy. Also, his resentment should not show, however fiercely it burned.

‘They have taken advantage of our friendship,’ he summed up. ‘And now we will take advantage of their weakness.’

‘Surely we are all friends?’

Henry grimaced, thinking of that scoundrel Ferdinand, and of his daughter, the cool beauty who had turned him down. ‘Oh, yes,’ he said. ‘Loyal friends.’

‘So I am to be betrothed and later, when I am fifteen, we will be married?’

The boy had understood nothing. So be it. ‘Say sixteen.’

‘Arthur was fifteen.’

Henry bit down the reply that much good it had done Arthur. Besides, it did not matter since it would never happen. ‘Oh, yes,’ he said again. ‘Fifteen, then.’

The boy knew that something was wrong. His smooth forehead was furrowed. ‘We do mean this, don’t we, Father? I would not mislead such a princess. It is a most solemn oath I will make?’

‘Oh, yes,’ the king said again.



The night before my betrothal to Prince Harry, I have a dream so lovely that I do not want to wake. I am in the garden of the Alhambra, walking with my hand in Arthur’s, laughing up at him, and showing him the beauty around us: the great sandstone wall which encircles the fort, the city of Granada below us and the mountains capped with silvery snow on the horizon.

‘I have won,’ I say to him. ‘I have done everything you wanted, everything that we planned. I will be princess as you made me. I will be queen as you wanted me to be. My mother’s wishes are fulfilled, my own destiny will be

complete, your desire and God's will. Are you happy now, my love?'

He smiles down at me, his eyes warm, his face tender, a smile he has only for me. 'I shall watch over you,' he whispers. 'All the time. Here in al-Yanna.'

I hesitate at the odd sound of the word on his lips, and then I realise that he has used the Moorish word: 'al-Yanna', which means both heaven, a cemetery, and a garden. For the Moors, heaven is a garden, an eternal garden.

'I shall come to you one day,' I whisper, even as his grasp on my hand becomes lighter, and then fades, though I try to hold him. 'I shall be with you again, my love. I shall meet you here in the garden.'

'I know,' he says, and now his face is melting away like mist in the morning, like a mirage in the hot air of the sierra. 'I know we will be together again, Catalina, my Katherine, my love.'

25th June 1503



It was a bright, hot June day. Catalina was dressed in a new gown of blue with a blue hood, the eleven-year-old boy opposite her was radiant with excitement, dressed in cloth of gold.

They were before the Bishop of Salisbury with a small court present: the king, his mother, the Princess Mary, and a few other witnesses. Catalina put her cold hand in the prince's warm palm and felt the plumpness of childhood beneath her fingers.

Catalina looked beyond the flushed boy to his father's grave face. The king had aged in the months since the death of his wife, and the lines in his face were more deeply grooved, his eyes shadowed. Men at the court said he was sick, some illness which was thinning his blood and wearing him out. Others said that he was sour with disappointment: at the loss of his heir, at the loss of his wife, at the frustration of his plans. Some said he had been crossed in love, outwitted by a woman. Only that could have unmanned him so bitterly.

Catalina smiled shyly at him, but there was no echoing warmth from the man who would be her father-in-law for the second time, but had wanted her for his own. For a moment, her confidence dimmed. She had allowed herself to hope that the king had surrendered to her determination, to her mother's ruling, to God's will. Now, seeing his cold look, she had a moment of fear that perhaps

this ceremony – even something as serious and sacred as a betrothal – might perhaps be nothing more than a revenge by this most cunning of kings.

Chilled, she turned away from him to listen to the bishop recite the words of the marriage service and she repeated her part, making sure not to think of when she had said the words before, only a year and a half ago, when her hand had been cool in the grasp of the most handsome young man she had ever seen, when her bridegroom had given her a shy sideways smile, when she had stared at him through the veil of her mantilla and been aware of the thousands of silently watching faces beyond.

The young prince, who had been dazzled then by the beauty of his sister-in-law the bride, was now the bridegroom. His beam was the boisterous joy of a young boy in the presence of a beautiful older girl. She had been the bride of his older brother, she was the young woman he had been proud to escort on her wedding day. He had begged her for a present of a Barbary horse for his tenth birthday. He had looked at her at her wedding feast and that night prayed that he too might have a Spanish bride just like her.

When she had left the court with Arthur he had dreamed of her, he had written poems and love-songs, secretly dedicating them to her. He had heard of Arthur's death with a bright, fierce joy that now she was free.

Now, not even two years on, she was before him, her hair brushed out bronze and golden over her shoulders signifying her virgin state, her blue lace mantilla veiling her face. Her hand was in his, her blue eyes were on him, her smile was only for him.

Harry's braggart boyish heart swelled so full in his chest that he could scarcely reply to his part of the service. Arthur was gone, and he was Prince of Wales; Arthur was gone, and he was his father's favourite, the rosebush of England. Arthur was gone, and Arthur's bride was his wife. He stood straight and proud and repeated his oaths in his clear treble voice. Arthur was gone, and there was only one Prince of Wales and one Princess: Prince Harry and Princess Katherine.

Princess Again

I may think that I have won; but still I have not won. I should have won; but I have not won. Harry reaches twelve, and they declare him Prince of Wales but they do not come for me, declare our betrothal or invest me as princess. I send for the ambassador. He does not come in the morning, he does not even come that day. He comes the day after, as if my affairs have no urgency, and he does not apologise for his delay. I ask him why I have not been invested as Princess of Wales alongside Harry and he does not know. He suggests that they are waiting for the payment of my dowry and without it, nothing can go ahead. But he knows, and I know, and King Henry knows, that I no longer have all my plate to give to them, and if my father will not send his share, there is nothing I can do.

My mother the queen must know that I am desolate; but I hear from her only rarely. It is as if I am one of her explorers, a solitary Cristóbal Colón with no companions and no maps. She has sent me out into the world and if I tumble off the edge or am lost at sea, there is nothing that anyone can do.

She has nothing to say to me. I fear that she is ashamed of me, as I wait at court like a suppliant for the prince to honour his promise. In November I am so filled with foreboding that she is ill or sad that I write to her and beg her to reply to me, to send me at least one word. That, as it happens, was the very day that she died and so she never had my letter and I never had my one word. She leaves me in death as she left me in life: to silence and a sense of her absence.

I knew that I would miss her when I left home. But it was a comfort to me to know that the sun still shone in the gardens of the Alhambra, and she was still there beside the green-trimmed pool. I did not know that the loss of her would make my situation in England so much worse. My father, having long refused to pay the second half of my dowry as part of his game with the King of England, now finds his play has become a bitter truth – he cannot pay. He has spent his life and his fortune in ceaseless crusade against the Moors and there is no money left for anyone. The rich revenues of Castile are now paid to Juana, my mother's heir; and my father has nothing in the treasury of Aragon for my marriage. My father is now no more than one of the many kings of Spain. Juana

is the great heiress of Castile and, if the gossips are to be believed, Juana has run as mad as a rabid dog, tormented by love and by her husband into insanity. Anyone looking at me now no longer sees a princess of a united Spain, one of the great brides of Christendom; but a widowed pauper with bad blood. Our family fortunes are cascading down like a house of cards without my mother's steady hand and watchful eye. There is nothing left for my father but despair; and that is all the dowry he can give me.

I am only nineteen. Is my life over?

And then, I waited. Incredibly, I waited for a total of six years. Six years when I went from a bride of seventeen to a woman of twenty-three. I knew then that King Henry's rage against me was bitter, and effective, and long-lasting. No princess in the world had ever been made to wait so long, or treated so harshly, or left in such despair. I am not exaggerating this, as a troubadour might do to make a better story – as I might have told you, beloved, in the dark hours of the night. No, it was not like a story, it was not even like a life. It was like a prison sentence, it was like being a hostage with no chance of redemption, it was loneliness, and the slow realisation that I had failed.

I failed my mother and failed to bring to her the alliance with England that I had been born and bred to do. I was ashamed of my failure. Without the dowry payment from Spain I could not force the English to honour the betrothal. With the king's enmity I could force them to do nothing. Harry was a child of thirteen, I hardly ever saw him. I could not appeal to him to make his promise good. I was powerless, neglected by the court and falling into shameful poverty.

Then Harry was fourteen years of age and our betrothal was still not made marriage, and that marriage not celebrated. I waited a year, he reached fifteen years, and nobody came for me. So Harry reached his sixteenth and then his seventeenth birthday, and still nobody came for me. Those years turned. I grew older. I waited. I was constant. It was all I could be.

I turned the panels on my gowns and sold my jewels for food. I had to sell my precious plate, one gold piece at a time. I knew it was the property of the king as I sent for the goldsmiths. I knew that each time I pawned a piece I put my wedding back another day. But I had to eat, my household had to eat. I could pay them no wages, I could hardly ask them to beg for me as well as go hungry on their own account.

I was friendless. I discovered that Dona Elvira was plotting against my father in favour of Juana and her husband Philip and I dismissed her, in a rage, and sent her away. I did not care if she spoke against me, if she named me as a liar. I did not care even if she declared that Arthur and I had been lovers. I had

caught her in treason against my father; did she truly think I would ally with my sister against the King of Aragon? I was so angry that I did not care what her enmity cost me.

Also, since I am not a fool, I calculated rightly that no-one would believe her word against mine. She fled to Philip and Juana in the Netherlands, and I never heard from her again, and I never complained of my loss.

I lost my ambassador, Dr de Puebla. I had often complained to my father of his divided loyalties, of his disrespect, of his concessions to the English court. But when he was recalled to Spain I found that he had known more than I had realised, he had used his friendship with the king to my advantage, he had understood his way around this most difficult court. He had been a better friend than I had known, and I was the poorer without him. I lost a friend and an ally, through my own arrogance; and I was sorry for his absence. His replacement: the emissary who had come to take me home, Don Gutierre Gomez de Fuensalida, was a pompous fool who thought the English were honoured by his presence. They sneered at his face and laughed behind his back and I was a ragged princess with an ambassador entranced by his own self-importance.

I lost my dear father in Christ, the confessor I trusted, appointed by my mother to guide me, and I had to find another for myself. I lost the ladies of my little court, who would not live in hardship and poverty, and I could not pay anyone else to serve me. Maria de Salinas stood by me, through all these long years of endurance, for love; but the other ladies wanted to leave. Then, finally, I lost my house, my lovely house on the Strand, which had been my home, a little safe place in this most foreign land.

The king promised me rooms at court and I thought that he had at last forgiven me. I thought he was offering me to come to court, to live in the rooms of a princess and to see Harry. But when I moved my household there I found that I was given the worst rooms, allocated the poorest service, unable to see the prince, except on the most formal of state occasions. One dreadful day, the court left on progress without telling us and we had to dash after them, finding our way down the unmarked country lanes, as unwanted and as irrelevant as a wagon filled with old goods. When we caught up, no-one had noticed that we were missing and I had to take the only rooms left: over the stables, like a servant.

The king stopped paying my allowance, his mother did not press my case. I had no money of my own at all. I lived despised on the fringe of the court, with Spaniards who served me only because they could not leave. They were trapped

like me, watching the years slide by, getting older and more resentful till I felt like the sleeping princess of the fairy tale and thought that I would never wake.

I lost my vanity – my proud sense that I could be cleverer than that old fox who was my father-in-law, and that sharp vixen his mother. I learned that he had betrothed me to his son Prince Harry, not because he loved and forgave me, but because it was the cleverest and cruellest way to punish me. If he could not have me, then he could make sure that no-one had me. It was a bitter day when I realised that.

And then, Philip died and my sister Juana was a widow like me, and King Henry came up with a plan to marry her, my poor sister – driven from her wits by the loss of her husband – and put her over me, on the throne of England, where everyone would see that she was crazed, where everyone could see the bad blood which I share, where everyone would know that he had made her queen and thrown me down to nothing. It was a wicked plan, certain to shame and distress both me and Juana. He would have done it if he could, and he made me his pander as well – he forced me to recommend him to my father. Under my father's orders I spoke to the king of Juana's beauty; under the king's orders I urged my father to accept his suit, all the time knowing that I was betraying my very soul. I lost my ability to refuse King Henry my persecutor, my father-in-law, my would-be seducer. I was afraid to say 'no' to him. I was very much reduced, that day.

I lost my vanity in my allure, I lost my confidence in my intelligence and skills; but I never lost my will to live. I was not like my mother, I was not like Juana, I did not turn my face to the wall and long for my pain to be over. I did not slide into the wailing grief of madness nor into the gentle darkness of sloth. I gritted my teeth, I am the constant princess, I don't stop when everyone else stops. I carried on. I waited. Even when I could do nothing else, I could still wait. So I waited.

These were not the years of my defeat; these were the years when I grew up, and it was a bitter maturing. I grew from a girl of sixteen ready for love to a half-orphaned, lonely widow of twenty-three. These were the years when I drew on the happiness of my childhood in the Alhambra and my love for my husband to sustain me, and swore that whatever the obstacles before me, I should be Queen of England. These were the years when, though my mother was dead, she lived again through me. I found her determination inside me, I found her courage inside me, I found Arthur's love and optimism inside me. These were the years when although I had nothing left: no husband, no mother, no friends, no

fortune and no prospects; I swore that however disregarded, however poor, however unlikely a prospect, I would still be Queen of England.



News, always slow to reach the bedraggled Spaniards on the fringe of the royal court, filtered through that Harry's sister the Princess Mary was to be married, gloriously, to Prince Charles, son of King Philip and Queen Juana, grandson to both the Emperor Maximilian and King Ferdinand. Amazingly, at this of all moments, King Ferdinand at last found the money for Catalina's dowry, and packed it off to London.

'My God, we are freed. There can be a double wedding. I can marry him,' Catalina said, heartfelt, to the Spanish emissary, Don Gutierre Gomez de Fuensalida.

He was pale with worry, his yellow teeth nipping at his lips. 'Oh, Infanta, I hardly know how to tell you. Even with this alliance, even with the dowry money – dear God, I fear it comes too late. I fear it will not help us at all.'

'How can it be? Princess Mary's betrothal only deepens the alliance with my family.'

'What if...?' He started and broke off. He could hardly speak of the danger that he foresaw. 'Princess, all the English know that the dowry money is coming, but they do not speak of your marriage. Oh, Princess, what if they plan an alliance that does not include Spain? What if they plan an alliance between the emperor and King Henry? What if the alliance is for them to go to war against Spain?'

She turned her head. 'It cannot be.'

'What if it is?'

'Against the boy's own grandfather?' she demanded.

'It would only be one grandfather, the emperor, against another, your father.'

'They would not,' she said determinedly.

'They could.'

'King Henry would not be so dishonest.'

'Princess, you know that he would.'

She hesitated. 'What is it?' she suddenly demanded, sharp with irritation. 'There is something else. Something you are not telling me. What is it?'

He paused, a lie in his mouth; then he told her the truth. 'I am afraid, I am very afraid, that they will betroth Prince Harry to Princess Eleanor, the sister of

Charles.'

'They cannot, he is betrothed to me.'

'They may plan it as part of a great treaty. Your sister Juana to marry the king, your nephew Charles for Princess Mary, and your niece Eleanor for Prince Harry.'

'But what about me? Now that my dowry money is on its way at last?'

He was silent. It was painfully apparent that Catalina was excluded by these alliances, and no provision made for her.

'A true prince has to honour his promise,' she said passionately. 'We were betrothed by a bishop before witnesses, it is a solemn oath.'

The ambassador shrugged, hesitated. He could hardly make himself tell her the worst news of all. 'Your Grace, Princess, be brave. I am afraid he may withdraw his oath.'

'He cannot.'

Fuensalida went further. 'Indeed, I am afraid it is already withdrawn. He may have withdrawn it years ago.'

'What?' she asked sharply. 'How?'

'A rumour, I cannot be sure of it. But I am afraid...' He broke off.

'Afraid of what?'

'I am afraid that the prince may be already released from his betrothal to you.' He hesitated at the sudden darkening of her face. 'It will not have been his choice,' he said quickly. 'His father is determined against us.'

'How could he? How can such a thing be done?'

'He could have sworn an oath that he was too young, that he was under duress. He may have declared that he did not want to marry you. Indeed, I think that is what he has done.'

'He was not under duress!' Catalina exclaimed. 'He was utterly delighted. He has been in love with me for years, I am sure he still is. He did want to marry me!'

'An oath sworn before a bishop that he was not acting of his own free will would be enough to secure his release from his promise.'

'So all these years that I have been betrothed to him, and acted on that premise, all these years that I have waited and waited and endured...' She could not finish. 'Are you telling me that for all these years, when I believed that we had them tied down, contracted, bound, he has been free?'

The ambassador nodded; her face was so stark and shocked that he could hardly find his voice.

‘This is...a betrayal,’ she said. ‘A most terrible betrayal.’ She choked on the words. ‘This is the worst betrayal of all.’

He nodded again.

There was a long, painful silence. ‘I am lost,’ she said simply. ‘Now I know it. I have been lost for years and I did not know. I have been fighting a battle with no army, with no support. Actually – with no cause. You tell me that I have been defending a cause that was gone long ago. I was fighting for my betrothal but I was not betrothed. I have been all alone, all this long time. And now I know it.’

Still she did not weep, though her blue eyes were horrified.

‘I made a promise,’ she said, her voice harsh. ‘I made a solemn and binding promise.’

‘Your betrothal?’

She made a little gesture with her hand. ‘Not that. I swore a promise. A deathbed promise. Now you tell me it has all been for nothing.’

‘Princess, you have stayed at your post, as your mother would have wanted you to do.’

‘I have been made a fool!’ burst out of her, from the depth of her shock. ‘I have been fighting for the fulfilment of a vow, not knowing that the vow was long broken.’

He could say nothing, her pain was too raw for any soothing words.

After a few moments, she raised her head. ‘Does everyone know but me?’ she asked bleakly.

He shook his head. ‘I am sure it was kept most secret.’

‘My Lady the King’s Mother,’ she predicted bitterly. ‘She will have known. It will have been her decision. And the king, the prince himself, and if he knew, then the Princess Mary will know – he would have told her. And his closest companions...’ She raised her head. ‘The king’s mother’s ladies, the princess’s ladies. The bishop that he swore to, a witness or two. Half the court, I suppose.’ She paused. ‘I thought that at least some of them were my friends,’ she said.

The ambassador shrugged. ‘In a court there are no friends, only courtiers.’

‘My father will defend me from this...cruelty!’ she burst out. ‘They should have thought of that before they treated me so! There will be no treaties for England with Spain when he hears about this. He will take revenge for this abuse of me.’

He could say nothing, and in the still silent face that he turned to her she saw the worst truth.

‘No,’ she said simply. ‘Not him. Not him as well. Not my father. He did not know. He loves me. He would never injure me. He would never abandon me here.’

Still he could not tell her. He saw her take a deep breath.

‘Oh. Oh. I see. I see from your silence. Of course. He knows, of course he knows, doesn’t he? My father? The dowry money is just another trick. He knows of the proposal to marry Prince Harry to Princess Eleanor. He has been leading the king on to think that he can marry Juana. He ordered me to encourage the king to marry Juana. He will have agreed to this new proposal for Prince Harry. And so he knows that the prince has broken his oath to me? And is free to marry?’

‘Princess, he has told me nothing. I think he must know. But perhaps he plans...’

Her gesture stopped him. ‘He has given up on me. I see. I have failed him and he has cast me aside. I am indeed alone.’

‘So shall I try to get us home now?’ Fuensalida asked quietly. Truly, he thought, it had become the very pinnacle of his ambitions. If he could get this doomed princess home to her unhappy father and her increasingly deranged sister, the new Queen of Castile, he would have done the best he could in a desperate situation. Nobody would marry Catalina of Spain now she was the daughter of a divided kingdom. Everyone could see that the madness in her blood was coming out in her sister. Not even Henry of England could pretend that Juana was fit to marry when she was on a crazed progress across Spain with her dead husband’s coffin. Ferdinand’s tricky diplomacy had rebounded on him and now everyone in Europe was his enemy, with two of the most powerful men in Europe allied to make war against him. Ferdinand was lost, and going down. The best that this unlucky princess could expect was a scratch marriage to some Spanish grandee and retirement to the countryside, with a chance to escape the war that must come. The worst was to remain trapped and in poverty in England, a forgotten hostage that no-one would ransom. A prisoner who would be soon forgotten, even by her gaolers.

‘What shall I do?’ Finally she accepted danger. He saw her take it in. Finally, she understood that she had lost. He saw her, a queen in every inch, learn the depth of her defeat. ‘I must know what I should do. Or I shall be hostage, in an enemy country, with no-one to speak for me.’

He did not say that he had thought her just that, ever since he had arrived.

‘We shall leave,’ he said decisively. ‘If war comes they will keep you as a

hostage and they will seize your dowry. God forbid that now the money is finally coming, it should be used to make war against Spain.'

'I cannot leave,' she said flatly. 'If I go, I will never get back here.'

'It is over!' he cried in sudden passion. 'You see it yourself, at last. We have lost. We are defeated. It is over for you and England. You have held on and faced humiliation and poverty, you have faced it like a princess, like a queen, like a saint. Your mother herself could not have shown more courage. But we are defeated, Infanta. You have lost. We have to get home as best we can. We have to run, before they catch us.'

'Catch us?'

'They could imprison us both as enemy spies and hold us to ransom,' he told her. 'They could impound whatever remains of your dowry goods and impound the rest when it arrives. God knows, they can make up a charge, and execute you, if they want to enough.'

'They dare not touch me! I am a princess of royal blood,' she flared up. 'Whatever else they can take from me, they can never take that! I am Infanta of Spain even if I am nothing else! Even if I am never Queen of England, at least I will always be Infanta of Spain.'

'Princes of royal blood have gone into the Tower of London before and not come out again,' the ambassador said bleakly. 'Princes of the royal blood of England have had those gates shut behind them and never seen daylight again. He could call you a pretender. You know what happens in England to pretenders. We have to go.'



Catalina curtsied to My Lady the King's Mother and received not even a nod of the head in return. She stiffened. The two retinues had met on their way to Mass; behind the old lady was her granddaughter the Princess Mary and half a dozen ladies. All of them showed frosty faces to the young woman who was supposed to be betrothed to the Prince of Wales but who had been neglected for so long.

'My lady.' Catalina stood in her path, waiting for an acknowledgement.

The king's mother looked at the young woman with open dislike. 'I hear that there are difficulties over the betrothal of the Princess Mary,' she said.

Catalina looked towards the Princess Mary and the girl, hidden behind her grandmother, made an ugly grimace at her and broke off with a sudden snort of

laughter.

‘I did not know,’ Catalina said.

‘You may not know, but your father undoubtedly knows,’ the old woman said irritably. ‘In one of your constant letters to him you might tell him that he does his cause and your cause no good by trying to disturb our plans for our family.’

‘I am very sure he does not...’ Catalina started.

‘I am very sure that he does; and you had better warn him not to stand in our way,’ the old woman interrupted her sharply, and swept on.

‘My own betrothal...’ Catalina tried.

‘Your betrothal?’ The king’s mother repeated the words as if she had never heard them before. ‘Your betrothal?’ Suddenly, she laughed, throwing her head back, her mouth wide. Behind her, the princess laughed too, and then all the ladies were laughing out loud at the thought of the pauper princess speaking of her betrothal to the most eligible prince in Christendom.

‘My father is sending my dowry!’ Catalina cried out.

‘Too late! You are far too late!’ the king’s mother wailed, clutching at the arm of her friend.

Catalina, confronted by a dozen laughing faces, reduced to helpless hysteria at the thought of this patched princess offering her bits of plate and gold, ducked her head down, pushed through them, and went away.



That night the ambassador of Spain and an Italian merchant of some wealth and great discretion stood side by side on a shadowy quayside at a quiet corner of the London docks, and watched the quiet loading of Spanish goods on to a ship bound for Bruges.

‘She has not authorised this?’ the merchant whispered, his dark face lit by flickering torchlight. ‘We are all but stealing her dowry! What will happen if the English suddenly say that the marriage is to go ahead and we have emptied her treasure room? What if they see that the dowry has come from Spain at last, but it never reached her treasure room? They will call us thieves. We will be thieves!’

‘They will never say it is to go ahead,’ the ambassador said simply. ‘They will impound her goods and imprison her the moment that they declare war on Spain, and they could do that any day now. I dare not let King Ferdinand’s

money fall into the hands of the English. They are our enemies, not our allies.'

'What will she do? We have emptied her treasury. There is nothing in her strong-room but empty boxes. We have left her a pauper.'

The ambassador shrugged. 'She is ruined anyway. If she stays here when England is at war with Spain then she is an enemy hostage and they will imprison her. If she runs away with me she will have no kind welcome back at home. Her mother is dead and her family is ruined and she is ruined too. I would not be surprised if she did not throw herself into the Thames and drown. Her life is over. I cannot see what will become of her. I can save her money, if you will ship it out for me. But I cannot save her.'



I know I have to leave England; Arthur would not want me to stay to face danger. I have a terror of the Tower and the block that would be fitting only if I were a traitor, and not a princess who has never done anything wrong but tell one great lie, and that for the best. It would be the jest of all time if I had to put my head down on Warwick's block and die, a Spanish pretender to the throne where he died a Plantagenet. That must not happen. I see that my writ does not run. I am not such a fool as to think I can command any more. I do not even pray any more. I do not even ask for my destiny. But I can run away. And I think the time to run away is now.



'You have done what?' Catalina demanded of her ambassador. The inventory in her hand trembled.

'I took it upon my own authority to move your father's treasure from the country. I could not risk...'

'My dowry.' She raised her voice.

'Your Grace, we both know it will not be needed for a wedding. He will never marry you. They would take your dowry and he would still not marry you.'

'It was my side of the bargain!' she shouted. 'I keep faith! Even if no-one else does! I have not eaten, I have given up my own house so as not to pawn that treasure. I make a promise and I keep to it, whatever the cost!'

‘The king would have used it to pay for soldiers to fight against your father. He would have fought against Spain with your father’s own gold!’ Fuensalida exclaimed miserably. ‘I could not let it happen.’

‘So you robbed me!’

He stumbled over the words. ‘I took your treasure into safe-keeping in the hopes that...’

‘Go!’ she said abruptly.

‘Princess?’

‘You have betrayed me, just as Dona Elvira betrayed me, just as everyone always betrays me,’ she said bitterly. ‘You may leave me. I shall not send for you again. Ever. Be very sure that I shall never speak to you again. But I shall tell my father what you have done. I shall write to him at once and tell him that you have stolen my dowry monies, that you are a thief. You will never be received at the court in Spain.’

He bowed, trembling with emotion, and then he turned to leave, too proud to defend himself.

‘You are nothing more than a traitor!’ Catalina cried as he reached the door. ‘And if I were a queen with the power of the queen I would have you hanged for treason.’

He stiffened. He turned, he bowed again, his voice when he spoke was ice. ‘Infanta, please do not make a fool of yourself by insulting me. You are badly mistaken. It was your own father who commanded me to return your dowry. I was obeying his direct order. Your own father wanted your treasury stripped of every valuable. It is he who decided to make you a pauper. He wanted the dowry money returned because he has given up all hope of your marriage. He wanted the money kept safe and smuggled safely out of England.

‘But I must tell you,’ he added with weighty malice, ‘he did not order me to make sure that *you* were safe. He gave no orders to smuggle you safely out of England. He thought of the treasure but not of you. His orders were to secure the safety of the goods. He did not even mention you by name. I think he must have given you up for lost.’

As soon as the words were out he wished he had not said them. The stricken look on her face was worse than anything he had ever seen before. ‘He told you to send back the gold but to leave me behind? With nothing?’

‘I am sure...’

Blindly, she turned her back to him and walked to the window so that he could not see the blank horror on her face. ‘Go,’ she repeated. ‘Just go.’



I am the sleeping princess in the story, a snow princess left in a cold land and forgetting the feel of the sun. This winter has been a long one, even for England. Even now, in April, the grass is so frosty in the morning that when I wake and see the ice on my bedroom windows the light filtering through is so white that I think it has snowed overnight. The water in the cup by my bed is frozen by midnight, and we cannot now afford to keep the fire in through the night. When I walk outside on the icy grass, it crunches thickly under my feet and I can feel its chill through the thin soles of my boots. This summer, I know, will have all the mild sweetness of an English summer; but I long for the burning heat of Spain. I want to have my despair baked out of me once more. I feel as if I have been cold for seven years, and if nothing comes to warm me soon I shall simply die of it, just melt away under the rain, just blow away like the mist off the river. If the king is indeed dying, as the court rumour says, and Prince Harry comes to the throne and marries Eleanor, then I shall ask my father for permission to take the veil and retire to a convent. It could not be worse than here. It could not be poorer, colder or more lonely. Clearly my father has forgotten his love for me and given me up, just as if I had died with Arthur. Indeed, now, I acknowledge that every day I wish that I had died with Arthur.

I have sworn never to despair – the women of my family dissolve into despair like molasses into water. But this ice in my heart does not feel like despair. It feels as if my rock-hard determination to be queen has turned me to stone. I don't feel as if I am giving way to my feelings like Juana; I feel as if I have mislaid my feelings. I am a block, an icicle, a princess of constant snow.

I try to pray to God but I cannot hear Him. I fear He has forgotten me as everyone else has done. I have lost all sense of His presence, I have lost my fear of His will, and I have lost my joy in His blessing. I can feel nothing for Him. I no longer think I am His special child, chosen to be blessed. I no longer console myself that I am His special child, chosen to be tested. I think He has turned His face from me. I don't know why, but if my earthly father can forget me, and forget that I was his favourite child, as he has done, then I suppose my Heavenly Father can forget me too.

In all the world I find that I care for only two things now: I can still feel my love for Arthur, like a warm, still-beating heart in a little bird that has fallen from a frozen sky, chilled and cold. And I still long for Spain, for the Alhambra Palace, for al-Yanna; the garden, the secret place, paradise.

I endure my life only because I cannot escape it. Each year I hope that my fortunes will change; each year when Harry's birthday comes around and the betrothal is not made marriage, I know that another year of my fertile life has come and gone. Each midsummer day, when the dowry payment falls due and there is no draft from my father, I feel shame: like a sickness in my belly. And twelve times a year, for seven years, that is eighty-four times, my courses have come and gone. Each time I bleed I think, there is another chance to make a prince for England wasted. I have learned to grieve for the stain on my linen as if it is a child lost. Eighty-four chances for me to have a son, in the very flush of my youth; eighty-four chances lost. I am learning to miscarry. I am learning the sorrow of miscarriage.

Each day, when I go to pray I look up at the crucified Christ and say: 'Your will be done'. That is each day for seven years, that is two thousand, five hundred and fifty-six times. This is the arithmetic of my pain. I say: 'Your will be done'; but what I mean is: 'make Your will on these wicked English councillors and this spiteful, unforgiving English king, and his old witch of a mother. Give me my rights. Make me queen. I must be queen, I must have a son, or I will become a princess of snow'.

21st April 1509



'The king is dead,' Fuensalida the ambassador wrote briefly to Catalina, knowing that she would not receive him in person, knowing that she would never forgive him for stealing her dowry and naming her as a pretender, for telling her that her father had abandoned her. 'I know you will not see me but I have to do my duty and warn you that on his deathbed the king told his son that he was free to marry whoever he chooses. If you wish me to commission a ship to take you home to Spain, I have personal funds to do so. Myself, I cannot see that you will gain anything by staying in this country but insult, ignominy, and perhaps danger.'

'Dead,' Catalina said.

'What?' one of her ladies asked.

Catalina scrunched the letter into her hand. She never trusted anyone with anything now. 'Nothing,' she said. 'I am going for a walk.'

Maria de Salinas stood up and put Catalina's patched cloak about her shoulders. It was the same cloak that she had worn wrapped around in the winter cold when she and Arthur had left London for Ludlow, seven years earlier.

'Shall we come with you?' she offered, without enthusiasm, glancing at the grey sky beyond the windows.

'No.'



I pound alongside the river, the gravelled walk pricking the soles of my feet through the thin leather, as if I am trying to run away from hope itself. I wonder if there is any chance that my luck might change, might be changing now. The king who wanted me, and then hated me for refusing him, is dead. They said he was sick; but God knows, he never weakened. I thought he would reign forever. But now he is dead. Now he has gone. It will be the prince who decides.

I dare not touch hope. After all these years of fasting, I feel as if hope would make me drunk if I had so much of a drop of it on my lips. But I do hope for just a little taste of optimism, just a little flavour which is not my usual diet of grim despair.

Because I know the boy, Harry. I swear I know him. I have watched him as a falconer wakes with a tired bird. Watched him, and judged him, and checked my judgement against his behaviour again and again. I have read him as if I were studying my catechism. I know his strengths and his weaknesses, and I think I have faint, very faint, reason for hope.

Harry is vain, it is the sin of a young boy and I do not blame him for it, but he has it in abundance. On the one hand this might make him marry me, for he will want to be seen to be doing the right thing – honouring his promise, even rescuing me. At the thought of being saved by Harry, I have to stop in my stride and pinch my nails into the palms of my hands in the shelter of my cloak. This humiliation too I can learn to bear. Harry may want to rescue me and I shall have to be grateful. Arthur would have died of shame at the thought of his little braggart brother rescuing me; but Arthur died before this hour, my mother died before this hour; I shall have to bear it alone.

But equally, his vanity could work against me. If they emphasise the wealth of Princess Eleanor, the influence of her Hapsburg family, the glory of the connection to the Holy Roman Emperor – he may be seduced. His grandmother will speak against me and her word has been his law. She will advise him to

marry Princess Eleanor and he will be attracted – like any young fool – to the idea of an unknown beauty.

But even if he wants to marry her, it still leaves him with the difficulty of what to do with me. He would look bad if he sent me home, surely he cannot have the gall to marry another woman with me still in attendance at court? I know that Harry would do anything rather than look foolish. If I can find a way to stay here until they have to consider his marriage, then I will be in a strong position indeed.

I walk more slowly, looking around me at the cold river, the passing boatmen huddled in their winter coats against the cold. ‘God bless you, Princess!’ calls out one man, recognising me. I raise my hand in reply. The people of this odd, fractious country have loved me from the moment they scrambled to see me in the little port of Plymouth. That will count in my favour too with a prince new-come to his throne and desperate for affection.

Harry is not mean with money. He is not old enough yet to know the value of it, and he has always been given anything he might want. He will not bicker over the dowry and the jointure. I am sure of that. He will be disposed to make a lordly gesture. I shall have to make sure that Fuensalida and my father do not offer to ship me home to make way for the new bride. Fuensalida despaired long ago of our cause. But now I do not. I shall have to resist his panic, and my own fears. I must stay here to be in the field. I cannot draw back now.

Harry was attracted to me once, I know that. Arthur told me of it first, said that the little boy liked leading me into my wedding, had been dreaming that he was the bridegroom and I was the bride. I have nurtured his liking, every time I see him I pay him particular attention. When his sister laughs at him and disregards him, I glance his way, ask him to sing for me, watch him dance with admiration. On the rare occasions that I have caught a moment with him in private I ask him to read to me and we discuss our thoughts on great writers. I make sure that he knows that I find him illuminating. He is a clever boy, it is no hardship to talk with him.

My difficulty always has been that everyone else admires him so greatly that my modest warmth can hardly weigh with him. Since his grandmother My Lady the King’s Mother declares that he is the handsomest prince in Christendom, the most learned, the most promising, what can I say to compare? How can one compliment a boy who is already flattered into extreme vanity, who already believes that he is the greatest prince the world has known?

These are my advantages. Against them I could list the fact that he has been

destined for me for six years and he perhaps sees me as his father's choice and a dull choice at that. That he has sworn before a bishop that I was not his choice in marriage and that he does not want to marry me. He might think to hold to that oath, he might think to proclaim he never wanted me, and deny the oath of our betrothal. At the thought of Harry announcing to the world that I was forced on him and now he is glad to be free of me, I pause again. This too I can endure.

These years have not been kind to me. He has never seen me laughing with joy, he has never seen me smiling and easy. He has never seen me dressed other than poorly, and anxious about my appearance. They have never called me forwards to dance before him, or to sing for him. I always have a poor horse when the court is hunting and sometimes I cannot keep up. I always look weary and I am always anxious. He is young and frivolous and he loves luxury and fineness of dress. He might have a picture of me in his mind as a poor woman, a drag upon his family, a pale widow, a ghost at the feast. He is a self-indulgent boy, he might decide to excuse himself from his duty. He is vain and light-hearted and might think nothing of sending me away.

But I have to stay. If I leave, he will forget me in a moment, I am certain of that, at least. I have to stay.



Fuensalida, summoned to the king's council, went in with his head held high, trying to seem unbowed, certain that they had sent for him to tell him to leave and take the unwanted Infanta with him. His high Spanish pride, which had so much offended them so very often in the past, took him through the door and to the Privy Council table. The new king's ministers were seated around the table, there was a place left empty for him in the plumb centre. He felt like a boy, summoned before his tutors for a scolding.

'Perhaps I should start by explaining the condition of the Princess of Wales,' he said diffidently. 'The dowry payment is safely stored, out of the country, and can be paid in...'

'The dowry does not matter,' one of the councillors said.

'The dowry?' Fuensalida was stunned into silence. 'But the princess's plate?'

'The king is minded to be generous to his betrothed.'

There was a stunned silence from the ambassador. 'His betrothed?'

'Of the greatest importance now is the power of the King of France and the

danger of his ambitions in Europe. It has been thus since Agincourt. The king is most anxious to restore the glory of England. And now we have a king as great as that Henry, ready to make England great again. English safety depends on a three-way alliance between Spain and England, and the emperor. The young king believes that his wedding with the Infanta will secure the support of the King of Aragon to this great cause. This is, presumably, the case?’

‘Certainly,’ said Fuensalida, his head reeling. ‘But the plate...’

‘The plate does not matter,’ one of the councillors repeated.

‘I thought that her goods...’

‘They do not matter.’

‘I shall have to tell her of this...change...in her fortunes.’

The Privy Council rose to their feet. ‘Pray do.’

‘I shall return when I have...er...seen her.’ Pointless, Fuensalida thought, to tell them that she had been so angry with him for what she saw as his betrayal that he could not be sure that she would see him. Pointless to reveal that the last time he had seen her he had told her that she was lost and her cause was lost and everyone had known it for years.

He staggered as much as walked from the room, and almost collided with the young prince. The youth, still not yet eighteen, was radiant. ‘Ambassador!’

Fuensalida threw himself back and dropped to his knee. ‘Your Grace! I must...condole with you on the death of...’

‘Yes, yes.’ He waved aside the sympathy. He could not make himself look grave. He was wreathed in smiles, taller than ever. ‘You will wish to tell the princess that I propose that our marriage takes place as soon as possible.’

Fuensalida found he was stammering with a dry mouth. ‘Of course, sire.’

‘I shall send a message to her for you,’ the young man said generously. He giggled. ‘I know that you are out of favour. I know that she has refused to see you, but I am sure that she will see you for my sake.’

‘I thank you,’ the ambassador said. The prince waved him away. Fuensalida rose from his bow and went towards the Princess’s chambers. He realised that it would be hard for the Spanish to recover from the largesse of this new English king. His generosity, his ostentatious generosity, was crushing.



Catalina kept her ambassador waiting, but she admitted him within the hour. He had to admire the self-control that set her to watch the clock when the man who

knew her destiny was waiting outside to tell her.

‘Emissary,’ she said levelly.

He bowed. The hem of her gown was ragged. He saw the neat, small threads where it had been stitched up, and then worn ragged again. He had a sense of great relief that whatever happened to her after this unexpected marriage, she would never again have to wear an old gown.

‘Dowager Princess, I have been to the Privy Council. Our troubles are over. He wants to marry you.’

Fuensalida had thought she might cry with joy, or pitch into his arms, or fall to her knees and thank God. She did none of these things. Slowly, she inclined her head. The tarnished gold leaf on the hood caught the light. ‘I am glad to hear it,’ was all she said.

‘They say that there is no issue about the plate.’ He could not keep the jubilation from his voice.

She nodded again.

‘The dowry will have to be paid. I shall get them to send the money back from Bruges. It has been in safe-keeping, Your Grace. I have kept it safe for you.’ His voice quavered, he could not help it.

Again she nodded.

He dropped to one knee. ‘Princess, rejoice! You will be Queen of England.’

Her blue eyes when she turned them to him were hard, like the sapphires she had sold long ago. ‘Emissary, I was always going to be Queen of England.’



I have done it. Good God, I have done it. After seven endless years of waiting, after hardship and humiliation, I have done it. I go into my bedchamber and kneel before my prie-dieu and close my eyes. But I speak to Arthur, not to the risen Lord.

‘I have done it,’ I tell him. ‘Harry will marry me, I have done as you wished me to do.’

For a moment I can see his smile, I can see him as I did so often, when I glanced sideways at him during dinner and caught him smiling down the hall to someone. Before me again is the brightness of his face, the darkness of his eyes, the clear line of his profile. And more than anything else, the scent of him, the very perfume of my desire.

Even on my knees before a crucifix I give a little sigh of longing. ‘Arthur,

beloved. My only love. I shall marry your brother but I am always yours.’ For a moment, I remember, as bright as the first taste of early cherries, the scent of his skin in the morning. I raise my face and it is as if I can feel his chest against my cheek as he bears down on me, thrusts towards me. ‘Arthur,’ I whisper. I am now, I will always be, forever his.



Catalina had to face one ordeal. As she went into dinner in a hastily tailored new gown, with a collar of gold at her neck and pearls in her ears, and was conducted to a new table at the very front of the hall, she curtsied to her husband-to-be and saw his bright smile at her, and then she turned to her grandmother-in-law and met the basilisk gaze of Lady Margaret Beaufort.

‘You are fortunate,’ the old lady said afterwards, as the musicians started to play and the tables were taken away.

‘I am?’ Catalina replied, deliberately dense.

‘You married one great prince of England and lost him; now it seems you will marry another.’

‘This can come as no surprise,’ Catalina observed in flawless French, ‘since I have been betrothed to him for six years. Surely, my lady, you never doubted that this day would come? You never thought that such an honourable prince would break his holy word?’

The old woman hid her discomfiture well. ‘I never doubted our intentions,’ she returned. ‘We keep our word. But when you withheld your dowry and your father reneged on his payments, I wondered as to your intentions. I wondered about the honour of Spain.’

‘Then you were kind to say nothing to disturb the king,’ Catalina said smoothly. ‘For he trusted me, I know. And I never doubted your desire to have me as your granddaughter. And see! Now I will be your granddaughter, I will be Queen of England, the dowry is paid, and everything is as it should be.’

She left the old lady with nothing to say – and there were few that could do that. ‘Well, at any rate, we will have to hope that you are fertile,’ was all she sourly mustered.

‘Why not? My mother had half a dozen children,’ Catalina said sweetly. ‘Let us hope my husband and I are blessed with the fertility of Spain. My emblem is the pomegranate – a Spanish fruit, filled with life.’

My Lady the King’s Grandmother swept away, leaving Catalina alone.

Catalina curtsayed to her departing back and rose up, her head high. It did not matter what Lady Margaret might think or say, all that mattered was what she could do. Catalina did not think she could prevent the wedding, and that was all that mattered.

Greenwich Palace, 11th June 1509



I was dreading the wedding, the moment when I would have to say the words of the marriage vows that I had said to Arthur. But in the end the service was so unlike that glorious day in St Paul's Cathedral that I could go through it with Harry before me, and Arthur locked away in the very back of my mind. I was doing this for Arthur, the very thing he had commanded, the very thing that he had insisted on – and I could not risk thinking of him.

There was no great congregation in a cathedral, there were no watching ambassadors, or fountains flowing with wine. We were married within the walls of Greenwich Palace in the church of the Friars Observant, with only three witnesses and half a dozen people present.

There was no rich feasting or music or dancing, there was no drunkenness at court or rowdiness. There was no public bedding. I had been afraid of that – the ritual of putting to bed and then the public showing of the sheets in the morning; but the prince – the king, I now have to say – is as shy as me, and we dine quietly before the court and withdraw together. They drink our healths and let us go. His grandmother is there, her face like a mask, her eyes cold. I show her every courtesy, it doesn't matter to me what she thinks now. She can do nothing. There is no suggestion that I shall be living in her chambers under her supervision. On the contrary she has moved out of her rooms for me. I am married to Harry. I am Queen of England and she is nothing more than the grandmother of a king.

My ladies undress me in silence, this is their triumph too, this is their escape from poverty as well as mine. Nobody wants to remember the night at Oxford, the night at Burford, the nights at Ludlow. Their fortunes as much as mine depend on the success of this great deception. If I asked them, they would deny Arthur's very existence.

Besides, it was all so long ago. Seven long years. Who but I can remember that far back? Who but I ever knew the delight of waiting for Arthur, the firelight

on the rich-coloured curtains of the bed, the glow of candlelight on our entwined limbs? The sleepy whispers in the early hours of the morning: 'Tell me a story!'

They leave me in one of my dozen exquisite new nightgowns and withdraw in silence. I wait for Harry, as long ago I used to wait for Arthur. The only difference is the utter absence of joy.



The men-at-arms and the gentlemen of the bedchamber brought the young king to the queen's door, tapped on it and admitted him to her rooms. She was in her gown, seated by the fireside, a richly embroidered shawl thrown over her shoulders. The room was warm, welcoming. She rose as he came in and swept him a curtsy.

Harry lifted her up with a touch on her elbow. She saw at once that he was flushed with embarrassment, she felt his hand tremble.

'Will you take a cup of wedding ale?' she invited him, she made sure that she did not think of Arthur bringing her a cup and saying it was for courage.

'I will,' he said. His voice, still so young, was unsteady in its register. She turned away to pour the ale so he should not see her smile.

They lifted their cups to each other. 'I hope you did not find today too quiet for your taste,' he said uncertainly. 'I thought with my father newly dead we should not have too merry a wedding. I did not want to distress My Lady, his mother.'

She nodded but said nothing.

'I hope you are not disappointed,' he pressed on. 'Your first wedding was so very grand.'

Catalina smiled. 'I hardly remember it, it was so long ago.'

He looked pleased at her reply, she noted. 'It was, wasn't it? We were all little more than children.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Far too young to marry.'

He shifted in his seat. She knew that the courtiers who had taken Hapsburg gold would have spoken against her. The enemies of Spain would have spoken against her. His own grandmother had advised against this wedding. This transparent young man was still anxious about his decision, however bold he might try to appear.

'Not that young; you were fifteen,' he reminded her. 'A young woman.'

'And Arthur was the same age,' she said, daring to name him. 'But he was

never strong, I think. He could not be a husband to me.'

Harry was silent and she was afraid she had gone too far. But then she saw the glimpse of hope in his face.

'It is indeed true then, that the marriage was never consummated?' he asked, colouring up in embarrassment. 'I am sorry...I wondered...I know they said... but I did wonder...'

'Never,' she said calmly. 'He tried once or twice but you will remember that he was not strong. He may have even bragged that he had done it, but, poor Arthur, it meant nothing.'



'I shall do this for you,' I say fiercely, in my mind, to my beloved. 'You wanted this lie. I shall do it thoroughly. If it is going to be done, it must be done thoroughly. It has to be done with courage, conviction; and it must never be undone.'



Aloud, Catalina said: 'We married in the November, you remember. December we spent most of the time travelling to Ludlow and were apart on the journey. He was not well after Christmas, and then he died in April. I was very sad for him.'

'He was never your lover?' Harry asked, desperate to be certain.

'How could he be?' She gave a pretty, deprecatory shrug that made the gown slip off one creamy shoulder a little. She saw his eyes drawn to the exposed skin, she saw him swallow. 'He was not strong. Your own mother thought that he should have gone back to Ludlow alone, for the first year. I wish we had done that. It would have made no difference to me, and he might have been spared. He was like a stranger to me for all our marriage. We lived like children in a royal nursery. We were hardly even companions.'

He sighed as if he were free of a burden, the face he turned to her was bright. 'You know, I could not help but be afraid,' he said. 'My grandmother said...'

'Oh! Old women always gossip in the corners,' she said, smiling. She ignored his widened eyes at her casual disrespect. 'Thank God we are young and need pay no attention.'

‘So, it was just gossip,’ he said, quickly adopting her dismissive tone. ‘Just old women’s gossip.’

‘We won’t listen to her,’ she said, daring him to go on. ‘You are king and I am queen and we shall make up our own minds. We hardly need her advice. Why – it is her advice that has kept us apart when we could have been together.’

It had not struck him before. ‘Indeed,’ he said, his face hardening. ‘We have both been deprived. And all the time she hinted that you were Arthur’s wife, wedded and bedded, and I should look elsewhere.’

‘I am a virgin, as I was when I came to England,’ she asserted boldly. ‘You could ask my old duenna or any of my women. They all knew it. My mother knew it. I am a virgin untouched.’

He gave a little sigh as if released from some worry. ‘You are kind to tell me,’ he said. ‘It is better to have these things in the light, so we know, so we both know. So that no-one is uncertain. It would be terrible to sin.’

‘We are young,’ she said. ‘We can speak of such things between ourselves. We can be honest and straightforward together. We need not fear rumours and slanders. We need have no fear of sin.’

‘It will be my first time too,’ he admitted shyly. ‘I hope you don’t think the less of me?’

‘Of course not,’ she said sweetly. ‘When were you ever allowed to go out? Your grandmother and your father had you mewed up as close as a precious falcon. I am glad that we shall be together, that it will be the first time, for both of us, together.’

Harry rose to his feet and held out his hand. ‘So, we shall have to learn together,’ he said. ‘We shall have to be kind to each other. I don’t want to hurt you, Catalina. You must tell me if anything hurts you.’

Easily she moved into his arms, and felt his whole body stiffen at her touch. Gracefully, she stepped back, as if modestly shrinking but kept one hand on his shoulder to encourage him to press forwards until the bed was behind her. Then she let herself lean back until she was on the pillows, smiling up at him, and she could see his blue eyes darken with desire.

‘I have wanted you since I first saw you,’ he said breathlessly. He stroked her hair, her neck, her naked shoulder, with a hurried touch, wanting all of her, at once.

She smiled. ‘And I, you.’

‘Really?’

She nodded.

‘I dreamed that it was me that married you that day.’ He was flushed, breathless.

Slowly, she untied the ribbons at the throat of her nightgown, letting the silky linen fall apart so that he could see her throat, her round, firm breasts, her waist, the dark shadow between her legs. Harry gave a little groan of desire at the sight of her. ‘It might as well have been,’ she whispered. ‘I have had no other. And we are married now, at last.’

‘Ah God, we are,’ he said longingly. ‘We are married now, at last.’

He dropped his face into the warmth of her neck, she could feel his breath coming fast and urgent in her hair, his body was pushing against hers, Catalina felt herself respond. She remembered Arthur’s touch and gently bit the tip of her tongue to remind herself never, never to say Arthur’s name out loud. She let Harry push against her, force himself against her and then he was inside her. She gave a little rehearsed cry of pain but she knew at once, in a heart-thud of dread, that it was not enough. She had not cried out enough, her body had not resisted him enough. She had been too warm, too welcoming. It had been too easy. He did not know much, this callow boy; but he knew that it was not difficult enough.

He checked, even in the midst of his desire. He knew that something was not as it should be. He looked down at her. ‘You *are* a virgin,’ he said uncertainly. ‘I hope that I do not hurt too much.’

But he knew that she was not. Deep down, he knew that she was no virgin. He did not know much, this over-protected boy, but he knew this. Somewhere in his mind, he knew that she was lying.

She looked up at him. ‘I was a virgin until this moment,’ she said, managing the smallest of smiles. ‘But your potency has overcome me. You are so strong. You overwhelmed me.’

His face was still troubled, but his desire could not wait. He started to move again, he could not resist the pleasure. ‘You have mastered me,’ she encouraged him. ‘You are my husband, you have taken your own.’ She saw him forget his doubt in his rising desire. ‘You have done what Arthur could not do,’ she whispered.

They were the very words to trigger his desire. The young man gave a groan of pleasure and fell down on to her, his seed pumping into her, the deed undeniably done.



He doesn't question me again. He wants so much to believe me that he does not ask the question, fearing that he might get an answer he doesn't like. He is cowardly in this. He is accustomed to hearing the answers he wants to hear and he would rather an agreeable lie than an unpalatable truth.

Partly, it is his desire to have me, and he wants me as I was when he first saw me: a virgin in bridal white. Partly it is to disprove everyone who warned him against the trap that I had set for him. But more than anything else: he hated and envied my beloved Arthur and he wants me just because I was Arthur's bride, and – God forgive him for a spiteful, envious, second son – he wants me to tell him that he can do something that Arthur could not do, that he can have something that Arthur could not have. Even though my beloved husband is cold under the nave of Worcester Cathedral, the child that wears his crown still wants to triumph over him. The greatest lie is not in telling Harry that I am a virgin. The greatest lie is in telling him that he is a better man, more of a man than his brother. And I did that too.

In the dawn, while he is still sleeping, I take my pen-knife and cut the sole of my foot, where he will not notice a scar, and drip blood on the sheet where we had lain, enough to pass muster for an inspection by My Lady the King's Grandmother, or any other bad-tempered, suspicious enemy who might still seek to discomfort me. There is to be no showing of the sheets for a king and his bride; but I know that everyone will ask, and it is best that my ladies can say that they have all seen the smear of blood, and that I am complaining of the pain.

In the morning, I do everything that a bride should do. I say I am tired, and I rest for the morning. I smile with my eyes looking downwards as if I have discovered some sweet secret. I walk a little stiffly and I refuse to ride out to hunt for a week. I do everything to indicate that I am a young woman who has lost her virginity. I convince everyone. And besides, no-one wants to believe anything other.

The cut on my foot is sore for a long, long time. It catches me every time I step into my new shoes, the ones with the great diamond buckles. It is like a reminder to me of the lie I promised Arthur that I would tell. Of the great lie that I will live, for the rest of my life. I don't mind the sharp little nip of pain when I slide my right foot into my shoe. It is nothing to the pain that is hidden deep inside me when I smile at the unworthy boy who is king and call him, in my new admiring voice: 'husband'.



Harry woke in the night and his quiet stillness woke Catalina.

‘My lord?’ she asked.

‘Go to sleep,’ he said. ‘It’s not yet dawn.’

She slipped from the bed and lit a taper in the red embers of the fire, then lit a candle. She let him see her, nightgown half-open, her smooth flanks only half-hidden by the fall of the gown. ‘Would you like some ale? Or some wine?’

‘A glass of wine,’ he said. ‘You have one too.’

She put the candle in the silver holder and came back to the bed beside him with the wine glasses in her hand. She could not read his face, but suppressed her pang of irritation that, whatever it was, she had to be woken, she had to inquire what was troubling him, she had to demonstrate her concern. With Arthur she had known in a second what he wanted, what he was thinking. But anything could distract Harry, a song, a dream, a note thrown from the crowd. Anything could trouble him. He had been raised to be accustomed to sharing his thoughts, accustomed to guidance. He needed an entourage of friends and admirers, tutors, mentors, parents. He liked constant conversation. Catalina had to be everyone to him.

‘I have been thinking about war,’ he said.

‘Oh.’

‘King Louis thinks he can avoid us, but we will force war on him. They tell me he wants peace, but I will not have it. I am the King of England, the victors of Agincourt. He will find me a force to be reckoned with.’

She nodded. Her father had been clear that Harry should be encouraged in his warlike ambitions against the King of France. He had written to her in the warmest of terms as his dearest daughter, and advised her that any war between England and France should be launched, not on the north coast – where the English usually invaded – but on the borders between France and Spain. He suggested that the English should reconquer the region of Aquitaine which would be glad to be free of France and would rise up to meet its liberators. Spain would be in strong support. It would be an easy and glorious campaign.

‘In the morning I am going to order a new suit of armour,’ Harry said. ‘Not a suit for jousting, I want heavy armour, for the battlefield.’

She was about to say that he could hardly go to war when there was so much to do in the country. The moment that an English army left for France, the Scots, even with an English bride on their throne, were certain to take advantage and

invade the north. The whole tax system was riddled with greed and injustice and must be reformed, there were new plans for schools, for a king's council, for forts and a navy of ships to defend the coast. These were Arthur's plans for England, they should come before Harry's desire for a war.

'I shall make my grandmother regent when I go to war,' Harry said. 'She knows what has to be done.'

Catalina hesitated, marshalling her thoughts. 'Yes indeed,' she said. 'But the poor lady is so old now. She has done so much already. Perhaps it might be too much of a burden for her?'

He smiled. 'Not her! She has always run everything. She keeps the royal accounts, she knows what is to be done. I don't think anything would be too much for her as long as it kept us Tudors in power.'

'Yes,' Catalina said, gently touching on his resentment. 'And see how well she ruled you! She never let you out of her sight for a moment. Why, I don't think she would let you go out even now if she could prevent you. When you were a boy, she never let you joust, she never let you gamble, she never let you have any friends. She dedicated herself to your safety and your wellbeing. She could not have kept you closer if you had been a princess.' She laughed. 'I think she thought you were a princess and not a lusty boy. Surely it is time that she had a rest? And you had some freedom?'

His swift, sulky look told her that she would win this.

'Besides,' she smiled, 'if you give her any power in the country she will be certain to tell the council that you will have to come home, that war is too dangerous for you.'

'She could hardly stop me going to war,' he bristled. 'I am the king.'

Catalina raised her eyebrows. 'Whatever you wish, my love. But I imagine she will stop your funds, if the war starts to go badly. If she and the Privy Council doubt your conduct of the war they need do nothing but sit on their hands and not raise taxes for your army. You could find yourself betrayed at home – betrayed by her love, I mean – while you are attacked abroad. You might find that the old people stop you doing what you want. Like they always try to do.'

He was aghast. 'She would never work against me.'

'Never on purpose,' Catalina agreed with him. 'She would always think she was serving your interest. It is just that...'

'What?'

'She will always think that she knows your business best. To her, you will

always be a little boy.'

She saw him flush with annoyance.

'To her you will always be a second son, the one who came after Arthur. Not the true heir. Not fitted for the throne. Old people cannot change their minds, cannot see that everything is different now. But really, how can she ever trust your judgement, when she has spent her life ruling you? To her, you will always be the youngest prince, the baby.'

'I shall not be limited by an old woman,' he swore.

'Your time is now,' Catalina agreed.

'D'you know what I shall do?' he demanded. 'I shall make you regent when I go to war! You shall rule the country for me while I am gone. You shall command our forces at home. I would trust no-one else. We shall rule together. And you will support me as I require. D'you think you could do that?'

She smiled at him. 'I know I can. I won't fail,' she said. 'I was born to rule England. I shall keep the country safe while you are away.'

'That's what I need,' Harry said. 'And your mother was a great commander, wasn't she? She supported her husband. I always heard that he led the troops but she raised the money and raised the army?'

'Yes,' she said, a little surprised at his interest. 'Yes, she was always there. Behind the lines, planning his campaigns, and making sure he had the forces he needed, raising funds and raising troops, and sometimes she was in the very forefront of the battles. She had her own armour, she would ride out with the army.'

'Tell me about her,' he said, settling himself down in the pillows. 'Tell me about Spain. About what it was like when you were a little girl in the palaces of Spain. What was it like? In – what is it called – the Alhambra?'

It was too close to what had been before. It was as if a shadow had stretched over her heart. 'Oh, I hardly remember it at all,' she said, smiling at his eager face. 'There's nothing to tell.'

'Go on. Tell me a story about it.'

'No. I can't tell you anything. D'you know, I have been an English princess for so long, I could not tell you anything about it at all.'



In the morning Harry was filled with energy, excited at the thought of ordering his suit of armour, wanting a reason to declare war at once. He woke her with

kisses and was on her, like an eager boy, while she was waking. She held him close, welcomed his quick, selfish pleasure, and smiled when he was up and out of bed in a moment, hammering at the door and shouting for his guards to take him to his rooms.

‘I want to ride before Mass today,’ he said. ‘It is such a wonderful day. Will you come with me?’

‘I’ll see you at Mass,’ Catalina promised him. ‘And then you can breakfast with me, if you wish.’

‘We’ll take breakfast in the hall,’ he ruled. ‘And then we must go hunting. It is too good weather not to take the dogs out. You will come, won’t you?’

‘I’ll come,’ she promised him, smiling at his exuberance. ‘And shall we have a picnic?’

‘You are the best of wives!’ he exclaimed. ‘A picnic would be wonderful. Will you tell them to get some musicians and we can dance? And bring ladies, bring all your ladies, and we shall all dance.’

She caught him before he went out of the door. ‘Harry, may I send for Lady Margaret Pole? You like her, don’t you? Can I have her as a lady-in-waiting?’

He stepped back into the room, caught her into his arms and kissed her heartily. ‘You shall have whoever you want to serve you. Anyone you want, always. Send for her at once, I know she is the finest of women. And appoint Lady Elizabeth Boleyn too. She is returning to court after her confinement. She has had another girl.’

‘What will she call her?’ Catalina asked, diverted.

‘Mary, I think. Or Anne. I can’t remember. Now, about our dance...’

She beamed at him. ‘I shall get a troupe of musicians and dancers and if I can order soft-voice zephyrs I will do that too.’ She laughed at the happiness in his face. She could hear the tramp of his guard coming to the door. ‘See you at Mass!’



I married him for Arthur, for my mother, for God, for our cause, and for myself. But in a very little while I have come to love him. It is impossible not to love such a sweet-hearted, energetic, good-natured boy as Harry, in these first years of his reign. He has never known anything but admiration and kindness, he expects nothing less. He wakes happy every morning, filled with the confident expectation of a happy day. And, since he is king, and surrounded by courtiers

and flatterers, he always has a happy day. When work troubles him or people come to him with disagreeable complaints he looks around for someone to take the bother of it away from him. In the first few weeks it was his grandmother who commanded; slowly, I make sure that it is to me that he hands the burdens of ruling the kingdom.

The Privy Councillors learn to come to me to ascertain what the king would think. It is easier for them to present a letter or a suggestion, if he has been prepared by me. The courtiers soon know that anything that encourages him to go away from me, anything that takes the country away from the alliance with Spain will displease me, and Harry does not like it when I frown. Men seeking advantage, advocates seeking help, petitioners seeking justice, all learn that the quickest way to a fair, prompt decision is to call first at the queen's rooms and then wait for my introduction.

I never have to ask anyone to handle him with tact. Everyone knows that a request should come to him as it were fresh, for the first time. Everyone knows that the self-love of a young man is very new and very bright and should not be tarnished. Everyone takes a warning from the case of his grandmother who is finding herself put gently and implacably to one side, because she openly advises him, because she takes decisions without him, because once – foolishly – she scolded him. Harry is a king so careless that he will hand over the keys of his kingdom to anyone he trusts. The trick for me is to make sure that he trusts only me.

I make sure that I never blame him for not being Arthur. I taught myself – in the seven years of widowhood – that God's will was done when He took Arthur from me, and there is no point in blaming those who survive when the best prince is dead. Arthur died with my promise in his ears and I think myself very lucky indeed that marriage to his brother is not a vow that I have to endure; but one I can enjoy.

I like being queen. I like having pretty things and rich jewels and a lap dog, and assembling ladies-in-waiting whose company is a pleasure. I like paying Maria de Salinas the long debt of her wages and watching her order a dozen gowns and fall in love. I like writing to Lady Margaret Pole and summoning her to my court, falling into her arms and crying for joy to see her again, and having her promise that she will be with me. I like knowing that her discretion is absolute; she never says one word about Arthur. But I like it that she knows what this marriage has cost me, and why I have done it. I like her watching me make Arthur's England even though it is Harry on the throne.

The first month of marriage is nothing for Harry but a round of parties, feasts, hunts, outings, pleasure trips, boating trips, plays, and tournaments. Harry is like a boy who has been locked up in a school room for too long and is suddenly given a summer holiday. The world is so filled with amusement for him that the least experience gives him great pleasure. He loves to hunt – and he had never been allowed fast horses before. He loves to joust and his father and grandmother had never even allowed him in the lists. He loves the company of men of the world who carefully adapt their conversation and their amusements to divert him. He loves the company of women but – thank God – his childlike devotion to me holds him firm. He likes to talk to pretty women, play cards with them, watch them dance and reward them with great prizes for petty feats – but always he glances towards me to see that I approve. Always he stays at my side, looking down at me from his greater height with a gaze of such devotion that I can't help but be loving towards him for what he brings me; and in a very little while, I can't help but love him for himself.

He has surrounded himself with a court of young men and women who are such a contrast to his father's court that they demonstrate by their very being that everything has changed. His father's court was filled with old men, men who had been through hard times together, some of them battle-hardened; all of them had lost and regained their lands at least once. Harry's court is filled with men who have never known hardship, never been tested.

I have made a point of saying nothing to criticise either him or the group of wild young men that gather around him. They call themselves the 'Minions' and they encourage each other in mad bets and jests all the day and – according to gossip – half the night too. Harry was kept so quiet and so close for all his childhood that I think it natural he should long to run wild now, and that he should love the young men who boast of drinking bouts and fights, and chases and attacks, and girls who they seduce, and fathers who pursue them with cudgels. His best friend is William Compton, the two go about with their arms around each other's shoulders as if ready to dance or braced for a fight for half the day. There is no harm in William, he is as great a fool as the rest of the court, he loves Harry as a comrade, and he has a mock-adoration of me that makes us all laugh. Half of the Minions pretend to be in love with me and I let them dedicate verses and sing songs to me and I make sure that Harry always knows that his songs and poems are the best.

The older members of the court disapprove and have made stern criticisms of the king's boisterous lads; but I say nothing. When the councillors come to me

with complaints I say that the king is a young man and youth will have its way. There is no great harm in any one of the comrades; when they are not drinking, they are sweet young men. One or two, like the Duke of Buckingham who greeted me long ago, or the young Thomas Howard, are fine young men who would be an ornament to any court. My mother would have liked them. But when the lads are deep in their cups they are noisy and rowdy and excitable as young men always are and when they are sober they talk nonsense. I look at them with my mother's eyes and I know that they are the boys who will become the officers in our army. When we go to war their energy and their courage are just what we will need. The noisiest, most disruptive young men in peacetime are exactly the leaders I will need in time of war.



Lady Margaret, the king's grandmother, having buried a husband or two, a daughter-in-law, a grandson and finally her own precious prince, was a little weary of fighting for her place in the world and Catalina was careful not to provoke her old enemy into open warfare. Thanks to Catalina's discretion, the rivalry between the two women was not played overtly – anyone hoping to see Lady Margaret abuse her granddaughter-in-law as she had insulted her son's wife was disappointed. Catalina slid away from conflict.

When Lady Margaret tried to claim precedence by arriving at the dining-hall door a few footsteps before Catalina, a Princess of the Blood, an Infanta of Spain and now Queen of England, Catalina stepped back at once and gave way to her with such an air of generosity that everyone remarked on the pretty behaviour of the new queen. Catalina had a way of ushering the older woman before her that absolutely denied all rules of precedence and instead somehow emphasised Lady Margaret's ungainly gallop to beat her granddaughter-in-law to the high table. They also saw Catalina pointedly step back, and everyone remarked on the grace and generosity of the younger woman.

The death of Lady Margaret's son, King Henry, had hit the old lady hard. It was not so much that she had lost a beloved child; it was more that she had lost a cause. In his absence she could hardly summon the energy to force the Privy Councillors to report to her before going to the king's rooms. Harry's joyful excusing of his father's debts and freeing of his father's prisoners she took as an insult to his father's memory, and to her own rule. The sudden leap of the court into youth and freedom and playfulness made her feel old and bad-tempered.

She, who had once been the commander of the court and the maker of the rules, was left to one side. Her opinion no longer mattered. The great book by which all court events must be governed had been written by her; but suddenly, they were celebrating events that were not in her book, they invented pastimes and activities, and she was not consulted.

She blamed Catalina for all the changes she most disliked, and Catalina smiled very sweetly and continued to encourage the young king to hunt and to dance and to stay up late at night. The old lady grumbled to her ladies that the queen was a giddy, vain thing and would lead the prince to disaster. Insultingly, she even remarked that it was no wonder Arthur had died, if this was the way that the Spanish girl thought a royal household should be run.

Lady Margaret Pole remonstrated with her old acquaintance as tactfully as she could. 'My lady, the queen has a merry court but she never does anything against the dignity of the throne. Indeed, without her, the court would be far wilder. It is the king who insists on one pleasure after another. It is the queen who gives this court its manners. The young men adore her and nobody drinks or misbehaves before her.'

'It is the queen who I blame,' the old woman said crossly. 'Princess Eleanor would never have behaved like this. Princess Eleanor would have been housed in my rooms, and the place would have run by my rules.'

Tactfully, Catalina heard nothing; not even when people came to her and repeated the slanders. Catalina simply ignored her grand-mother-in-law and the constant stream of her criticism. She could have done nothing that would irritate her more.

It was the late hours that the court now kept that were the old lady's greatest complaint. Increasingly, she had to wait and wait for dinner to be served. She would complain that it was so late at night that the servants would not be finished before dawn, and then she would retire before the court had even finished their dinner.

'You keep late hours,' she told Harry. 'It is foolish. You need your sleep. You are only a boy; you should not be roistering all night. I cannot keep hours like this, and it is a waste of candles.'

'Yes; but my lady grandmother, you are nearly seventy years old,' he said patiently. 'Of course you should have your rest. You shall retire whenever you wish. Catalina and I are only young. It is natural for us to want to stay up late. We like amusement.'

'She should be resting. She has to conceive an heir,' Lady Margaret said

irritably. 'She's not going to do that bobbing about in a dance with a bunch of feather-heads. Masquing, every night. Whoever heard of such a thing? And who is to pay for all this?'

'We've been married less than a month!' he exclaimed, a little irritated. 'These are our wedding celebrations. I think we can enjoy good pastimes, and keep a merry court. I like to dance.'

'You act as if there was no end to money,' she snapped. 'How much has this dinner cost you? And last night's? The strewing herbs alone must cost a fortune. And the musicians? This is a country that has to hoard its wealth, it cannot afford a spendthrift king. It is not the English way to have a popinjay on the throne, a court of mummers.'

Harry flushed, he was about to make a sharp retort.

'The king is no spendthrift,' Catalina intervened quickly. 'This is just part of the wedding festivities. Your son, the late king, always thought that there should be a merry court. He thought that people should know that the court was wealthy and gay. King Harry is only following in the footsteps of his wise father.'

'His father was not a young fool under the thumb of his foreign wife!' the old lady said spitefully.

Catalina's eyes widened slightly and she put her hand on Harry's sleeve to keep him silent. 'I am his partner and his help-meet, as God has bidden me,' she said gently. 'As I am sure you would want me to be.'

The old lady grunted. 'I hear you claim to be more than that,' she began.

The two young people waited. Catalina could feel Harry shift restlessly under the gentle pressure of her hand.

'I hear that your father is to recall his ambassador. Am I right?' She glared at them both. 'Presumably he does not need an ambassador now. The King of England's own wife is in the pay and train of Spain. The King of England's own wife is to be the Spanish ambassador. How can that be?'

'My lady grandmother...' Harry burst out; but Catalina was sweetly calm.

'I am a princess of Spain, of course I would represent the country of my birth to my country by marriage. I am proud to be able to do such a thing. Of course I will tell my father that his beloved son, my husband, is well, that our kingdom is prosperous. Of course I will tell my husband that my loving father wants to support him in war and peace.'

'When we go to war...' Harry began.

'War?' the old lady demanded, her face darkening. 'Why should we go to war? We have no quarrel with France. It is only her father who wants war with

France, no-one else. Tell me that not even you will be such a fool as to take us into war to fight for the Spanish! What are you now? Their errand boy? Their vassal?’

‘The King of France is a danger to us all!’ Harry stormed. ‘And the glory of England has always been...’

‘I am sure My Lady the King’s Grandmother did not mean to disagree with you, sire,’ Catalina said sweetly. ‘These are changing times. We cannot expect older people always to understand when things change so quickly.’

‘I’m not quite in my dotage yet!’ the old woman flared. ‘And I know danger when I see it. And I know divided loyalties when I see them. And I know a Spanish spy...’

‘You are a most treasured advisor,’ Catalina assured her. ‘And my lord the king and I are always glad of your advice. Aren’t we, Harry?’

He was still angry. ‘Agincourt was...’

‘I’m tired,’ the old woman said. ‘And you twist and twist things about. I’m going to my room.’

Catalina swept her a deep, respectful curtsy, Harry ducked his head with scant politeness. When Catalina came up the old woman had gone.

‘How can she say such things?’ Harry demanded. ‘How can you bear to listen to her when she says such things? She makes me want to roar like a baited bear! She understands nothing, and she insults you! And you just stand and listen!’

Catalina laughed, took his cross face in her hands and kissed him on the lips. ‘Oh, Harry, who cares what she thinks as long as she can do nothing? Nobody cares what she says now.’

‘I am going to war with France whatever she thinks,’ he promised.

‘Of course you are, as soon as the time is right.’



I hide my triumph over her, but I know the taste of it, and it is sweet. I think to myself that one day the other tormentors of my widowhood, the princesses, Harry’s sisters, will know my power too. But I can wait.

Lady Margaret may be old but she cannot even gather the senior people of court about her. They have known her forever, the bonds of kinship, wardship, rivalry and feud run through them all like veins through dirty marble. She was never well-liked: not as a woman, not as the mother of a king. She was from one

of the great families of the country but when she leapt up so high after Bosworth she flaunted her importance. She has a great reputation for learning and for holiness but she is not beloved. She always insisted on her position as the king's mother and a gulf has grown between her and the other people of the court.

Drifting away from her, they are becoming friends of mine: Lady Margaret Pole of course, the Duke of Buckingham and his sisters, Elizabeth and Anne, Thomas Howard, his sons, Sir Thomas and Lady Elizabeth Boleyn, dearest William Warham, the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Talbot, Sir Henry Vernon that I knew from Wales. They all know that although Harry neglects the business of the realm, I do not.

I consult them for their advice, I share with them the hopes that Arthur and I had. Together with the men of the Privy Council I am bringing the kingdom into one powerful, peaceful country. We are starting to consider how to make the law run from one coast to another, through the wastes, the mountains and forests alike. We are starting to work on the defences of the coast. We are making a survey of the ships that could be commanded into a fighting navy, we are creating muster rolls for an army. I have taken the reins of the kingdom into my hands and found that I know how it is done.

Statecraft is my family business. I sat at my mother's feet in the throne room of the Alhambra Palace. I listened to my father in the beautiful golden Hall of the Ambassadors. I learned the art and the craft of kingship as I had learned about beauty, music, and the art of building, all in the same place, all in the same lessons. I learned a taste for rich tiling, for bright sunlight falling on a delicate tracery of stucco, and for power, all at the same time. Becoming a Queen Regnant is like coming home. I am happy as Queen of England. I am where I was born and raised to be.



The king's grandmother lay in her ornate bed, rich curtains drawn close so that she was lulled by shadows. At the foot of the bed an uncomplaining lady-in-waiting held up the monstrance for her to see the body of Christ in its white purity through the diamond-cut piece of glass. The dying woman fixed her eyes on it, occasionally looking to the ivory crucifix on the wall beside the bed, ignoring the soft murmur of prayers around her.

Catalina knelt at the foot of the bed, her head bowed, a coral rosary in her hands, praying silently. My Lady Margaret, confident of a hard-won place in

heaven, was sliding away from her place on earth.

Outside, in her presence chamber, Harry waited for them to tell him that his grandmother was dead. The last link to his subordinate, junior childhood would be broken with her death. The years in which he had been the second son – trying a little harder for attention, smiling a little brighter, working at being clever – would all be gone. From now on, everyone he would meet would know him only as the most senior member of his family, the greatest of his line. There would be no articulate, critical old Tudor lady to watch over this gullible prince, to cut him down with one quiet word in the very moment of his springing up. When she was dead he could be a man, on his own terms. There would be no one left who knew him as a boy. Although he was waiting, outwardly pious, for news of her death, inside he was longing to hear that she was gone, that he was at last truly independent, at last a man and a king. He had no idea that he still desperately needed her counsel.

‘He must not go to war,’ the king’s grandmother said hoarsely from the bed.

The lady-in-waiting gave a little gasp at the sudden clarity of her mistress’s speech. Catalina rose to her feet. ‘What did you say, my lady?’

‘He must not go to war,’ she repeated. ‘Our way is to keep out of the endless wars of Europe, to keep behind the seas, to keep safe and far away from all those princeling squabbles. Our way is keep the kingdom at peace.’

‘No,’ Catalina said steadily. ‘Our way is to take the crusade into the heart of Christendom and beyond. Our way is to make England a leader in establishing the church throughout Europe, throughout the Holy Land, to Africa, to the Turks, to the Saracens, to the edge of the world.’

‘The Scots...’

‘I shall defeat the Scots,’ Catalina said firmly. ‘I am well aware of the danger.’

‘I did not let him marry you for you to lead us to war.’ The dark eyes flared with fading resentment.

‘You did not let him marry me at all. You opposed it from the first moment,’ Catalina said bluntly. ‘And I married him precisely so that he should mount a great crusade.’ She ignored the little whimper from the lady-in-waiting, who believed that a dying woman should not be contradicted.

‘You will promise me that you will not let him go to war,’ the old lady breathed. ‘My dying promise, my deathbed promise. I lay it on you from my deathbed, as a sacred duty.’

‘No.’ Catalina shook her head. ‘Not me. Not another. I made one deathbed

promise and it has cost me dearly. I will not make another. Least of all to you. You have lived your life and made your world as you wished. Now it is my turn. I shall see my son as King of England and perhaps King of Spain. I shall see my husband lead a glorious crusade against the Moors and the Turks. I shall see my country, England, take its place in the world, where it should be. I shall see England at the heart of Europe, a leader of Europe. And I shall be the one that defends it and keeps it safe. I shall be the one that is Queen of England, as you never were.'

'No...' the old woman breathed.

'Yes,' Catalina swore, without compromise. 'I am Queen of England now and I will be till my death.'

The old woman raised herself up, struggled for breath. 'You pray for me.' She laid the order on the younger woman almost as if it were a curse. 'I have done my duty to England, to the Tudor line. You see that my name is remembered as if I were a queen.'

Catalina hesitated. If this woman had not served herself, her son and her country, the Tudors would not be on the throne. 'I will pray for you,' she conceded grudgingly. 'And as long as there is a chantry in England, as long as the Holy Roman Catholic Church is in England, your name will be remembered.'

'Forever,' the old woman said, happy in her belief that some things could never change.

'Forever,' Catalina agreed.



Then, less than an hour later, she was dead; and I became queen, ruling queen, undeniably in command, without a rival, even before my coronation. No-one knows what to do in the court, there is no-one who can give a coherent order. Harry has never ordered a royal funeral, how should he know where to begin, how to judge the extent of the honour that should be given to his grandmother? How many mourners? How long the time of mourning? Where should she be buried? How should the whole ceremonial be done?

I summon my oldest friend in England, the Duke of Buckingham, who greeted me on my arrival all those years ago and is now Lord High Steward, and I ask for Lady Margaret Pole to come to me. My ladies bring me the great volume of ceremonial, The Royal Book, written by the king's dead grandmother

herself, and I set about organising my first public English event.

I am lucky; tucked inside the cover of the book I find three pages of handwritten instructions. The vain old lady had laid out the order of the procession that she wanted for her funeral. Lady Margaret and I gasp at the numbers of bishops she would like to serve, the pallbearers, the mutes, the mourners, the decorations on the streets, the duration of the mourning. I show them to the Duke of Buckingham, her one-time ward, who says nothing but in discreet silence just smiles and shakes his head. Hiding my unworthy sense of triumph I take a quill, dip it in black ink, cut almost everything by a half, and then start to give orders.



It was a quiet ceremony of smooth dignity, and everyone knew that it had been commanded and ordered by the Spanish bride. Those who had not known before realised now that the girl who had been waiting for seven years to come to the throne of England had not wasted her time. She knew the temperament of the English people, she knew how to put on a show for them. She knew the tenor of the court: what they regarded as stylish, what they saw as mean. And she knew, as a princess born, how to rule. In those days before her coronation, Catalina established herself as the undeniable queen, and those who had ignored her in her years of poverty now discovered in themselves tremendous affection and respect for the princess.

She accepted their admiration, just as she had accepted their neglect: with calm politeness. She knew that by ordering the funeral of the king's grandmother she established herself as the first woman of the new court, and the arbiter of all decisions of court life. She had, in one brilliant performance, established herself as the foremost leader of England. And she was certain that after this triumph no-one would ever be able to supplant her.



We decide not to cancel our coronation, though My Lady the King's Grandmother's funeral preceded it. The arrangements are all in place, we judge that we should do nothing to mar the joy of the City or of the people who have come from all over England to see the boy Harry take his father's crown. They

say that some have travelled all the way from Plymouth, who saw me come ashore, a frightened seasick girl, all those years ago. We are not going to tell them that the great celebration of Harry's coming to the throne, of my coronation, is cancelled because a cross old lady has died at an ill-judged time. We agree that the people are expecting a great celebration and we should not deny them.

In truth, it is Harry who cannot bear a disappointment. He had promised himself a great moment of glory and he would not miss it for the world. Certainly not for the death of a very old lady who spent the last years of her life preventing him from having his own way in anything.

I agree with him. I judge that the king's grandmother seized her power and enjoyed her time, and now it is time for us. I judge that it is the mood of the country and the mood of the court to celebrate the triumph of Harry's coming to the throne with me at his side. Indeed, for some of them, who have long taken an interest in me, there is the greatest delight that I shall have the crown at last. I decide – and there is no-one but me to decide – that we will go ahead. And so we do.

I know that Harry's grief for his grandmother is only superficial; his mourning is mostly show. I saw him when I came from her privy chamber, and he knew, since I had left her bedside, that she must be dead. I saw his shoulders stretch out and lift, as if he were suddenly free from the burden of her care, as if her skinny, loving, age-spotted hand had been a dead weight on his neck. I saw his quick smile – his delight that he was alive and young and lusty, and that she was gone. Then I saw the careful composing of his face into conventional sadness and I stepped forwards, with my face grave also, and told him that she was dead, in a low sad voice, and he answered me in the same tone.

I am glad to know that he can play the hypocrite. The court room in the Alhambra Palace has many doors; my father told me that a king should be able to go out of one and come in through another and nobody know his mind. I know that to rule is to keep your own counsel. Harry is a boy now, but one day he will be a man and he will have to make up his own mind and judge well. I will remember that he can say one thing and think another.

But I have learned something else about him too. When I saw that he did not weep one real tear for his grandmother I knew that this king, our golden Harry, has a cold heart that no-one can trust. She had been as a mother to him; she had dominated his childhood. She had cared for him, watched over him, and taught him herself. She supervised his every waking moment and shielded him from

every unpleasant sight, she kept him from tutors who would have taught him of the world, and allowed him to walk only in the gardens of her making. She spent hours on her knees in prayer for him and insisted that he be taught the rule and the power of the church. But when she stood in his way, when she denied him his pleasures, he saw her as his enemy; and he cannot forgive anyone who refuses him something he wants. I know from this that this boy, this charming boy, will grow to be a man whose selfishness will be a danger to himself, and to those around him. One day we may all wish that his grandmother had taught him better.

24th June 1509



They carried Catalina from the Tower to Westminster as an English princess. She travelled in a litter made of cloth of gold, carried high by four white palfreys so everyone could see her. She wore a gown of white satin and a coronet set with pearls, her hair brushed out over her shoulders. Harry was crowned first and then Catalina bowed her head and took the holy oil of kingship on her head and breasts, stretched out her hand for the sceptre and the ivory wand, knew that, at last, she was a queen, as her mother had been: an anointed queen, a greater being than mere mortals, a step closer to the angels, appointed by God to rule His country, and under His especial protection. She knew that finally she had fulfilled the destiny that she had been born for, she had taken her place, as she had promised that she would.

She took a throne just a little lower than King Henry's, and the crowd that cheered for the handsome young king coming to his throne also cheered for her, the Spanish princess, who had been constant against the odds and was crowned Queen Katherine of England at last.



I have waited for this day for so long that when it comes it is like a dream, like the dreams I have had of my greatest desires. I go through the coronation ceremony: my place in the procession, my seat on the throne, the cool lightness

of the ivory rod in my hand, my other hand tightly gripping the heavy sceptre, the deep, heady scent of the holy oil on my forehead and breasts, as if it is another dream of longing for Arthur.

But this time it is real.

When we come out of the Abbey and I hear the crowd cheer for him, for me, I turn to look at my husband beside me. I am shocked then, a sudden shock like waking suddenly from a dream – that he is not Arthur. He is not my love. I had expected to be crowned beside Arthur and for us to take our thrones together. But instead of the handsome, thoughtful face of my husband, it is Harry's round, flushed beam. Instead of my husband's shy, coltish grace, it is Harry's exuberant swagger at my side.

I realise at that moment, that Arthur really is dead, really gone from me. I am fulfilling my part of our promise, marrying the King of England, even though it is Harry. Please God, Arthur is fulfilling his part: to watch over me from al-Yanna, and to wait for me there. One day, when my work is done and I can go to my love, I will live with him forever.

'Are you happy?' the boy asks me, shouting to make himself heard above the pealing of the bells and the cheering of the crowds. 'Are you happy, Catalina? Are you glad that I married you? Are you glad to be Queen of England, that I have given you this crown?'

'I am very happy,' I promise him. 'And you must call me Katherine now.'

'Katherine?' he asks. 'Not Catalina any more?'

'I am Queen of England,' I say, thinking of Arthur saying these very words. 'I am Queen Katherine of England.'

'Oh, I say!' he exclaims, delighted at the idea of changing his name, as I have changed mine. 'That's good. We shall be King Henry, and Queen Katherine. They shall call me Henry too.'

This is the king but he is not Arthur, he is Harry who wants to be called Henry, like a man. I am the queen, and I shall not be Catalina. I shall be Katherine – English through and through, and not the girl who was once so very much in love with the Prince of Wales.

Katherine, Queen of England

Summer 1509

The court, drunk with joy, with delight in its own youth, with freedom, took the summer for pleasure. The progress from one beautiful, welcoming house to another lasted for two long months when Henry and Katherine hunted, dined in the greenwood, danced until midnight, and spent money like water. The great lumbering carts of the royal household went along the dusty lanes of England so that the next house might shine with gold and be bright with tapestries, so that the royal bed – which they shared every night – would be rich with the best linen and the glossiest furs.

No business of any worth was transacted by Henry at all. He wrote once to his father-in-law to tell him how happy he was, but the rest of the work for the king followed him in boxes from one beautiful parkland castle or mansion to another, and these were opened and read only by Katherine, Queen of England, who ordered the clerks to write her orders to the Privy Council, and sent them out herself over the king's signature.

Not until mid-September did the court return to Richmond and Henry at once declared that the party should go on. Why should they ever cease in pleasure? The weather was fair, they could have hunting and boating, archery and tennis contests, parties and masquings. The nobles and gentry flocked to Richmond to join the unending party: the families whose power and name were older than the Tudors, and the new ones, whose wealth and name was bobbing upwards on the rise of the Tudor tide, floated by Tudor wealth. The victors of Bosworth who had staked their lives on the Tudor courage in great danger found themselves alongside newcomers who made their fortunes on nothing more than Tudor amusements.

Henry welcomed everyone with uncritical delight; anyone who was witty and well-read, charming or a good sportsman could have a place at court. Katherine smiled on them all, never rested, never refused a challenge or an invitation, and set herself the task of keeping her teenage husband entertained all the day long. Slowly, but surely, she drew the management of the entertainments, then of the household, then of the king's business, then of the

kingdom, into her hands.



Queen Katherine had the accounts for the royal court spread out before her, a clerk to one side, a comptroller of the household with his great book to another, the men who served as exchequers of the household standing behind her. She was checking the books of the great departments of the court: the kitchen, the cellar, the wardrobe, the servery, the payments for services, the stables, the musicians. Each department of the palace had to compile their monthly expenditure and send it to the Queen's Exchequer – just as they had sent it to My Lady the King's Mother, for her to approve their business, and if they overspent by very much, they could expect a visit from one of the exchequers for the Privy Purse to ask them pointedly if they could explain why costs had so suddenly risen?

Every court in Europe was engaged in the struggle to control the cost of running the sprawling feudal households with the newly fashionable wealth and display. All the kings wanted a great entourage, like a mediaeval lord; but now they wanted culture, wealth, architecture and rich display as well. England was managed better than any court in Europe. Queen Katherine had learned her housekeeping skills the hard way: when she had tried to run Durham House as a royal palace should be run, but with no income. She knew to a penny what was the price of a gallon loaf, she knew the difference between salted fish and fresh, she knew the price of cheap wine imported from Spain and expensive wine brought in from France. Even more rigorous than My Lady the King's Mother, Queen Katherine's scrutiny of the household books made the cooks argue with suppliers at the kitchen doors, and get the very best price for the extravagantly consuming court.

Once a week Queen Katherine surveyed the expenditure of the different departments of the court, and every day at dawn, while King Henry was out hunting, she read the letters that came for him, and drafted his replies.

It was steady, unrelenting work, to keep the court running as a well-ordered centre for the country, and to keep the king's business under tight control. Queen Katherine, determined to understand her new country, did not begrudge the hours she spent reading letters, taking advice from Privy Councillors, inviting objections, taking opinions. She had seen her own mother dominate a country by persuasion. Isabella of Spain had brokered her country out of a collection of rival

kingships and lordships by offering them a trouble-free, cheap, central administration, a nationwide system of justice, an end to corruption and banditry and an infallible defence system. Her daughter saw at once that these advantages could be transferred to England.

But she was also following in the steps of her Tudor father-in-law, and the more she worked on his papers and read his letters, the more she admired the steadiness of his judgement. Oddly, she wished now, that she had known him as a ruler, as she would have benefited from his advice. From his records she could see how he balanced the desire of the English lords to be independent, on their own lands, with his own need to bind them to the crown. Cunningly, he allowed the northern lords greater freedom and greater wealth and status than anyone, since they were his bulwark against the Scots. Katherine had maps of the northern lands pinned around the council chamber and saw how the border with Scotland was nothing more than a handful of disputed territories in difficult country. Such a border could never be made safe from a threatening neighbour. She thought that the Scots were England's Moors: the land could not be shared with them. They would have to be utterly defeated.

She shared her father-in-law's fears of overmighty English lords at court, she learned his jealousy of their wealth and power; and when Henry thought to give one man a handsome pension in an exuberant moment, it was Katherine who pointed out that he was a wealthy man already, there was no need to make his position any stronger. Henry wanted to be a king famed for his generosity, beloved for the sudden shower of his gifts. Katherine knew that power followed wealth and that kings new-come to their throne must hoard both wealth and power.

'Did your father never warn you about the Howards?' she asked as they stood together watching an archery contest. Henry, stripped down to his shirtsleeves, his bow in his hand, had the second-highest score and was waiting for his turn to go again.

'No,' he replied. 'Should he have done so?'

'Oh no,' she said swiftly. 'I did not mean to suggest that they would play you false in any way, they are love and loyalty personified, Thomas Howard has been a great friend to your family, keeping the north safe for you, and Edward is my knight, my dearest knight of all. It is just that their wealth has increased so much, and their family alliances are so strong. I just wondered what your father thought of them.'

'I wouldn't know,' Henry said easily. 'I wouldn't have asked him. He

wouldn't have told me anyway.'

'Not even when he knew you were to be the next king?'

He shook his head. 'He thought I wouldn't be king for years yet,' he said. 'He had not finished making me study my books. He had not yet let me out into the world.'

She shook her head. 'When we have a son we will make sure he is prepared for his kingdom from an early age.'

At once, his hand stole around her waist. 'Do you think it will be soon?' he asked.

'Please God,' she said sweetly, withholding her secret hope. 'Do you know, I have been thinking of a name for him?'

'Have you, sweetheart? Shall you call him Ferdinand for your father?'

'If you would like it, I thought we might call him Arthur,' she said carefully.

'For my brother?' His face darkened at once.

'No, Arthur for England,' she said swiftly. 'When I look at you sometimes I think you are like King Arthur of the round table, and this is Camelot. We are making a court here as beautiful and as magical as Camelot ever was.'

'Do you think that, little dreamer?'

'I think you could be the greatest king England has ever known since Arthur of Camelot,' she said.

'Arthur it is, then,' he said, soothed as always by praise. 'Arthur Henry.'

'Yes.'

They called to him from the butts that it was his turn, and that he had a high score to beat, and he went with a kiss blown to her. Katherine made sure that she was watching as he drew his bow, and when he glanced over, as he always did, he could see that her attention was wholly on him. The muscles in his lean back rippled as he drew back the arrow, he was like a statue, beautifully poised, and then slowly, like a dancer, he released the string and the arrow flew – faster than sight – true to the very centre of the target.

'A hit!'

'A winning hit!'

'Victory to the king!'

The prize was a golden arrow and Henry came bright-faced to his wife to kneel at her feet so that she could bend down and kiss him on both cheeks, and then, lovingly, on the mouth.

'I won for you,' he said. 'You, alone. You bring me luck. I never miss when you are watching me. You shall keep the winning arrow.'

‘It is a Cupid’s arrow,’ she responded. ‘I shall keep it to remind me of the one in my heart.’

‘She loves me.’ He rose to his feet and turned to his court, and there was a ripple of applause and laughter. He shouted triumphantly: ‘She loves me!’

‘Who could help but love you?’ Lady Elizabeth Boleyn, one of the ladies-in-waiting, called out boldly. Henry glanced at her and then looked down from his great height to his petite wife.

‘Who could help but love her?’ he asked, smiling at her.



That night I kneel before my prie-dieu and clasp my hands over my belly. It is the second month that I have not bled, I am almost certain that I am with child.

‘Arthur,’ I whisper, my eyes closed. I can almost see him, as he was: naked in candlelight in our bedroom at Ludlow. ‘Arthur, my love. He says that I can call this boy Arthur Henry. So I will have fulfilled our hope – that I should give you a son called Arthur. And though I know you didn’t like your brother, I will show him the respect that I owe to him; he is a good boy and I pray that he will grow to a good man. I shall call my boy Arthur Henry for you both.’

I feel no guilt for my growing affection for this boy Henry though he can never take the place of his brother, Arthur. It is right that I should love my husband and Henry is an endearing boy. The knowledge that I have of him, from watching him for long years as closely as if he were an enemy, has brought me to a deep awareness of the sort of boy he is. He is selfish as a child, but he has a child’s generosity and easy tenderness. He is vain, he is ambitious, to tell truth, he is as conceited as a player in a troupe, but he is quick to laughter and quick to tears, quick to compassion, quick to alleviate hardship. He will make a good man if he has good guides, if he can be taught to rein in his desires and learn service to his country and to God. He has been spoiled by those who should have guided him; but it is not too late to make a good man from him. It is my task and my duty to keep him from selfishness. Like any young man, he is a tyrant in the making. A good mother would have disciplined him, perhaps a loving wife can curb him. If I can love him, and hold him to love me, I can make a great king of him. And England needs a great king.

Perhaps this is one of the services I can do for England: guide him, gently and steadily, away from his spoiled childhood and towards a manhood which is responsible. His father and his grandmother kept him as a boy; perhaps it is my

task to help him grow to be a man.

‘Arthur, my dearest Arthur,’ I say quietly as I rise and go towards the bed, and this time I am speaking to them both: to the husband that I loved first, and to the child that is slowly, quietly growing inside me.

Autumn 1509

At nighttime in October, after Katherine had refused to dance after midnight for the previous three weeks, and had insisted, instead, on watching Henry dance with her ladies, she told him that she was with child, and made him swear to keep it secret.

‘I want to tell everyone!’ he exclaimed. He had come to her room in his nightgown and they were seated either side of the warm fire, on their way to bed.

‘You can write to my father next month,’ she specified. ‘But I don’t want everyone to know yet. They will all guess soon enough.’

‘You must rest,’ he said instantly. ‘And should you have special things to eat? Do you have a desire for anything special to eat? I can send someone for it at once, they can wake the cooks. Tell me, love, what would you like?’

‘Nothing! Nothing!’ she said, laughing. ‘See, we have biscuits and wine. What more do I ever eat this late at night?’

‘Oh usually, yes! But now everything is different.’

‘I shall ask the physicians in the morning,’ she said. ‘But I need nothing now. Truly, my love.’

‘I want to get you something,’ he said. ‘I want to look after you.’

‘You do look after me,’ she reassured him. ‘And I am perfectly well fed, and I feel very well.’

‘Not sick? That is a sign of a boy, I am sure.’

‘I have been feeling a little sick in the mornings,’ she said, and watched his beam of happiness. ‘I feel certain that it is a boy. I hope this is our Arthur Henry.’

‘Oh! You were thinking of him when you spoke to me at the archery contest.’

‘Yes, I was. But I was not sure then, and I did not want to tell you too early.’

‘And when do you think he will be born?’

‘In early summer, I think.’

‘It cannot take so long!’ he exclaimed.

‘My love, I think it does take that long.’

‘I shall write to your father in the morning,’ he said. ‘I shall tell him to expect great news in the summer. Perhaps we shall be home after a great campaign against the French then. Perhaps I shall bring you a victory and you shall give me a son.’



Henry has sent his own physician, the most skilled man in London, to see me. The man stands at one side of the room while I sit on a chair at the other. He cannot examine me, of course – the body of the queen cannot be touched by anyone but the king. He cannot ask me if I am regular in my courses or in my bowels; they too are sacred. He is so paralysed with embarrassment at being called to see me that he keeps his eyes on the floor and asks me short questions in a quiet, clipped voice. He speaks English, and I have to strain to hear and understand him.

He asks me if I eat well, and if I have any sickness. I answer that I eat well enough but that I am sick of the smell and sight of cooked meats. I miss the fruit and vegetables that were part of my daily diet in Spain, I am craving baklava sweetmeats made from honey, or a tagine made with vegetables and rice. He says that it does not matter since there is no benefit to eating vegetables or fruit for humans, and indeed, he would have advised me against eating any raw stuff for the duration of my pregnancy.

He asks me if I know when I conceived. I say that I cannot say for certain, but that I know the date of my last course. He smiles as a learned man to a fool and tells me that this is little guide as to when a baby might be due. I have seen Moorish doctors calculate the date of a baby’s birth with a special abacus. He says he has never heard of such things and such heathen devices would be unnatural and not wanted at the treatment of a Christian child.

He suggests that I rest. He asks me to send for him whenever I feel unwell and he will come to apply leeches. He says he is a great believer in bleeding women frequently to prevent them becoming overheated. Then he bows and leaves.

I look blankly at Maria de Salinas, standing in the corner of the room for this mockery of a consultation. ‘This is the best doctor in England?’ I ask her. ‘This is the best that they have?’

She shakes her head in bewilderment.

‘I wonder if we can get someone from Spain,’ I think aloud.

'Your mother and father have all but cleared Spain of the learned men,' she says, and in that moment I feel almost ashamed of them.

'Their learning was heretical,' I say defensively.

She shrugs. 'Well, the Inquisition arrested most of them. The rest have fled.'

'Where did they go?' I ask.

'Wherever people go. The Jews went to Portugal and then to Italy, to Turkey, I think throughout Europe. I suppose the Moors went to Africa and the East.'

'Can we not find someone from Turkey?' I suggest. 'Not a heathen, of course. But someone who has learned from a Moorish physician? There must be some Christian doctors who have knowledge. Some who know more than this one?'

'I will ask the ambassador,' she says

'He must be Christian,' I stipulate. I know that I will need a better doctor than this shy ignoramus, but I do not want to go against the authority of my mother and the Holy Church. If they say that such knowledge is sin, then, surely, I should embrace ignorance. It is my duty. I am no scholar and it is better if I am guided by the ruling of the Holy Church. But can God really want us to deny knowledge? And what if this ignorance costs me England's son and heir?



Katherine did not reduce her work, commanding the clerks to the king, hearing petitioners who needed royal justice, discussing with the Privy Council the news from the kingdom. But she wrote to Spain to suggest that her father might like to send an ambassador to represent Spanish interests, especially since Henry was determined on a war against France in alliance with Spain as soon as the season for war started in the spring, and there would be much correspondence between the two countries.

'He is most determined to do your bidding,' Catalina wrote to her father, carefully translating every word into the complex code that they used. 'He is conscious that he has not been to war and is anxious that all goes well for an English-Spanish army. I am very concerned, indeed, that he is not exposed to danger. He has no heir, and even if he did, this is a hard country for princes in their minority. When he goes to war with you, I shall trust him into your safekeeping. He should certainly feel that he is experiencing war to the full, he should certainly learn how to campaign from you. But I shall trust you to keep him from any real danger. Do not misunderstand me on this,' she wrote sternly.

‘He must feel that he is at the heart of war, he must learn how battles are won; but he must not ever be in any real danger. And,’ she added, ‘he must never know that we have protected him.’

King Ferdinand, in full possession of Castile and Aragon once more, ruling as regent for Juana who was now said to be far beyond taking her throne, lost in a dark world of grief and madness, wrote smoothly back to his youngest daughter that she was not to worry about the safety of her husband in war, he would make sure that Henry was exposed to nothing but excitement. ‘And do not let your wifely fears distract him from his duty,’ he reminded her. ‘In all her years with me your mother never shirked from danger. You must be the queen she would want you to be. This is a war that has to be fought for the safety and profit of us all, and the young king must play his part alongside this old king and the old emperor. This is an alliance of two old warhorses and one young colt; and he will want to be part of it.’ He left a space in the letter as if for thought and then added a postscript. ‘Of course, we will both make sure it is mostly play for him. Of course he will not know.’

Ferdinand was right. Henry was desperate to be part of an alliance that would defeat France. The Privy Council, the thoughtful advisors of his father’s careful reign, were appalled to find that the young man was utterly set on the idea that kingship meant warfare, and he could imagine no better way to demonstrate that he had inherited the throne. The eager, boastful young men that formed the young court, desperate for a chance to show their own courage, were egging Henry on to war. The French had been hated for so long that it seemed incredible that a peace had ever been made and that it had lasted. It seemed unnatural to be at peace with the French – the normal state of warfare should be resumed as soon as victory was a certainty. And victory, with a new young king, and a new young court, must be a certainty now.

Nothing that Katherine might quietly remark could completely calm the fever for war, and Henry was so bellicose with the French ambassador at their first meeting that the astounded representative reported to his master that the new young king was out of his mind with choler, denying that he had ever written a peaceable letter to the King of France, which the Privy Council had sent in his absence. Fortunately, their next meeting went better. Katherine made sure that she was there.

‘Greet him pleasantly,’ she prompted Henry as she saw the man advance.

‘I will not feign kindness where I mean war.’

‘You have to be cunning,’ she said softly. ‘You have to be skilled in saying

one thing and thinking another.'

'I will never pretend. I will never deny my righteous pride.'

'No, you should not pretend, exactly. But let him in his folly misunderstand you. There is more than one way to win a war, and it is winning that matters, not threatening. If he thinks you are his friend, we will catch them unprepared. Why would we give them warning of attack?'

He was troubled, he looked at her, frowning. 'I am not a liar.'

'No, for you told him last time that the vain ambitions of his king would be corrected by you. The French cannot be allowed to capture Venice. We have an ancient alliance with Venice...'

'Do we?'

'Oh, yes,' Katherine said firmly. 'England has an ancient alliance with Venice, and besides, it is the very first wall of Christianity against the Turks. By threatening Venice the French are on the brink of letting the heathens into Italy. They should be ashamed of themselves. But last time you met, you warned the French ambassador. You could not have been more clear. Now is the time for you to greet him with a smile. You do not need to spell out your campaign. We will keep our own counsel. We will not share it with such as him.'

'I have told him once, I need not tell him again. I do not repeat myself,' Henry said, warming to the thought.

'We don't brag of our strength,' she said. 'We know what we can do, and we know what we will do. They can find out for themselves in our own good time.'

'Indeed,' said Henry, and stepped down from the little dais to greet the French ambassador quite pleasantly, and was rewarded to see the man fumble in his bow and stutter in his address.

'I had him quite baffled,' he said to Katherine gleefully.

'You were masterly,' she assured him.



If he was a dullard I would have to bite back my impatience and curb my temper more often than I do. But he is not unintelligent. He is bright and clever, perhaps even as quick-witted as Arthur. But where Arthur had been trained to think, had been educated as a king from birth, they let this second son slide by on his charm and his ready tongue. They found him pleasing and encouraged him to be nothing more than agreeable. He has a good brain and he can read, debate and think well – but only if the topic catches his interest, and then only for a while.

They taught him to study, but only to demonstrate his own cleverness. He is lazy, he is terribly lazy – he would always rather that someone does the detailed work for him, and this is a great fault in a king, it throws him into the power of his clerks. A king who will not work will always be in the hands of his advisors. It is a recipe for overmighty councillors.

When we start to discuss the terms of the contract between Spain and England he asks me to write it out for him, he does not like to do this himself, he likes to dictate and have a clerk write it out fair. And he will never bother to learn the code. It means that every letter between him and the emperor, every letter between him and my father, is either written by me, or translated by me. I am at the very centre of the emerging plans for war, whether I want to be or no. I cannot help but be the decision-maker at the very heart of this alliance, and Henry puts himself to one side.

Of course I am not reluctant to do my duty. No true child of my mother's would ever have turned away from effort, especially one that led to war with the enemies of Spain. We were all raised to know that kingship is a vocation, not a treat. To be a king means to rule; and ruling is always demanding work. No true child of my father's could have resisted being at the very heart of planning and plotting, and preparing for war. There is no-one at the English court better able than I to take our country into war.

I am no fool. I guessed from the start that my father planned to use our English troops against the French, and while we engage them at the time and place of his choosing, I wager that he will invade the kingdom of Navarre. I must have heard him a dozen times telling my mother that if he could have Navarre he would have rounded the north border of Aragon and besides, Navarre is a rich region, growing grapes and wheat. My father has wanted it from the moment he came to the throne of Aragon. I know that if he has a chance at Navarre he will win it, and if he can make the English do the work for him he would think that even better.

But I am not fighting this war to oblige my father, though I let him think that. He will not use me as his instrument, I will use him for mine. I want this war for England, and for God. The Pope himself has ruled that the French should not overrun Venice, the Pope himself is putting his own holy army into the field against the French. No true son or daughter of the church needs any greater cause than this: to know that the Holy Father is calling for support.

And for me there is another reason, even more powerful than that. I never forget my mother's warning that the Moors will come against Christendom

again, I never forget her telling me that I must be ready in England as she was always ready in Spain. If the French defeat the armies of the Pope and seize Venice, who can doubt but that the Moors will see it as their chance to snatch Venice in their turn from the French? And once the Moors get a toe-hold in the heart of Christendom once more, it will be my mother's war to be fought all over again. They will come at us from the East, they will come at us from Venice, and Christian Europe will lie at their mercy. My father himself told me that Venice with its great trade, its arsenal, its powerful dockyards, must never be taken by the Moors, we must never let them win a city where they could build fighting galleys in a week, arm them in days, man them in a morning. If they have the Venetian dockyards and shipwrights then we have lost the seas. I know that it is my given duty, given to me by my mother and by God: to send English men to serve the Pope, and to defend Venice from any invader. It is easy to persuade Henry to think the same.

But I don't forget Scotland. I never forget Arthur's fear of Scotland. The Privy Council has spies along the border, and Thomas Howard, the old Earl of Surrey, was placed there, quite deliberately I think, by the old king. King Henry my father-in-law gave Thomas Howard great lands in the north so that he, of all people, would keep the border safe. The old king was no fool. He did not let others do his business and trust to their abilities. He tied them into his success. If the Scots invade England they will come through Howard lands, and Thomas Howard is as anxious as I that this will never happen. He has assured me that the Scots will not come against us this summer, in any numbers worse than their usual brigand raids. All the intelligence we can gather from English merchants in Scotland, from travellers primed to keep their eyes open, confirms the earl's view. We are safe for this summer at least. I can take this moment and send the English army to war against the French. Henry can march out in safety and learn to be a soldier.



Katherine watched the dancing at the Christmas festivities, applauded her husband when he twirled other ladies around the room, laughed at the mummers, and signed off the court's bills for enormous amounts of wine, ale, beef, and the rarest and finest of everything. She gave Henry a beautiful inlaid saddle for his Christmas gift, and some shirts that she had sewn and embroidered herself with the beautiful blackwork of Spain.

‘I want all my shirts to be sewn by you,’ he said, putting the fine linen against his cheek. ‘I want to never wear anything that another woman has touched. Only your hands shall make my shirts.’

Katherine smiled and pulled his shoulder down to her height. He bent down like a grown boy, and she kissed his forehead. ‘Always,’ she promised him. ‘I shall always sew your shirts for you.’

‘And now, my gift to you,’ he said. He pushed a large leather box towards her. Katherine opened it. There was a great set of magnificent jewels: a diadem, a necklace, two bracelets and matching rings.

‘Oh, Henry!’

‘Do you like them?’

‘I love them,’ she said.

‘Will you wear them tonight?’

‘I shall wear them tonight and at the Twelfth Night feast,’ she promised.

The young queen shone in her happiness, this first Christmas of her reign. The full skirts of her gown could not conceal the curve of her belly; everywhere she went the young king would order a chair to be brought for her, she must not stand for a moment, she must never be wearied. He composed for her special songs that his musicians played, special dances and special masques were made up in her honour. The court, delighted with the young queen’s fertility, with the health and strength of the young king, with itself, made merry late into the night and Katherine sat on her throne, her feet slightly spread to accommodate the curve of her belly, and smiled in her joy.

Westminster Palace, January 1510



I wake in the night to pain, and a strange sensation. I dreamed that a tide was rising in the river Thames and that a fleet of black-sailed ships were coming upriver. I think that it must be the Moors, coming for me, and then I think it is a Spanish fleet – an armada, but strangely, disturbingly, my enemy, and the enemy of England. In my distress I toss and turn in bed and I wake with a sense of dread and find that it is worse than any dream, my sheets are wet with blood, and there is a real pain in my belly.

I call out in terror, and my cry wakes Maria de Salinas, who is sleeping with

me.

‘What is it?’ she asks, then she sees my face and calls out sharply to the maid at the foot of the bed and sends her running for my ladies and for the midwives, but somewhere in the back of my mind I know already that there is nothing that they can do. I clamber into my chair in my bloodstained nightdress and feel the pain twist and turn in my belly.

By the time they arrive, struggling from their beds, all stupid with sleep, I am on my knees on the floor like a sick dog, praying for the pain to pass and to leave me whole. I know that there is no point in praying for the safety of my child. I know that my child is lost. I can feel the tearing sensation in my belly as he slowly comes away.

After a long, bitter day, when Henry comes to the door again and again, and I send him away, calling out to him in a bright voice of reassurance, biting the palm of my hand so that I do not cry out, the baby is born, dead. The midwife shows her to me, a little girl, a white, limp little thing: poor baby, my poor baby. My only comfort is that it is not the boy I had promised Arthur I would bear for him. It is a girl, a dead girl, and then I twist my face in grief when I remember that he wanted a girl first, and she was to be called Mary.

I cannot speak for grief, I cannot face Henry and tell him myself. I cannot bear the thought of anyone telling the court, I cannot bring myself to write to my father and tell him that I have failed England, I have failed Henry, I have failed Spain, and worst of all – and this I could never tell anyone – I have failed Arthur.

I stay in my room, I close the door on all the anxious faces, on the midwives wanting me to drink strawberry-leaf tisanes, on the ladies wanting to tell me about their still births, and their mothers’ still births and their happy endings, I shut them away from me and I kneel at the foot of my bed, and press my hot face against the covers. I whisper through my sobs, muffled so that no-one but him can hear me. ‘I am sorry, so sorry, my love. I am so sorry not to have had your son. I don’t know why, I don’t know why our gentle God should send me this great sorrow. I am so sorry, my love. If I ever have another chance I will do my best, the very best that I can, to have our son, to keep him safe till birth and beyond. I will, I swear I will. I tried this time, God knows, I would have given anything to have your son and named him Arthur for you, my love.’ I steady myself as I can feel the words tumbling out too quickly, I can feel myself losing control, I feel the sobs starting to choke me.

‘Wait for me,’ I say quietly. ‘Wait for me still. Wait for me by the quiet

waters in the garden where the white and the red rose petals fall. Wait for me and when I have given birth to your son Arthur and your daughter Mary, and done my duty here, I will come to you. Wait for me in the garden and I will never fail you. I will come to you, love. My love.'



The king's physician went to the king directly from the queen's apartments. 'Your Grace, I have good news for you.'

Henry turned a face to him that was as sour as a child's whose joy has been stolen. 'You have?'

'I have indeed.'

'The queen is better? In less pain? She will be well?'

'Even better than well,' the physician said. 'Although she lost one child, she has kept another. She was carrying twins, Your Grace. She has lost one child but her belly is still large and she is still with child.'

For a moment the young man could not understand the words. 'She still has a child?'

The physician smiled. 'Yes, Your Grace.'

It was like a stay of execution. Henry felt his heart turn over with hope. 'How can it be?'

The physician was confident. 'By various ways I can tell. Her belly is still firm, the bleeding has stopped. I am certain she is still with child.'

Henry crossed himself. 'God is with us,' he said positively. 'This is the sign of His favour.' He paused. 'Can I see her?'

'Yes, she is as happy at this news as you.'

Henry bounded up the stairs to Katherine's rooms. Her presence chamber was empty of anyone but the least informed sight-seers, the court and half the City knew that she had taken to her bed and would not be seen. Henry brushed through the crowd who whispered hushed blessings for him and the queen, strode through her privy chamber, where her women were sewing, and tapped on her bedroom door.

Maria de Salinas opened it and stepped back for the king. The queen was out of her bed, seated in the window seat, her book of prayers held up to the light.

'My love!' he exclaimed. 'Here is Dr Fielding come to me with the best of news.'

Her face was radiant. 'I told him to tell you privately.'

‘He did. No-one else knows. My love, I am so glad!’

Her eyes were wet with tears. ‘It is like a redemption,’ she said. ‘I feel as if a cross has been lifted from my shoulders.’

‘I shall go to Walsingham the moment our baby is born and thank Our Lady for her favour,’ he promised. ‘I shall endow the shrine with a fortune, if it is a boy.’

‘Please God that He grants it,’ she murmured.

‘Why should He not?’ Henry demanded. ‘When it is our desire, and right for England, and we ask it as holy children of the church?’

‘Amen,’ she said quickly. ‘If it is God’s will.’

He flicked his hand. ‘Of course it must be His will,’ he said. ‘Now you must take care and rest.’

Katherine smiled at him. ‘As you see.’

‘Well, you must. And anything you want, you shall have.’

‘I shall tell the cooks if I want anything.’

‘And the midwives shall attend you night and morning to make sure that you are well.’

‘Yes,’ she agreed. ‘And if God is willing, we shall have a son.’



It was Maria de Salinas, my true friend who had come with me from Spain, and stayed with me through our good months and our hard years, who found the Moor. He was attending on a wealthy merchant, travelling from Genoa to Paris, they had called in at London to value some gold and Maria heard of him from a woman who had given a hundred pounds to Our Lady of Walsingham, hoping to have a son.

‘They say he can make barren women give birth,’ she whispers to me, watching that none of my other ladies have come close enough to overhear.

I cross myself as if to avoid temptation. ‘Then he must use black arts.’

‘Princess, he is supposed to be a great physician. Trained by masters who were at the university of Toledo.’

‘I will not see him.’

‘Because you think he must use black arts?’

‘Because he is my enemy and my mother’s enemy. She knew that the Moors’ knowledge was unlawfully gained, drawn from the devil, not from the revealed truth of God. She drove the Moors from Spain and their magical arts with them.’

'Your Grace, he may be the only doctor in England who knows anything about women.'

'I will not see him.'



Maria took my refusal and let a few weeks go by and then I woke in the night with a deep pain in my belly, and slowly, felt the blood coming. She was quick and ready to call the maids with the towels and with a ewer to wash, and when I was back in bed again and we realised that it was no more than my monthly courses returned, she came quietly and stood beside the head of the bed. Lady Margaret Pole was silent at the doorway.

'Your Grace, please see this doctor.'

'He is a Moor.'

'Yes, but I think he is the only man in this country who will know what is happening. How can you have your courses if you are with child? You may be losing this second baby. You have to see a doctor that we can trust.'

'Maria, he is my enemy. He is my mother's enemy. She spent her life driving his people from Spain.'

'We lost their wisdom with them,' Maria says quietly. 'You have not lived in Spain for nearly a decade, Your Grace, you do not know what it is like there now. My brother writes to me that people fall sick and there are no hospitals that can cure them. The nuns and the monks do their best; but they have no knowledge. If you have a stone it has to be cut out of you by a horse doctor, if you have a broken arm or leg then the blacksmith has to set it. The barbers are surgeons, the tooth drawers work in the market place and break people's jaws. The midwives go from burying a man sick with sores to a childbirth and lose as many babies as they deliver. The skills of the Moorish physicians, with their knowledge of the body, their herbs to soothe pain, their instruments for surgery, and their insistence on washing – it is all lost.'

'If it was sinful knowledge it is better lost,' I say stubbornly.

'Why would God be on the side of ignorance and dirt and disease?' she asks fiercely. 'Forgive me, Your Grace, but this makes no sense. And you are forgetting what your mother wanted. She always said that the universities should be restored, to teach Christian knowledge. But by then she had killed or banished all the teachers who knew anything.'

'The queen will not want to be advised by a heretic,' Lady Margaret said

firmly. 'No English lady would consult a Moor.'

Maria turns to me. 'Please, Your Grace.'

I am in such pain that I cannot bear an argument. 'Both of you can leave me now,' I say. 'Just let me sleep.'

Lady Margaret goes out of the door but Maria pauses to close the shutters so that I am in shadow. 'Oh, let him come then,' I say. 'But not while I am like this. He can come next week.'



She brings him by the hidden stairway which runs from the cellars through a servants' passage to the queen's private rooms at Richmond Palace. I am wearily dressing for dinner, and I let him come into my rooms while I am still unlaced, in my shift with a cape thrown on top. I grimace at the thought of what my mother would say at a man coming into my privy chamber. But I know, in my heart, that I have to see a doctor who can tell me how to get a son for England. And I know, if I am honest, that something is wrong with the baby they say I am carrying.

I know him for an unbeliever the moment I see him. He is black as ebony, his eyes as dark as jet, his mouth wide and sensual, his face both merry and compassionate, all at the same time. The back of his hands are black, dark as his face, long-fingered, his nails rosy pink, the palms brown, the creases ingrained with his colour. If I were a palmist I could trace the lifeline on his African palm like cart tracks of brown dust in a field of terracotta. I know him at once for a Moor and a Nubian; and I want to order him away from my rooms. But I know, at the same time, that he may be the only doctor in this country who has the knowledge I need.

This man's people, infidels, sinners who have set their black faces against God, have medicine that we do not. For some reason, God and his angels have not revealed to us the knowledge that these people have sought and found. These people have read in Greek everything that the Greek physicians thought. Then they have explored for themselves, with forbidden instruments, studying the human body as if it were an animal, without fear or respect. They create wild theories with forbidden thoughts and then they test them, without superstition. They are prepared to think anything, to consider anything; nothing is taboo. These people are educated where we are fools, where I am a fool. I might look down on him as coming from a race of savages, I might look down on him as an

infidel doomed to hell; but I need to know what he knows.

If he will tell me.

'I am Catalina, Infanta of Spain and Queen Katherine of England,' I say bluntly, that he may know that he is dealing with a queen and the daughter of a queen who had defeated his people.

He inclines his head, as proud as a baron. 'I am Yusuf, son of Ismail,' he says.

'You are a slave?'

'I was born to a slave, but I am a free man.'

'My mother would not allow slavery,' I tell him. 'She said it was not allowed by our religion, our Christian religion.'

'Nevertheless, she sent my people into slavery,' he remarks. 'Perhaps she should have considered that high principles and good intentions end at the border.'

'Since your people won't accept the salvation of God then it doesn't matter what happens to your earthly bodies.'

His face lights up with amusement, and he gives a delightful, irrepressible chuckle. 'It matters to us, I think,' he says. 'My nation allows slavery, but we don't justify it like that. And most importantly, you cannot inherit slavery with us. When you are born, whatever the condition of your mother, you are born free. That is the law, and I think it a very good one.'

'Well, it makes no difference what you think,' I say rudely. 'Since you are wrong.'

Again he laughs aloud, in true merriment, as if I have said something very funny. 'How good it must be, always to know that you are right,' he says. 'Perhaps you will always be certain of your rightness. But I would suggest to you, Catalina of Spain and Katherine of England, that sometimes it is better to know the questions than the answers.'

I pause at that. 'But I want you only for answers,' I say. 'Do you know medicine? Whether a woman can conceive a son? If she is with child?'

'Sometimes it can be known,' he says. 'Sometimes it is in the hands of Allah, praise His holy name, and sometimes we do not yet understand enough to be sure.'

I cross myself against the name of Allah, quick as an old woman spitting on a shadow. He smiles at my gesture, not in the least disturbed. 'What is it that you want to know?' he asks, his voice filled with kindness. 'What is it that you want to know so much that you have to send for an infidel to advise you? Poor queen,

you must be very alone if you need help from your enemy.'

My eyes are filling with too-quick tears at the sympathy in his voice and I brush my hand against my face.

'I have lost a baby,' I say shortly. 'A daughter. My physician says that she was one of twins, and that there is another child still inside me, that there will be another birth.'

'So why send for me?'

'I want to know for sure,' I say. 'If there is another child I will have to go into confinement, the whole world will watch me. I want to know that the baby is alive inside me now, that it is a boy, that he will be born.'

'Why should you doubt your own physician's opinion?'

I turn from his inquiring, honest gaze. 'I don't know,' I say evasively.

'Infanta, I think you do know.'

'How can I know?'

'With a woman's sense.'

'I have it not.'

He smiles at my stubbornness. 'Well, then, woman without any feelings, what do you think with your clever mind, since you have decided to deny what your body tells you?'

'How can I know what I should think?' I ask. 'My mother is dead. My greatest friend in England...' I break off before I can say the name of Arthur. 'I have no-one to confide in. One midwife says one thing, one says another. The physician is sure...but he wants to be sure. The king rewards him only for good news. How can I know the truth?'

'I should think you do know, despite yourself,' he insists gently. 'Your body will tell you. I suppose your courses have not returned?'

'No, I have bled,' I admit unwillingly. 'Last week.'

'With pain?'

'Yes.'

'Your breasts are tender?'

'They were.'

'Are they fuller than usual?'

'No.'

'You can feel the child? He moves inside you?'

'I can't feel anything since I lost the girl.'

'You are in pain now?'

'Not any more. I feel...'

'Yes?'

'Nothing. I feel nothing.'

He says nothing, he sits quietly, he breathes so softly it is like sitting with a quietly sleeping black cat. He looks at Maria. 'May I touch her?'

'No,' she says. 'She is the queen. Nobody can touch her.'

He shrugs his shoulders. 'She is a woman like any other. She wants a child like any woman. Why should I not touch her belly as I would touch any woman?'

'She is the queen,' she repeats. 'She cannot be touched. She has an anointed body.'

He smiles as if the holy truth is amusing. 'Well, I hope someone has touched her, or there cannot be a child at all,' he remarks.

'Her husband. An anointed king,' Maria says shortly. 'And take care of how you speak. These are sacred matters.'

'If I may not examine her, then I shall have to say only what I think from looking at her. If she cannot bear examination then she will have to make do with guesswork.' He turns to me. 'If you were an ordinary woman and not a queen, I would take your hands in mine now.'

'Why?'

'Because it is a hard word I have to tell you.'

Slowly, I stretch out my hands with the priceless rings on my fingers. He takes them gently, his dark hands as soft as the touch of a child. His dark eyes look into mine without fear, his face is tender, moved. 'If you are bleeding then it is most likely that your womb is empty,' he says. 'There is no child there. If your breasts are not full then they are not filling with milk, your body is not preparing to feed a child. If you do not feel a child move inside you in the sixth month, then either the child is dead, or there is no child there. If you feel nothing then that is most probably because there is nothing to feel.'

'My belly is still swollen.' I draw back my cloak and show him the curve of my belly under my shift. 'It is hard, I am not fat, I look as I did before I lost the first baby.'

'It could be an infection,' he says consideringly. 'Or – pray Allah that it is not – it could be a growth, a swelling. Or it could be a miscarriage which you have not yet expelled.'

I draw my hands back. 'You are ill-wishing me!'

'Never,' he says. 'To me, here and now, you are not Catalina, Infanta of Spain, but simply a woman who has asked for my help. I am sorry for you.'

'Some help!' Maria de Salinas interrupts crossly. 'Some help you have

been!’

‘Anyway, I don’t believe it,’ I say. ‘Yours is one opinion, Dr Fielding has another. Why should I believe you, rather than a good Christian?’

He looks at me for a long time, his face tender. ‘I wish I could tell you a better opinion,’ he says. ‘But I imagine there are many who will tell you agreeable lies. I believe in telling the truth. I will pray for you.’

‘I don’t want your heathen prayers,’ I say roughly. ‘You can go, and take your bad opinion and your heresies with you.’

‘Go with God, Infanta,’ he says with dignity, as if I have not insulted him. He bows. ‘And since you don’t want my prayers to my God (praise be to His holy name), I shall hope instead that when you are in your time of trouble that your doctor is right, and your own God is with you.’

I let him leave, as silent as a dark cat down the hidden staircase, and I say nothing. I hear his sandals clicking down the stone steps, just like the hushed footsteps of the servants at my home. I hear the whisper of his long gown, so unlike the stiff brush of English cloth. I feel the air gradually lose the scent of him, the warm spicy scent of my home.

And when he is gone, quite gone, and the downstairs door is shut and I hear Maria de Salinas turn the key in the lock, then I find that I want to weep – not just because he has told me such bad news, but because one of the few people in the world who has ever told me the truth has gone.

Spring 1510

Katherine did not tell her young husband of the visit of the Moorish doctor, nor of the bad opinion that he had so honestly given her. She did not mention his visit to anyone, not even Lady Margaret Pole. She drew on her sense of destiny, on her pride, and on her faith that she was still especially favoured by God, and she continued with the pregnancy, not even allowing herself to doubt.

She had good reason. The English physician, Dr Fielding, remained confident, the midwives did not contradict him, the court behaved as if Katherine would be brought to bed of a child in March or April, and so she went through the spring weather, the greening gardens, the bursting trees, with a serene smile and her hand clasped gently against her rounded belly.

Henry was excited by the imminent birth of his child; he was planning a great tournament to be held at Greenwich once the baby was born. The loss of the girl had taught him no caution, he bragged all round the court that a healthy baby would soon come. He was forewarned only not to predict a boy. He told everyone that he did not mind if this first child was a prince or princess – he would love this baby for being the first-born, for coming to himself and the queen in the first flush of their happiness.

Katherine stifled her doubts, and never even said to Maria de Salinas that she had not felt her baby kick, that she felt a little colder, a little more distant from everything every day. She spent longer and longer on her knees in her chapel; but God did not speak to her, and even the voice of her mother seemed to have grown silent. She found that she missed Arthur – not with the passionate longing of a young widow, but because he had been her dearest friend in England, and the only one she could have trusted now with her doubts.

In February she attended the great Shrove Tuesday feast and shone before the court and laughed. They saw the broad curve of her belly, they saw her confidence as they celebrated the start of Lent. They moved to Greenwich, certain that the baby would be born just after Easter.



We are going to Greenwich for the birth of my child, the rooms are prepared for me as laid down in My Lady the King's Mother's Royal Book – hung with tapestries with pleasing and encouraging scenes, carpeted with rugs and strewn with fresh herbs. I hesitate at the doorway, behind me my friends raise their glasses of spiced wine. This is where I shall do my greatest work for England, this is my moment of destiny. This is what I was born and bred to do. I take a deep breath and go inside. The door closes behind me. I will not see my friends, the Duke of Buckingham, my dear knight Edward Howard, my confessor, the Spanish ambassador, until my baby is born.

My women come in with me. Lady Elizabeth Boleyn places a sweet-smelling pomander on my bedside table, Lady Elizabeth and Lady Anne, sisters to the Duke of Buckingham, straighten a tapestry, one at each corner, laughing over whether it leans to one side or the other. Maria de Salinas is smiling, standing by the great bed that is new-hung with dark curtains. Lady Margaret Pole is arranging the cradle for the baby at the foot of the bed. She looks up and smiles at me as I come in and I remember that she is a mother, she will know what is to be done.

'I shall want you to take charge of the royal nurseries,' I suddenly blurt out to her, my affection for her and my sense of needing the advice and comfort of an older woman is too much for me.

There is a little ripple of amusement among my women. They know that I am normally very formal, such an appointment should come through the head of my household after consultation with dozens of people.

Lady Margaret smiles at me. 'I knew you would,' she says, speaking in reply as intimate as myself. 'I have been counting on it.'

'Without royal invitation?' Lady Elizabeth Boleyn teases. 'For shame, Lady Margaret! Thrusting yourself forwards!'

That makes us all laugh at the thought of Lady Margaret, that most dignified of women, as someone craving patronage.

'I know you will care for him as if he were your own son,' I whisper to her.

She takes my hand and helps me to the bed. I am heavy and ungainly, I have this constant pain in my belly that I try to hide.

'God willing,' she says quietly.

Henry comes in to bid me farewell. His face is flushed with emotion and his mouth is working, he looks more like a boy than a king. I take his hands and I kiss him tenderly on the mouth. 'My love,' I say. 'Pray for me, I am sure everything will go well for us.'

'I shall go to Our Lady of Walsingham to give thanks,' he tells me again. 'I have written to the nunnery there and promised them great rewards if they will intercede with Our Lady for you. They are praying for you now, my love. They assure me that they are praying all the time.'

'God is good,' I say. I think briefly of the Moorish doctor who told me that I was not with child and I push his pagan folly from my mind. 'This is my destiny and it is my mother's wish and God's will,' I say.

'I so wish your mother could be here,' Henry says clumsily. I do not let him see me flinch.

'Of course,' I say quietly. 'And I am sure she is watching me from al-Yan –' I cut off the words before I can say them. 'From paradise,' I say smoothly. 'From heaven.'

'Can I get you anything?' he asks. 'Before I leave, can I fetch you anything?'

I do not laugh at the thought of Henry – who never knows where anything is – running errands for me at this late stage. 'I have everything I need,' I assure him. 'And my women will care for me.'

He straightens up, very kingly, and he looks around at them. 'Serve your mistress well,' he says firmly. To Lady Margaret he says, 'Please send for me at once if there is any news, at any time, day or night.' Then he kisses me farewell very tenderly, and when he goes out they close the door behind him and I am alone with my ladies, in the seclusion of my confinement.

I am glad to be confined. The shady, peaceful bedroom will be my haven, I can rest for a while in the familiar company of women. I can stop play-acting the part of a fertile and confident queen, and be myself. I put aside all doubts. I will not think and I will not worry. I will wait patiently until my baby comes, and then I will bring him into the world without fear, without screaming. I am determined to be confident that this child, who has survived the loss of his twin, will be a strong baby. And I, who have survived the loss of my first child, will be a brave mother. Perhaps it might be true that we have surmounted grief and loss together: this baby and I.

I wait. All through March I wait, and I ask them to pin back the tapestry that covers the window so I can smell the scent of spring on the air and hear the seagulls as they call over the high tides on the river.

Nothing seems to be happening; not for my baby nor for me. The midwives ask me if I feel any pain, and I do not. Nothing more than the dull ache I have had for a long time. They ask if the baby has quickened, if I feel him kick me, but, to tell truth, I do not understand what they mean. They glance at one another

and say over-loudly, over-emphatically, that it is a very good sign, a quiet baby is a strong baby; he must be resting.

The unease that I have felt right from the start of this second pregnancy, I put right away from me. I will not think of the warning from the Moorish doctor, nor of the compassion in his face. I am determined not to seek out fear, not to run towards disaster. But April comes and I can hear the patter of rain on the window, and then feel the heat of the sunshine, and still nothing happens.

My gowns that strained so tight across my belly through the winter feel looser in April, and then looser yet. I send out all the women but Maria, and I unlace my gown and show her my belly and ask if she thinks I am losing my girth.

‘I don’t know,’ she says; but I can tell by her aghast face that my belly is smaller, that it is obvious that there is no baby in there, ready to be born.

In another week it is obvious to everyone that my belly is going down, I am growing slim again. The midwives try to tell me that sometimes a woman’s belly diminishes just before her baby is born, as her baby drops down to be born, or some such arcane knowledge. I look at them coldly, and I wish I could send for a decent physician who would tell me the truth.

‘My belly is smaller and my course has come this very day,’ I say to them flatly. ‘I am bleeding. As you know, I have bled every month since I lost the girl. How can I be with child?’

They flutter their hands, and cannot say. They don’t know. They tell me that these are questions for my husband’s respected physician. It was he who had said that I was still with child in the first place, not them. They had never said that I was with child, they had merely been called in to assist with a delivery. It was not them who had said that I was carrying a baby.

‘But what did you think, when he said there was a twin?’ I demand. ‘Did you not agree when he said that I had lost a child and yet kept one?’

They shake their heads. They did not know.

‘You must have thought something,’ I say impatiently. ‘You saw me lose my baby. You saw my belly stay big. What could cause that if not another child?’

‘God’s will,’ says one of them helplessly.

‘Amen,’ I say, and it costs me a good deal to say it.



‘I want to see that physician again,’ Katherine said quietly to Maria de Salinas.

‘Your Grace, it may be that he is not in London. He travels in the household of a French count. It may be that he has gone.’

‘Find out if he is still in London, or when they expect him to return,’ the queen said. ‘Don’t tell anyone that it is I who have asked for him.’

Maria de Salinas looked at her mistress with sympathy. ‘You want him to advise you how to have a son?’ she asked in a low voice.

‘There is not a university in England that studies medicine,’ Katherine said bitterly. ‘There is not one that teaches languages. There is not one that teaches astronomy, or mathematics, geometry, geography, cosmography, or even the study of animals, or plants. The universities of England are about as much use as a monastery full of monks colouring-in the margins of sacred texts.’

Maria de Salinas gave a little gasp of shock at Katherine’s bluntness. ‘The church says...’

‘The church does not need decent physicians. The church does not need to know how sons are conceived,’ Katherine snapped. ‘The church can continue with the revelations of the saints. It needs nothing more than scripture. The church is composed of men who are not troubled by the illnesses and difficulties of women. But for those of us on our pilgrimage today, those of us in the world, especially those of us who are women: we need a little more.’

‘But you said that you did not want pagan knowledge. You said to the doctor himself. You said your mother was right to close the universities of the infidel.’

‘My mother had half a dozen children,’ Katherine replied crossly. ‘But I tell you, if she could have found a doctor to save my brother she would have had him even if he had been trained in hell itself. She was wrong to turn her back on the learning of the Moors. She was mistaken. I have never thought that she was perfect, but I think the less of her now. She made a great mistake when she drove away their wise scholars along with their heretics.’

‘The church itself said that their scholarship is heresy,’ Maria observed. ‘How could you have one without the other?’

‘I am sure that you know nothing about it,’ said Isabella’s daughter, driven into a corner. ‘It is not a fit subject for you to discuss and besides, I have told you what I want you to do.’



The Moor, Yusuf, is away from London but the people at his lodging house say that he has reserved his rooms to return within the week. I shall have to be

patient. I shall wait in my confinement and try to be patient.

They know him well, Maria's servant tells her. His comings and goings are something of an event in their street. Africans are so rare in England as to be a spectacle – and he is a handsome man and generous with small coins for little services. They told Maria's servant that he insisted on having fresh water for washing in his room and he washes every day, several times a day, and that – wonder of wonders – he bathes three or four times a week, using soap and towels, and throwing water all over the floor to the great inconvenience of the housemaids, and to great danger of his health.

I cannot help but laugh at the thought of the tall, fastidious Moor folding himself up into a washing tub, desperate for a steam, a tepid soak, a massage, a cold shower, and then a long, thoughtful rest while smoking a hookah and sipping a strong, sweet peppermint tea. It reminds me of my horror when I first came to England and discovered that they bathe only infrequently, and wash only the tips of their fingers before eating. I think that he has done better than me – he has carried his love of his home with him, he has re-made his home wherever he goes. But in my determination to be Queen Katherine of England I have given up being Catalina of Spain.



They brought the Moor to Katherine under cover of darkness, to the chamber where she was confined. She sent the women from the room at the appointed hour and told them that she wanted to be alone. She sat in her chair by the window, where the tapestries were drawn back for air, and the first thing he saw, as she rose when he came in, was her slim candlelit profile against the darkness of the window. She saw his little grimace of sympathy.

‘No child.’

‘No,’ she said shortly. ‘I shall come out of my confinement tomorrow.’

‘You are in pain?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Well, I am glad of that. You are bleeding?’

‘I had my normal course last week.’

He nodded. ‘Then you may have had a disease which has passed,’ he said. ‘You may be fit to conceive a child. There is no need to despair.’

‘I do not despair,’ she said flatly. ‘I never despair. That is why I have sent for you.’

‘You will want to conceive a child as soon as possible,’ he guessed.

‘Yes.’

He thought for a moment. ‘Well, Infanta, since you have had one child, even if you did not bear it to full term, we know that you and your husband are fertile. That is good.’

‘Yes,’ she said, surprised by the thought. She had been so distressed by the miscarriage she had not thought that her fertility had been proven. ‘But why do you speak of my husband’s fertility?’

The Moor smiled. ‘It takes both a man and a woman to conceive a child.’

‘Here in England they think that it is only the woman.’

‘Yes. But in this, as in so many other things, they are wrong. There are two parts to every baby: the man’s breath of life and the woman’s gift of the flesh.’

‘They say that if a baby is lost, then the woman is at fault, perhaps she has committed a great sin.’

He frowned. ‘It is possible,’ he conceded. ‘But not very likely. Otherwise how would murderesses ever give birth? Why would innocent animals miscarry their young? I think we will learn in time that there are humours and infections which cause miscarriage. I do not blame the woman, it makes no sense to me.’

‘They say that if a woman is barren it is because the marriage is not blessed by God.’

‘He is your God,’ he remarked reasonably. ‘Would he persecute an unhappy woman in order to make a point?’

Katherine did not reply. ‘They will blame me if I do not have a live child,’ she observed very quietly.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘But the truth of the matter is: having had one child and lost it, there is every reason to think that you might have another. And there should be no reason why you should not conceive again.’

‘I must bear the next child to full term.’

‘If I could examine you, I might know more.’

She shook her head. ‘It is not possible.’

His glance at her was merry. ‘Oh, you savages,’ he said softly.

She gave a little gasp of amused shock. ‘You forget yourself!’

‘Then send me away.’

That stopped her. ‘You can stay,’ she said. ‘But of course, you cannot examine me.’

‘Then let us consider what might help you conceive and carry a child,’ he said. ‘Your body needs to be strong. Do you ride horses?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ride astride before you conceive and then take a litter thereafter. Walk every day, swim if you can. You will conceive a child about two weeks after the end of your course. Rest at those times, and make sure that you lie with your husband at those times. Try to eat moderately at every meal and drink as little of their accursed small ale as you can.’

Katherine smiled at the reflection of her own prejudices. ‘Do you know Spain?’

‘I was born there. My parents fled from Malaga when your mother brought in the Inquisition and they realised that they would be tormented to death.’

‘I am sorry,’ she said awkwardly.

‘We will go back, it is written,’ he said with nonchalant confidence.

‘I should warn you that you will not.’

‘I know that we will. I have seen the prophecy myself.’

At once they fell silent again.

‘Shall I tell you what I advise? Or shall I just leave now?’ he asked, as if he did not much mind which it was to be.

‘Tell me,’ she said. ‘And then I can pay you, and you can go. We were born to be enemies. I should not have summoned you.’

‘We are both Spanish, we both love our country. We both serve our God. Perhaps we were born to be friends.’

She had to stop herself giving him her hand. ‘Perhaps,’ she said gruffly, turning her head away. ‘But I was brought up to hate your people and hate your faith.’

‘I was brought up to hate no-one,’ he said gently. ‘Perhaps that is what I should be teaching you before anything else.’

‘Just teach me how to have a son,’ she repeated.

‘Very well. Drink water that has been boiled, eat as much fruit and fresh vegetables as you can get. Do you have salad vegetables here?’



For a moment I am back in the garden at Ludlow with his bright eyes on me.

‘Acetaria?’

‘Yes, salad.’

‘What is it, exactly?’



He saw the queen's face glow.

'What are you thinking of?'

'Of my first husband. He told me that I could send for gardeners to grow salad vegetables, but I never did.'

'I have seeds,' the Moor said surprisingly. 'I can give you some seeds and you can grow the vegetables you will need.'

'You have?'

'Yes.'

'You would give me...you would sell them to me?'

'Yes. I would give them to you.'

For a moment she was silenced by his generosity. 'You are very kind,' she said.

He smiled. 'We are both Spanish and a long way from our homes. Doesn't that matter more than the fact that I am black and you are white? That I worship my God facing Mecca and you worship yours facing west?'

'I am a child of the true religion and you are an infidel,' she said, but with less conviction than she had ever felt before.

'We are both people of faith,' he said quietly. 'Our enemies should be the people who have no faith, neither in their God, nor in others, nor in themselves. The people who should face our crusade should be those who bring cruelty into the world for no reason but their own power. There is enough sin and wickedness to fight, without taking up arms against people who believe in a forgiving God and who try to lead a good life.'

Katherine found that she could not reply. On the one hand was her mother's teaching, on the other was the simple goodness that radiated from this man. 'I don't know,' she said finally, and it was as if the very words set her free. 'I don't know. I would have to take the question to God. I would have to pray for guidance. I don't pretend to know.'

'Now, that is the very beginning of wisdom,' he said gently. 'I am sure of that, at least. Knowing that you do not know is to ask humbly, instead of tell arrogantly. That is the beginning of wisdom. Now, more importantly, I will go home and write you a list of things that you must not eat, and I will send you some medicine to strengthen your humours. Don't let them cup you, don't let them put leeches on you, and don't let them persuade you to take any poisons or potions. You are a young woman with a young husband. A baby will come.'

It was like a blessing. 'You are sure?' she said.
'I am sure,' he replied. 'And very soon.'

Greenwich Palace, May 1510



I send for Henry, he should hear it first from me. He comes unwillingly. He has been filled with a terror of women's secrets and women's doings and he does not like to come into a room which has been prepared for a confinement. Also, there is something else: a lack of warmth, I see it in his face, turned away from me. The way he does not meet my eyes. But I cannot challenge him about coolness towards me when I first have to tell him such hard news. Lady Margaret leaves us alone, closing the door behind her. I know she will ensure no-one outside eavesdrops. They will all know soon enough.

'Husband, I am sorry, I have sad news for us,' I say.

The face he turns to me is sulky. 'I knew it could not be good when Lady Margaret came for me.'

There is no point in my feeling a flash of irritation. I shall have to manage us both. 'I am not with child,' I say, plunging in. 'The doctor must have made a mistake. There was only one child and I lost it. This confinement has been a mistake. I shall return to court tomorrow.'

'How can he have mistaken such a thing?'

I give a little shrug of the shoulders. I want to say: because he is a pompous fool and your man, and you surround yourself with people who only ever tell you the good news and are afraid to tell you bad. But instead I say neutrally: 'He must have been mistaken.'

'I shall look a fool!' he bursts out. 'You have been away for nearly three months and nothing to show for it.'

I say nothing for a moment. Pointless to wish that I were married to a man who might think beyond his appearance. Pointless to wish that I were married to a man whose first thought might be of me.

'No-one will think anything at all,' I say firmly. 'If anything, they will say that it is I who am a fool to not know whether I am with child, or no. But at least we had a baby and that means we can have another.'

'It does?' he asks, immediately hopeful. 'But why should we lose her? Is God

displeased with us? Have we committed some sin? Is it a sign of God's displeasure?'

I nip my lower lip to stop the Moor's question: is God so vindictive that He would kill an innocent child to punish the parents for a sin so venial that they do not even know that they have committed it?

'My conscience is clear,' I say firmly.

'Mine too,' he says quickly, too quickly.



But my conscience is not clear. That night I go on my knees to the image of the crucified lord and for once I truly pray, I do not dream of Arthur, or consult my memory of my mother. I close my eyes and I pray.

'Lord, it was a deathbed promise,' I say slowly. 'He demanded it of me. It was for the good of England. It was to guide the kingdom and the new king in the paths of the church. It was to protect England from the Moor and from sin. I know that it has brought me wealth, and the throne, but I did not do it for gain. If it is sin, Lord, then show me now. If I should not be his wife, then tell me now. Because I believe that I did the right thing, and that I am doing the right thing. And I believe that You would not take my son from me in order to punish me for this. I believe that You are a merciful God. And I believe that I did the right thing for Arthur, for Henry, for England and for me.'

I sit back on my heels and wait for a long time, for an hour, perhaps more, in case my God, the God of my mother, chooses to speak to me in His anger.

He does not.

So I will go on assuming that I am in the right. Arthur was right to call on my promise, I was right to tell the lie, my mother was right to call it God's will that I should be Queen of England, and that whatever happens – nothing will change that.



Lady Margaret Pole comes to sit with me this evening, my last evening in confinement, and she takes the stool on the opposite side of the fire, close enough so that we cannot easily be overheard. 'I have something to tell you,' she says.

I look at her face, she is so calm that I know at once something bad has happened.

‘Tell me,’ I say instantly.

She makes a little moue of distaste. ‘I am sorry to bring you the tittle-tattle of the court.’

‘Very well. Tell me.’

‘It is the Duke of Buckingham’s sister.’

‘Elizabeth?’ I ask, thinking of the pretty young woman who had come to me the moment she knew I would be queen and asked if she could be my lady-in-waiting.

‘No, Anne.’

I nod, this is Elizabeth’s younger sister, a dark-eyed girl with a roguish twinkle and a love of male company. She is popular at court among the young men but – at least as long as I am present – she behaves with all the demure grace of a young matron of the highest family in the land, in service to the queen.

‘What of her?’

‘She has been seeing William Compton, without telling anyone. They have had assignations. Her brother is very upset. He has told her husband, and he is furious at her risking her reputation and his good name in a flirtation with the king’s friend.’

I think for a moment. William Compton is one of Henry’s wilder companions, the two of them are inseparable.

‘William will only have been amusing himself,’ I say. ‘He is a heart-breaker.’

‘It turns out that she has gone missing from a masque, once during dinner and once all day when the court was hunting.’

I nod. This is much more serious. ‘There is no suggestion that they are lovers?’

She shrugs. ‘Certainly her brother, Edward Stafford, is furious. He has complained to Compton and there has been a quarrel. The King has defended Compton.’

I press my lips together to prevent myself snapping out a criticism in my irritation. The Duke of Buckingham is one of the oldest friends of the Tudor family, with massive lands and many retainers. He greeted me with Prince Harry all those years ago, he is now honoured by the king, the greatest man in the land. He has been a good friend to me since then. Even when I was in disgrace I

always had a smile and a kind word from him. Every summer he sent me a gift of game, and there were some weeks when that was the only meat we saw. Henry cannot quarrel with him as if he were a tradesman and Henry a surly farmer. This is the king and the greatest man of the state of England. The old king Henry could not even have won his throne without Buckingham's support. A disagreement between them is not a private matter, it is a national disaster. If Henry had any sense he would not have involved himself in this petty courtiers' quarrel. Lady Margaret nods at me, I need say nothing, she understands my disapproval.

'Can I not leave the court for a moment without my ladies climbing out of their bedroom windows to run after young men?'

She leans forwards and pats my hand. 'It seems not. It is a foolish young court, Your Grace, and they need you to keep them steady. The king has spoken very high words to the duke and the duke is much offended. William Compton says he will say nothing of the matter to anyone, so everyone thinks the worst. Anne has been all but imprisoned by her husband, Sir George, we none of us have seen her today. I am afraid that when you come out of your confinement he will not allow her to wait on you, and then your honour is involved.' She pauses. 'I thought you should know now rather than be surprised by it all tomorrow morning. Though it goes against the grain to be a tale-bearer of such folly.'

'It is ridiculous,' I say. 'I shall deal with it tomorrow, when I come out of confinement. But really, what are they all thinking of? This is like a schoolyard! William should be ashamed of himself and I am surprised that Anne should so far forget herself as to chase after him. And what does her husband think he is? Some knight at Camelot to imprison her in a tower?'



Queen Katherine came out of her confinement, without announcement, and returned to her usual rooms at Greenwich Palace. There could be no churching ceremony to mark her return to normal life, since there had been no birth. There could be no christening since there was no child. She came out of the shadowy room without comment, as if she had suffered some secret, shameful illness, and everyone pretended that she had been gone for hours rather than nearly three months.

Her ladies-in-waiting, who had become accustomed to an idle pace of life with the queen in her confinement, assembled at some speed in the queen's

chambers, and the housemaids hurried in with fresh strewing herbs and new candles.

Katherine caught several furtive glances among the ladies and assumed that they too had guilty consciences over misbehaviour in her absence; but then she realised that there was a whispered buzz of conversation that ceased whenever she raised her head. Clearly, something had happened that was more serious than Anne's disgrace; and, equally clearly, no-one was telling her.

She beckoned one of her ladies, Lady Madge, to come to her side.

'Is Lady Elizabeth not joining us this morning?' she asked, as she could see no sign of the older Stafford sister.

The girl flushed scarlet to her ears. 'I don't know,' she stammered. 'I don't think so.'

'Where is she?' Katherine asked.

The girl looked desperately round for help but all the other ladies in the room were suddenly taking an intense interest in their sewing, in their embroidery, or in their books. Elizabeth Boleyn dealt a hand of cards with as much attention as if she had a fortune staked on it.

'I don't know where she is,' the girl confessed.

'In the ladies' room?' Katherine suggested. 'In the Duke of Buckingham's rooms?'

'I think she has gone,' the girl said baldly. At once someone gasped, and then there was silence.

'Gone?' Katherine looked around. 'Will someone tell me what is happening?' she asked, her tone reasonable enough. 'Where has Lady Elizabeth gone? And how can she have gone without my permission?'

The girl took a step back. At that moment, Lady Margaret Pole came into the room.

'Lady Margaret,' Katherine said pleasantly. 'Here is Madge telling me that Lady Elizabeth has left court without my permission and without bidding me farewell. What is happening?'

Katherine felt her amused smile freeze on her face when her old friend shook her head slightly, and Madge, relieved, dropped back to her seat. 'What is it?' Katherine asked more quietly.

Without seeming to move, all the ladies craned forwards to hear how Lady Margaret would explain the latest development.

'I believe the king and the Duke of Buckingham have had hard words,' Lady Margaret said smoothly. 'The duke has left court and taken both his sisters with

him.'

'But they are my ladies-in-waiting. In service to me. They cannot leave without my permission.'

'It is very wrong of them, indeed,' Margaret said. Something in the way she folded her hands in her lap and looked so steadily and calmly warned Katherine not to probe.

'So what have you been doing in my absence?' Katherine turned to the ladies, trying to lighten the mood of the room.

At once they all looked sheepish. 'Have you learned any new songs? Have you danced in any masques?' Katherine asked.

'I know a new song,' one of the girls volunteered. 'Shall I sing it?'

Katherine nodded, at once one of the other women picked up a lute. It was as if everyone was quick to divert her. Katherine smiled and beat the time with her hand on the arm of her chair. She knew, as a woman who had been born and raised in a court of conspirators, that something was very wrong indeed.

There was the sound of company approaching and Katherine's guards threw open the door to the king and his court. The ladies stood up, shook out their skirts, bit their lips to make them pink, and sparkled in anticipation. Someone laughed gaily at nothing. Henry strode in, still in his riding clothes, his friends around him, William Compton's arm in his.

Katherine was again alert to some difference in her husband. He did not come in, take her in his arms, and kiss her cheeks. He did not stride into the very centre of the room and bow to her either. He came in, twinned with his best friend, the two almost hiding behind each other, like boys caught out in a petty crime: part-shamefaced, part-braggart. At Katherine's sharp look Compton awkwardly disengaged himself, Henry greeted his wife without enthusiasm, his eyes downcast, he took her hand and then kissed her cheek, not her mouth.

'Are you well now?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said calmly. 'I am quite well now. And how are you, sire?'

'Oh,' he said carelessly. 'I am well. We had such a chase this morning. I wish you had been with us. We were half way to Sussex, I do believe.'

'I shall come out tomorrow,' Katherine promised him.

'Will you be well enough?'

'I am quite well,' she repeated.

He looked relieved. 'I thought you would be ill for months,' he blurted out.

Smiling, she shook her head, wondering who had told him that.

'Let's break our fast,' he said. 'I am starving.'

He took her hand and led her to the great hall. The court fell in informally behind them. Katherine could hear the over-excited buzz of whispers. She leaned her head towards Henry so that no-one could catch her words. 'I hear there have been some quarrels in court.'

'Oh! You have heard of our little storm already, have you?' he said. He was far too loud, he was far too jovial. He was acting the part of a man with nothing to trouble his conscience. He threw a laugh over his shoulder and looked for someone to join in his forced amusement. Half a dozen men and women smiled, anxious to share his good humour. 'It is something and nothing. I have had a quarrel with your great friend, the Duke of Buckingham. He has left the court in a temper!' He laughed again, even more heartily, glancing at her sideways to see if she was smiling, trying to judge if she already knew all about it.

'Indeed?' Katherine said coolly.

'He was insulting,' Henry said, gathering his sense of offence. 'He can stay away until he is ready to apologise. He is such a pompous man, you know. Always thinks he knows everything. And his sour sister Elizabeth can go too.'

'She is a good lady-in-waiting and a kind companion to me,' Katherine observed. 'I expected her to greet me this day. I have no quarrel with her, nor with her sister Anne. I take it you have no quarrel with them either?'

'Nonetheless I am most displeased with their brother,' Henry said. 'They can all go.'

Katherine paused, took a breath. 'She and her sister are in my household,' she observed. 'I have the right to choose and dismiss my own ladies.'

She saw the quick flush of his childish temper. 'You will oblige me by sending them away from your household! Whatever your rights! I don't expect to hear talk of rights between us!'

The court behind them fell silent at once. Everyone wanted to hear the first royal quarrel.

Katherine released his hand and went around the high table to take her place. It gave her a moment to remind herself to be calm. When he came to his seat beside hers she took a breath and smiled at him. 'As you wish,' she said evenly. 'I have no great preference in the matter. But how am I to run a well-ordered court if I send away young women of good family who have done nothing wrong?'

'You were not here, so you have no idea what she did or didn't do!' Henry sought for another complaint and found one. He waved the court to sit and dropped into his own chair. 'You locked yourself away for months. What am I

supposed to do without you? How are things supposed to be run if you just go away and leave everything?’

Katherine nodded, keeping her face absolutely serene. She was very well aware that the attention of the entire court was focused on her like a burning glass on fine paper. ‘I hardly left for my own amusement,’ she observed.

‘It has been most awkward for me,’ he said, taking her words at face value. ‘Most awkward. It is all very well for you, taking to your bed for weeks at a time, but how is the court to run without a queen? Your ladies were without discipline, nobody knew how things were to go on, I couldn’t see you, I had to sleep alone...’ He broke off.

Katherine realised, belatedly, that his bluster was hiding a genuine sense of hurt. In his selfishness, he had transformed her long endurance of pain and fear into his own difficulty. He had managed to see her fruitless confinement as her wilfully deserting him, leaving him alone to rule over a lopsided court; in his eyes, she had let him down.

‘I think at the very least you should do as I ask,’ he said pettishly. ‘I have had trouble enough these last months. All this reflects very badly on me, I have been made to look a fool. And no help from you at all.’

‘Very well,’ Katherine said peaceably. ‘I shall send Elizabeth away and her sister Anne too, since you ask it of me. Of course.’

Henry found his smile, as if the sun was coming out from behind clouds. ‘Yes. And now you are back we can get everything back to normal.’



Not a word for me, not one word of comfort, not one thought of understanding. I could have died trying to bring his child into the world, without his child I have to face sorrow, grief and a haunting fear of sin. But he does not think of me at all.

I find a smile to reply to his. I knew when I married him that he was a selfish boy and I knew he would grow into a selfish man. I have set myself the task of guiding him and helping him to be a better man, the best man that he can be. There are bound to be times when I think he has failed to be the man he should be. And when those times come, as now, I must see it as my failure to guide him. I must forgive him.

Without my forgiveness, without me extending my patience further than I thought possible, our marriage will be a poorer one. He is always ready to

resent a woman who cares for him – he learned that from his grandmother. And I, God forgive me, am too quick to think of the husband that I lost, and not of the husband that I won. He is not the man that Arthur was, and he will never be the king that Arthur would have been. But he is my husband and my king and I should respect him.

Indeed: I will respect him, whether he deserves it or not.



The court was subdued over breakfast, few of them could drag their eyes from the high table where, under the gold canopy of state, seated on their thrones, the king and queen exchanged conversation and seemed to be quite reconciled.

‘But does she know?’ one courtier whispered to one of Katherine’s ladies.

‘Who would tell her?’ she replied. ‘If Maria de Salinas and Lady Margaret have not told her already then she doesn’t know. I would put my earrings on it.’

‘Done,’ he said. ‘Ten shillings that she finds out.’

‘By when?’

‘Tomorrow,’ he said.



I had another piece of the jigsaw when I came to look at the accounts for the weeks while I had been in confinement. In the first days that I had been away from court there had been no extraordinary expenses. But then the bill for amusements began to grow. There were bills from singers and actors to rehearse their celebration for the expected baby, bills from the organist, the choristers, from drapers for the material for pennants and standards, extra maids for polishing the gold christening bowl. Then there were payments for costumes of Lincoln green for disguising, singers to perform under the window of Lady Anne, a clerk to copy out the words of the king’s new song, rehearsals for a new May Day masque with a dance, and costumes for three ladies with Lady Anne to play the part of Unattainable Beauty.

I rose from the table where I had been turning over the papers and went to the window to look down at the garden. They had set up a wrestling ring and the young men of the court were stripped to their shirtsleeves. Henry and Charles Brandon were gripped in each other’s arms like blacksmiths at a fair. As I

watched, Henry tripped his friend and threw him to the ground and then dropped his weight on him to hold him down. Princess Mary applauded, the court cheered.

I turned from the window. I began to wonder if Lady Anne had proved to be unattainable indeed. I wondered how merry they had been on May Day morning when I had woken on my own, in sadness, to silence, with no-one singing beneath my window. And why should the court pay for singers, hired by Compton, to seduce his newest mistress?



The king summoned the queen to his rooms in the afternoon. Some messages had come from the Pope and he wanted her advice. Katherine sat beside him, listened to the report of the messenger and stretched up to whisper in her husband's ear.

He nodded. 'The queen reminds me of our well-known alliance with Venice,' he said pompously. 'And indeed, she has no need to remind me. I am not likely to forget it. You can depend on our determination to protect Venice and indeed all Italy against the ambitions of the French king.'

The ambassadors nodded respectfully. 'I shall send you a letter about this,' Henry said grandly. They bowed and withdrew.

'Will you write to them?' he asked Katherine.

She nodded. 'Of course,' she said. 'I thought that you handled that quite rightly.'

He smiled at her approval. 'It is so much better when you are here,' he said. 'Nothing goes on right when you are away.'

'Well, I am back now,' she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. She could feel the power of the muscle under her hand. Henry was a man now, with the strength of a man. 'Dearest, I am so sorry about your quarrel with the Duke of Buckingham.'

Under her hand she felt his shoulder hunch, he shrugged away her touch. 'It is nothing,' he said. 'He shall beg my pardon and it will be forgotten.'

'But perhaps he could just come back to court,' she said. 'Without his sisters if you don't want to see them...'

Inexplicably he barked out a laugh. 'Oh, bring them all back by all means,' he said. 'If that is your true wish, if you think it will bring you happiness. You should never have gone into confinement, there was no child, anyone could have

seen that there would be no child.'

She was so taken aback that she could hardly speak. 'This is about my confinement?'

'It would hardly have happened without. But everyone could see there would be no child. It was wasted time.'

'Your own doctor...'

'What did he know? He only knows what you tell him.'

'He assured me...'

'Doctors know nothing!' he suddenly burst out. 'They are always guided by the woman; everyone knows that. And a woman can say anything. Is there a baby, isn't there a baby? Is she a virgin, isn't she a virgin? Only the woman knows and the rest of us are fooled.'

Katherine felt her mind racing, trying to trace what had offended him, what she could say. 'I trusted your doctor,' she said. 'He was very certain. He assured me I was with child and so I went into confinement. Another time I will know better. I am truly sorry, my love. It has been a very great grief to me.'

'It just makes me look such a fool!' he said plaintively. 'It's no wonder that I...'

'That you? What?'

'Nothing,' said Henry, sulkily.



'It is such a lovely afternoon, let us go for a walk,' I say pleasantly to my ladies. 'Lady Margaret will accompany me.'

We go outside, my cape is brought and put over my shoulders and my gloves. The path down to the river is wet and slippery and Lady Margaret takes my arm and we go down the steps together. The primroses are thick as churned butter in the hedgerows and the sun is out. There are white swans on the river but when the barges and wherries go by the birds drift out of the way as if by magic. I breathe deeply, it is so good to be out of that small room and to feel the sun on my face again that I hardly want to open the subject of Lady Anne.

'You must know what took place?' I say to her shortly.

'I know some gossip,' she says levelly. 'Nothing for certain.'

'What has angered the king so much?' I ask. 'He is upset about my confinement, he is angry with me. What is troubling him? Surely not the Stafford girl's flirtation with Compton?'

Lady Margaret's face is grave. 'The king is very attached to William Compton,' she said. 'He would not have him insulted.'

'It sounds as if all the insult is the other way,' I say. 'It is Lady Anne and her husband who are dishonoured. I would have thought the king would have been angry with William. Lady Anne is not a girl to tumble behind a wall. There is her family to consider and her husband's family. Surely the king should have told Compton to behave himself?'

Lady Margaret shrugs. 'I don't know,' she says. 'None of the girls will even talk to me. They are as silent as if it were a grave matter.'

'But why, if it was nothing more than a foolish affair? Youth calls to youth in springtime?'

She shakes her head. 'Truly, I don't know. You would think so. But if it is a flirtation, why would the duke be so very offended? Why quarrel with the king? Why would the girls not be laughing at Anne for getting caught?'

'And another thing...' I say.

She waits.

'Why should the king pay for Compton's courtship? The fee for the singers is in the court accounts.'

She frowned. 'Why would he encourage it? The king must have known that the duke would be greatly offended.'

'And Compton remains in high favour?'

'They are inseparable.'

I speak the thought that is sitting cold in my heart. 'So do you think that Compton is the shield and the love affair is between the king, my husband, and Lady Anne?'

Lady Margaret's grave face tells me that my guess is her own fear. 'I don't know,' she says, honest as ever. 'As I say, the girls tell me nothing, and I have not asked anyone that question.'

'Because you think you will not like the answer?'

She nods. Slowly, I turn, and we walk back along the river in silence.



Katherine and Henry led the company into dinner in the grand hall and sat side by side under the gold canopy of state as they always did. There was a band of special singers that had come to England from the French court and they sang without instruments, very true to the note with a dozen different parts. It was

complicated and beautiful and Henry was entranced by the music. When the singers paused, he applauded and asked them to repeat the song. They smiled at his enthusiasm, and sang again. He asked for it once more, and then sang the tenor line back to them: note perfect.

It was their turn to applaud him and they invited him to sing with them the part that he had learned so rapidly. Katherine, on her throne, leaned forwards and smiled as her handsome young husband sang in his clear young voice, and the ladies of the court clapped in appreciation.

When the musicians struck up and the court danced, Katherine came down from the raised platform of the high table and danced with Henry, her face bright with happiness and her smile warm. Henry, encouraged by her, danced like an Italian, with fast, dainty footwork and high leaps. Katherine clapped her hands in delight and called for another dance as if she had never had a moment's worry in her life. One of her ladies leaned towards the courtier who had taken the bet that Katherine would find out. 'I think I shall keep my earrings,' she said. 'He has fooled her. He has played her for a fool, and now he is fair game to any one of us. She has lost her hold on him.'



I wait till we are alone, and then I wait until he beds me with his eager joy, and then I slip from the bed and bring him a cup of small ale.

'So tell me the truth, Henry,' I say to him simply. 'What is the truth of the quarrel between you and the Duke of Buckingham, and what were your dealings with his sister?'

His swift sideways glance tells me more than any words. He is about to lie to me. I hear the words he says: a story about a disguising and all of them in masks and the ladies dancing with them and Compton and Anne dancing together, and I know that he is lying.

It is an experience more painful than I thought I could have with him. We have been married for nearly a year, a year next month, and always he has looked at me directly, with all his youth and honesty in his gaze. I have never heard anything but truth in his voice: boastful-ness, certainly, the arrogance of a young man, but never this uncertain deceitful quaver. He is lying to me, and I would almost rather have a bare-faced confession of infidelity than to see him look at me, blue-eyed and sweet as a boy, with a parcel of lies in his mouth.

I stop him, I truly cannot bear to hear it. 'Enough,' I say. 'I know enough at

least to realise that this is not true. She was your lover, wasn't she? And Compton was your friend and shield?'

His face is aghast. 'Katherine...'

'Just tell me the truth.'

His mouth is trembling. He cannot bear to admit what he has done. 'I didn't mean to...'

'I know that you did not,' I say. 'I am sure you were sorely tempted.'

'You were away for so long...'

'I know.'

A dreadful silence falls. I had thought that he would lie to me and I would track him down and then confront him with his lies and with his adultery and I would be a warrior queen in my righteous anger. But this is sadness and a taste of defeat. If Henry cannot remain faithful when I am in confinement with our child, our dearly needed child, then how shall he be faithful till death? How shall he obey his vow to forsake all others when he can be distracted so easily? What am I to do, what can any woman do, when her husband is such a fool as to desire a woman for a moment, rather than the woman he is pledged to for eternity?

'Dear husband, this is very wrong,' I say sadly.

'It was because I had such doubts. I thought for a moment that we were not married,' he confesses.

'You forgot we were married?' I ask incredulously.

'No!' His head comes up, his blue eyes are filled with unshed tears. His face shines with contrition. 'I thought that since our marriage was not valid, I need not abide by it.'

I am quite amazed by him. 'Our marriage? Why would it not be valid?'

He shakes his head. He is too ashamed to speak. I press him. 'Why not?'

He kneels beside my bed and hides his face in the sheets. 'I liked her and I desired her and she said some things which made me feel...'

'Feel what?'

'Made me think...'

'Think what?'

'What if you were not a virgin when I married you?'

At once I am alert, like a villain near the scene of a crime, like a murderer when the corpse bleeds at the sight of him. 'What do you mean?'

'She was a virgin...'

'Anne?'

'Yes. Sir George is impotent. Everyone knows that.'

'Do they?'

'Yes. So she was a virgin. And she was not...' He rubs his face against the sheet of our bed. 'She was not like you. She...' He stumbles for words. 'She cried out in pain. She bled, I was afraid when I saw how much blood, really a lot...' He breaks off again. 'She could not go on, the first time. I had to stop. She cried, I held her. She was a virgin. That is what it is like to lie with a virgin, the first time. I was her first love. I could tell. Her first love.'

There is a long, cold silence.

'She fooled you,' I say cruelly, throwing away her reputation, and his tenderness for her, with one sweep, making her a whore and him a fool, for the greater good.

He looks up, shocked. 'She did?'

'She was not that badly hurt, she was pretending.' I shake my head at the sinfulness of young women. 'It is an old trick. She will have had a bladder of blood in her hand and broke it to give you a show of blood. She will have cried out. I expect she whimpered and said she could not bear the pain from the very beginning.'

Henry is amazed. 'She did.'

'She thought to make you feel sorry for her.'

'But I was!'

'Of course. She thought to make you feel that you had taken her virginity, her maidenhead, and that you owe her your protection.'

'That is what she said!'

'She tried to entrap you,' I say. 'She was not a virgin, she was acting the part of one. I was a virgin when I came to your bed and the first night that we were lovers was very simple and sweet. Do you remember?'

'Yes,' he says.

'There was no crying and wailing like players on a stage. It was quiet and loving. Take that as your benchmark,' I say. 'I was a true virgin. You and I were each other's first love. We had no need for play-acting and exaggeration. Hold to that truth of our love, Henry. You have been fooled by a counterfeit.'

'She said...' he begins.

'She said what?' I am not afraid. I am filled with utter determination that Anne Stafford will not put asunder what God and my mother have joined together.

'She said that you must have been Arthur's lover.' He stumbles before the

white fierceness of my face. 'That you had lain with him, and that...'

'Not true.'

'I didn't know.'

'It is not true.'

'Oh, yes.'

'My marriage with Arthur was not consummated. I came to you a virgin. You were my first love. Does anyone dare say different to me?'

'No,' he says rapidly. 'No. No-one shall say different to you.'

'Nor to you.'

'Nor to me.'

'Would anyone dare to say to my face that I am not your first love, a virgin untouched, your true wedded wife, and Queen of England?'

'No,' he says again.

'Not even you.'

'No.'

'It is to dishonour me,' I say furiously. 'And where will scandal stop? Shall they suggest that you have no claim to the throne because your mother was no virgin on her wedding day?'

He is stunned with shock. 'My mother? What of my mother?'

'They say that she lay with her uncle, Richard the usurper,' I say flatly. 'Think of that! And they say that she lay with your father before they were married, before they were even betrothed. They say that she was far from a virgin on her wedding day when she wore her hair loose and went in white. They say she was dishonoured twice over, little more than a harlot for the throne. Do we allow people to say such things of a queen? Are you to be disinherited by such gossip? Am I? Is our son?'

Henry is gasping with shock. He loved his mother and he had never thought of her as a sexual being before. 'She would never have...she was a most...how can...'

'You see? This is what happens if we allow people to gossip about their betters.' I lay down the law which will protect me. 'If you allow someone to dishonour me, there is no stopping the scandal. It insults me, but it threatens you. Who knows where scandal will stop once it takes hold? Scandal against the queen rocks the throne itself. Be warned, Henry.'

'She said it!' he exclaims. 'Anne said that it was no sin for me to lie with her because I was not truly married!'

'She lied to you,' I say. 'She pretended to her virgin state and she traduced

me.'

His face flushes red with anger. It is a relief to him to turn to rage. 'What a whore!' he exclaims crudely. 'What a whore to trick me into thinking...what a jade's trick!'

'You cannot trust young women,' I say quietly. 'Now that you are King of England you will have to be on your guard, my love. They will run after you and they will try to charm you and seduce you, but you have to be faithful to me. I was your virgin bride, I was your first love. I am your wife. Do not forsake me.'

He takes me into his arms. 'Forgive me,' he whispers brokenly.

'We will never ever speak of this again,' I say solemnly. 'I will not have it, and I will not allow anyone to dishonour either me or your mother.'

'No,' he says fervently. 'Before God. We will never speak of this nor allow any other to speak of it again.'



Next morning Henry and Katherine rose up together and went quietly to Mass in the king's chapel. Katherine met with her confessor and kneeled to confess her sins. She did not take very long, Henry observed, she must have no great sins to confess. It made him feel even worse to see her go to her priest for a brief confession and come away with her face so serene. He knew that she was a woman of holy purity, just like his mother. Penitently, his face in his hands, he thought that not only had Katherine never been unfaithful to her given word, she had probably never even told a lie in her life.



I go out with the court to hunt dressed in a red velvet gown, determined to show that I am well, that I am returned to the court, that everything will be as it was before. We have a long, hard run after a fine stag who takes a looping route around the great park and the hounds bring him down in the stream and Henry himself goes into the water, laughing, to cut his throat. The stream blooms red around him and stains his clothes, and his hands. I laugh with the court but the sight of the blood makes me feel sick to my very belly.

We ride home slowly, I keep my face locked in a smile to hide my weariness and the pain in my thighs, in my belly, in my back. Lady Margaret brings her

horse beside mine, and glances at me. 'You had better rest this afternoon.'

'I cannot,' I say shortly.

She does not need to ask why. She has been a princess, she knows that a queen has to be on show, whatever her own feelings. 'I have the story, if you want to trouble yourself to hear such a thing.'

'You are a good friend,' I say. 'Tell me briefly. I think I know the worst that it can be already.'

'After we had gone in for your confinement the king and the young men started to go into the City in the evenings.'

'With guards?'

'No, alone and disguised.'

I stifle a sigh. 'Did no-one try to stop him?'

'The Earl of Surrey, God bless him. But his own sons were of the party and it was light-hearted fun, and you know that the king will not be denied his pastimes.'

I nod.

'One evening they came into court in their disguises and pretended to be London merchants. The ladies danced with them, it was all very amusing. I was not there that evening, I was with you in confinement; someone told me about it the next day. I took no notice. But apparently one of the merchants singled out Lady Anne and danced with her all night.'

'Henry,' I say, and I can hear the bitterness in my own whisper.

'Yes, but everyone thought it was William Compton. They are about the same height, and they were all wearing false beards and hats. You know how they do.'

'Yes,' I say. 'I know how they do.'

'Apparently they made an assignation and when the duke thought that his sister was sitting with you in the evenings she was slipping away and meeting the king. When she went missing all night, it was too much for her sister. Elizabeth went to her brother and warned him of what Anne was doing. They told her husband and all of them confronted Anne and demanded to know who she was seeing, and she said it was Compton. But when she was missing, and they thought she was with her lover, they met Compton. So then they knew, it was not Compton, it was the king.'

I shake my head.

'I am sorry, my dear,' Lady Margaret says to me gently. 'He is a young man. I am sure it is no more than vanity and thoughtlessness.'

I nod and say nothing. I check my horse, who is tossing his head against my

hands, which are too heavy on the reins. I am thinking of Anne crying out in pain as her hymen was broken.

‘And is her husband, Sir George, unmanned?’ I ask. ‘Was she a virgin until now?’

‘So they say,’ Lady Margaret replies drily. ‘Who knows what goes on in a bedroom?’

‘I think we know what goes on in the king’s bedroom,’ I say bitterly. ‘They have hardly been discreet.’

‘It is the way of the world,’ she says quietly. ‘When you are confined it is only natural that he will take a lover.’

I nod again. This is nothing but the truth. What is surprising to me is that I should feel such hurt.

‘The duke must have been much aggrieved,’ I say, thinking of the dignity of the man, and how it was he who put the Tudors on the throne in the first place.

‘Yes,’ she says. She hesitates. Something about her voice warns me that there is something she is not sure if she should say.

‘What is it, Margaret?’ I ask. ‘I know you well enough to know that there is something more.’

‘It is something that Elizabeth said to one of the girls before she left,’ she says.

‘Oh?’

‘Elizabeth says that her sister did not think it was a light love affair that would last while you were in confinement and then be forgotten.’

‘What else could it be?’

‘She thought that her sister had ambitions.’

‘Ambitions for what?’

‘She thought that she might take the king’s fancy and hold him.’

‘For a season,’ I say disparagingly.

‘No, for longer,’ she says. ‘He spoke of love. He is a romantic young man. He spoke of being hers till death.’ She sees the look on my face and breaks off. ‘Forgive me, I should have said none of this.’

I think of Anne Stafford crying out in pain and telling him that she was a virgin, a true virgin, in too much pain to go on. That he was her first love, her only love. I know how much he would like that.

I check my horse again, he frets against the bit. ‘What do you mean, she was ambitious?’

‘I think she thought that given her family position, and the liking that was

between her and the king, that she could become the great mistress of the English court.'

I blink. 'And what about me?'

'I think she thought that, in time, he might turn from you to her. I think she hoped to supplant you in his love.'

I nod. 'And if I died bearing his child, I suppose she thought she would have her empty marriage annulled and marry him?'

'That would be the very cusp of her ambition,' Lady Margaret says. 'And stranger things have happened. Elizabeth Woodville got to the throne of England on looks alone.'

'Anne Stafford was my lady-in-waiting,' I say. 'I chose her for the honour over many others. What about her duty to me? What about her friendship with me? Did she never think of me? If she had served me in Spain we would have lived night and day together...' I break off, there is no way to explain the safety and affection of the harem to a woman who has always lived her life alert to the gaze of men.

Lady Margaret shakes her head. 'Women are always rivals,' she says simply. 'But until now everyone has thought that the king only had eyes for you. Now everyone knows different. There is not a pretty girl in the land who does not now think that the crown is for taking.'

'It is still my crown,' I point out.

'But girls will hope for it,' she says. 'It is the way of the world.'

'They will have to wait for my death,' I say bleakly. 'That could be a long wait even for the most ambitious girl.'

Lady Margaret nods. I indicate behind me and she looks back. The ladies-in-waiting are scattered among the huntsmen and courtiers, riding and laughing and flirting. Henry has Princess Mary on one side of him and one of her ladies-in-waiting on another. She is a new girl to court, young and pretty. A virgin, without doubt, another pretty virgin.

'And which of these will be next?' I ask bitterly. 'When I next go in for my confinement and cannot watch them like a fierce hawk? Will it be a Percy girl? Or a Seymour? Or a Howard? Or a Neville? Which girl will step up to the king next and try to charm her way into his bed and into my place?'

'Some of your ladies love you dearly,' she says.

'And some of them will use their position at my side to get close to the king,' I say. 'Now they have seen it done they will be waiting for their chance. They will know that the easiest route to the king is to come into my rooms, to pretend

to be my friend, to offer me service. First she will pretend friendship and loyalty to me and all the time she will watch for her chance. I can know that one will do it, but I cannot know which one she is.'

Lady Margaret leans forward, and strokes her horse's neck, her face grave. 'Yes,' she agrees.

'And one of them, one of the many, will be clever enough to turn the king's head,' I say bitterly. 'He is young and vain and easily misled. Sooner or later, one of them will turn him against me and want my place.'

Lady Margaret straightens up and looks directly at me, her grey eyes as honest as ever. 'This may all be true; but I think you can do nothing to prevent it.'

'I know,' I say grimly.



'I have good news for you,' Katherine said to Henry. They had thrown open the windows of her bedroom to let in the cooler night air. It was a warm night in late May and for once, Henry had chosen to come to bed early.

'Tell me some good news,' he said. 'My horse went lame today, and I cannot ride him tomorrow. I would welcome some good news.'

'I think I am with child.'

He bounced up in the bed. 'You are?'

'I think so,' she said, smiling.

'Praise God! You are?'

'I am certain of it.'

'God be praised. I shall go to Walsingham the minute you give birth to our son. I shall go on my knees to Walsingham! I shall crawl along the road! I shall wear a suit of pure white. I shall give Our Lady pearls.'

'Our Lady has been gracious to us indeed.'

'And how potent they will all know that I am now! Out of confinement in the first week of May and pregnant by the end of the month. That will show them! That will prove that I am a husband indeed.'

'Indeed it will,' she said levelly.

'It is not too early to be sure?'

'I have missed my course, and I am sick in the morning. They tell me it is a certain sign.'

'And you are certain?' He had no tact to phrase his anxiety in gentle words.

‘You are certain this time? You know that there can be no mistake?’

She nodded. ‘I am certain. I have all the signs.’

‘God be praised. I knew it would come. I knew that a marriage made in heaven would be blessed.’

Katherine nodded. Smiling.

‘We shall go slowly on our progress, you shall not hunt. We shall go by boat for some of the way, barges.’

‘I think I will not travel at all, if you will allow it,’ she said. ‘I want to stay quietly in one place this summer, I don’t even want to ride in a litter.’

‘Well, I shall go on progress with the court and then come home to you,’ he said. ‘And what a celebration we shall have when our baby is born. When will it be?’

‘After Christmas,’ Katherine said. ‘In the New Year.’

Winter 1510

I should have been a soothsayer, I have proved to be so accurate with my prediction, even without a Moorish abacus. We are holding the Christmas feast at Richmond and the court is joyful in my happiness. The baby is big in my belly, and he kicks so hard that Henry can put his hand on me and feel the little heel thud out against his hand. There is no doubt that he is alive and strong, and his vitality brings joy to the whole court. When I sit in council, I sometimes wince at the strange sensation of him moving inside me, the pressure of his body against my own, and some of the old councillors laugh – having seen their own wives in the same state – for joy that there is to be an heir for England and Spain at last.

I pray for a boy but I do not expect one. A child for England, a child for Arthur, is all I want. If it is the daughter that he had wanted, then I will call her Mary as he asked.

Henry's desire for a son, and his love for me, has made him more thoughtful at last. He takes care of me in ways that he has never done before. I think he is growing up, the selfish boy is becoming a good man at last, and the fear that has haunted me since his affair with the Stafford girl is receding. Perhaps he will take lovers as kings always do, but perhaps he will resist falling in love with them and making the wild promises that a man can make but a king must not. Perhaps he will acquire the good sense that so many men seem to learn: to enjoy a new woman but remain constant, in their hearts, to their wife. Certainly, if he continues to be this sweet-natured, he will make a good father. I think of him teaching our son to ride, to hunt, to joust. No boy could have a better father for sports and pastimes than a son of Henry's. Not even Arthur would have made a more playful father. Our boy's education, his skill in court life, his upbringing as a Christian, his training as a ruler, these are the things that I will teach him. He will learn my mother's courage and my father's skills, and from me – I think I can teach him constancy, determination. These are my gifts now.

I believe that between Henry and me, we will raise a prince who will make his mark in Europe, who will keep England safe from the Moors, from the French, from the Scots, from all our enemies.

I will have to go into confinement again but I leave it as late as I dare. Henry swears to me that there will be no other while I am confined, that he is mine, all mine. I leave it till the evening of the Christmas feast and then I take my spiced wine with the members of my court and bid them merry Christmas as they bid me God speed, and I go once more into the quietness of my bedroom.

In truth, I don't mind missing the dancing and the heavy drinking. I am tired, this baby is a weight to carry. I rise and then rest with the winter sun, rarely waking much before nine of the morning, and ready to sleep at five in the afternoon. I spend much time praying for a safe delivery, and for the health of the child that moves so strongly inside me.

Henry comes to see me, privately, most days. The Royal Book is clear that the queen should be in absolute isolation before the birth of her child; but the Royal Book was written by Henry's grandmother and I suggest that we can please ourselves. I don't see why she should command me from beyond the grave when she was such an unhelpful mentor in life. Besides, to put it as bluntly as an Aragonese: I don't trust Henry on his own in court. On New Year's Eve he dines with me before going to the hall for the great feast, and brings me a gift of rubies, with stones as big as Cristóbal Colón's haul. I put them around my neck and see his eyes darken with desire for me as they gleam on the plump whiteness of my breasts.

'Not long now,' I say, smiling; I know exactly what he is thinking.

'I shall go to Walsingham as soon as our child is born, and when I come back you will be churched,' he says.

'And then, I suppose you will want to make another baby,' I say with mock weariness.

'I will,' he says, his face bright with laughter.

He kisses me goodnight, wishes me joy of the new year and then goes out of the hidden door in my chamber to his own rooms, and from there to the feast. I tell them to bring the boiled water that I still drink in obedience to the Moor's advice, and then I sit before the fire sewing the tiniest little gown for my baby, while Maria de Salinas reads in Spanish to me.

Suddenly, it is as if my whole belly has turned over, as if I am falling from a great height. The pain is so thorough, so unlike anything I have ever known before, that the sewing drops from my hands and I grip the arms of my chair and let out a gasp before I can say a word. I know at once that the baby is coming. I had been afraid that I would not know what was happening, that it would be a pain like that when I lost my poor girl. But this is like the great force of a deep

river, this feels like something powerful and wonderful starting to flow. I am filled with joy and a holy terror. I know that the baby is coming and that he is strong, and that I am young, and that everything will be all right.

As soon as I tell the ladies, the chamber bursts into uproar. My Lady the King's Mother might have ruled that the whole thing shall be done soberly and quietly with the cradle made ready and two beds made up for the mother, one to give birth in and one to rest in; but in real life, the ladies run around like hens in a poultry yard, squawking in alarm. The midwives are summoned from the hall, they have gone off to make merry, gambling that they would not be needed on New Year's Eve. One of them is quite tipsy and Maria de Salinas throws her out of the room before she falls over and breaks something. The physician cannot be found at all, and pages are sent running all over the palace looking for him.

The only ones who are settled and determined are Lady Margaret Pole, Maria de Salinas, and I. Maria, because she is naturally disposed to calm, Lady Margaret, because she has been confident from the start of this confinement, and I, because I can feel that nothing will stop this baby coming, and I might as well grab hold of the rope in one hand, my relic of the Virgin Mother in the other, fix my eyes on the little altar in the corner of the room and pray to St Margaret of Antioch to give me a swift and easy delivery and a healthy baby.

Unbelievably, it is little more than six hours – though one of those hours lingers on for at least a day – and then there is a rush and a slither, and the midwife mutters 'God be praised!' quietly and then there is a loud, irritable cry, almost a shout, and I realise that this is a new voice in the room, that of my baby.

'A boy, God be praised, a boy,' the midwife says and Maria looks up at me and sees me radiant with joy.

'Really?' I demand. 'Let me see him!'

They cut the cord and pass him up to me, still naked, still bloody, his little mouth opened wide to shout, his eyes squeezed tight in anger, Henry's son.

'My son,' I whisper.

'England's son,' the midwife says. 'God be praised.'

I put my face down to his warm little head, still sticky, I sniff him like a cat sniffs her kittens. 'This is our boy,' I whisper to Arthur, who is so close at that moment that it is almost as if he is at my side, looking over my shoulder at this tiny miracle, who turns his head and nuzzles at my breast, little mouth gaping. 'Oh, Arthur, my love, this is the boy I promised I would bear for you and for England. This is our son for England, and he will be king.'

Spring 1511

1st January 1511

The whole of England went mad when they learned on New Year's Day that a boy had been born. Everyone called him Prince Henry at once, there was no other name possible. In the streets they roasted oxen and drank themselves into a stupor. In the country they rang the church bells and broke into the church ales to toast the health of the Tudor heir, the boy who would keep England at peace, who would keep England allied with Spain, who would protect England from her enemies and who would defeat the Scots once and for all.

Henry came in to see his son, disobeying the rules of confinement, tiptoeing carefully, as if his footstep might shake the room. He peered into the cradle, afraid almost to breathe near the sleeping boy.

‘He is so small,’ he said. ‘How can he be so small?’

‘The midwife says he is big and strong,’ Katherine corrected him, instantly on the defence of her baby.

‘I am sure. It is just that his hands are so...and look, he has fingernails! Real fingernails!’

‘He has toenails too,’ she said. The two of them stood side by side and looked down in amazement at the perfection that they had made together. ‘He has little plump feet and the tiniest toes you can imagine.’

‘Show me,’ he said.

Gently, she pulled off the little silk shoes that the baby wore. ‘There,’ she said, her voice filled with tenderness. ‘Now I must put this back on so that he does not get cold.’

Henry bent over the crib, and tenderly took the tiny foot in his big hand. ‘My son,’ he said wonderingly. ‘God be praised, I have a son.’



I lie on my bed as the old king's mother commanded in the Royal Book, and I receive honoured guests. I have to hide a smile when I think of my mother giving birth to me on campaign, in a tent, like any soldier's doxy. But this is the English way and I am an English queen and this baby will be King of England.

I've never known such simple joy. When I doze I wake with my heart filled with delight, before I even know why. Then I remember. I have a son for England, for Arthur and for Henry; and I smile and turn my head, and whoever is watching over me answers the question before I have asked it: 'Yes, your son is well, Your Grace.'

Henry is excessively busy with the care of our son. He comes in and out to see me twenty times a day with questions and with news of the arrangements he has made. He has appointed a household of no less than forty people for this tiny baby, and already chosen his rooms in the Palace of Westminster for his council chamber when he is a young man. I smile, and say nothing. Henry is planning the greatest christening that has ever been seen in England, nothing is too good for this Henry who will be Henry the Ninth. Sometimes when I am sitting on my bed, supposed to be writing letters, I draw his monogram. Henry IX: my son, the King of England.

His sponsors are carefully chosen: the daughter of the emperor, Margaret of Austria, and King Louis the Twelfth of France. So he is working already, this little Tudor, to cloud the French suspicion against us, to maintain our alliance with the Hapsburg family. When they bring him to me and I put my finger in the palm of his tiny hand, his fingers curl around, as if to grip on. As if he would hold my hand. As if he might love me in return. I lie quietly, watching him sleep, my finger against his little palm, the other hand cupped over his tender little head where I can feel a steady pulse throbbing.

His godparents are Archbishop Warham, my dear and true friend Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, and the Earl and Countess of Devon. My dearest Lady Margaret is to run his nursery at Richmond. It is the newest and cleanest of all the palaces near London, and wherever we are, whether at Whitehall or Greenwich or Westminster, it will be easy for me to visit him.

I can hardly bear to let him go away, but it is better for him to be in the country than in the City. And I shall see him every week at the very least, Henry has promised me that I shall see him every week.



Henry went to the shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham, as he had promised, and Katherine asked him to tell the nuns who kept the shrine that she would come herself when she was next with child. When the next baby was in the queen's womb she would give thanks for the safe birth of the first; and pray for the safe delivery of a second. She asked the king to tell the nuns that she would come to them every time she was with child, and that she hoped to visit them many times.

She gave him a heavy purse of gold. 'Will you give them this, from me, and ask them for their prayers?'

He took it. 'They pray for the Queen of England as their duty,' he said.

'I want to remind them.'

Henry returned to court for the greatest tournament that England had ever seen, and Katherine was up and out of her bed to organise it for him. He had commissioned new armour before he went away and she had commanded her favourite, Edward Howard, the talented younger son of the Howard house, to make sure that it would fit precisely to the slim young king's measurements, and that the workmanship was perfect. She had banners made, and tapestries hung, masques prepared with glorious themes, gold everywhere: cloth of gold banners and curtains, and swathes of cloth, gold plates and gold cups, gold tips to the ornamental lances, gold-embossed shields, even gold on the king's saddlery.

'This will be the greatest tournament that England has ever seen,' Edward Howard said to her. 'English chivalry and Spanish elegance. It will be a thing of beauty.'

'It is the greatest celebration that we have ever had,' she said, smiling. 'For the greatest reason.'



I know I have made an outstanding showcase for Henry but when he rides into the tiltyard I catch my breath. It is the fashion that the knights who have come to joust choose a motto; sometimes they even compose a poem or play a part in a tableau before they ride. Henry has kept his motto a secret, and not told me what it is going to be. He has commissioned his own banner and the women have hidden from me, with much laughter, while they embroider his words on the banner of Tudor green silk. I truly have no idea what it will say until he bows before me in the royal box, the banner unfurls and his herald shouts out his title for the joust: 'Sir Loyal Heart'.

I rise to my feet and clasp my hands before my face to hide my trembling mouth. My eyes fill with tears, I cannot help it. He has called himself ‘Sir Loyal Heart’ – he has declared to the world the restoration of his devotion and love for me. My women step back so that I can see the canopy that he has commanded them to hang all around the royal box. He has had it pinned all over with little gold badges of H and K entwined. Everywhere I look, at every corner of the jousting green, on every banner, on every post there are Ks and Hs together. He has used this great joust, the finest and richest that England has ever seen, to tell the world that he loves me, that he is mine, that his heart is mine and that it is a loyal heart.

I look around at my ladies-in-waiting and I am utterly triumphant. If I could speak freely I would say to them: ‘There! Take this as your warning. He is not the man that you have thought him. He is not a man to turn from his true-married wife. He is not a man that you can seduce, however clever your tricks, however insidious your whispers against me. He has given his heart to me, and he has a loyal heart.’ I run my eyes over them, the prettiest girls from the greatest families of England, and I know that every one of them secretly thinks that she could have my place. If she were to be lucky, if the king were to be seduced, if I were to die, she could have my throne.

But his banner tells them ‘Not so.’ His banner tells them, the gold Ks and Hs tell them, the herald’s cry tells them that he is all mine, forever. The will of my mother, my word to Arthur, the destiny given by God to England has brought me finally to this: a son and heir in England’s cradle, the King of England publicly declaring his passion for me, and my initial twined with his in gold everywhere I look.

I touch my hand to my lips and hold it out to him. His visor is up, his blue eyes are blazing with passion for me. His love for me warms me like the hot sun of my childhood. I am a woman blessed by God, especially favoured by Him, indeed. I survived widowhood and my despair at the loss of Arthur. The courtship of the old king did not seduce me, his enmity did not defeat me, the hatred of his mother did not destroy me. The love of Henry delights me but does not redeem me. With God’s especial favour, I have saved myself. I myself have come from the darkness of poverty into the glamour of the light. I myself have fought that terrible slide into blank despair. I myself have made myself into a woman who can face death and face life and endure them both.

I remember once when I was a little girl, my mother was praying before a battle and then she rose up from her knees, kissed the little ivory cross, put it

back on its stand and gestured for her lady-in-waiting to bring her breastplate and buckle it on.

I ran forwards and begged her not to go, and I asked her why she must ride, if God gives us His blessing? If we are blessed by God, why do we have to fight as well? Will He not just drive away the Moors for us?

'I am blessed because I am chosen to do His work.' She kneeled down and put her arm around me. 'You might say, why not leave it to God and he will send a thunderstorm over the wicked Moors?'

I nodded.

'I am the thunderstorm,' she said, smiling. 'I am God's thunderstorm to drive them away. He has not chosen a thunderstorm today, He has chosen me. And neither I nor the dark clouds can refuse our duty.'

I smile at Henry as he drops his visor and turns his horse from the royal box. I understand now what my mother meant by being God's thunderstorm. God has called me to be his sunshine in England. It is my God-given duty to bring happiness and prosperity and security to England. I do this by leading the king in the right choices, by securing the succession, and by protecting the safety of the borders. I am England's queen chosen by God and I smile on Henry as his big glossy black horse trots slowly to the end of the lists, and I smile on the people of London who call out my name and shout 'God bless Queen Katherine!' and I smile to myself because I am doing as my mother wished, as God decreed, and Arthur is waiting for me in al-Yanna, the garden.

22nd February 1511



Ten days later, when she was at the height of her happiness, they brought to Queen Katherine the worst news of her life.



It is worse even than the death of my husband, Arthur. I had not thought there could be anything worse than that; but so it proves. It is worse than my years of widowhood and waiting. It is worse than hearing from Spain that my mother was

dead, that she died on the day I wrote to her, begging her to send me a word. Worse than the worst days I have ever had.

My baby is dead. More than this, I cannot say, I cannot even hear. I think Henry is here, some of the time; and Maria de Salinas. I think Margaret Pole is here, and I see the stricken face of Thomas Howard at Henry's shoulder; William Compton desperately gripping Henry's shoulder; but the faces all swim before my eyes and I can be sure of nothing.

I go into my room and I order them to close the shutters and bolt the doors. But it is too late. They have already brought me the worst news of my life; closing the door will not keep it out. I cannot bear the light. I cannot bear the sound of ordinary life going on. I hear a page boy laugh in the garden near my window and I cannot understand how there can be any joy or gladness left in the world, now that my baby has gone.

And now the courage I have held on to, for all my life, turns out to be a thread, a spider-web, a nothing. My bright confidence that I am walking in the way of God and that He will protect me is nothing more than an illusion, a child's fairy story. In the shadows of my room I plunge deep into the darkness that my mother knew when she lost her son, that Juana could not escape when she lost her husband, that was the curse of my grandmother, that runs through the women of my family like a dark vein. I am no different after all. I am not a woman who can survive love and loss, as I had thought. It has only been that, so far, I have never lost someone who was worth more than life itself to me. When Arthur died my heart was broken. But now that my baby is dead, I want nothing but that my heart should cease to beat.

I cannot think of any reason why I should live and that innocent, sinless babe be taken from me. I can see no reason for it. I cannot understand a God who can take him from me. I cannot understand a world that can be so cruel. In the moment that they told me, 'Your Grace, be brave, we have bad news of the prince,' I lost my faith in God. I lost my desire to live. I lost even my ambition to rule England and keep my country safe.



He had blue eyes and the smallest, most perfect hands. He had fingernails like little shells. His little feet...his little feet...



Lady Margaret Pole, who had been in charge of the dead child's nursery, came into the room without knocking, without invitation, and kneeled before Queen Katherine, who sat on her chair by the fire, among her ladies, seeing nothing and hearing nothing.

'I have come to beg your pardon though I did nothing wrong,' she said steadily.

Katherine raised her head from her hand. 'What?'

'Your baby died in my care. I have come to beg your pardon. I was not remiss, I swear it. But he is dead. Princess, I am sorry.'

'You are always here,' Katherine said with quiet dislike. 'In my darkest moments, you are always at my side, like bad luck.'

The older woman flinched. 'Indeed, but it is not my wish.'

'And don't call me "Princess".'

'I forgot.'

For the first time in weeks Katherine sat up and looked into the face of another person, saw her eyes, saw the new lines around her mouth, realised that the loss of her baby was not her grief alone. 'Oh God, Margaret,' she said, and pitched forwards.

Margaret Pole caught her and held her. 'Oh God, Katherine,' she said into the queen's hair.

'How could we lose him?'

'God's will. God's will. We have to believe it. We have to bow beneath it.'

'But why?'

'Princess, no-one knows why one is taken and another spared. D'you remember?'

She felt from the shudder that the woman remembered the loss of her husband in this, the loss of her son.

'I never forget. Every day. But why?'

'It is God's will,' Lady Margaret repeated.

'I don't think I can bear it.' Katherine breathed so softly that none of her ladies could hear. She raised her tearstained face from her friend's shoulder. 'To lose Arthur felt like torture, but to lose my baby is like death itself. I don't think I can bear it, Margaret.'

The older woman's smile was infinitely patient. 'Oh, Katherine. You will learn to bear it. There is nothing that anyone can do but bear it. You can rage or

you can weep but in the end, you will learn to bear it.'

Slowly Katherine sat back on her chair; Margaret remained, with easy grace, kneeling on the floor at her feet, handclasped with her friend.

'You will have to teach me courage all over again,' Katherine whispered.

The older woman shook her head. 'You only have to learn it once,' she said. 'You know, you learned at Ludlow; you are not a woman to be destroyed by sorrow. You will grieve but you will live, you will come out into the world again. You will love. You will conceive another child, this child will live, you will learn again to be happy.'

'I cannot see it,' Katherine said desolately.

'It will come.'



The battle that Katherine had waited for, for so long, came while she was still overshadowed with grief for her baby. But nothing could penetrate her sadness.

'Great news, the best news in the world!' wrote her father. Wearily, Katherine translated from the code and then from Spanish to English. 'I am to lead a crusade against the Moors in Africa. Their existence is a danger to Christendom, their raids terrify the whole of the Mediterranean and endanger shipping from Greece to the Atlantic. Send me the best of your knights – you who claim to be the new Camelot. Send me your most courageous leaders at the head of your most powerful men and I shall take them to Africa and we will destroy the infidel kingdoms as holy Christian kings.'

Wearily, Katherine took the translated letter to Henry. He was coming off the tennis court, a napkin twisted around his neck, his face flushed. He beamed when he saw her, then at once his look of joy was wiped from his face by a grimace of guilt, like a boy caught out in a forbidden pleasure. At that fleeting expression, at that brief, betraying moment, she knew he had forgotten that their son was dead. He was playing tennis with his friends, he had won, he saw the wife he still loved, he was happy. Joy came as easily to the men of his family as sorrow to the women of hers. She felt a wave of hatred wash over her, so powerful that she could almost taste it in her mouth. He could forget, even for a moment, that their little boy had died. She thought that she would never forget; never.

'I have a letter from my father,' she said, trying to put some interest into her harsh voice.

‘Oh?’ He was all concern. He came towards her and took her arm. She gritted her teeth so that she did not scream: ‘Don’t touch me!’

‘Did he tell you to have courage? Did he write comforting words?’

The clumsiness of the young man was unbearable. She summoned her most tolerant smile. ‘No. It is not a personal letter. You know he rarely writes to me in that way. It is a letter about a crusade. He invites our noblemen and lords to raise regiments and go with him against the Moors.’

‘Does he? Oh, does he? What a chance!’

‘Not for you,’ she said, quelling any idea that Henry might have that he could go to war when they had no son. ‘It is just a little expedition. But my father would welcome English men, and I think they should go.’

‘I should think he would.’ Henry turned and shouted for his friends, who were hanging back like guilty schoolboys caught having fun. They could not bear to see Katherine since she had become so pale and quiet. They liked her when she was the queen of the joust and Henry was Sir Loyal Heart. She made them uncomfortable when she came to dinner like a ghost, ate nothing, and left early.

‘Hey! Anyone want to go to war against the Moors?’

A chorus of excited yells answered his holloa. Katherine thought that they were like nothing so much as a litter of excited puppies, Lord Thomas Darcy and Edward Howard at their head.

‘I will go!’

‘And I will go!’

‘Show them how Englishmen fight!’ Henry urged them. ‘I, myself, will pay the costs of the expedition.’

‘I will write to my father that you have eager volunteers,’ Katherine said quietly. ‘I will go and write to him now.’ She turned away and walked quickly towards the doorway to the little stair that led to her rooms. She did not think she could bear to be with them for another moment. These were the men who would have taught her son to ride. These were the men who would have been his statesmen, his Privy Council. They would have sponsored him at his first communion, they would have stood proxy for him at his betrothal, they would have been godfathers to his sons. And here they were, laughing, clamouring for war, competing with each other for Henry’s shouted approval, as if her son had not been born, had not died. As if the world were the same as it had ever been; when Katherine knew that it was utterly changed.



He had blue eyes. And the tiniest, most perfect feet.



In the event, the glorious crusade never happened. The English knights arrived at Cadiz but the crusade never set sail for the Holy Land, never faced a sharp scimitar wielded by a black-hearted infidel. Katherine translated letters between Henry and her father in which her father explained that he had not yet raised his troops, that he was not yet ready to leave, and then, one day, she came to Henry with a letter in her hand and her face shocked out of its usual weariness.

‘Father writes me the most terrible news.’

‘What is happening?’ Henry demanded, bewildered. ‘See, here, I have just received a letter from an English merchant in Italy, I cannot make any sense of it. He writes that the French and the Pope are at war.’ Henry held out his letter to her. ‘How can this be? I don’t understand it at all.’

‘It is true. This is from my father. He says the Pope has declared that the French armies must get out of Italy,’ Katherine explained. ‘And the Holy Father has put his own papal troops into the field against the French. King Louis has declared that the Pope shall no longer be Pope.’

‘How dare he?’ Henry demanded, shocked to his core.

‘Father says we must forget the crusade and go at once to the aid of the Pope. He will try to broker an alliance between us and the Holy Roman Emperor. We must form an alliance against France. King Louis cannot be allowed to take Rome. He must not advance into Italy.’

‘He must be mad to think that I would allow it!’ Henry exclaimed. ‘Would I let the French take Rome? Would I allow a French puppet Pope? Has he forgotten what an English army can do? Does he want another Agincourt?’

‘Shall I tell my father we will unite with him against France?’ Katherine asked. ‘I could write at once.’

He caught her hand and kissed it. For once she did not pull away and he drew her a little closer and put his arm around her waist. ‘I’ll come with you while you write and we can sign the letter from us both – your father should know that his Spanish daughter and his English son are absolutely as one in his support. Thank God that our troops are in Cadiz already,’ Henry exclaimed as

his good fortune struck him.

Katherine hesitated, a thought forming slowly in her mind. 'It is... fortuitous.'

'Lucky,' Henry said buoyantly. 'We are blessed by God.'

'My father will want some benefit for Spain from this.' Katherine introduced the suspicion carefully as they went to her rooms, Henry shortening his stride to match hers. 'He never makes a move without planning far ahead.'

'Of course, but you will guard our interests as you always do,' he said confidently. 'I trust you, my love, as I trust him. Is he not my only father now?'

Summer 1511

Slowly, as the days grow warmer, and the sun is more like a Spanish sun, I grow warm too and become more like the Spanish girl I once was. I cannot reconcile myself to the death of my son, I think I will never reconcile myself to his loss; but I can see that there is no-one to blame for his death. There was no neglect or negligence, he died like a little bird in a warm nest and I have to see that I will never know why.

I know now that I was foolish to blame myself. I have committed no crime, no sin so bad that God, the merciful God of my childhood prayers, would punish me with such an awful grief as this. There could be no good God who would take away such a sweet baby, such a perfect baby with such blue eyes, as an exercise of His divine will. I know in my heart that such a thing cannot be, such a God cannot be. Even though in the first worst outpourings of my grief I blamed myself and I blamed God, I know now that it was not a punishment for sin. I know that I kept my promise, Arthur's promise, for the best reasons; and God has me in His keeping.

The awful, icy, dark fact of my baby's loss seems to recede with the awful cold darkness of that English winter. One morning the fool came and told me some little jest and I laughed aloud. It was as if a door had opened that had long been locked tight. I realise that I can laugh, that it is possible to be happy, that laughter and hope can come back to me and perhaps I might even make another child and feel that overwhelming tenderness again.

I start to feel that I am alive again, that I am a woman with hope and prospects again, that I am the woman that the girl from Spain became. I can sense myself alive: poised halfway between my future and my past.

It is as if I am checking myself over as a rider does after a bad fall from a horse, patting my arms and legs, my vulnerable body, as if looking for permanent damage. My faith in God returns utterly unshaken, as firm as it has ever been. There seems to be only one great change: my belief in my mother and my father is damaged. For the first time in my life I truly think it possible that they can have been wrong.

I remember the Moorish physician's kindness to me and I have to amend my view of his people. No-one who could see his enemy brought as low as he saw me, and yet could look at her with such deep compassion, can be called a barbarian, a savage. He might be a heretic – steeped in error – but surely he must be allowed his own conclusions with his own reasons. And from what I know of the man, I am certain that he will have fine reasons.

I would like to send a good priest to wrestle for his soul, but I cannot say, as my mother would have said, that he is spiritually dead, fit for nothing but death. He held my hands to tell me hard news and I saw the tenderness of Our Lady in his eyes. I cannot dismiss the Moors as heretics and enemies any more. I have to see that they are men and women, fallible as us, hopeful as us, faithful to their creed as we are to ours.

And this in turn leads me to doubt my mother's wisdom. Once I would have sworn that she knew everything, that her writ must run everywhere. But now I have grown old enough to view her more thoughtfully. I was left in poverty in my widowhood because her contract was carelessly written. I was abandoned, all alone in a foreign country, because – though she summoned me with apparent urgency – in truth it was just for show; she would not take me back to Spain at any price. She hardened her heart against me and cleaved to her plan for me, and let me, her own daughter, go.

And finally, I was forced to find a doctor in secret and consult with him in hiding because she had done her part in driving from Christendom the best physicians, the best scientists, and the cleverest minds in the world. She had named their wisdom as sin and the rest of Europe had followed her lead. She rid Spain of the Jews and their skills and courage, she rid Spain of the Moors and their scholarship and gifts. She, a woman who admired learning, banished those that they call the People of the Book. She who fought for justice had been unjust.

I cannot yet think what this estrangement might mean for me. My mother is dead, I cannot reproach her or argue with her now, except in my imagination. But I know these months have wrought a deep and lasting change in me. I have come to an understanding of my world that is not her understanding of hers. I do not support a crusade against the Moors, nor against anyone. I do not support persecution, nor cruelty to them for the colour of their skin or the belief in their hearts. I know that my mother is not infallible, I no longer believe she and God think as one. Though I still love my mother, I don't worship her any more. I suppose, at last, I am growing up.



Slowly, the queen emerged from her grief and started to take an interest in the running of the court and country once more. London was buzzing with the news that Scottish privateers had attacked an English merchant ship. Everyone knew the name of the privateer: he was Andrew Barton, who sailed with letters of authority from King James of Scotland. Barton was merciless to English ships, and the general belief in the London docks was that James had deliberately licensed the pirate to prey on English shipping as if the two countries were already at war.

‘He has to be stopped,’ Katherine said to Henry.

‘He does not dare to challenge me!’ Henry exclaimed. ‘James sends border raiders and pirates against me because he does not dare to face me himself. James is a coward and an oath-breaker.’

‘Yes,’ Katherine agreed. ‘But the main thing about this pirate Barton is that he is not only a danger to our trade, he is a forerunner of worse to come. If we let the Scots rule the seas then we let them command us. This is an island; the seas must belong to us as much as the land or we have no safety.’

‘My ships are ready and we sail at midday. I shall capture him alive,’ Edward Howard, the Admiral of the Fleet, promised Katherine, as he came to bid her farewell. She thought he looked very young, as boyish as Henry; but his flair and courage were unquestioned. He had inherited all his father’s tactical skill but brought it to the newly formed navy. The Howards traditionally held the post of Lord Admiral, but Edward was proving exceptional. ‘If I cannot capture him alive, I shall sink his ship and bring him back dead.’

‘For shame on you! A Christian enemy!’ she said teasingly, holding out her hand for his kiss.

He looked up, serious for once. ‘I promise you, Your Grace, that the Scots are a greater danger to the peace and wealth of this country than the Moors could ever be.’

He saw her wistful smile. ‘You are not the first Englishman to tell me that,’ she said. ‘And I have seen it myself in these last years.’

‘It has to be right,’ he said. ‘In Spain your father and mother never rested until they could dislodge the Moors from the mountains. For us in England, our closest enemy is the Scots. It is they who are in our mountains, it is they who have to be suppressed and quelled if we are ever to be at peace. My father has spent his life defending the northern borders, and now I am fighting the same

enemy but at sea.'

'Come home safely,' she urged.

'I have to take risks,' he said carelessly. 'I am no stay-at-home.' 'No-one doubts your bravery, and my fleet needs an admiral,' she told him. 'I want the same admiral for many years. I need my champion at the next joust. I need my partner to dance with me. You come home safely, Edward Howard!'



The king was uneasy at his friend Edward Howard setting sail against the Scots, even against a Scots privateer. He had hoped that his father's alliance with Scotland, enforced by the marriage of the English princess, would have guaranteed peace.

'James is such a hypocrite to promise peace and marry Margaret on one hand and license these raids on the other! I shall write to Margaret and tell her to warn her husband that we cannot accept raids on our shipping. They should keep to their borders too.'

'Perhaps he will not listen to her,' Katherine pointed out.

'She can't be blamed for that,' he said quickly. 'She should never have been married to him. She was too young, and he was too set in his ways, and he is a man for war. But she will bring peace if she can, she knows it was my father's wish, she knows that we have to live in peace. We are kin now, we are neighbours.'

But the border lords, the Percys and the Nevilles, reported that the Scots had recently become more daring in their raids on the northern lands. Unquestionably, James was spoiling for war, undoubtedly he meant to take land in Northumberland as his own. Any day now he could march south, take Berwick, and continue on to Newcastle.

'How dare he?' Henry demanded. 'How dare he just march in and take our goods and disturb our people? Does he not know that I could raise an army and take them against him tomorrow?'

'It would be a hard campaign,' Katherine remarked, thinking of the wild land of the border and the long march to get to it. The Scotsmen would have everything to fight for, with the rich southern lands spread before them, and English soldiers never wanted to fight when they were far from their villages.

'It would be easy,' Henry contradicted her. 'Everyone knows that the Scots can't keep an army in the field. They are nothing more than a raiding party. If I

took out a great English army, properly armed and supplied and ordered, I would make an end of them in a day!’

‘Of course you would,’ Katherine smiled. ‘But don’t forget, we have to muster our army to fight against the French. You would far rather win your spurs against the French on a field of chivalry which will go down in history than in some dirty border quarrel.’



Katherine spoke to Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, Edward Howard’s father, at the end of the Privy Council meeting as the men came out of the king’s rooms.

‘My lord? Have you heard from Edward? I miss my young Chevalier.’

The old man beamed at her. ‘We had a report this day. The king will tell you himself. He knew you would be pleased that your favourite has had a victory.’

‘He has?’

‘He has captured the pirate Andrew Barton with two of his ships.’ His pride shone through his pretence of modesty. ‘He has only done his duty,’ he said. ‘He has only done as any Howard boy should do.’

‘He is a hero!’ Katherine said enthusiastically. ‘England needs great sailors as much as we need soldiers. The future for Christendom is in dominating the seas. We need to rule the seas as the Saracens rule the deserts. We have to drive pirates from the seas and make English ships a constant presence. And what else? Is he on his way home?’

‘He will bring his ships into London and the pirate in chains with him. We’ll try him, and hang him on the quayside. But King James won’t like it.’

‘Do you think the Scots king means war?’ Katherine asked him bluntly. ‘Would he go to war over such a cause as this? Is the country in danger?’

‘This is the worst danger to the peace of the kingdom of any in my lifetime,’ the older man said honestly. ‘We have subdued the Welsh and brought peace to our borders in the west, now we will have to put down the Scots. After them we will have to settle the Irish.’

‘They are a separate country, with their own kings and laws,’ Katherine demurred.

‘So were the Welsh till we defeated them,’ he pointed out. ‘This is too small a land for three kingdoms. The Scots will have to be yoked into our service.’

‘Perhaps we could offer them a prince,’ Katherine thought aloud. ‘As you did to the Welsh. The second son could be the Prince of Scotland as the first-

born is the Prince of Wales, for a kingdom united under the English king.'

He was struck with her idea. 'That's right,' he said. 'That would be the way to do it. Hit them hard and then offer them a peace with honour. Otherwise we will have them snapping at our heels forever.'

'The king thinks that their army would be small and easily defeated,' Katherine remarked.

Howard choked back a laugh. 'His Grace has never been to Scotland,' he said. 'He has never even been to war yet. The Scots are a formidable enemy, whether in pitched battle or a passing raid. They are a worse enemy than any of his fancy French cavalry. They have no laws of chivalry, they fight to win and they fight to the death. We will need to send a powerful force under a skilled commander.'

'Could you do it?' Katherine asked.

'I could try,' he replied honestly. 'I am the best weapon to your hand at the moment, Your Grace.'

'Could the king do it?' she asked quietly.

He smiled at her. 'He's a young man,' he said. 'He lacks nothing for courage, no-one who has seen him in a joust could doubt his courage. And he is skilled on his horse. But a war is not a joust, and he does not know that yet. He needs to ride out at the head of a bold army, and be seasoned in a few battles before he fights the greatest war of his life – the war for his very kingdom. You don't put a colt into a cavalry charge on his first outing. He has to learn. The king, even though a king, will have to learn.'

'He was taught nothing of warfare,' she said. 'He has not had to study other battles. He knows nothing about observing the lie of the land and positioning a force. He knows nothing about supplies and keeping an army on the move. His father taught him nothing.'

'His father knew next to nothing,' the earl said quietly, for her ears only. 'His first battle was Bosworth and he won that partly by luck and partly by the allies his mother put in the field for him. He was courageous enough, but no general.'

'But why did he not ensure that Henry was taught the art of warfare?' asked Ferdinand's daughter, who had been raised in a camp and seen a campaign plan before she had learned how to sew.

'Who would have thought he would need to know?' the old earl asked her. 'We all thought it would be Arthur.'

She made sure that her face did not betray the sudden pang of grief at the

unexpected mention of his name. ‘Of course,’ she said. ‘Of course you did. I forgot. Of course you did.’

‘Now, he would have been a great commander. He was interested in the waging of war. He read. He studied. He talked to his father, he pestered me. He was well aware of the danger of the Scots, he had a great sense of how to command men. He used to ask me about the land on the border, where the castles were placed, how the land fell. He could have led an army against the Scots with some hopes of success. Young Henry will be a great king when he has learned tactics, but Arthur knew it all. It was in his blood.’

Katherine did not even allow herself the pleasure of speaking of him. ‘Perhaps,’ was all she said. ‘But in the meantime, what can we do to limit the raids of the Scots? Should the border lords be reinforced?’

‘Yes, but it is a long border, and hard to keep. King James does not fear an English army led by the king. He does not fear the border lords.’

‘Why does he not fear us?’

He shrugged, too much of a courtier to say any betraying word. ‘Well, James is an old warrior, he has been spoiling for a fight for two generations now.’

‘Who could make James fear us and keep him in Scotland while we reinforce the border and get ready for war? What would make James delay and buy us time?’

‘Nothing,’ he declared, shaking his head. ‘There is no-one who could hold back James if he is set on war. Except perhaps only the Pope, if he would rule? But who could persuade His Holiness to intervene between two Christian monarchs quarrelling over a pirate’s raid and a patch of land? And the Pope has his own worries with the French advancing. And besides, a complaint from us would only bring a rebuttal from Scotland. Why would His Holiness intervene for us?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Katherine. ‘I don’t know what would make the Pope take our side. If only he knew of our need! If only he would use his power to defend us!’



Richard Bainbridge, Cardinal Archbishop of York, happens to be at Rome and is a good friend of mine. I write to him that very night, a friendly letter as between one acquaintance to another far from home, telling him of the news from London, the weather, the prospects for the harvest and the price of wool. Then I

tell him of the enmity of the Scottish king, of his sinful pride, of his wicked licensing of attacks on our shipping and – worst of all – his constant invasions of our northern lands. I tell him that I am so afraid that the king will be forced to defend his lands in the north that he will not be able to come to the aid of the Holy Father in his quarrel with the French king. It would be such a tragedy, I write, if the Pope was left exposed to attack and we could not come to his aid because of the wickedness of the Scots. We plan to join my father's alliance and defend the Pope; but we can hardly muster for the Pope if there is no safety at home. If I have my way, nothing should distract my husband from his alliance with my father, with the emperor and with the Pope, but what can I, a poor woman, do? A poor woman whose own defenceless border is under constant threat?

What could be more natural than that Richard, my brother in Christ, should go with my letter in his hand to His Holiness the Pope and say how disturbed I am by the threat to my peace from King James of Scotland, and how the whole alliance to save the Eternal City is threatened by this bad neighbourliness?

The Pope, reading my letter to Richard, reads it aright, and writes at once to King James and threatens to excommunicate him if he does not respect the peace and the justly agreed borders of another Christian king. He is shocked that James should trouble the peace of Christendom. He takes his behaviour very seriously and grave penalties could result. King James, forced to accede to the Pope's wishes, forced to apologise for his incursions, writes a bitter letter to Henry saying that Henry had no right to approach the Pope alone, that it had been a quarrel between the two of them and there is no need to go running behind his back to the Holy Father.



‘I don’t know what he is talking about,’ Henry complained to Katherine, finding her in the garden playing at catch with her ladies-in-waiting. He was too disturbed to run into the game as he usually did and snatch the ball from the air, bowl it hard at the nearest girl and shout with joy. He was too worried even to play with them. ‘What is he saying? I have never appealed to the Pope. I did not report him. I am no tale-bearer!’

‘No, you are not, and so you can tell him,’ Katherine said serenely, slipping her hand in his arm and walking away from the women.

‘I shall tell him. I said nothing to the Pope, and I can prove it.’

‘I may have mentioned my concerns to the archbishop and he may have passed them on,’ Katherine said casually. ‘But you can hardly be blamed if your wife tells her spiritual advisor that she is anxious.’

‘Exactly,’ Henry said. ‘I shall tell him so. And you should not be worried for a moment.’

‘Yes. And the main thing is that James knows he cannot attack us with impunity, His Holiness has made a ruling.’

Henry hesitated. ‘You did not mean Bainbridge to tell the Pope, did you?’

She peeped a little smile at him. ‘Of course,’ she said. ‘But it still is not you who has complained of James to the Pope.’

His grip tightened around her waist. ‘You are a redoubtable enemy. I hope we are never on opposing sides. I should be sure to lose.’

‘We never will be,’ she said sweetly. ‘For I will never be anything but your loyal and faithful wife and queen.’

‘I can raise an army in a moment, you know,’ Henry reminded her. ‘There is no need for you to fear James. There is no need for you even to pretend to fear. I could be the hammer of the Scots. I could do it as well as anyone, you know.’

‘Yes, of course you can. And, thank God, now you don’t need to do so.’

Autumn 1511

Edward Howard brought the Scots privateers back to London in chains and was greeted as an English hero. His popularity made Henry – always alert to the acclaim of the people – quite envious. He spoke more and more often of a war against the Scots, and the Privy Council, though fearful of the cost of war and privately doubtful of Henry's military abilities, could not deny that Scotland was an ever-present threat to the peace and security of England.

It was the queen who diverted Henry from his envy of Edward Howard, and the queen who continually reminded him that his first taste of warfare should surely be in the grand fields of Europe and not in some half-hidden hills in the borders. When Henry of England rode out it should be against the French king, in alliance with the two other greatest kings of Christendom. Henry, inspired from childhood with tales of Crécy and Agincourt, was easy to seduce with thoughts of glory against France.

Spring 1512

It was hard for Henry not to embark in person when the fleet sailed to join King Ferdinand's campaign against the French. It was a glorious start: the ships went out flying the banners of most of the great houses of England, they were the best equipped, finest arrayed force that had left England in years. Katherine had been busy, supervising the endless work of provisioning the ships, stocking the armouries, equipping the soldiers. She remembered her mother's constant work when her father was at war, and she had learned the great lesson of her childhood – that a battle could only be won if it was thoroughly and reliably supplied.

She sent out an expeditionary fleet that was better organised than any that had gone from England before, and she was confident that under her father's command they would defend the Pope, beat the French, win lands in France, and establish the English as major landowners in France once more. The peace party on the Privy Council worried, as they always did, that England would be dragged into another endless war; but Henry and Katherine were convinced by Ferdinand's confident predictions that a victory would come quickly and there would be rich gains for England.



I have seen my father command one campaign after another for all of my childhood. I have never seen him lose. Going to war is to relive my childhood again, the colour and the sounds and the excitement of a country at war are a deep joy for me. This time, to be in alliance with my father, as an equal partner, to be able to deliver to him the power of the English army, feels like my coming of age. This is what he has wanted from me, this is the fulfilment of my life as his daughter. It is for this that I endured the long years of waiting for the English throne. This is my destiny, at last, I am a commander as my father is, as my mother was. I am a Queen Militant, and there is no doubt in my mind on this sunny morning as I watch the fleet set sail that I will be a Queen Triumphant.



The plan was that the English army would meet the Spanish army and invade south-western France: Guienne and the Duchy of Aquitaine. There was no doubt in Katherine's mind that her father would take his share of the spoils of war, but she expected that he would honour his promise to march with the English into Aquitaine, and win it back for England. She thought that his secret plan would be the carving up of France, which would return that over-mighty country to the collection of small kingdoms and duchies it once had been, their ambitions crushed for a generation. Indeed, Katherine knew her father believed that it was safer for Christendom if France was reduced. It was not a country that could be trusted with the power and wealth that unity brings.

May 1512



It was as good as any brilliant court entertainment to see the ships cross the bar and sail out, a strong wind behind them, on a sunny day; and Henry and Katherine rode back to Windsor filled with confidence that their armies would be the strongest in Christendom, that they could not fail.

Katherine took advantage of the moment and Henry's enthusiasm for the ships to ask him if he did not think that they should build galleys, fighting ships powered with oars. Arthur had known at once what she had meant by galleys; he had seen drawings and had read how they could be deployed. Henry had never seen a battle at sea, nor had he seen a galley turn without wind in a moment and come against a becalmed fighting ship. Katherine tried to explain to him, but Henry, inspired by the sight of the fleet in full sail, swore that he wanted only sailing ships, great ships manned with free crews, named for glory.

The whole court agreed with him, and Katherine knew she could make no headway against a court that was always blown about by the latest fashion. Since the fleet had looked so very fine when it set sail, all the young men wanted to be admirals like Edward Howard, just as the summer before they had all wanted to be crusaders. There was no discussing the weakness of big sailing ships in close combat – they all wanted to set out with full sail. They all wanted their own ship.

Henry spent days with shipwrights and ship-builders, and Edward Howard argued for a greater and greater navy.

Katherine agreed that the fleet was very fine, and the sailors of England were the finest in the world, but remarked that she thought she might write to the arsenal at Venice to ask them the cost of a galley and if they would build it as a commission, or if they would agree to send the parts and plans to England, for English shipwrights to assemble in English dockyards.

‘We don’t need galleys,’ Henry said dismissively. ‘Galleys are for raids on shore. We are not pirates. We want great ships that can carry our soldiers. We want great ships that can tackle the French ships at sea. The ship is a platform from which you launch your attack. The greater the platform, the more soldiers can muster. It has to be a big ship for a battle at sea.’

‘I am sure you are right,’ she said. ‘But we must not forget our other enemies. The seas are one border and we must dominate them with ships both great and small. But our other border must be made safe too.’

‘D’you mean the Scots? They have taken their warning from the Pope. I don’t expect to be troubled with them.’

She smiled. She would never openly disagree with him. ‘Certainly,’ she said. ‘The archbishop has secured us a breathing space. But next year, or the year after, we will have to go against the Scots.’

Summer 1512

Then there was nothing for Katherine to do but to wait. It seemed as if everyone was waiting. The English army were in Fuenterrabia, waiting for the Spanish to join with them for their invasion of southern France. The heat of the summer came on as they kicked their heels, ate badly and drank like thirsty madmen. Katherine alone of Henry's council knew that the heat of midsummer Spain could kill an army as they did nothing but wait for orders. She concealed her fears from Henry and from the council but privately she wrote to her father asking what his plans were, she tackled his ambassador, asking him what her father intended the English army to do, and when should they march?

Her father, riding with his own army, on the move, did not reply; and the ambassador did not know.

The summer wore on, Katherine did not write again. In a bitter moment, which she did not even acknowledge to herself, she saw that she was not her father's ally on the chessboard of Europe – she realised that she was nothing more than a pawn in his plan. She did not need to ask her father's strategy; once he had the English army in place and did not use them, she guessed it.

It grew colder in England, but it was still hot in Spain. At last Ferdinand had a use for his allies, but when he sent for them, and ordered that they should spend the winter season on campaign, they refused to answer his call. They mutinied against their own commanders and demanded to go home.

Winter 1512

It came as no surprise to Katherine, nor to the cynics on the council, when the English army came home in dishonoured tatters in December. Lord Dorset, despairing of ever receiving orders and reinforcements from King Ferdinand, confronted by mutinying troops, hungry, weary, and with two thousand men lost to illness, straggled home in disgrace, as he had taken them out in glory.

‘What can have gone wrong?’ Henry rushed into Katherine’s rooms and waved away her ladies-in-waiting. He was almost in tears of rage at the shame of the defeat. He could not believe that his force that had gone out so bravely should come home in such disarray. He had letters from his father-in-law complaining of the behaviour of the English allies, he had lost face in Spain, he had lost face with his enemy France. He fled to Katherine as the only person in the world who would share his shock and dismay. He was almost stammering with distress, it was the first time in his reign that anything had gone wrong and he had thought – like a boy – that nothing would ever go wrong for him.



I take his hands. I have been waiting for this since the first moment in the summer when there was no battle plan for the English troops. As soon as they arrived and were not deployed I knew that we had been misled. Worse, I knew that we had been misled by my father.

I am no fool. I know my father as a commander, and I know him as a man. When he did not fling the English into battle on the day that they arrived, I knew that he had another plan for them, and that plan was hidden from us. My father would never leave good men in camp to gossip and drink and get sick. I was on campaign with my father for most of my childhood, I never saw him let the men sit idle. He always keeps his men moving, he always keeps them in work and out of mischief. There is not a horse in my father’s stables with a pound of extra fat on it; he treats his soldiers just the same.

If the English were left to rot in camp it was because he had need of them

just where they were – in camp. He did not care that they were getting sick and lazy. That made me look again at the map and I saw what he was doing. He was using them as a counterweight, as an inactive diversion. I read the reports from our commanders as they arrived, their complaints at their pointless inaction, their exercises on the border, sighting the French army and being seen by them, but not being ordered to engage; and I knew I was right. My father kept the English troops dancing on the spot in Fuenterrabia so that the French, alarmed by such a force on their flank, would place their army in defence. Guarding against the English they could not attack my father who, joyously alone and unencumbered, at the head of his troops, marched into the unprotected kingdom of Navarre and so picked up that which he had desired for so long at no expense or danger to himself.

‘My dear, your soldiers were not tried and found wanting,’ I say to my distressed young husband. ‘There is no question as to the courage of the English. There can be no doubting you.’

‘He says...’ He waves the letter at me.

‘It doesn’t matter what he says,’ I say patiently. ‘You have to look at what he does.’

The face he turns to me is so hurt that I cannot bring myself to tell him that my father has used him, played him for a fool, used his army, used even me, to win himself Navarre.

‘My father has taken his fee before his work, that is all,’ I say robustly. ‘Now we have to make him do the work.’

‘What do you mean?’ Henry is still puzzled.

‘God forgive me for saying it, but my father is a masterly double-dealer. If we are going to make treaties with him we will have to learn to be as clever as him. He made a treaty with us and said he would be our partner in war against France, but all we have done is win him Navarre, by sending our army out and home again.’

‘They have been shamed. I have been shamed.’

He cannot understand what I am trying to tell him. ‘Your army has done exactly what my father wanted them to do. In that sense, it has been a most successful campaign.’

‘They did nothing! He complains to me that they are good for nothing!’

‘They pinned down the French with that nothing. Think of that! The French have lost Navarre.’

‘I want to court-martial Dorset!’

‘Yes, we can do so, if you wish. But the main thing is that we still have our army, we have lost only two thousand men, and my father is our ally. He owes us for this year. Next year you can go back to France and this time Father will fight for us; not us for him.’

‘He says he will conquer Guienne for me, he says it as if I cannot do it myself! He speaks to me as a weakling with a useless force!’

‘Good,’ I say, surprising him. ‘Let him conquer Guienne for us.’

‘He wants us to pay him.’

‘Let us pay for it. What does it matter as long as my father is on our side when we go to war with the French? If he wins Guienne for us then that is to our good; if he does not, but just distracts the French when we invade in the north from Calais, then that is all to the good as well.’

For a moment he gapes at me, his head spinning. Then he sees what I mean. ‘He pins down the French for us, as we advance, just as we did for him?’

‘Exactly.’

‘We use him, as he used us?’

‘Yes.’

He is amazed. ‘Did your father teach you how to do this – to plan ahead as if a campaign were a chess board, and you have to move the pieces around?’

I shake my head. ‘Not on purpose. But you cannot live with a man like my father without learning the arts of diplomacy. You know Machiavelli himself called him the perfect prince? You could not be at my father’s court, as I was, or on campaign with him, as I was, without seeing that he spends his life seeking advantage. He taught me every day, I could not help but learn, just from watching him. I know how his mind works. I know how a general thinks.’

‘But what made you think of invading from Calais?’

‘Oh, my dear, where else would England invade France? My father can fight in the south for us, and we will see if he can win us Guienne. You can be sure that he will do so if it is in his interest. And, at any rate, while he is doing that, the French will not be able to defend Normandy.’

Henry’s confidence comes rushing back to him. ‘I shall go myself,’ he declares. ‘I shall take to the field of battle myself. Your father will not be able to criticise the command of the English army if I do it myself.’

For a moment I hesitate. Even playing at war is a dangerous game, and while we do not have an heir, Henry is precious beyond belief. Without him, the safety of England will be torn between a hundred pretenders. But I will never keep my hold on him if I coop him up as his grandmother did. Henry will have to

learn the nature of war, and I know that he will be safest in a campaign commanded by my father, who wants to keep me on my throne as much as I want it; and safer by far facing the chivalrous French than the murderous Scots. Besides, I have a plan that is a secret. And it requires him to be out of the country.

‘Yes, you shall,’ I say. ‘And you shall have the best armour and strongest horse and handsomest guard of any king who takes the field.’

‘Thomas Howard says that we should abandon our battle against France until we have suppressed the Scots.’

I shake my head. ‘You shall fight in France in the alliance of the three kings,’ I assure him. ‘It will be a mighty war, one that everyone will remember. The Scots are a minor danger, they can wait, at the worst they are a petty border raid. And if they invade the north when you go to war, they are so unimportant that even I could command an expedition against them while you go to the real war in France.’

‘You?’ he asks.

‘Why not? Are we not a king and queen come young to our thrones in our power? Who should deny us?’

‘No-one! I shall not be diverted,’ Henry declares. ‘I shall conquer in France and you shall guard us against the Scots.’

‘I will,’ I promise him. This is just what I want.

Spring 1513

Henry talked of nothing but war all winter, and in the spring Katherine started a great muster of men and materials for the invasion of northern France. The treaty with Ferdinand agreed that he would invade Guienne for England at the same time as the English troops took Normandy. The Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian would join with the English army in the battle in the north. It was an infallible plan if the three parties attacked simultaneously, if they kept meticulous faith with each other.



It comes as no surprise to me to find that my father has been talking peace with France in the very same days that I have had Thomas Wolsey, my right-hand man, the royal almoner, writing to every town in England and asking them how many men they can muster for the king's service when we go to war in France. I knew my father would think only of the survival of Spain: Spain before everything. I do not blame him for it. Now that I am a queen I understand a little better what it means to love a country with such a passion that one will betray anything – even one's own child, as he does – to keep it safe. My father, with the prospect on one hand of a troublesome war and little gain, and on the other hand peace, with everything to play for, chooses peace and chooses France as his friend. He has betrayed us in absolute secrecy and he fooled even me.

When the news of his grand perfidy comes out he blames it all on his ambassador, and on letters going astray. It is a slight excuse; but I do not complain. My father will join us as soon as it looks as if we will win. The main thing for me now is that Henry should have his campaign in France and leave me alone to settle with the Scots.

'He has to learn how to lead men into battle,' Thomas Howard says to me. 'Not boys into a bawdy house – excuse me, Your Grace.'

'I know,' I reply. 'He has to win his spurs. But there is such a risk.'

The old soldier puts his hand over mine. 'Very few kings die in battle,' he

says. 'Don't think of King Richard, for he all but ran on the swords. He knew he was betrayed. Mostly, kings get ransomed. It's not one half of the risk that you will be facing if you equip an army and send it across the narrow seas to France, and then try and fight the Scots with what is left.'

I am silent for a moment. I did not know that he had seen what I plan. 'Who thinks that this is what I am doing?'

'Only me.'

'Have you told anyone?'

'No,' he says stoically. 'My first duty is to England, and I think you are right. We have to finish with the Scots once and for all, and it had better be done when the king is safely overseas.'

'I see you don't fear overmuch for my safety?' I observe.

He shrugs and smiles. 'You are a queen,' he says. 'Dearly beloved, perhaps. But we can always get another queen. We have no other Tudor king.'

'I know,' I say. It is a truth as clear as water. I can be replaced but Henry cannot. Not until I have a Tudor son.

Thomas Howard has guessed my plan. I have no doubt in my mind where my truest duty lies. It is as Arthur taught me – the greatest danger to the safety of England comes from the north, from the Scots, and so it is to the north that I should march. Henry should be encouraged to put on his most handsome armour to go with his most agreeable friends in a sort of grand joust against the French. But there will be bloody work on the northern border; a victory there will keep us safe for generations. If I want to make England safe for me and for my unborn son, and for the kings who come after me, I must defeat the Scots.

Even if I never have a son, even if I never have cause to go to Walsingham to thank Our Lady for the son she has given me, I shall still have done my first and greatest duty by this, my beloved country of England, if I beat the Scots. Even if I die in doing it.

I maintain Henry's resolve, I do not allow him to lose his temper or his will. I fight the Privy Council who choose to see my father's unreliability as another sign that we should not go to war. Partly, I agree with them. I think we have no real cause against France, and no great gains to make. But I know that Henry is wild to go to war and he thinks that France is his enemy and King Louis his rival. I want Henry out of the way this summer, when it is my intention to destroy the Scots. I know that the only thing that can divert him will be a glorious war. I want war, not because I am angry with the French, or want to show our strength to my father; I want war because we have the French to the south and the Scots

to the north and we will have to engage with one and play with the other to keep England safe.

I spend hours on my knees in the royal chapel; but it is Arthur that I am talking to, in long, silent reveries. 'I am sure I am right, my love,' I whisper into my clasped hands. 'I am sure that you were right when you warned me of the danger of the Scots. We have to subdue the Scots or we will never have a kingdom that can sleep in peace. If I can have my way, this will be the year when the fate of England is decided. If I have my way, I will send Henry against the French and I will go against the Scots and our fate can be decided. I know the Scots are the greater danger. Everyone thinks of the French – your brother thinks of nothing but the French – but these are men who know nothing of the reality of war. The enemy who is across the sea, however much you hate him, is a lesser enemy than the one who can march over your borders in a night.'

I can almost see him in the shadowy darkness behind my closed eyes. 'Oh, yes,' I say with a smile to him. 'You can think that a woman cannot lead an army. You can think that a woman cannot wear armour. But I know more about warfare than most men at this peaceable court. This is a court devoted to jousting, all the young men think war is a game. But I know what war is. I have seen it. This is the year when you will see me ride out as my mother did, when you see me face our enemy – the only enemy that really matters. This is my country now, you yourself made it my country. And I will defend it for you, for me, and for our heirs.'



The English preparations for the war against France went on briskly with Katherine and Thomas Wolsey, her faithful assistant, working daily on the muster rolls for the towns, the gathering of provisions for the army, the forging of armour and the training of volunteers to march, prepare to attack, and retreat, on command. Wolsey observed that the queen had two muster rolls, almost as if she was preparing for two armies. 'Are you thinking we will have to fight the Scots as well as the French?' he asked her.

'I am sure of it.'

'The Scots will snap at us, as soon as our troops leave for France,' he said. 'We shall have to reinforce the borders.'

'I hope to do more than that,' was all she said.

'His Grace the king will not be distracted from his war with France,' he

pointed out.

She did not confide in him, as he wanted her to do. 'I know. We must make sure he has a great force to take to Calais. He must not be distracted by anything.'

'We will have to keep some men back to defend against the Scots, they are certain to attack,' he warned her.

'Border guards,' she said dismissively.

Handsome young Edward Howard, in a new cloak of dark sea-blue, came to take leave of Katherine as the fleet prepared to set sail with orders to blockade the French in port, or engage them if possible on the high seas.

'God bless you,' said the queen, and heard her voice a little shaken with emotion. 'God bless you, Edward Howard, and may your luck go with you as it always does.'

He bowed low. 'I have the luck of a man favoured by a great queen who serves a great country,' he said. 'It is an honour to serve my country, the king... and,' he lowered his voice to an intimate whisper, 'and you, my queen.'

Katherine smiled. All of Henry's friends shared a tendency to think themselves into the pages of a romance. Camelot was never very far away from their minds. Katherine had served as the lady of the courtly myth ever since she had been queen. She liked Edward Howard more than any of the other young men. His genuine gaiety and his open affection endeared him to everyone, and he had a passion for the navy and the ships under his command that commended him to Katherine, who saw the safety of England could only be assured by holding the seas.

'You are my knight, and I trust you to bring glory to your name and to mine,' she said to him, and saw the gleam of pleasure in his eyes as he dropped his dark head to kiss her hand.

'I shall bring you home some French ships,' he promised her. 'I have brought you Scots pirates, now you shall have French galleons.'

'I have need of them,' she said earnestly.

'You shall have them if I die in the attempt.'

She held up a finger. 'No dying,' she warned him. 'I have need of you, too.' She gave him her other hand. 'I shall think of you every day and in my prayers,' she promised him.

He rose up and with a swirl of his new cloak he went out.



It is the feast of St George and we are still waiting for news from the English fleet, when a messenger comes in, his face grave. Henry is at my side as the young man tells us, at last, of the sea battle that Edward was so certain he should win, that we were so certain would prove the power of our ships over the French. With his father at my side I learn the fate of Edward, my knight Edward, who had been so sure that he would bring home a French galleon to the Pool of London.

He pinned down the French fleet in Brest and they did not dare to come out. He was too impatient to wait for them to make the next move, too young to play a long game. He was a fool, a sweet fool, like half the court, certain that they are invincible. He went into battle like a boy who has no fear of death, who has no knowledge of death, who has not even the sense to fear his own death. Like the Spanish grandes of my childhood, he thought that fear was an illness he could never catch. He thought that God favoured him above all others and nothing could touch him.

With the English fleet unable to go forwards and the French sitting snug in harbour, he took a handful of rowing boats and threw them in, under the French guns. It was a waste, a wicked waste of his men and of himself – and only because he was too impatient to wait, and too young to think. I am sorry that we sent him, dearest Edward, dearest young fool, to his own death. But then I remember that my husband is no older and certainly no wiser, and has even less knowledge of the world of war, and that even I, a woman of twenty-seven years old, married to a boy who has just reached his majority, can make the mistake of thinking that I cannot fail.

Edward himself led the boarding party on to the flagship of the French admiral – an act of extraordinary daring – and almost at once his men failed him, God forgive them, and called him away when the battle was too hot for them. They jumped down from the deck of the French ship into their own rowing boats, some of them leaping into the sea in their terror to be away, shot ringing around them like hailstones. They cast off, leaving him fighting like a madman, his back to the mast, hacking around him with his sword, hopelessly outnumbered. He made a dash to the side and if a boat had been there, he might have dropped down to it. But they had gone. He tore the gold whistle of his office from his neck and flung it far out into the sea, so that the French would not have it, and then he turned and fought them again. He went down, still fighting, a dozen swords stabbed him, he was still fighting as he slipped and fell, supporting

himself with one arm, his sword still parrying. Then, a hungry blade slashed at his sword arm, and he was fighting no more. They could have stepped back and honoured his courage; but they did not. They pressed him further and fell on him like hungry dogs on a skin in Smithfield market. He died with a hundred stab wounds.

They threw his body into the sea, they cared so little for him, these French soldiers, these so-called Christians. They could have been savages, they could have been Moors for all the Christian charity they showed. They did not think of the supreme unction, of a prayer for the dead, they did not think of his Christian burial, though a priest watched him die. They flung him into the sea as if he were nothing more than some spoiled food to be nibbled by fishes.

Then they realised that it was Edward Howard, my Edward Howard, the admiral of the English navy, and the son of one of the greatest men in England, and they were sorry that they had thrown him overboard like a dead dog. Not for honour – oh, not them – but because they could have ransomed him to his family and God knows we would have paid well to have sweet Edward restored to us. They sent the sailors out in boats with hooks to drag his body up again. They sent them to fish for his poor dead body as if he were salvage from a wreck. They gutted his corpse like a carp, they cut out his heart, salted it down like cod, they stole his clothes for souvenirs and sent them to the French court. The butchered scraps that were left of him they sent home to his father and to me.

This savage story reminds me of Hernando Perez del Pulgar who led such a desperately daring raid into the Alhambra. If they had caught him they would have killed him, but I don't think even the Moors would have cut out his heart for their amusement. They would have acknowledged him as a great enemy, a man to be honoured. They would have returned his body to us with one of their grand chivalric gestures. God knows, they would have composed a song about him within a week, we would have been singing it the length and breadth of Spain within a fortnight, and they would have made a fountain to commemorate his beauty within a month. They were Moors; but they had a grace that these Christians utterly lack. When I think of these Frenchmen it makes me ashamed to call the Moors 'barbarians'.

Henry is shaken by this story and by our defeat, and Edward's father ages ten years in the ten minutes that it takes the messenger to tell him that his son's body is downstairs, in a cart, but his clothes have been sent as spoil to Madame Claude, the daughter of the King of France, his heart is a keepsake for the French admiral. I can comfort neither of them, my own shock is too great. I go

to my chapel and I take my sorrow to Our Lady, who knows herself what it is to love a young man and to see Him go out to His death. And when I am on my knees I swear that the French will regret the day that they cut my champion down. There will be a reckoning for this filthy act. They will never be forgiven by me.

Summer 1513

The death of Edward Howard made Katherine work even harder for the preparations of the English army to leave for Calais. Henry might be going to play-act a war, but he would use real shot and cannon, swords and arrows, and she wanted them to be well made and their aim to be true. She had known the realities of war all her life, but with the death of Edward Howard, Henry now saw, for the first time, that it was not like in a story book, it was not like a joust. A well-favoured, brilliant young man like Edward could go out in the sunshine and come home, butchered into pieces, in a cart. To his credit, Henry did not waver in his courage as this truth came home to him, as he saw young Thomas Howard step up to his brother's place, as he saw Edward's father summoning his tenants and calling in his debts to provide troops to avenge his son.

They sent the first part of the army to Calais in May, and Henry prepared to follow them with the second batch of troops in June. He was more sombre than he had ever been before.

Katherine and Henry rode slowly through England from Greenwich to Dover for Henry's embarkation. The towns turned out to feast them and muster their men as they went through. Henry and Katherine had matching great white horses and Katherine rode astride, her long blue gown spread out all around. Henry, riding at her side, looked magnificent, taller than any other man in the ranks, stronger than most, golden-haired and smiling all around.

In the mornings when they rode out of a town they would both wear armour: matching suits of silver and gilt. Katherine wore only a breastplate and a helmet, made from finely beaten metal and chased with gold patterns. Henry wore full armour from toes to fingertips every day, whatever the heat. He rode with his visor up and his blue eyes dancing, and a gold circlet around his helmet. The standard bearers carrying Katherine's badge on one side, and Henry's on the other, rode either side of them and when people saw the queen's pomegranate and Henry's rose they shouted 'God Bless the King!' and 'God Bless the Queen!' When they left a town, with the troops marching behind them, and the bowmen before them, the townspeople would crowd the sides of the road for a

good mile to see them ride by, and they threw rose petals and rosebuds on the road in front of the horses. All the men marched with a rose in their lapels or in their hats, and they sang as they marched: bawdy songs of old England, but also sometimes ballads of Henry's composing.

They took nearly two weeks to get to Dover and the time was not wasted, for they gathered supplies and recruited troops in every village. Every man in the land wanted to be in the army to defend England against France. Every girl wanted to say that her lad had gone to be a soldier. The whole country was united in wanting revenge against the French. And the whole country was confident that with the young king at the head of a young army, it could be done.



I am happier, knowingly happier, than I have been since the death of our son. I am happier than I had thought possible. Henry comes to my bed every night during the feasting, dancing, marching tour to the coast, he is mine in thought and word and deed. He is going on a campaign of my organising, he is safely diverted from the real war that I will have to fight, and he never has a thought, or says a word, but he shares it with me. I pray that in one of these nights on the road, riding south to the coast together, in the heightened tension that comes with war, we will make another child, another boy, another rose for England as Arthur was.



Thanks to Katherine and Thomas Wolsey the arrangements for the embarkation were timed to perfection. Not for this English army the usual delay while last-minute orders were given, and forgotten essentials desperately ordered. Henry's ships – four hundred of them – brightly painted, with pennants flying, sails ready-rigged – were waiting to take the troops to France. Henry's own ship, blazing in gold leaf with the red dragon flying at its stern, bobbed at the dock. His royal guard, superbly trained, their new livery of Tudor green and white, spangled with sequins, were paraded on the quay, his two suits of gold-inlaid armour were packed on board, his specially trained white horses were in their stalls. The preparations were as meticulous as those of the most elaborate of court masques and Katherine knew that for many of the young men, they were

looking forward to war as they did to a court entertainment.

Everything was ready for Henry to embark and sail for France when in a simple ceremony, on the strand at Dover, he took the great seal of state and before them all invested Katherine as regent in his place, Governor of the Realm and Captain General of the English forces for home defence.



I make sure that my face is grave and solemn when he names me Regent of England, and I kiss his hand and then I kiss him full on the mouth to wish him God speed. But as his ship is taken in tow by the barges, crosses the bar of the harbour, and then unfurls her sails to catch the wind and sets out for France, I could sing aloud for joy. I have no tears for the husband who is going away because he has left me with everything that I have ever wanted. I am more than Princess of Wales, I am more than Queen of England, I am Governor of the Realm, I am Captain General of the army, this is my country indeed, and I am sole ruler.

And the first thing I will do – indeed, perhaps the only thing I will do with the power vested in me, the only thing that I must do with this God-given chance – is defeat the Scots.



As soon as Katherine arrived at Richmond Palace she gave Thomas Howard, Edward's younger brother, his orders to take the cannon from the armouries in the Tower, and set sail with the whole English fleet, north to Newcastle to defend the borders against the Scots. He was not the admiral that his brother had been but he was a steady young man and she thought she could rely on him to do his part to deliver the vital weapons to the north.

Every day brought Katherine news from France by messengers that she had already posted along the way. Wolsey had strict instructions to report back to the queen the progress of the war. From him she wanted an accurate analysis. She knew that Henry would give her an optimistic account. It was not all good news. The English army had arrived in France, there was much excitement in Calais and feasting and celebrations. There were parades and musters and Henry had been much congratulated on his handsome armour and his smart troops. But the

Emperor Maximilian failed to muster his own army to support the English. Instead, pleading poverty but swearing his enthusiasm to the cause, he came to the young prince to offer his sword and his service.

It was clearly a heady moment for Henry, who had not yet even heard a shot fired in anger, to have the Holy Roman Emperor offering his services, overwhelmed by the glamorous young prince.

Katherine frowned when she read that part of Wolsey's account, calculating that Henry would hire the emperor at an inflated amount, and would thus have to pay an ally who had promised to come at his own expense for a mercenary army. She recognised at once the double-dealing that had characterised this campaign from the start. But at least it would mean that the emperor was with Henry in his first battle, and Katherine knew that she could rely on the experienced older man to keep the impulsive young king safe.

On the advice of Maximilian, the English army laid siege to Therouanne – a town which the Holy Roman Emperor had long desired, but of no tactical value to England – and Henry, safely distanced from the short-range guns on the walls of the little town, walked alone through his camp at midnight, spoke comforting words to the soldiers on watch, and was allowed to fire his first cannon.

The Scots, who had been waiting only until England was defenceless with king and army in France, declared war against the English and started their own march south. Wolsey wrote with alarm to Katherine, asking her if she needed the return of some of Henry's troops to face this new threat. Katherine replied that she thought she could defend against a border skirmish, and started a fresh muster of troops from every town in the country, using the lists she had already prepared.

She commanded the assembly of the London militia and went out in her armour, on her white horse, to inspect them before they started their march north.



I look at myself in the mirror as my ladies-in-waiting tie on my breastplate, and my maid-in-waiting holds my helmet. I see the unhappiness in their faces, the way the silly maid holds the helmet as if it is too heavy for her, as if none of this should be happening, as if I were not born for this moment: now. The moment of my destiny.

I draw a silent breath. I look so like my mother in my armour that it could be

her reflection in the mirror, standing so still and proud, with her hair caught back from her face, and her eyes shining as bright as the burnished gilt on her breastplate; alive at the prospect of battle, gleaming with joy at her confidence in victory.

‘Are you not afraid?’ Maria de Salinas asks me quietly.

‘No.’ I speak the truth. ‘I have spent all my life waiting for this moment. I am a queen, and the daughter of a queen who had to fight for her country. I have come to this, my own country, at the very moment that it needs me. This is not a time for a queen who wants to sit on her throne and award prizes for jousting. This is a time for a queen who has the heart and stomach of a man. I am that queen. I shall ride out with my army.’

There is a little flurry of dismay. ‘Ride out?’ ‘But not north?’ ‘Parade them, but surely not ride with them?’ ‘But isn’t it dangerous?’

I reach for my helmet. ‘I shall ride with them north to meet the Scots. And if the Scots break through I shall fight them. And when I take the field against them I shall be there until I defeat them.’

‘But what about us?’

I smile at the women. ‘Three of you will come with me to bear me company and the rest of you will stay here,’ I say firmly. ‘Those behind will continue to make banners and prepare bandages and send them on to me. You will keep good order,’ I say firmly. ‘Those who come with me will behave as soldiers in the field. I will have no complaints.’

There is an outburst of dismay, which I avoid by heading for the door. ‘Maria and Margaret, you shall come with me now,’ I say.

The troops are drawn up before the palace. I ride slowly down the lines, letting my eyes rest on one face and then another. I have seen my father do this, and my mother. My father told me that every soldier should know that he is valued, should know that he has been seen as an individual man on parade, should feel himself to be an essential part of the body of the army. I want them to be sure that I have seen them, seen every man; that I know them. I want them to know me. When I have ridden past every single one of the five hundred, I go to the front of the army and I take off my helmet so that they can see my face. I am not like a Spanish princess now, with my hair hidden and my face veiled. I am a bare-headed, bare-faced English queen. I raise my voice so that every one of them can hear me.

‘Men of England,’ I say. ‘You and I will go together to fight the Scots, and neither of us will falter nor fail. We will not turn back until they have turned

back. We will not rest until they are dead. Together we will defeat them, for we do the work of heaven. This is not a quarrel of our making, this is a wicked invasion by James of Scotland; breaking his own treaty, insulting his own English wife. An ungodly invasion condemned by the Pope himself, an invasion against the order of God. He has planned this for years. He has waited, like a coward, thinking to find us weak. But he is mistaken for we are powerful now. We will defeat him, this heretic king. We will win. I can assure you of this because I know God's will in this matter. He is with us. And you can be sure that God's hand is always over men who fight for their homes.'

There is a great roar of approval and I turn and smile to one side and then the other, so that they can all see my pleasure in their courage. So that they can all see that I am not afraid.

'Good. Forward march,' I say simply to the commander at my side and the army turns and marches out of the parade ground.



As Katherine's first army of defence marched north under the Earl of Surrey, gathering men as they went, the messengers rode desperately south to London to bring her the news she had been expecting. James's army had crossed the Scottish border and was advancing through the rolling hills of the border country, recruiting soldiers and stealing food as they went.

'A border raid?' Katherine asked, knowing it would not be.

The man shook his head. 'My lord told me to tell you that the French king has promised the Scots king that he will recognise him if he wins this battle against us.'

'Recognise him? As what?'

'As King of England.'

He expected her to cry out in indignation or in fear, but she merely nodded, as if it were something else to consider.

'How many men?' Katherine demanded of the messenger.

He shook his head. 'I can't say for certain.'

'How many do you think?'

He looked at the queen, saw the sharp anxiety in her eyes, and hesitated.

'Tell me the truth!'

'I am afraid sixty thousand, Your Grace, perhaps more.'

'How many more? Perhaps?'

Again he paused. She rose from her chair and went to the window. 'Please, tell me what you think,' she said. 'You do me no service if, thanks to you, trying to spare me distress, I go out with an army and find before me an enemy in greater force than I expected.'

'One hundred thousand, I would think,' he said quietly.

He expected her to gasp in horror but when he looked at her she was smiling. 'Oh, I'm not afraid of that.'

'Not afraid of one hundred thousand Scots?' he demanded.

'I've seen worse,' she said.



I know now that I am ready. The Scots are pouring over the border, in their full power. They have captured the northern castles with derisive ease, the flower of the English command and the best men are overseas in France. The French king thinks to defeat us with the Scots, in our own lands, while our masquing army rides around northern France and makes pretty gestures. My moment is now. It is up to me, and the men who are left. I order the royal standards and banners from the great wardrobe. Flown at the head of the army the royal standards show that the King of England is on the battlefield. That will be me.

'You will never ride under the royal standard?' one of my ladies queries.

'Who else?'

'It should be the king.'

'The king is fighting the French. I shall fight the Scots.'

'Your Grace, a queen cannot take the king's standard and ride out.'

I smile at her, I am not pretending to confidence, I truly know that this is the moment for which I have waited all my life. I promised Arthur I could be a queen in armour; and now I am. 'A queen can ride under a king's standard, if she thinks she can win.'

I summon the remaining troops; these will be my force. I plan to parade them in battle order, but there are more comments.

'You will never ride at their head?'

'Where would you want me to ride?'

'Your Grace, perhaps you should not be there at all?'

'I am their Commander in Chief,' I say simply. 'You must not think of me as a queen who stays at home, influences policy by stealth, and bullies her children. I am a queen who rules as my mother did. When my country is in danger, I am in

danger. When my country is triumphant, as we will be, it is my triumph.'

'But what if...?' The lady-in-waiting is silenced by one hard look from me.

'I am not a fool, I have planned for defeat,' I tell her. 'A good commander always speaks of victory and yet has a plan for defeat. I know exactly where I shall fall back, and I know exactly where I shall regroup, and I know exactly where I shall join battle again, and if I fail there, I know where I shall regroup again. I did not wait long years for this throne to see the King of Scotland and that fool Margaret take it from me.'



Katherine's men, all forty thousand of them, straggled along the road behind the royal guard, weighed down by their weapons and sacks of food in the late summer sunshine. Katherine, at the head of the train, rode her white horse where everyone could see her, with the royal standard over her head, so that the men should know her now, on the march, and recognise her later, in battle. Twice a day she rode down the length of the line with a word of encouragement for everyone who was scuffling along in the rear, choking with the dust from the forward wagons. She kept monastic hours, rising at dawn to hear Mass, taking communion at noon, and going to bed at dusk, waking at midnight to say her prayers for the safety of the realm, for the safety of the king, and for herself.

Messengers passed constantly between Katherine's army and the force commanded by Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey. Their plan was that Surrey should engage with the Scots at the first chance, anything to stop their rapid and destructive advance southwards. If Surrey were defeated then the Scots would come on and Katherine would meet them with her force, and fling them into defence of the southern counties of England. If the Scots cut through them then Katherine and Surrey had a final plan for the defence of London. They would regroup, summon a citizens' army, throw up earthworks around the City and if all else failed, retreat to the Tower, which could be held for long enough for Henry to reinforce them from France.



Surrey is anxious that I have ordered him to lead the first attack against the Scots, he would rather wait for my force to join him; but I insist the attack shall

go as I have planned. It would be safer to join our two armies, but I am fighting a defensive campaign. I have to keep an army in reserve to stop the Scots sweeping south, if they win the first battle. This is not a single battle I am fighting here. This is a war that will destroy the threat of the Scots for a generation, perhaps forever.

I too am tempted to order him to wait for me, I so want to join the battle; I feel no fear at all, just a sort of wild gladness as if I am a hawk mewed-up for too long and now suddenly set free. But I will not throw my precious men into a battle that would leave the road to London open if we lost. Surrey thinks that if we unite the forces we will be certain to win, but I know that there is no certainty in warfare, anything can go wrong. A good commander is ready for the worst, and I am not going to risk the Scots beating us in one battle and then marching down the Great North Road and into my capital city, and a coronation with French acclaim. I did not win this throne so hard, to lose it in one reckless fight. I have a battle plan for Surrey, and one for me, and then a position to retreat to, and a series of positions after that. They may win one battle, they may win more than one, but they will never take my throne from me.

We are sixty miles out of London, at Buckingham. This is good speed for an army on the march, they tell me it is tremendous speed for an English army; they are notorious for dawdling on the road. I am tired, but not exhausted. The excitement and – to be honest – the fear in each day is keeping me like a hound on a leash, always eager, straining to get ahead and start the hunt.

And now I have a secret. Each afternoon, when I dismount from my horse, I get down from the saddle and first thing, before anything else, I go into the necessary house, or tent, or wherever I can be alone, and I pull up my skirts and look at my linen. I am waiting for my monthly course, and it is the second month that it has failed to come. My hope, a strong, sweet hope, is that when Henry sailed to France he left me with child.

I will tell no-one, not even my women. I can imagine the outcry if they knew I was riding every day, and preparing for battle when I am with child, or even in hopes of a child. I dare not tell them, for in all truth, I do not dare do anything which might tilt the balance in this campaign against us. Of course, nothing could be more important than a son for England – except this one thing: holding England for that son to inherit. I have to grit my teeth on the risk I am taking, and take it anyway.

The men know that I am riding at their head and I have promised them victory. They march well, they will fight well because they have put their faith in

me. Surrey's men, closer to the enemy than us, know that behind them, in reliable support, is my army. They know that I am leading their reinforcements in person. It has caused much talk in the country, they are proud to have a queen who will muster herself for them. If I were to turn my face to London and tell them to go on without me, for I have a woman's work to do, they would head for home too – it is as simple as that. They would think that I had lost confidence, that I had lost faith in them, that I anticipate defeat. There are enough whispers about an unstoppable army of Scotsmen – one hundred thousand angry Highlanders – without me adding to their fears.

Besides, if I cannot save my kingdom for my child, then there is little point in having a child. I have to defeat the Scots, I have to be a great general. When that duty is done, I can be a woman again.

At night, I have news from Surrey that the Scots are encamped on a strong ridge, drawn up in battle order at a place called Flodden. He sends me a plan of the site, showing the Scots camped on high ground, commanding the view to the south. One glance at the map tells me that the English should not attack uphill against the heavily armed Scots. The Scots archers will be shooting downhill and then the Highlanders will charge down on our men. No army could face an attack like that.

'Tell your master he is to send out spies and find a way around the back of the Scots to come upon them from the north,' I say to the messenger, staring at the map. 'Tell him my advice is that he makes a feint, leaves enough men before the Scots to pin them down, but marches the rest away, as if he is heading north. If he is lucky, they will give chase and you will have them on open ground. If he is unlucky he will have to reach them from the north. Is it good ground? He has drawn a stream on this sketch.'

'It is boggy ground,' the man confirms. 'We may not be able to cross it.'

I bite my lip. 'It's the only way that I can see,' I say. 'Tell him this is my advice but not my command. He is commander in the field, he must make his own judgement. But tell him I am certain that he has to get the Scots off that hill. Tell him I know for sure that he cannot attack uphill. He has to either go round and surprise them from the rear; or lure them down off that hill.'

The man bows and leaves. Please God he can get my message through to Surrey. If he thinks he can fight an army of Scots uphill he is finished. One of my ladies comes to me the minute the messenger has left my tent, she is trembling with fatigue and fear. 'What do we do now?'

'We advance north,' I say.

'But they may be fighting any day now!'
'Yes, and if they win we can go home. But if they lose we shall stand between the Scots and London.'
'And do what?' she whispers.
'Beat them,' I say simply.

10th September 1513



'Your Grace!' A page boy came dashing into Katherine's tent, bobbed a most inadequate, hurried bow. 'A messenger, with news of the battle! A messenger from Lord Surrey.'

Katherine whirled around, her shoulder strap from her halberk still undone. 'Send him in!'

The man was already in the room, the dirt of the battle still on him, but with the beam of a man bringing good news, great news.

'Yes?' Katherine demanded, breathless with hope.

'Your Grace has conquered,' he said. 'The King of Scotland lies dead, twenty Scottish lords lie with him, bishops, earls, and abbots too. It is a defeat they will never rise up from. Half of their great men have died in a single day.'

He saw the colour drain from her face and then she suddenly grew rosy. 'We have won?'

'You have won,' he confirmed. 'The earl said to tell you that your men, raised and trained and armed by you, have done what you ordered they should do. It is your victory, and you have made England safe.'

Her hand went at once to her belly, under the metal curve of the breastplate. 'We are safe,' she said.

He nodded. 'He sent you this...'

He held out for her a surcoat, terribly torn and slashed and stained with blood.

'This is?'

'The coat of the King of Scotland. We took it from his dead body as proof. We have his body, it is being embalmed. He is dead, the Scots are defeated. You have done what no English king since Edward the First could do. You have made England safe from Scottish invasion.'

‘Write out a report for me,’ she said decisively. ‘Dictate it to the clerk. Everything you know, and everything that my lord Surrey said. I must write to the king.’

‘Lord Surrey asked...’

‘Yes?’

‘Should he advance into Scotland and lay it waste? He says there will be little or no resistance. This is our chance. We could destroy them, they are utterly at our mercy.’

‘Of course,’ she said at once, then she paused. It was the answer that any monarch in Europe would have given. A troublesome neighbour, an inveterate enemy lay weakened. Every king in Christendom would have advanced and taken revenge.

‘No. No, wait a moment.’

She turned away from him and went to the doorway of her tent. Outside, the men were preparing for another night on the road, far from their homes. There were little cook-fires all around the camp, torches burning, the smell of cooking and dung and sweat in the air. It was the very scent of Katherine’s childhood, a childhood spent for the first seven years in a state of constant warfare against an enemy who was driven backwards and backwards and finally into slavery, exile and death.



Think, I say to myself fiercely. Don’t feel with a tender heart, think with a hard brain, a soldier’s brain. Don’t consider this as a woman with child who knows there are many widows in Scotland tonight, think as a queen. My enemy is defeated, the country lies open before me, their king is dead, their queen is a young fool of a girl and my sister-in-law. I can cut this country into pieces, I can quilt it. Any commander of any experience would destroy them now and leave them destroyed for a whole generation. My father would not hesitate; my mother would have given the order already.

I check myself. They were wrong, my mother and father. Finally, I say the unsayable, unthinkable thing. They were wrong, my mother and father. Soldiers of genius they may have been, convinced they certainly were, Christian kings they were called – but they were wrong. It has taken me all my life to learn this.

A state of constant warfare is a two-edged sword, it cuts both the victor and the defeated. If we pursue the Scots now, we will triumph, we can lay the country

waste, we can destroy them for generations to come. But all that grows on waste are rats and pestilence. They would recover in time, they would come against us. Their children would come against my children and the savage battle would have to be fought all over again. Hatred breeds hatred. My mother and father drove the Moors overseas, but everyone knows that by doing so they won only one battle in a war that will never cease until Christians and Muslims are prepared to live side by side in peace and harmony. Isabella and Ferdinand hammered the Moors, but their children and their children's children will face the jihad in reply to the crusade. War does not answer war, war does not finish war. The only ending is peace.



‘Get me a fresh messenger,’ Katherine said over her shoulder, and waited till the man came. ‘You are to go to my lord Surrey and tell him I give him thanks for this great news of a wonderful victory. You are to tell him that he is to let the Scots soldiers surrender their arms and they are to go in peace. I myself will write to the Scots queen and promise her peace if she will be our good sister and good neighbour. We are victorious, we shall be gracious. We shall make this victory a lasting peace, not a passing battle and an excuse for savagery.’ The man bowed and left. Katherine turned to the soldier. ‘Go and get yourself some food,’ she said. ‘You can tell everyone that we have won a great battle and that we shall go back to our homes knowing that we can live at peace.’

She went to her little table and drew her writing box towards her. The ink was corked in a tiny glass bottle, the quill especially cut down to fit the small case. The paper and sealing wax were to hand. Katherine drew a sheet of paper towards her, and paused. She wrote a greeting to her husband, she told him she was sending him the coat of the dead Scots king.

In this, Your Grace shall see how I can keep my promise, sending you for your banners a king's coat. I thought to send himself to you, but our Englishmen's hearts would not suffer it.



I pause. With this great victory I can go back to London, rest and prepare for the birth of the child that I am sure I am carrying. I want to tell Henry that I am

once again with child; but I want to write to him alone. This letter – like every letter between us – will be half-public. He never opens his own letters, he always gets a clerk to open them and read them for him, he rarely writes his own replies. Then I remember that I told him that if Our Lady ever blessed me with a child again I would go at once to her shrine at Walsingham to give thanks. If he remembers this, it can serve as our code. Anyone can read it to him but he will know what I mean, I shall have told him the secret, that we will have a child, that we may have a son. I smile and start to write, knowing that he will understand what I mean, knowing what joy this letter will bring him.

*I make an end, praying God to send you home shortly, for without no joy can here be accomplished, and for the same I pray, and now go to Our Lady at Walsingham, that I promised so long ago to see. Your humble wife and true servant,
Katherine.*

Walsingham, Autumn 1513



Katherine was on her knees at the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, her eyes fixed on the smiling statue of the Mother of Christ, but seeing nothing.



Beloved, beloved, I have done it. I sent the coat of the Scots king to Henry and I made sure to emphasise that it is his victory, not mine. But it is yours. It is yours because when I came to you and to your country, my mind filled with fears about the Moors, it was you who taught me that the danger here was the Scots. Then life taught me a harder lesson, beloved: it is better to forgive an enemy than destroy him. If we had Moorish physicians, astronomers, mathematicians in this country we would be the better for it. The time may come when we also need the courage and the skills of the Scots. Perhaps my offer of peace will mean that they will forgive us for the battle of Flodden.

I have everything I ever wanted – except you. I have won a victory for this kingdom that will keep it safe for a generation. I have conceived a child and I

feel certain that this baby will live. If he is a boy I shall call him Arthur for you. If she is a girl, I shall call her Mary. I am Queen of England, I have the love of the people and Henry will make a good husband and a good man.

I sit back on my heels and close my eyes so the tears should not run down my cheeks. 'The only thing I lack is you, beloved. Always you. Always you.'

'Your Grace, are you unwell?' The quiet voice of the nun recalls me and I open my eyes. My legs are stiff from kneeling so long. 'We did not want to disturb you, but it has been some hours.'

'Oh, yes,' I say. I try to smile at her. 'I shall come in a moment. Leave me now.'

I turn back to my dream of Arthur but he is gone. 'Wait for me in the garden,' I whisper. 'I will come to you. I will come one day soon. In the garden, when my work here is done.'

Blackfriars Hall

The Papal Legate sitting as a court to hear the King's Great Matter, June 1529

Words have weight, something once said cannot be unsaid, meaning is like a stone dropped into a pool; the ripples will spread and you cannot know what bank they wash against.

I once said, 'I love you, I will love you forever,' to a young man in the night. I once said, 'I promise.' That promise, made twenty-seven years ago to satisfy a dying boy, to fulfil the will of God, to satisfy my mother and – to tell truth – my own ambition, that word comes back to me like ripples washing to the rim of a marble basin and then eddying back again to the centre.

I knew I would have to answer for my lies before God. I never thought that I would have to answer to the world. I never thought that the world could interrogate me for something that I had promised for love, something whispered in secret. And so, in my pride, I never have answered for it. Instead, I held to it.

And so, I believe, would any woman in my position.

Henry's new lover, Elizabeth Boleyn's girl, my maid-in-waiting, turns out to be the one that I knew I had to fear: the one who has an ambition that is even greater than mine. Indeed, she is even more greedy than the king. She has an ambition greater than any I have ever seen before in a man or a woman. She does not desire Henry as a man – I have seen his lovers come and go and I have learned to read them like an easy story book. This one desires not my husband, but my throne. She has had much work to find her way to it, but she is persistent and determined. I think I knew, from the moment that she had his ear, his secrets, and his confidence, that in time she would find her way – like a weasel smelling blood through a coney warren – to my lie. And when she found it, she would feast on it.

The usher calls out, 'Katherine of Aragon, Queen of England, come into court'; and there is a token silence, for they expect no answer. There are no lawyers waiting to help me there, I have prepared no defence. I have made it clear that I do not recognise the court. They expect to go on without me. Indeed,

the usher is just about to call the next witness...

But I answer.

My men throw open the double doors of the hall that I know so well and I walk in, my head up, as fearless as I have been all my life. The regal canopy is in gold, over at the far end of the hall with my husband, my false, lying, betraying, unfaithful husband in his ill-fitting crown on his throne sitting beneath it.

On a stage below him are the two cardinals, also canopied with cloth of gold, seated in golden chairs with golden cushions. That betraying slave Wolsey, red-faced in his red cardinal's robe, failing to meet my eye, as well he might; and that false friend Campeggio. Their three faces, the king and his two procurers, are mirrors of utter dismay.

They thought they had so distressed and confused me, separated me from my friends and destroyed me, that I would not come. They thought I would sink into despair like my mother, or into madness like my sister. They are gambling on the fact that they have frightened me and threatened me and taken my child from me and done everything they can do to break my heart. They never dreamed that I have the courage to stalk in before them, and stand before them, shaking with righteousness, to face them all.

Fools, they forget who I am. They are advised by that Boleyn girl who has never seen me in armour, driven on by her who never knew my mother, did not know my father. She knows me as Katherine, the old Queen of England, devout, plump, dull. She has no idea that inside, I am still Catalina, the young Infanta of Spain. I am a princess born and trained to fight. I am a woman who has fought for every single thing I hold, and I will fight, and I will hold, and I will win.

They did not foresee what I would do to protect myself, and my daughter's inheritance. She is Mary, my Mary, named by Arthur: my beloved daughter, Mary. Would I let her be put aside for some bastard got on a Boleyn?

That is their first mistake.

I ignore the cardinals completely. I ignore the clerks on the benches before them, the scribes with their long rolls of parchment making the official record of this travesty. I ignore the court, the city, even the people who whisper my name with loving voices. Instead, I look at no-one but Henry.

I know Henry, I know him better than anyone else in the world does. I know him better than his current favourite ever will, for I have seen him, man and boy. I studied him when he was a boy, when he was a child of ten who came to meet me and tried to persuade me to give him a Barbary stallion. I knew him then as a boy who could be won with fair words and gifts. I knew him through the eyes of

his brother, who said – and rightly – that he was a child who had been spoiled by too much indulgence and would be a spoilt man, and a danger to us all. I knew him as a youth, and I won my throne by pandering to his vanity. I was the greatest prize he could desire and I let him win me. I knew him as a man as vain and greedy as a peacock when I gave to him the credit for my war: the greatest victory ever won by England.

At Arthur's request I told the greatest lie a woman has ever told, and I will tell it to the very grave. I am an Infanta of Spain, I do not give a promise and fail to keep it. Arthur, my beloved, asked me for an oath on his deathbed and I gave it to him. He asked me to say that we had never been lovers and he commanded me to marry his brother and be queen. I did everything I promised him, I was constant to my promise. Nothing in these years has shaken my faith that it is God's will that I should be Queen of England, and that I shall be Queen of England until I die. No-one could have saved England from the Scots but me – Henry was too young and too inexperienced to take an army into the field. He would have offered a duel, he would have chanced some forlorn hope, he would have lost the battle and died at Flodden and his sister Margaret would have been Queen of England in my place.

It did not happen because I did not allow it to happen. It was my mother's wish and God's will that I should be Queen of England, and I will be Queen of England until I die.

I do not regret the lie. I held to it, and I made everyone else hold to it, whatever doubts they may have had. As Henry learned more of women, as Henry learned more of me, he knew, as surely he had known on our wedding night, that it was a lie, I was no virgin for him. But in all our twenty years of marriage together, he found the courage to challenge me only once, at the very beginning; and I walk into the court on the great gamble that he will never have the courage to challenge me again, not even now.

I walk into court with my entire case staked on his weakness. I believe that when I stand before him, and he is forced to meet my eyes, he will not dare to say that I was no virgin when I came to him, that I was Arthur's wife and Arthur's lover before I was ever his. His vanity will not allow him to say that I loved Arthur with a true passion and he loved me. That in truth, I will live and die as Arthur's wife and Arthur's lover, and thus Henry's marriage to me can be rightfully dissolved.

I don't think he has the courage that I have. I think if I stand straight and tell the great lie again, he will not dare to stand straight and tell the truth.

'Katherine of Aragon, Queen of England, come into court,' the usher repeats stupidly, as the echo of the doors banging behind me reverberates in the shocked courtroom, and everyone can see that I am already in court, standing like a stocky fighter before the throne.

It is me they call for, by this title. It was my dying husband's hope, my mother's wish and God's will that I should be Queen of England; and for them and for the country, I will be Queen of England until I die.

'Katherine of Aragon, Queen of England, come into court!'

This is me. This is my moment. This is my battle cry.

I step forwards.

Author's Note

This has been one of the most fascinating and most moving novels to write, from the discovery of the life of the young Katherine, to the great question of the lie that she told and maintained all her life.

That it was a lie is, I think, the most likely explanation. I believe that her marriage to Arthur was consummated. Certainly, everyone thought so at the time; it was only Dona Elvira's insistence after Katherine had been widowed, and Katherine's own insistence at the time of her separation from Henry that put the consummation into doubt. Later historians, admiring Katherine and accepting her word against Henry's, put the lie into the historical record where it stays today.

The lie was the starting place of the novel but the surprise in the research was the background of Catalina of Spain. I enjoyed a wonderful research trip to Granada to discover more about the Spain of Isabella and Ferdinand, and came home with an abiding respect both for their courage and for the culture they swore to overthrow: the rich tolerant and beautiful land of the Moslems of Spain, el Andalus. I have tried to give these almost forgotten Europeans a voice in this book, and to give us today, as we struggle with some of the same questions, an idea of the *convivencia* – a land where Jews, Moslems and Christians managed to live side by side in respect and peace as 'People of the Book'.

A note on the songs



'Alas, Alhama!', 'Riders gallop through the Elvira gate...' and 'There was crying in Granada...' are traditional songs, quoted by Francesca Claremount in *Catherine of Aragon* (see book list below).



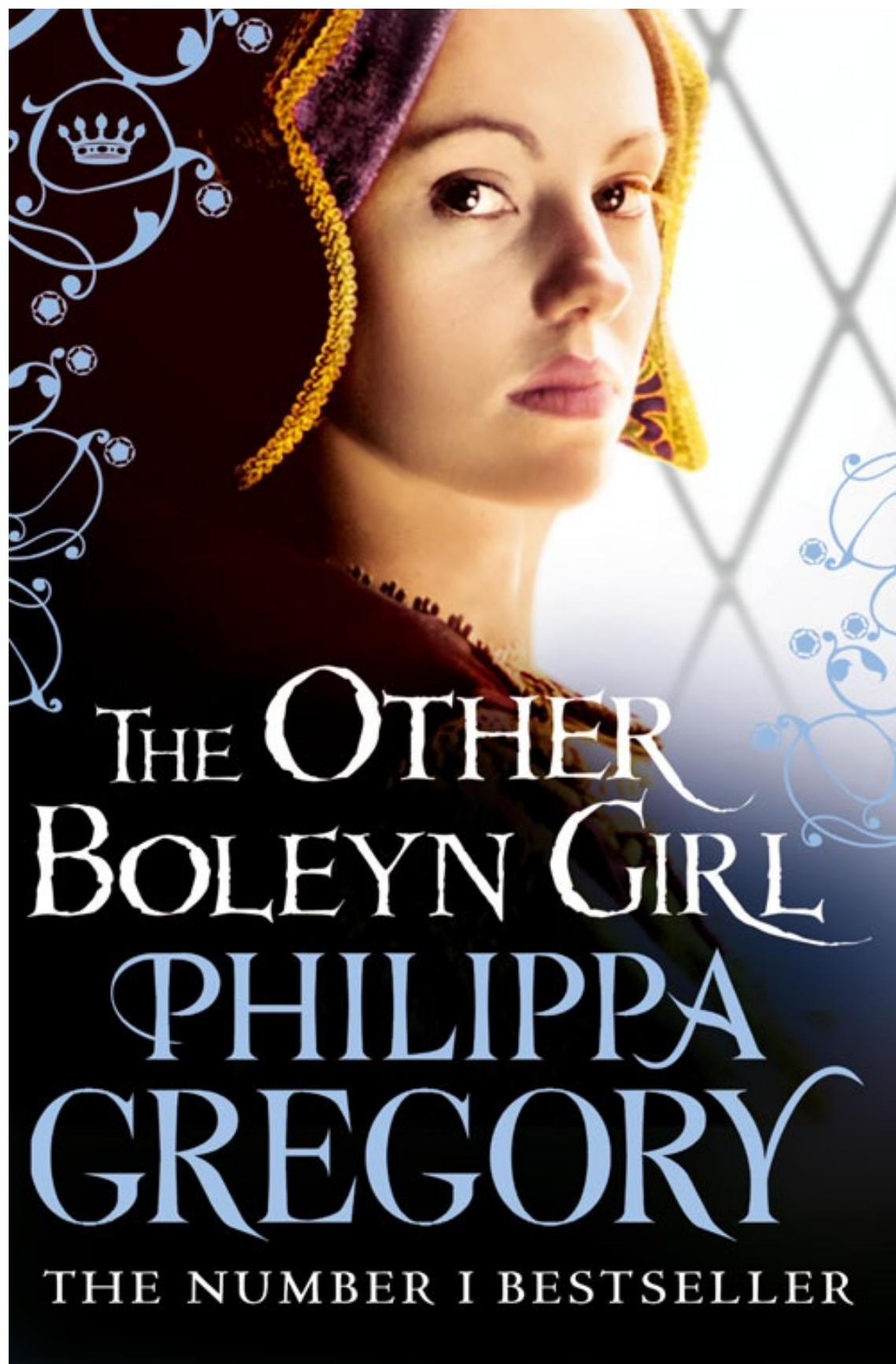
‘A palm tree stands in the middle of Rusafa’, is by Abd al Rahman, translated by D. F. Ruggles and quoted in Menocal, *The Ornament of the World* (see book list below).



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THE OTHER
BOLEYN GIRL
PHILIPPA
GREGORY

THE NUMBER 1 BESTSELLER

PHILIPPA GREGORY

THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL

HARPER

Dedication

For Anthony

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Spring 1521

I could hear a roll of muffled drums. But I could see nothing but the lacing on the bodice of the lady standing in front of me, blocking my view of the scaffold. I had been at this court for more than a year and attended hundreds of festivities; but never before one like this.

By stepping to one side a little and craning my neck, I could see the condemned man, accompanied by his priest, walk slowly from the Tower towards the green where the wooden platform was waiting, the block of wood placed centre stage, the executioner dressed all ready for work in his shirtsleeves with a black hood over his head. It looked more like a masque than a real event, and I watched it as if it were a court entertainment. The king, seated on his throne, looked distracted, as if he was running through his speech of forgiveness in his head. Behind him stood my husband of one year, William Carey, my brother, George, and my father, Sir Thomas Boleyn, all looking grave. I wriggled my toes inside my silk slippers and wished the king would hurry up and grant clemency so that we could all go to breakfast. I was only thirteen years old, I was always hungry.

The Duke of Buckinghamshire, far away on the scaffold, put off his thick coat. He was close enough kin for me to call him uncle. He had come to my wedding and given me a gilt bracelet. My father told me that he had offended the king a dozen ways: he had royal blood in his veins and he kept too large a retinue of armed men for the comfort of a king not yet wholly secure on his throne; worst of all he was supposed to have said that the king had no son and heir now, could get no son and heir, and that he would likely die without a son to succeed him to the throne.

Such a thought must not be said out loud. The king, the court, the whole country knew that a boy must be born to the queen, and born soon. To suggest otherwise was to take the first step on the path that led to the wooden steps of the scaffold which the duke, my uncle, now climbed, firmly and without fear. A good courtier never refers to any unpalatable truths. The life of a court should always be merry.

Uncle Stafford came to the front of the stage to say his final words. I was too far from him to hear, and in any case I was watching the king, waiting for his cue to step forward and offer the royal pardon. This man standing on the scaffold, in the sunlight of the early morning, had been the king's partner at tennis, his rival on the jousting field, his friend at a hundred bouts of drinking and gambling, they had been comrades since the king was a boy. The king was teaching him a lesson, a powerful public lesson, and then he would forgive him and we could all go to breakfast.

The little faraway figure turned to his confessor. He bowed his head for a blessing and kissed the rosary. He knelt before the block and clasped it in both hands. I wondered what it must be like, to put one's cheek to the smooth waxed wood, to smell the warm wind coming off the river, to hear, overhead, the cry of seagulls. Even knowing as he did that this was a masque and not the real thing, it must be odd for Uncle to put his head down and know that the executioner was standing behind.

The executioner raised his axe. I looked towards the king. He was leaving his intervention very late. I glanced back at the stage. My uncle, head down, flung wide his arms, a sign of his consent, the signal that the axe could fall. I looked back to the king, he must rise to his feet now. But he still sat, his handsome face grim. And while I was still looking towards him there was another roll of drums, suddenly silenced, and then the thud of the axe, first once, then again and a third time: a sound as domestic as chopping wood. Disbelievingly, I saw the head of my uncle bounce into the straw and a scarlet gush of blood from the strangely stumpy neck. The black-hooded axeman put the great stained axe to one side and lifted the head by the thick curly hair, so that we could all see the strange mask-like thing: black with the blindfold from forehead to nose, and the teeth bared in a last defiant grin.

The king rose slowly from his seat and I thought, childishly, 'Dear God, how awfully embarrassing this is going to be. He has left it too late. It has all gone wrong. He forgot to speak in time.'

But I was wrong. He did not leave it too late, he did not forget. He wanted my uncle to die before the court so that everybody might know that there was only one king, and that was Henry. There could be only one king, and that was Henry. And there would be a son born to this king – and even to suggest otherwise meant a shameful death.



The court returned quietly to Westminster Palace in three barges, rowed up the river. The men on the riverbank pulled off their hats and kneeled as the royal barge went swiftly past with a flurry of pennants and a glimpse of rich cloth. I was in the second barge with the ladies of the court, the queen's barge. My mother was seated near me. In a rare moment of interest she glanced at me and remarked, 'You're very pale, Mary, are you feeling sick?'

'I didn't think he would be executed,' I said. 'I thought the king would forgive him.'

My mother leaned forward so that her mouth was at my ear and no-one could have heard us over the creaking of the boat and the beat of the rowers' drum. 'Then you are a fool,' she said shortly. 'And a fool to remark it. Watch and learn, Mary. There is no room for mistakes at court.'

Spring 1522

‘I am going to France tomorrow and I shall bring your sister Anne home with me,’ my father told me on the stairs of Westminster Palace. ‘She’s to have a place in the court of Queen Mary Tudor as she returns to England.’

‘I thought she’d stay in France,’ I said. ‘I thought she’d marry a French count or somebody.’

He shook his head. ‘We have other plans for her.’

I knew it was pointless to ask what plans they had. I would have to wait and see. My greatest dread was that they would have a better marriage for her than I had made, that I would have to follow the hem of her gown as she swept ahead of me for the rest of my life.

‘Wipe that surly look off your face,’ my father said sharply.

At once I smiled my courtier’s smile. ‘Of course, Father,’ I said obediently.

He nodded and I curtsied low as he left me. I came up from my curtsy and went slowly to my husband’s bedroom. I had a small looking glass on the wall and I stood before it and gazed at my own reflection. ‘It’ll be all right,’ I whispered to myself. ‘I am a Boleyn, that’s not a small thing to be, and my mother was born a Howard, that’s to be one of the greatest families in the country. I’m a Howard girl, a Boleyn girl.’ I bit my lip. ‘But so is she.’

I smiled my empty courtier’s smile and the reflected pretty face smiled back. ‘I am the youngest Boleyn girl, but not the least. I am married to William Carey, a man high in the king’s favour. I am the queen’s favourite and youngest lady in waiting. Nobody can spoil this for me. Not even she can take this from me.’



Anne and Father were delayed by spring storms and I found myself hoping, childishly, that her boat would sink and she would drown. At the thought of her death I felt a confusing pang of genuine distress mixed with elation. There could hardly be a world for me without Anne, there was hardly world enough for us both.

In any case, she arrived safely enough. I saw my father walking with her from the royal landing stage up the gravelled paths to the palace. Even from the first-floor window, looking down I could see the swing of her gown, the stylish cut of her cloak, and a moment of pure envy swept through me as I saw how it swirled around her. I waited till she was out of sight and then I hurried to my seat in the queen's presence chamber.

I planned that she should first see me very much at home in the queen's richly tapestried rooms, and that I should rise and greet her, very grown-up and gracious. But when the doors opened and she came in I was overcome by a rush of sudden joy, and I heard myself cry out 'Anne!' and ran to her, my skirt swishing. And Anne, who had come in with her head very high, and her arrogant dark look darting everywhere, suddenly stopped being a grand young lady of fifteen years and threw out her arms to me.

'You're taller,' she said breathlessly, her arms tight around me, her cheek pressed to mine.

'I've got *such* high heels.' I inhaled the familiar perfume of her. Soap, and rosewater essence from her warm skin, lavender from her clothes.

'You all right?'

'Yes. You?'

'*Bien sur!* How is it? Marriage?'

'Not too bad. Nice clothes.'

'And he?'

'Very grand. Always with the king, high in his favour.'

'Have you done it?'

'Yes, ages ago.'

'Did it hurt?'

'Very much.'

She pulled back to read my face.

'Not too much,' I said, qualifying. 'He does try to be gentle. He always gives me wine. It's just all rather awful, really.'

Her scowl melted away and she giggled, her eyes dancing. 'How is it awful?'

'He pisses in the pot, right where I can see!'

She collapsed in a wail of laughter. 'No!'

'Now, girls,' my father said, coming up behind Anne. 'Mary, take Anne and present her to the queen.'

At once I turned and led her through the press of ladies in waiting to where the queen was seated, erect in her chair at the fireside. 'She's strict,' I warned

Anne. 'It's not like France.'

Katherine of Aragon took the measure of Anne with one of her clear blue-eyed sweeps and I felt a pang of fear that she would prefer my sister to me.

Anne swept the queen an immaculate French curtsey, and came up as if she owned the palace. She spoke in a voice rippling with that seductive accent, her every gesture was that of the French court. I noted with glee the queen's frosty response to Anne's stylish manner. I drew her to a windowseat.

'She hates the French,' I said. 'She'll never have you around her if you keep that up.'

Anne shrugged. 'They're the most fashionable. Whether she likes them or not. What else?'

'Spanish?' I suggested. 'If you have to pretend to be something else.'

Anne let out a snort of laughter. 'And wear those hoods! She looks as if someone stuck a roof on her head.'

'Ssshhh,' I said reprovingly. 'She's a beautiful woman. The finest queen in Europe.'

'She's an old woman,' Anne said cruelly. 'Dressed like an old woman in the ugliest clothes in Europe, from the stupidest nation in Europe. We have no time for the Spanish.'

'Who's we?' I asked coldly. 'Not the English.'

'*Les Français!*' she said irritatingly. '*Bien sur!* I am all but French now.'

'You're English born and bred, like George and me,' I said flatly. 'And I was brought up at the French court just like you. Why do you always have to pretend to be different?'

'Because everyone has to do something.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Every woman has to have something which singles her out, which catches the eye, which makes her the centre of attention. I am going to be French.'

'So you pretend to be something that you're not,' I said disapprovingly.

She gleamed at me and her dark eyes measured me in a way that only Anne could do. 'I pretend no more and no less than you do,' she said quietly. 'My little sister, my little golden sister, my milk and honey sister.'

I met her eyes, my lighter gaze into her black, and I knew that I was smiling her smile, that she was a dark mirror to me. 'Oh that,' I said, still refusing to acknowledge a hit. 'Oh that.'

'Exactly,' she said. 'I shall be dark and French and fashionable and difficult and you shall be sweet and open and English and fair. What a pair we shall be.'

What man could resist us?’

I laughed, she could always make me laugh. I looked down from the leaded window and saw the king’s hunt returning to the stable yard.

‘Is that the king on his way?’ Anne asked. ‘Is he as handsome as they say?’

‘He’s wonderful. He really is. He dances and rides, and – oh – I can’t tell you!’

‘Will he come here now?’

‘Probably. He always comes to see her.’

Anne glanced dismissively to where the queen sat sewing with her ladies. ‘Can’t think why.’

‘Because he loves her,’ I said. ‘It’s a wonderful love story. Her married to his brother and his brother dying like that, so young, and then her not knowing what she should do or where she could go, and then him taking her and making her his wife and his queen. It’s a wonderful story and he loves her still.’

Anne raised a perfectly arched eyebrow and glanced around the room. All the ladies in waiting had heard the sound of the returning hunt and had spread the skirts of their gowns and moved in their seats so that they were placed like a little tableau to be viewed from the doorway when the door was flung open and Henry the king stood on the threshold and laughed with the boisterous joy of an indulged young man. ‘I came to surprise you and I catch you all unawares!’

The queen started. ‘How amazed we are!’ she said warmly. ‘And what a delight!’

The king’s companions and friends followed their master into the room. My brother George came in first, checked on the threshold at the sight of Anne, held his pleasure hidden behind his handsome courtier’s face, and bowed low over the queen’s hand. ‘Majesty.’ He breathed on her fingers. ‘I have been in the sun all the morning but I am only dazzled now.’

She smiled her small polite smile as she gazed down at his bent dark curly head. ‘You may greet your sister.’

‘Mary is here?’ George asked indifferently, as if he had not seen us both.

‘Your other sister, Anne,’ the queen corrected him. A small gesture from her hand, heavy with rings, indicated that the two of us should step forward. George swept us a bow without moving from the prime place near the throne.

‘Has she changed much?’ the queen asked.

George smiled. ‘I hope she will change more with a model such as you before her eyes.’

The queen gave a little laugh. ‘Very pretty,’ she said appreciatively, and

waved him towards us.

‘Hello, little Miss Beautiful,’ he said to Anne. ‘Hello, Mistress Beautiful,’ to me.

Anne regarded him from under her dark eyelashes. ‘I wish I could hug you,’ she said.

‘We’ll go out, as soon as we can,’ George decreed. ‘You look well, Annamaria.’

‘I am well,’ she said. ‘And you?’

‘Never better.’

‘What’s little Mary’s husband like?’ she asked curiously, watching William as he entered and bowed over the queen’s hand.

‘Great-grandson of the third Earl of Somerset, and very high in the king’s favour.’ George volunteered the only matters of interest: his family connections and his closeness to the throne. ‘She’s done well. Did you know you were brought home to be married, Anne?’

‘Father hasn’t said who.’

‘I think you’re to go to Ormonde,’ George said.

‘A countess,’ Anne said with a triumphant smile to me.

‘Only Irish,’ I rejoined at once.

My husband stepped back from the queen’s chair, caught sight of us, and then raised an eyebrow at Anne’s intense provocative stare. The king took his seat beside the queen and looked around the room.

‘My dear Mary Carey’s sister has come to join our company,’ the queen said. ‘This is Anne Boleyn.’

‘George’s sister?’ the king asked.

My brother bowed. ‘Yes, Your Majesty.’

The king smiled at Anne. She dropped him a curtsey straight down, like a bucket in a well, head up, and a small challenging smile on her lips. The king was not taken, he liked easy women, he liked smiling women. He did not like women who fixed him with a dark challenging gaze.

‘And are you happy to be with your sister again?’ he asked me.

I dipped a low curtsey and came up a little flushed. ‘Of course, Your Majesty,’ I said sweetly. ‘What girl would not long for the company of a sister like Anne?’

His eyebrows twitched together a little at that. He preferred the open bawdy humour of men to the barbed wit of women. He looked from me to Anne’s slightly quizzical expression and then he got the joke and laughed out loud, and

snapped his fingers and held out his hand to me. 'Don't worry, sweetheart,' he said. 'No-one can overshadow the bride in her early years of wedded bliss. And both Carey and I have a preference for fair-haired women.'

Everyone laughed at that, especially Anne who was dark, and the queen whose auburn hair had faded to brown and grey. They would have been fools to do anything but laugh heartily at the king's pleasantry. And I laughed as well, with more joy in my heart than they had in theirs, I should think.

The musicians played an opening chord, and Henry drew me to him. 'You're a very pretty girl,' he said approvingly. 'Carey tells me that he so likes a young bride that he'll never bed any but twelve-year-old virgins ever again.'

It was hard to keep my chin up and my smile on my face. We turned in the dance and the king smiled down on me.

'He's a lucky man,' he said graciously.

'He is lucky to have your favour,' I started, stumbling towards a compliment.

'Luckier to have yours, I should think!' he said with a sudden bellow of laughter. Then he swept me into a dance, and I whirled down the line of dancers and saw my brother's quick glance of approval, and what was sweeter still: Anne's envious eyes as the King of England danced past her with me in his arms.



Anne slipped into the routine of the English court and waited for her wedding. She still had not met her husband-to-be, and the arguments about the dowry and settlements looked as if they would take forever. Not even the influence of Cardinal Wolsey, who had his finger in this as well as every other pie in the bakehouse of England, could speed the business along. In the meantime she flirted as elegantly as a Frenchwoman, served the king's sister with a nonchalant grace, and squandered hours every day in gossiping, riding, and playing with George and me. We were alike in tastes and not far apart in age; I was the baby at fourteen to Anne's fifteen and George's nineteen years. We were the closest of kin and yet almost strangers. I had been at the French court with Anne while George had been learning his trade as a courtier in England. Now, reunited, we became known around the court as the three Boleyns, the three delightful Boleyns, and the king would often look round when he was in his private rooms and cry out for the three Boleyns and someone would be sent running from one end of the castle to fetch us.

Our first task in life was to enhance the king's many entertainments: jousting, tennis, riding, hunting, hawking, dancing. He liked to live in a continual roar of excitement and it was our duty to ensure that he was never bored. But sometimes, very rarely, in the quiet time before dinner, or if it rained and he could not hunt, he would find his own way to the queen's apartments, and she would put down her sewing or her reading and send us away with a word.

If I lingered I might see her smile at him, in a way that she never smiled at anyone else, not even at her daughter the Princess Mary. And once, when I had entered without realising the king was there, I found him seated at her feet like a lover, with his head tipped back to rest in her lap as she stroked his red-gold curls off his forehead and twisted them round her fingers where they glowed as bright as the rings he had given her when she had been a young princess with hair as bright as his, and he had married her against the advice of everyone.

I tiptoed away without them seeing me. It was so rare that they were alone together that I did not want to be the one to break the spell. I went to find Anne. She was walking in the cold garden with George, a bunch of snowdrops in her hand, her cloak wrapped tight about her.

'The king is with the queen,' I said as I joined them. 'On their own.'

Anne raised an eyebrow. 'In bed?' she asked curiously.

I flushed. 'Of course not, it's two in the afternoon.'

Anne smiled at me. 'You must be a happy wife if you think you can't bed before nightfall.'

George extended his other arm to me. 'She is a happy wife,' he said on my behalf. 'William was telling the king that he had never known a sweeter girl. But what were they doing, Mary?'

'Just sitting together,' I said. I had a strong feeling that I did not want to describe the scene to Anne.

'She won't get a son that way,' Anne said crudely.

'Hush,' George and I said at once. The three of us drew a little closer and lowered our voices.

'She must be losing hope of it,' George said. 'What is she now? Thirty-eight? Thirty-nine?'

'Only thirty-seven,' I said indignantly.

'Does she still have her monthly courses?'

'Oh George!'

'Yes she does,' Anne said, matter-of-factly. 'But little good they do her. It's her fault. It can't be laid at the king's door with his bastard from Bessie Blount

learning to ride his pony.'

'There's still plenty of time,' I said defensively.

'Time for her to die and him to remarry?' Anne said thoughtfully. 'Yes. And she's not strong, is she?'

'Anne!' For once my recoil from her was genuine. 'That's vile.'

George glanced around once more to ensure that there was no-one near us in the garden. A couple of Seymour girls were walking with their mother but we paid no attention to them. Their family were our chief rivals for power and advancement, we liked to pretend not to see them.

'It's vile but it's true,' he said bluntly. 'Who's to be the next king if he doesn't have a son?'

'Princess Mary could marry,' I suggested.

'A foreign prince brought in to rule England? It'd never hold,' George said. 'And we can't tolerate another war for the throne.'

'Princess Mary could become queen in her own right and not marry,' I said wildly. 'Rule as a queen on her own.'

Anne gave a snort of disbelief, her breath a little cloud on the cold air. 'Oh aye,' she said derisively. 'She could ride astride and learn to joust. A girl can't rule a country like this, the great lords'd eat her alive.'

The three of us paused before the fountain that stood in the centre of the garden. Anne, with her well-trained grace, sat on the rim of the basin and looked into the water, a few goldfish swam hopefully towards her and she pulled off her embroidered glove and dabbled her long fingers in the water. They came up, little mouths gaping, to nibble at the air. George and I watched her, as she watched her own rippling reflection.

'Does the king think of this?' she asked her mirrored image.

'Constantly,' George answered. 'There is nothing in the world more important. I think he would legitimise Bessie Blount's boy and make him heir if there's no issue from the queen.'

'A bastard on the throne?'

'He wasn't christened Henry Fitzroy for no reason,' George replied. 'He's acknowledged as the king's own son. If Henry lives long enough to make the country safe for him, if he can get the Seymours to agree, and us Howards, if Wolsey gets the church behind him and the foreign powers ... what should stop him?'

'One little boy, and he a bastard,' Anne said thoughtfully. 'One little girl of six, one elderly queen and a king in the prime of his life.' She looked up at the

two of us, dragging her gaze away from her own pale face in the water. ‘What’s going to happen?’ she asked. ‘Something has to happen. What’s it going to be?’



Cardinal Wolsey sent a message to the queen asking us to take part in a masque on Shrove Tuesday which he was to stage at his house, York Place. The queen asked me to read the letter and my voice trembled with excitement over the words: a great masque, a fortress named Chateau Vert, and five ladies to dance with the five knights who would besiege the fort. ‘Oh! Your Majesty ...’ I started and then fell silent.

‘Oh! Your Majesty, what?’

‘I was just wondering if I might be allowed to go,’ I said very humbly. ‘To watch the revels.’

‘I think you were wondering a little more than that?’ she asked me with a gleam in her eyes.

‘I was wondering if I might be one of the dancers,’ I confessed. ‘It does sound very wonderful.’

‘Yes, you may be,’ she said. ‘How many ladies does the cardinal command of me?’

‘Five,’ I said quietly. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Anne sit back in her seat and close her eyes for just a moment. I knew exactly what she was doing, I could hear her voice in my head as loudly as if she was shouting: ‘Choose me! Choose me! Choose me!’

It worked. ‘Mistress Anne Boleyn,’ the queen said thoughtfully. ‘The Queen Mary of France, the Countess of Devon, Jane Parker, and you, Mary.’

Anne and I exchanged a rapid glance. We would be an oddly assorted quintet: the king’s aunt, his sister Queen Mary, and the heiress Jane Parker who was likely to be our sister-in-law, if her father and ours could agree her dowry, and the two of us.

‘Will we wear green?’ Anne asked.

The queen smiled at her. ‘Oh, I should think so,’ she said. ‘Mary, why don’t you write a note to the cardinal and tell him that we will be delighted to attend, and ask him to send the master of the revels so that we can all choose costumes and plan our dances?’

‘I’ll do it.’ Anne rose from her chair and went to the table where the pen and ink and paper were ready. ‘Mary has such a cramped hand he will think we are

writing a refusal.'

The queen laughed. 'Ah, the French scholar,' she said gently. 'You shall write to the cardinal then, Mistress Boleyn, in your beautiful French, or shall you write to him in Latin?'

Anne's gaze did not waver. 'Whichever Your Majesty prefers,' she said steadily. 'I am reasonably fluent in both.'

'Tell him that we are all eager to play our part in his Chateau Vert,' the queen said smoothly. 'What a shame you can't write Spanish.'



The arrival of the master of the revels to teach us our steps for the dance was the signal for a savage battle fought with smiles and the sweetest words as to who would play which role in the masque. In the end the queen herself intervened and gave us our parts without allowing any discussion. She gave me the role of Kindness, the king's sister Queen Mary got the plum part of Beauty, Jane Parker was Constancy – 'Well she does cling on so,' Anne whispered to me. Anne herself was Perseverance. 'Shows what she thinks of you,' I whispered back. Anne had the grace to giggle.

We were to be attacked by Indian women – in reality the choristers of the royal chapel – before being rescued by the king and his chosen friends. We were warned that the king would be disguised and we should take great care not to penetrate the transparent ruse of a golden mask strapped on a golden head, taller than anyone else in the room.



It was a great romp in the end, far more fun than I had expected, much more of a play-fight than a dance. George flung rose petals at me and I drenched him with a shower of rosewater. The choristers were just little boys and they got over-excited and attacked the knights and were swung off their feet and spun around and dumped, dizzy and giggly, on the ground. When we ladies came out from the castle and danced with the mystery knights it was the tallest knight who came to dance with me, the king himself, and I, still breathless from my battle with George, and with rose petals in my headdress and my hair, and sugared fruit tumbling out of the folds of my gown, found that I was laughing and giving my

hand to him, and dancing with him as if he were an ordinary man and I little more than a kitchen maid at a country romp.

When the signal for the unmasking should have come the king cried out: 'Play on! Let's dance some more!' and instead of turning and taking another partner he led me out again, a country dance when we went hand to hand and I could see his eyes gleaming at me through the slits in his golden mask. Reckless and laughing, I smiled back up at him and let that sunny approbation sink into my skin.

'I envy your husband when your dress comes off tonight, you will shower him with sweets,' he said in an undertone when the dance brought us side by side as we watched another couple in the centre of the ring.

I could not think of a witty reply, these were not the formal compliments of courtly love. The image of a husband being showered with sweets was too domestic, and too erotic.

'Surely you should envy nothing,' I said. 'Surely everything is all yours.'

'Why would that be?' he asked.

'Because you are king,' I started, forgetting that he was supposed to be in impenetrable disguise. 'King of Chateau Vert,' I recovered. 'King for a day. It should be King Henry who envies you, for you have won a great siege in one afternoon.'

'And what d'you think of King Henry?'

I looked up at him, my innocent look. 'He is the greatest king that this country has ever known. It is an honour to be at his court and a privilege to be near him.'

'Could you love him as a man?'

I looked down and blushed. 'I would not dare to think of it. He has never so much as glanced towards me.'

'Oh he has glanced,' the king said firmly. 'You can be sure of that. And if he glanced more than once, Miss Kindness, would you be true to your name and be kind to him?'

'Your ...' I bit my lip and stopped myself saying: 'Your Majesty'. I looked around for Anne; more than anything, I wanted her by my side and her wits at my service.

'You are named Kindness,' he reminded me.

I smiled at him, peeping up through my golden mask. 'I am,' I said. 'And I suppose I should have to be kind.'

The musicians finished the dance and waited, poised for the king's orders.

‘Unmask!’ he said and tore his own mask off his face. I saw the king of England, gave a wonderful little gasp and staggered.

‘She’s fainting!’ George cried out, it was beautifully done. I fell into the king’s arms as Anne, fast as a snake, unpinned my mask, and – brilliantly – pulled off my headdress so that my golden hair tumbled down like a stream over the king’s arm.

I opened my eyes, his face was very close. I could smell the perfume on his hair, his breath was on my cheek, I watched his lips, he was close enough to kiss me.

‘You have to be kind to me,’ he reminded me.

‘You are the king ...’ I said incredulously.

‘And you have promised to be kind to me.’

‘I didn’t know it was you, Your Majesty.’

He lifted me gently and carried me over to the window. He opened it himself and the cold air blew in. I tossed my head and let my hair ripple in the draught.

‘Did you faint for fright?’ he asked, his voice very low.

I looked down at my hands. ‘For delight,’ I whispered, as sweet as a virgin in confession.

He bent his head and kissed my hands and then rose to his feet. ‘And now we dine!’ he called out.

I looked over to Anne. She was untying her mask and watching me with a long calculating look, the Boleyn look, the Howard look that says: what has happened here, and how may I turn it to my advantage? It was as if under her golden mask was another beautiful mask of skin, and only beneath that was the real woman. As I looked back at her she gave me a small secret smile.

The king gave his arm to the queen, she rose from her chair as gay as if she had been enjoying watching her husband flirt with me; but as he turned to lead her away she paused and her blue eyes looked long and hard at me, as if she were saying goodbye to a friend.

‘I hope you will soon recover from your faintness, Mistress Carey,’ she said gently. ‘Perhaps you should go to your room.’

‘I think she is light-headed from lack of food,’ George interposed quickly. ‘May I bring her in to dine?’

Anne stepped forward. ‘The king frightened her when he unmasked. No-one guessed for a moment that it was you, Your Majesty!’

The king laughed in delight, and the court laughed with him. Only the queen heard how the three of us had turned her order so that despite her declared

wishes, I would be brought in to dine. She measured the strength of the three of us. I was no Bessie Blount, who was next to nobody; I was a Boleyn, and the Boleyns worked together.

‘Come and dine with us then, Mary,’ she said. The words were inviting but there was no warmth in them at all.



We were to sit where we pleased, the knights of the Chateau Vert and the ladies, all mixed up informally at a round table. Cardinal Wolsey as the host sat opposite the king with the queen at the third point on the table and the rest of us scattered where we chose. George put me next to him and Anne summoned my husband to her side and diverted him, while the king, seated opposite me, stared at me and I, carefully, looked away. On Anne’s right was Henry Percy of Northumberland, on George’s other side was Jane Parker, watching me intently, as if she were trying to discover the trick of being a desirable girl.

I ate only a little, though there were pies and pasties and fine meats and game. I took a little salad, the queen’s favourite dish, and drank wine and water. My father joined the table during the meal and sat beside my mother who whispered quickly in his ear and I saw his glance flick over me, like a horse-trader assessing the value of a filly. Whenever I looked up the king’s eyes were on me, whenever I looked away I was conscious of his stare still on my face.

When we had finished, the cardinal suggested that we go to the hall and listen to some music. Anne was at my side and steered me down the stairs so that when the king arrived the two of us were seated on a bench against the wall. It was easy and natural for him to pause to ask me how I did now. Natural that Anne and I should stand as he came past us, and that he should sit on the vacant bench and invite me to sit beside him. Anne drifted away and chattered to Henry Percy, shielding the king and me from the court, most especially from the smiling gaze of Queen Katherine. My father went up to speak to her while the musicians played. It was all done with complete ease and comfort, and it meant that the king and I were all but concealed in a crowded room with music loud enough to drown our whispered conversation, and every member of the Boleyn family well placed to hide what was going on.

‘You are better now?’ he asked me in an undertone.

‘Never better in all my life, sire.’

‘I am riding out tomorrow,’ he said. ‘Would you care to come with me?’

‘If Her Majesty can spare me,’ I said, determined not to risk the queen’s displeasure.

‘I will ask the queen to release you for the morning. I shall tell her that you need the fresh air.’

I smiled. ‘What a fine physician you would make, Your Majesty. If you can make a diagnosis and provide the cure all in the space of a day.’

‘You must be an obedient patient and do whatever I advise,’ he warned me.

‘I will.’ I looked down at my fingers. I could feel his gaze on me. I was soaring, higher than I could have dreamed.

‘I may order you to bed for days at a time,’ he said, his voice very low.

I snatched a quick look at his intense gaze on my face and felt myself blush and heard myself stammer into silence. The music abruptly stopped. ‘Do play again!’ my mother said. Queen Katherine looked around for the king and saw him seated with me. ‘Shall we dance?’ she asked.

It was a royal command. Anne and Henry Percy took their places in a set, the musicians started to play. I rose to my feet and Henry went to sit beside his wife and watch us. George was my partner.

‘Head up,’ he snapped as he took my hand. ‘You look hangdog.’

‘She’s watching me,’ I whispered back.

‘Course she is. More to the point *he’s* watching you. And most important of all, Father and Uncle Howard are watching you, and they expect you to carry yourself as a young woman on the rise. Up you go, Mistress Carey, and all of us go up with you.’

I raised my head at that and I smiled at my brother as if I were carefree. I danced as gracefully as I could, I dipped and turned and twirled under his careful hand. And when I looked up at the king and the queen they were both watching me.



They held a family conference at my uncle Howard’s great house in London. We met in his library where the dark bound books muffled the noise from the streets. Two men in our Howard livery were stationed outside the door to prevent any interruptions, and to ensure that no-one stopped and eavesdropped. We were to discuss family business, family secrets. No-one but a Howard could come near.

I was the very cause and subject of the meeting. I was the hub around which these events would turn. I was the Boleyn pawn that must be played to

advantage. Everything was concentrated on me. I felt my very wrists throb with a sense of my own importance, and a contradictory flutter of anxiety that I would fail them.

‘Is she fertile?’ Uncle Howard asked my mother.

‘Her courses are regular enough and she’s a healthy girl.’

My uncle nodded. ‘If the king has her, and she conceives his bastard, then we have much to play for.’ I noticed with a sort of terrified concentration that the fur on the hem of his sleeves brushed against the wood of the table, the richness of his coat took on a lustre from the light of the flames of the fire behind him. ‘She can’t sleep in Carey’s bed any more. The marriage has to be put aside while the king favours her.’

I gave a little gasp. I could not think who would say such a thing to my husband. And besides, we had sworn that we would stay together, that marriage was for the making of children, that God had put us together and no man could put us apart.

‘I don’t ...’ I started.

Anne tweaked at my gown. ‘Hush,’ she hissed. The seed pearls on her French hood winked at me like bright-eyed conspirators.

‘I’ll speak to Carey,’ my father said.

George took my hand. ‘If you conceive a child the king has to know that it is his and none other’s.’

‘I can’t be his mistress,’ I whispered back.

‘No choice.’ He shook his head.

‘I can’t do it,’ I said out loud. I gripped tightly on my brother’s comforting clasp and looked down the long dark wood table to my uncle, as sharp as a falcon with black eyes that missed nothing. ‘Sir, I am sorry, but I love the queen. She’s a great lady and I can’t betray her. I promised before God to cleave only to my husband, and surely I shouldn’t betray him? I know the king is the king; but you can’t want me to? Surely? Sir, I can’t do it.’

He did not answer me. Such was his power that he did not even consider replying. ‘What am I supposed to do with this delicate conscience?’ he asked the air above the table.

‘Leave it to me,’ Anne said simply. ‘I can explain things to Mary.’

‘You’re a little young for the task of tutor.’

She met his look with her quiet confidence. ‘I was reared in the most fashionable court in the world,’ she said. ‘And I was not idle. I watched everything. I learned all there was to see. I know what is needed here, and I can

teach Mary how to behave.'

He hesitated for a moment. 'You had better not have studied flirtation too closely, Miss Anne.'

Her serenity was that of a nun. 'Of course not.'

I felt my shoulder lift, as if I would shrug her away. 'I don't see why I should do what Anne says.'

I had disappeared, though this whole meeting was supposed to be about me. Anne had stolen their attention. 'Well, I shall trust you to coach your sister. George, you too. You know how the king is with women, keep Mary in his sight.'

They nodded. There was a brief silence.

'I'll speak with Carey's father,' my father volunteered. 'William will be expecting it. He's no fool.'

My uncle glanced down the table to Anne and George where they stood either side of me, more like jailers than friends. 'You help your sister,' he ordered them. 'Whatever she needs to ensnare the king, you give her. Whatever arts she needs, whatever goods she should have, whatever skills she lacks, you get them for her. We are looking to the two of you to get her into his bed. Don't forget it. There will be great rewards. But if you fail, there will be nothing for us at all. Remember it.'



My parting with my husband was curiously painful. I walked into our bedroom as my maid was packing my things to take them to the queen's rooms. He stood amid the chaos of shoes and gowns thrown on the bed, and cloaks tossed over chairs, and jewel boxes everywhere; and his young face showed his shock.

'I see you are on the rise, madam.'

He was a handsome young man, one that any woman might have favoured. I thought that if we had not been ordered by our families into this marriage and now out of it that we might have liked each other. 'I am sorry,' I said awkwardly. 'You know that I have to do what my uncle and my father tell me.'

'I know that,' he said bluntly. 'I have to do what they all order as well.'

To my relief, Anne appeared in the doorway, her mischievous smile very bright. 'How now, William Carey? Well met!' It seemed as if it were her greatest joy to see her brother-in-law amid the mess of my things and the wreckage of his own hopes for a marriage and a son.

‘Anne Boleyn.’ He bowed briefly. ‘Have you come to help your sister onwards and upwards?’

‘Of course.’ She gleamed at him. ‘As we all should do. None of us will suffer if Mary is favoured.’

She held his gaze for one fearless moment, and it was he who turned away to look out of the window. ‘I have to go,’ he said. ‘The king bids me to go hunting with him.’ He hesitated a moment and then he came across the room to where I stood surrounded by the scatterings of my wardrobe. Gently, he took my hand and kissed it. ‘I am sorry for you. And I am sorry for me. When you are sent back to me, perhaps a month from now, perhaps a year, I will try to remember this day, and you looking like a child, a little lost among all these clothes. I will try to remember that you were innocent of any plotting; that today at least, you were more a girl than a Boleyn.’



The queen observed that I was now a single woman, lodged with Anne as my bedfellow in a little room off her chambers, without comment. Her outward manner to me changed not at all. She remained courteous and quiet-spoken. If she wanted me to do something for her: write a note, sing, take her lap dog from the room, or send a message, she asked me as politely as she had ever done. But she never again asked me to read to her from the Bible, she never asked me to sit at her feet while she sewed, she never blessed me when I went to bed. I was no longer her favourite little maid.

It was a relief to go to bed at night with Anne. We drew the curtains around us so that we were safe to whisper in the shadowy darkness without being overheard and it was like France in the days of our childhood. Sometimes George would leave the king’s rooms and come to find us, and climb onto the high bed, balance his candle perilously on the bedhead, and bring out his pack of cards or his dice and play with us while the other girls in nearby rooms slept, not knowing that a man was hidden in our chamber.

They did not lecture me about the role I was to play. Cunningly, they waited for me to come to them and tell them that it was beyond me.

I said nothing while my clothes were moved from one end of the palace to the other. I said nothing when the whole court packed and moved to the king’s favourite palace, Eltham in Kent, for the spring. I said nothing when my husband rode beside me during the progress and talked to me kindly of the weather and

the condition of my horse, which was Jane Parker's, lent under protest, as her contribution to the family ambition. But when I had George and Anne to myself in the garden at Eltham Palace, I said to George:

'I don't think I can do this.'

'Do what?' he asked unhelpfully. We were supposed to be walking the queen's dog, which had been carried on the pommel of the saddle for the day's ride and was thoroughly jolted and sick-looking. 'Come on, Flo!' he said encouragingly. 'Seek! Seek!'

'I can't be with my husband and the king at the same time,' I said. 'I can't laugh with the king when my husband is watching.'

'Why not?' Anne rolled a ball along the ground for Flo to chase after. The little dog watched it go without interest. 'Oh go on, you stupid thing!' Anne exclaimed.

'Because I feel all wrong.'

'D'you know better than your mother?' Anne asked bluntly.

'Of course not!'

'Better than your father? Your uncle?'

I shook my head.

'They are planning a great future for you,' Anne said solemnly. 'Any girl in England would die for your chances. You are on the way to becoming the favourite of the king of England, and you are simpering round the garden wondering if you can laugh at his jokes? You've got about as much sense as Flo here.' She put the tip of her riding boot under Flo's unwilling arse and pushed her gently along the path. Flo sat down, as stubborn and as unhappy as me.

'Gently,' George cautioned her. He took my cold hand and tucked it in the crook of his elbow. 'It's not as bad as you think,' he said. 'William was riding with you today to show that he gives his consent, not to make you feel guilty. He knows that the king must have his way. We all know that. William's happy enough about it. There will be favours for him which you will have been the means of his getting. You're doing your duty by him by advancing his family. He's grateful to you. You're not doing anything wrong.'

I hesitated. I looked from George's brown honest eyes to Anne's averted face. 'There's another thing,' I said, forced to confess.

'What is it?' George asked. Anne's eyes followed Flo but I knew that her attention was turned on me.

'I don't know how to do it,' I said quietly. 'You know, William did it once a week or so, and that in the dark, and quickly done, and I never much liked it. I

don't know what it is I am supposed to do.'

George gave a little gulp of laughter and put his arm around my shoulders and gave me a hug. 'Oh, I'm sorry to laugh. But you have it all wrong. He doesn't want a woman who knows what to do. There are dozens of them in every bath house in the City. He wants you. It's you he likes. And he'll like it if you are a little shy and a little uncertain. That's all right.'

'Hulloah!' came a shout from behind us. 'The Three Boleyns!'

We turned and there was the king on the upper terrace, still dressed in his travelling cloak with his hat rakishly set on his head.

'Here we go.' George swept a low bow. Anne and I sank down into our curtseys together.

'Are you not tired from your ride?' the king asked. The question was general but he was looking at me.

'Not at all.'

'That's a pretty little mare you were riding, but too short in the back. I shall give you a new horse,' he said.

'Your Majesty is very kind,' I said. 'She's a borrowed horse. I should be glad to have a horse of my own.'

'You shall pick out your choice in the stables,' he said. 'Come, we can go and look now.'

He held out his arm to me and I put my fingers gently on the rich cloth of his sleeve.

'I can hardly feel you.' He put his hand on my own and pressed it tighter. 'There. I want to know that I have you, Mistress Carey.' His eyes were very blue and bright, he took in the top of my French hood and then my golden-brown hair, smoothed back under the hood, and then my face. 'I *do* want to know that I have you.'

I felt my mouth go dry and I smiled, despite the breathless feeling that was something between fear and desire. 'I am happy to be with you.'

'Are you?' he asked, suddenly intent. 'Are you really? I want no false coin from you. There are many who would urge you to be with me. I want you to come of your own free will.'

'Oh Your Majesty! As if I did not dance with you at Cardinal Wolsey's revels without even knowing that it was you!'

He was pleased with the recollection. 'Oh yes! And you all but fainted when I unmasked and you discovered me. Who did you think it was?'

'I didn't think. I know it was foolish of me. I thought you were perhaps a

stranger in court, a new and handsome stranger, and I was so pleased to be dancing with you.'

He laughed. 'Oh Mistress Carey, such a sweet face and such naughty thoughts! You hoped that a handsome stranger had come to court and chose to dance with you?'

'I don't mean to be naughty.' I was afraid for a moment that it was too sugary even for his taste. 'I just forgot how I should behave when you asked me to dance. I am sure I would never do anything wrong. There was just a moment when I –'

'When you?'

'When I forgot,' I said softly.

We reached the stone archway which led into the stables. The king paused in the shelter of the arch and turned me towards him. I could feel myself alive in every part of my body, from my riding boots, slippery on the cobblestones, to my upward glance at his face.

'Would you forget again?'

I hesitated, and then Anne stepped forward and said lightly: 'What horse does Your Majesty have in mind for my sister? I think you'll find she's a good horsewoman.'

He led the way into the stables, releasing me for a moment. George and he looked at one horse and then another. Anne came to my side.

'You have to keep him coming forward,' she said. 'Keep him coming forward but never let him think that you come forward yourself. He wants to feel that he is pursuing you, not that you are entrapping him. When he gives you the choice of coming forward or running away, like then – you must always run away.'

The king turned and smiled at me as George told a stable boy to lead a handsome bay horse from the stall. 'But don't run too fast,' my sister warned. 'Remember he has to catch you.'



I danced with the king that evening before the whole of the court, and the next day I rode my new horse at his side when we went hunting. The queen, seated at the high table, watched us dance together, and when we rode out she waved farewell to him from the great door of the palace. Everyone knew that he was courting me, everyone knew that I would consent when I was ordered to do so.

The only person who did not know this was the king. He thought that the pace of the courtship was determined by his desire.

The first rent day came a few weeks later in April when my father was appointed treasurer of the king's household, a post which brought him access to the king's daily wealth which he could peculate as he thought best. My father met me as we went in to dinner, and took me from the queen's train for a quiet word as Her Majesty went to her place at the top table.

'Your uncle and I are pleased with you,' he said briefly. 'Be guided by your brother and sister, they tell me that you are doing well.'

I bobbed a little curtsey.

'This is just the start for us,' he reminded me. 'You've got to have him and hold him, remember.'

I flinched a little from the words of the wedding mass. 'I know,' I said. 'I don't forget.'

'Has he done anything yet?'

I glanced towards the great hall where the king and the queen were taking their place. The trumpeters were in position to announce the arrival of the procession of servers from the kitchen.

'Not yet,' I said. 'Just eyes and words.'

'And you reply?'

'With smiles.' I did not tell my father that I was half-delirious with pleasure at being courted by the most powerful man in the kingdom. It was not hard to follow my sister's advice and smile and smile at him. It was not hard to blush and feel that I wanted to run away and at the same time wanted to draw closer.

My father nodded. 'Good enough. You may go to your place.'

I curtsied again and hurried into the hall just ahead of the servers. The queen looked at me a little sharply, as if she might reprimand me, but then she glanced sideways and caught sight of her husband's face. His expression was fixed, his gaze locked onto me, as I made my way up the hall and took my place among the ladies in waiting. It was an odd expression, intent, as if for a moment he could see nothing and hear nothing, as if the whole of the great hall had melted away for him and all he could see was me in my blue gown with my blue hood and my fair hair smoothed away off my face, and a smile trembling on my lips as I felt his desire. The queen took in the heat of his look, pressed her lips together, smiled her thin smile, and looked away.



He came to her rooms that evening. 'Shall we have some music?' he asked her.

'Yes, Mistress Carey can sing for us,' she said pleasantly, gesturing me forward.

'Her sister Anne has the sweeter voice,' the king countermanded. Anne threw me a swift triumphant glance.

'Will you sing us one of your French songs, Miss Anne?' the king asked.

Anne swept one of her graceful curtsies. 'Your Majesty has only to command,' she said, the hint of the French accent strong in her voice.

The queen watched this exchange, I could see that she was wondering if the king's fancy was moving to another Boleyn girl. But he had outwitted her. Anne sat on a stool in the middle of the room, her lute on her lap, her voice sweet – as he said, sweeter than mine. The queen sat in her usual chair, with padded embroidered arms and a cushioned back which she never leaned against. The king did not take the matching chair beside hers, he strolled over to me and took Anne's vacated space, and glanced at the sewing in my hands.

'Very fine work,' he remarked.

'Shirts for the poor,' I said. 'The queen is good to the poor.'

'Indeed,' he said. 'How quickly your needle goes in and out, I should make such a knot of it. How tiny and deft your fingers are.'

His head was bent towards my hands, I found I was looking at the base of his neck and thinking that I should like to touch the thick curling hair.

'Your hands must be half the size of mine,' he said idly. 'Stretch them out and show me.'

I stabbed the needle into the shirts for the poor people and stretched out my hand to show him, palm up, towards him. His gaze never left my face as he put his hand out too, palm to palm towards mine yet not touching. I could feel the warmth of his hand against my hand, but I could not take my eyes from his face. His moustache curled a little around his lips, I wondered if the hair would be soft, like my husband's dark sparse curls, or wiry like spun gold. It looked as if it might be strong and scratchy, his kiss might buff my face to redness, everyone would know we had been kissing. Beneath the little curls of hair his lips were sensual, I could not take my eyes from them, I could not help but think about the touch of them, the taste of them.

Slowly, he brought his hand closer to mine, like dancers closing in a pavane. The heel of his hand touched the heel of mine and I felt the touch like a bite. I jumped a little and I saw his lips curve as he saw that his touch was a shock to

me. My cool palm and fingers extended along his, my fingers stopping short of his at the top joints. I felt the sensation of his warm skin, a callus on one finger from archery, the hard palms of a man who rides and plays tennis and hunts and can hold a lance and a sword all the day. I dragged my gaze from his lips and took in his whole face, the bright alertness of his gaze focused on me like a sun through a burning glass, the desire which radiated from him like heat.

‘Your skin is so soft.’ His voice was as low as a whisper. ‘And your hands are tiny, as I thought.’

The excuse of measuring the span of our fingers had long been exhausted, but we remained still, palm to palm, eyes on each other’s face. Then slowly, irresistibly, his hand cupped around mine and he held it, gently but firmly within his own.

Anne finished one song and started another, without a change of key, without a break in her voice, keeping the spell of the moment.

It was the queen who interrupted. ‘Your Majesty is disturbing Mistress Carey,’ she said, with a little laugh as if the sight of her husband handfast with another woman, twenty-three years her junior, was amusing. ‘Your friend William will not thank you for making his wife idle. She has promised to hem these shirts for the nuns at Whitchurch nunnery and they are not half done.’

He let me go and turned his head to his wife. ‘William will forgive me,’ he said carelessly.

‘I am going to have a game of cards,’ the queen said. ‘Will you play with me, husband?’

For a moment I thought she had done it, drawn him away from me by his long-established affection. But as he rose to his feet to do as she wanted, he glanced back and saw me looking up at him. There was almost no calculation in my look – almost none. I was nothing more than a young woman gazing up at a man, with desire in her eyes.

‘I shall have Mistress Carey as my partner. Shall you send for George and have another Boleyn for your partner? We could have a matched pair.’

‘Jane Parker can play with me,’ the queen said coolly.



‘You did that very well,’ Anne said that night. She was seated by the fire in our bedroom, brushing her long dark hair, her head tipped to the side so that it fell like a scented waterfall over her shoulder. ‘The bit with the hands was very

good. What were you doing?’

‘He was measuring his hand span against mine,’ I said. I finished the plait of my fair hair and pulled my nightcap on my head and tied the white ribbon. ‘When our hands touched I felt ...’

‘What?’

‘It was like my skin was on fire,’ I whispered. ‘Really. Like his touch could burn me.’

Anne looked at me sceptically. ‘What d’you mean?’

The words spilled out of my mouth. ‘I want him to touch me. I am absolutely dying for him to touch me. I want his kiss.’

Anne was incredulous. ‘You desire him?’

I wrapped my arms around myself and sank onto the stone windowseat. ‘Oh God. Yes. I didn’t realise this was where I was going. Oh yes. Oh yes.’

She grimaced, her mouth pulled down. ‘You’d better not let Father and Mother hear that,’ she warned. ‘They’ve ordered you to play a clever game, not moon around like a lovesick girl at twilight.’

‘But don’t you think he wants me?’

‘Oh, for the moment, yes. But next week? Next year?’

There was a tap on our bedroom door and George put his head around it. ‘Can I come in?’

‘All right,’ Anne said ungraciously. ‘But you can’t stay long. We’re going to bed.’

‘I am too,’ he said. ‘I’ve been drinking with Father. I am going to bed and tomorrow, when I am sober, I shall arise early and hang myself.’

I hardly heard him, I was staring out of the window and thinking of the touch of Henry’s hand against my own.

‘Why?’ Anne asked.

‘My wedding is to be next year. Envy me, why don’t you?’

‘Everyone gets married but me,’ Anne said irritably. ‘The Ormondes have fallen through and they have nothing else for me. Do they want me to be a nun?’

‘Not a bad choice,’ George said. ‘D’you think they’d take me?’

‘In a nunnery?’ I caught the sense of the talk and turned around to laugh at him. ‘A fine abbess you’d make.’

‘Better than most,’ George said cheerfully. He went to sit on a stool, missed his seat and thudded down on the stone floor.

‘You’re drunk,’ I accused.

‘Aye. And sour with it.’

‘There’s something about my future wife that strikes me as very odd,’ George said. ‘Something a little ...’ he searched for the word. ‘Rancid.’

‘Nonsense,’ Anne said. ‘She’s got an excellent dowry and good connections, she’s favourite of the queen and her father is respected and rich. Why worry?’

‘Because she’s got a mouth like a rabbit snare, and eyes that are hot and cold at the same time.’

Anne laughed. ‘Poet.’

‘I know what George means,’ I said. ‘She’s passionate and somehow secretive.’

‘Just discreet,’ Anne said.

George shook his head. ‘Hot and cold at once. All the humours muddled up together. I shall live a dog’s life with her.’

‘Oh marry her and bed her and send her to the country,’ Anne said impatiently. ‘You’re a man, you can do what you like.’

He looked more cheerful at that. ‘I could push her down to Hever,’ he said.

‘Or Rochford Hall. And the king’s bound to give you a new estate on your marriage.’

George raised his stone decanter to his lips. ‘Anyone want some of this?’

‘I will,’ I said, taking the bottle and tasting the tart cold red wine.

‘I’m going to bed,’ Anne said primly. ‘You should be ashamed of yourself, Mary, drinking in your nightcap.’ She turned back the covers and climbed into bed. She inspected George and me as she folded the sheets around her hips. ‘Both of you are a good deal too easy,’ she ruled.

George pulled a face. ‘Told us,’ he said cheerfully to me.

‘She’s very strict,’ I whispered in mock-respect. ‘You’d never think she spent half her life flirting in the French court.’

‘More Spanish than French, I think,’ George said, wantonly provocative.

‘And unmarried,’ I whispered. ‘A Spanish duenna.’

Anne lay down on the pillow, hunched her shoulders and pulled the covers into place. ‘I’m not listening, so you can save your breath.’

‘Who’d have her?’ George demanded. ‘Who’d want her?’

‘They’ll find her someone,’ I said. ‘Some younger son, or some poor old broken-down squire.’ I gave the flask to George.

‘You’ll see,’ came from the bed. ‘I’ll make a better marriage than either of you. And if they don’t forge me one soon, I’ll do it for myself.’

George passed the stone flask back to me. ‘Drain it,’ he said. ‘I’ve had more than enough.’

I finished the last swig of drink and went round to the other side of the bed. 'Goodnight,' I said to George.

'I'll sit here awhile beside the fire,' he said. 'We are doing well, aren't we, us Boleyns? Me betrothed, and you on your way to bedding the king, and little Mademoiselle Parfait here free on the market with everything to play for?'

'Yes,' I said. 'We are doing well.'

I thought of the intent blue gaze of the king on my face, the way his eyes travelled from the top of my headdress down to the top of my gown. I turned my face into the pillow so that neither of them could hear me. 'Henry,' I whispered. 'Your Majesty. My love.'



Next day there was to be a joust in the gardens of a house a little distance from Eltham Palace. Fearson House had been built in the last reign by one of the many hard men who had come to their wealth under the king's father, himself the hardest man of them all. It was a big grand house, free of any castle wall or moat. Sir John Lovick had believed that England was at peace forever and built a house which would not be defended, indeed which could not be defended. His gardens were laid around the house like a chequerboard of green and white: white stones and paths and borders around low knot gardens of green bay. Beyond them lay the park where he ran deer for hunting, and between the park and the gardens was a beautiful lawn kept ready all the year round for the king's use as a jousting green.

The tent for the queen and her ladies was hung in cherry-red and white silk, the queen was wearing a cherry gown to match and she looked young and rosy in the bright colour. I was in green, the gown I had worn at the Shrove Tuesday masque when the king singled me out from all the others. The colour made my hair glow more golden and my eyes shone. I stood beside the queen's chair and knew that any man looking from her to me would think that she was a fine woman, but old enough to be my mother, while I was a woman of only fourteen, a woman ready to fall in love, a woman ready to feel desire, a precocious woman, a flowering girl.

The first three jousts were among the lower men of the court, hoping to attract attention by risking their necks. They were skilled enough, there were a couple of exciting passes, and one good moment when the smaller man unhorsed a bigger rival which made the common people cheer. The little man dismounted

and took off his helmet to acknowledge the applause. He was handsome, slight and fair-haired. Anne nudged me. 'Who's that?'

'Only one of the Seymour boys.'

The queen turned her head. 'Mistress Carey, would you go and ask the master of the horse when my husband is riding today and what horse he has chosen?'

I turned to do her bidding, and I saw why she was sending me away. The king was coming slowly across the grass towards our pavilion and she wanted me out of his way. I curtsied and dawdled to the doorway, timing my departure so that he saw me hesitating under the awning. At once he excused himself from a conversation and hurried over. His armour was polished bright as silver, the trimming on it was gold. The leather straps holding his breastplate and armguards were red and smooth as velvet. He looked taller, a commanding hero from long-ago wars. The sun shining on him made the metal burn with light so that I had to step back into the shade and put my hand up to my eyes.

'Mistress Carey, in Lincoln green.'

'You are all bright,' I said.

'You would be dazzling if you were in the darkest of blacks.'

I said nothing. I just looked at him. If Anne or George had been close by they could have prompted me with some compliment. But I was empty of wit, it was all crowded out by desire. I could say and do nothing but just look at him and know that my face was full of longing. And he said nothing too. We stood, gazes locked, intently interrogating each other's faces as if we might understand the other's desire from his eyes.

'I must see you alone,' he said finally.

I did not coquet. 'Your Majesty, I cannot.'

'You don't want to?'

'I dare not.'

He took in a deep breath at that, as if he would sniff out lust itself. 'You could trust me.'

I tore my eyes from his face and looked away, seeing nothing. 'I dare not,' I said again simply.

He reached out and took my hand to his lips and kissed it. I could feel the warmth of his breath on my fingers and, at last, the gentle stroke of the curls of his moustache.

'Oh, soft.'

He looked up from my hand. 'Soft?'

‘The touch of your moustache,’ I explained. ‘I have been wondering how it felt.’

‘You have been wondering how my moustache felt?’ he asked.

I could feel my cheeks growing warm. ‘Yes.’

‘If you were kissed by me?’

I dropped my gaze to my feet so that I should not see the brightness of his blue eyes, and gave a little imperceptible nod.

‘You have been wishing to be kissed by me?’

I looked up at that. ‘Your Majesty, I have to go,’ I said desperately. ‘The queen sent me on an errand and she will wonder where I am.’

‘Where did she bid you go?’

‘To your master of horse, to find out what horse you are riding and when you are to ride.’

‘I can tell her that myself. Why should you walk around in the burning sun?’

I shook my head. ‘It’s no trouble to me to go for her.’

He made a little tutting noise. ‘And she has servants enough to run around the jousting green, God knows. She has a full Spanish retinue while I am begrudged my little court.’

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Anne coming through the hangings of the queen’s room and freeze as she saw the king and me close together.

Gently he released me. ‘I shall go to see her now and answer her questions about my horses. What will you do?’

‘I’ll come in a moment,’ I said. ‘I need to take a little moment before I go back in, I feel all ...’ I broke off at the impossibility of describing what I was feeling.

He looked at me tenderly. ‘You’re very young to be playing this game, aren’t you? Boleyn or no Boleyn. They’ll be telling you what to do and putting you in my way, I suppose.’

I would have confessed to the family’s plot to ensnare him but for Anne, waiting in the shadows of the jousting tent. With her watching me, I just shook my head. ‘It’s no game to me.’ I looked away, I let my lip tremble. ‘I promise you, it’s no game to me, Your Majesty.’

His hand came up, he took my chin and turned my face towards him. For one breathless moment I thought with dread and with delight that he was going to kiss me, in front of everyone.

‘Are you afraid of me?’

I shook my head and resisted the temptation to turn my face to his hand. ‘I

am afraid of what may happen.'

'Between us?' He smiled, the confident smile of a man who knows that the woman he desires is only moments away from his arms. 'Nothing bad will come to you for loving me, Mary. You can have my word on it, if you like. You will be my mistress, you will be my little queen.'

I gasped at that potent word.

'Give me your scarf, I want to wear your favour while I joust,' he said suddenly.

I looked around. 'I can't give it to you here.'

'Send it to me,' he said. 'I'll tell George to come to you, give it to him. I won't wear it so it shows. I'll tuck it into my breastplate. I'll wear it against my heart.'

I nodded.

'So you give me your favour?'

'If you wish,' I whispered.

'I wish it so much,' he said. He bowed and turned towards the entrance of the queen's tent. My sister Anne had disappeared like a helpful ghost.

I gave them all a few minutes and then I went back into the tent myself. The queen gave me a sharp interrogatory look. I sank into a curtsy. 'I saw the king coming to answer your questions himself, Your Majesty,' I said sweetly. 'So I came back.'

'You should have sent a servant in the first place,' the king said abruptly. 'Mistress Carey should not be running round the jousting ground in this sun. It's far too hot.'

The queen hesitated for only a moment. 'I am so sorry,' she said. 'It was thoughtless of me.'

'It's not me you should apologise to,' he said pointedly.

I thought she would balk at that, and from the tension in Anne's body at my side I knew that she too was waiting to see what a Princess of Spain and a Queen of England would do next.

'I am sorry if I inconvenienced you, Mistress Carey,' the queen said levelly.

I felt no triumph at all. I looked across the richly carpeted tent at a woman old enough to be my mother and felt nothing but pity for the pain I would cause her. For a moment I did not even see the king, I saw only the two of us, bound to be each other's grief.

'It is a pleasure to serve you, Queen Katherine,' I said, and I meant it.

For a moment she looked at me as if she understood some of what was in my

mind and then she turned to her husband. 'And are your horses fit for today?' she asked. 'Are you confident, Your Majesty?'

'It's me or Suffolk today,' he said.

'You will be careful, sire?' she said softly. 'There's no harm in losing to a rider like the duke; and it would be the end of the kingdom if anything happened to you.'

It was a loving thought, but he took it with no grace at all. 'It would be indeed, since we have no son.'

She flinched and I saw the colour go from her face. 'There is time,' she said, her voice so quiet that I could hardly hear it. 'There is still time ...'

'Not much,' he said flatly. He turned away from her. 'I must go and get ready.'

He went past me without a glance, though Anne and I and all the other ladies sank down into a curtsy as he passed by. When I rose up the queen was looking towards me, not as if I were a rival, but as if I were still her favourite little maid in waiting who might bring her some comfort. She looked at me as if for a moment she would seek someone who would understand the dreadful predicament of a woman, in this world ruled by men.

George strolled into the room and kneeled before the queen with his easy grace. 'Your Majesty,' he said. 'I have come to visit the fairest lady in Kent, in England and the world.'

'Oh George Boleyn, rise up,' she said, smiling.

'I would rather die at your feet,' he offered.

She gave him a little tap on the hand with her fan. 'No, but you can give me odds for the king's joust if you want.'

'Who would bet against him? He is the finest of horsemen. I will give you a wager of five to two against the second joust. Seymours against Howards. There's no doubt in my mind of the winner.'

'You would offer me a bet on the Seymours?' the queen asked.

'Have them carry your blessing? Never,' George said quickly. 'I would have you bet on my cousin Howard, Your Majesty. Then you can be sure of winning, you can be sure of betting on one of the finest and most loyal families in the country, and you can have tremendous odds as well.'

She laughed at that. 'You are an exquisite courtier indeed. How much do you want to lose to me?'

'Shall we say five crowns?' George asked.

'Done!'

‘I’ll take a bet,’ Jane Parker said suddenly.

George’s smile vanished. ‘I could not offer you such odds, Mistress Parker,’ he said civilly. ‘For you have all my fortune at your command.’

It was still the language of courtly love, the constant flirtatiousness which went on in the royal circles night and day and sometimes meant everything, but more often than not meant nothing at all.

‘I’d just like to bet a couple of crowns.’ Jane was trying to engage George in the witty flattering conversation that he could do so well. Anne and I watched her critically, not disposed to help her with our brother.

‘If I lose to Her Majesty – and you will see how graciously she will impoverish me – then I will have nothing for any other,’ George said. ‘Indeed, whenever I am with Her Majesty I have nothing for any other. No money, no heart, no eyes.’

‘For shame,’ the queen interrupted. ‘You say this to your betrothed?’

George bowed to her. ‘We are betrothed stars circling a beautiful moon,’ he said. ‘The greatest beauty makes everything else dim.’

‘Oh run away,’ the queen said. ‘Go and twinkle elsewhere, my little star Boleyn.’

George bowed and went to the back of the tent. I drifted after him. ‘Give it me quick,’ he said tersely. ‘He’s riding next.’

I had a yard of white silk trimming the top of my dress, which I took and pulled through the green loops until it was free and then handed it to George. He whisked it into his pocket.

‘Jane sees us,’ I said.

He shook his head. ‘No matter. She’s tied to our interest whatever her opinion. I have to go.’

I nodded and went back into the tent as he left. The queen’s eyes rested briefly on the empty loops at the front of my gown, but she said nothing.

‘They’ll start in a moment,’ Jane said. ‘The king’s joust is next.’

I saw him helped into his saddle, two men supporting him as the weight of his armour nearly bore him down. Charles Brandon, the Duke of Suffolk, the king’s brother-in-law, was arming also, and the two men rode out together and came past the entrance to the queen’s tent. The king dipped his lance in salute to her, and held it down as he rode past the length of the tent. It became a salute to me, the visor of his helmet was up, I could see him smile at me. There was a tiny flutter of white at the shoulder of his breastplate which I knew was the kerchief from my gown. The Duke of Suffolk rode behind him, dipped his lance to the

queen and then stiffly nodded his head to me. Anne, standing behind me, gave a little indrawn breath.

‘Suffolk acknowledged you,’ she whispered.

‘I thought so.’

‘He did. He bowed his head. That means the king has spoken to him of you, or spoken to his sister Queen Mary, and she has told Suffolk. He’s serious. He must be serious.’

I glanced sideways. The queen was looking down the list where the king had halted his horse. The big charger was tossing his head and sidling while he waited for the trumpet blast. The king sat easily in the saddle, a little golden circlet round his helmet, his visor down, his lance held before him. The queen leaned forward to see. There was a trumpet blast and the two horses leaped forward as the spurs were driven into their sides. The two armoured men thundered towards each other, divots of earth flying out from the horses’ hooves. The lances were down like arrows flying to a target, the pennants on the end of each lance fluttering as the gap closed between them, then the king took a glancing blow which he caught on his shield, but his thrust at Suffolk slid under the shield and thudded into the breastplate. The shock of the blow threw Suffolk back off his horse and the weight of his armour did the rest, dragging him over the haunches, and he fell with an awful thud to the ground.

His wife leaped to her feet. ‘Charles!’ She whirled out of the queen’s pavilion, lifting her skirts, running like a common woman towards her husband as he lay unmoving on the grass.

‘I’d better go too.’ Anne hurried after her mistress.

I looked down the lists to the king. His squire was stripping him of his heavy armour. As the breastplate came off my white kerchief fluttered to the ground, he did not see it fall. They unstrapped the greaves from his legs and the guards from his arms and he pulled on a coat as he walked briskly up the lists to the ominously still body of his friend. Queen Mary was kneeling beside Suffolk, his head cradled in her arms. His squire was stripping off the heavy armour from his master as he lay there. Mary looked up as her brother came closer and she was smiling.

‘He’s all right,’ she said. ‘He just swore an awful oath at Peter for pinching him with a buckle.’

Henry laughed. ‘God be praised!’

Two men carrying a stretcher ran forward. Suffolk sat up. ‘I can walk,’ he said. ‘Be damned if I’m carried from the field before I’m dead.’

‘Here,’ Henry said and heaved him to his feet. Another man came running to the other side and the two of them started to walk him away, his feet dragging and then stumbling to keep pace.

‘Don’t come,’ Henry called to Queen Mary over his shoulder. ‘Let us make him comfortable and then we’ll get a cart or something and he can ride home.’

She stopped where she was bid. The king’s page came running up with my kerchief in his hands, taking it to his master. Queen Mary put out her hand. ‘Don’t bother him now,’ she said sharply.

The lad skidded to a halt, still holding my kerchief. ‘He dropped this, Your Majesty,’ he said. ‘Had it in his breastplate.’

She put out an indifferent hand for it and he gave it to her. She was looking after her husband being helped into the house by her brother and Sir John Lovick hurrying ahead of them, opening doors and shouting for servants. Absently she walked back to the queen’s pavilion with my kerchief balled up in her hand. I went forward to take it from her and then I hesitated, not knowing what to say.

‘Is he all right?’ Queen Katherine asked.

Queen Mary found a smile. ‘Yes. His head is clear; and no bones broken. His breastplate is hardly dented.’

‘Shall I have that?’ Queen Katherine asked.

Queen Mary glanced down at my crumpled kerchief. ‘This! The king’s page gave it me. It was in his breastplate.’ She handed it over. She was quite blind and deaf to anything but her husband. ‘I’ll go to him,’ she decided. ‘Anne, you and the rest can go home with the queen after dinner.’

The queen nodded her permission and Queen Mary went quickly from the pavilion towards the house. Queen Katherine watched her go, my kerchief in her hands. Slowly, as I knew she would, she turned it over. The fine silk slipped easily through her fingers. At the fringed hem she saw the bright green of the embroidered silk monogram: MB. Slowly, accusingly, she turned towards me.

‘I think this must be yours,’ she said, her voice low and disdainful. She held it at arm’s length, between finger and thumb, as if it were a dead mouse that she had found at the back of a cupboard.

‘Go on,’ Anne whispered. ‘You’ve got to get it.’ She pushed me in the small of my back and I stepped forward.

The queen dropped it as I reached her, I caught it as it fell. It looked a sorry bit of cloth, something you might wash a floor with.

‘Thank you,’ I said humbly.



At dinner the king hardly looked at me. The accident had thrown him into the melancholy that was such a characteristic of his father, which his courtiers too were learning to fear.

The queen could not have been more pleasant and more entertaining. But no conversation, no charming smiles, no music could lift his spirits. He watched the antics of his Fool without laughing, he listened to the musicians and drank deep. The queen could do nothing to cheer him, because she was partly the cause of his ill-humour. He was looking at her as a woman near her change of life, he saw Death at her shoulder. She might live for a dozen years more, she might live for a score. Death was even now drying up her courses and putting the lines on her face. The queen was heading towards old age and she had made no heirs to follow them. They might joust and sing and dance and play all the day but if the king did not put a boy into Wales as prince then he had failed in his greatest, most fundamental duty to the kingdom. And a bastard on Bessie Blount would not do.

‘I am sure that Charles Brandon will soon be well again,’ the queen volunteered. There were sugared plums on the table and a rich sweet wine. She took a sip but I thought that she had little relish for it while her husband sat beside her with a face so drawn and dark that he could have been his father who had never liked her. ‘You must not feel that you did wrong, Henry. It was a fair joust. And you’ve taken hits from him before, God knows.’

He turned in his chair and looked at her. She looked back at him and I saw the smile drain from her face at the coldness of his stare. She did not ask him what was the matter. She was too old and wise ever to ask an angry man what was troubling him. Instead, she smiled, a dauntless endearing smile, and she raised her glass to him.

‘Your health, Henry,’ she said with her warm accent. ‘Your health and I must thank God that it was not you that was hurt today. Before now, I have been the one running from the pavilion to the lists with my heart half broken with fear; and though I am sorry for your sister Queen Mary, I have to be glad that it was not you that was hurt today.’

‘Now that,’ Anne said in my ear, ‘*that* is masterly.’

It worked. Henry, seduced by the thought of a woman sick with fear over his well-being, lost his dark sulky look. ‘I would never cause you a moment of uneasiness.’

‘My husband, you have caused me days and nights of them,’ Queen Katherine said, smiling. ‘But as long as you are well and happy, and as long as you come home at the end of it all; why should I complain?’

‘Aha,’ Anne said quietly. ‘And so she gives him permission and your sting is drawn.’

‘What d’you mean?’ I asked.

‘Wake up,’ Anne said brutally. ‘Don’t you see? She’s called him out of his bad temper and she has told him that he can have you, as long as he comes home afterwards.’

I watched him lift his glass in a return toast to her.

‘So what happens next?’ I asked. ‘Since you know everything?’

‘Oh he has you for a while,’ she said negligently. ‘But you won’t come between them. You won’t hold him. She’s old, I grant you. But she can act as if she adores him and he needs that. And when he was little more than a boy she was the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. It’ll take a lot to overcome that. I doubt that you’re the woman to do it. You’re pretty enough and half in love with him, which is helpful, but I doubt that a woman such as you could command him.’

‘Who could do it?’ I demanded, stung by her dismissal of me. ‘You, I suppose?’

She looked at the two of them as if she were a siege engineer measuring a wall. There was nothing in her face but curiosity and professional expertise. ‘I might,’ she said. ‘But it would be a difficult project.’

‘It’s me that he wants, not you,’ I reminded her. ‘He asked for my favour. He wore my kerchief under his breastplate.’

‘He dropped it and forgot it,’ Anne pointed out with her usual cruel accuracy. ‘And anyway, what he wants is not the issue. He’s greedy and he’s spoiled. He could be made to want almost anything. But you’ll never be able to do that.’

‘Why should I not do that?’ I demanded passionately. ‘What makes you think that you could hold him and I could not?’

Anne looked at me with her perfectly beautiful face as lovely as if it were carved from ice. ‘Because the woman who manages him will be one who never stops for a moment remembering that she is there for strategy. You are all ready for the pleasures of bed and board. But the woman who manages Henry will know that her pleasure must be in managing his thoughts, every minute of the day. It would not be a marriage of sensual lust at all, though Henry would think

that was what he was getting. It would be an affair of unending skill.'



The dinner ended at about five o'clock on the cool April evening and they brought the horses around to the front of the house so that we could say goodbye to our host and mount and ride back to Eltham Palace. As we left the banqueting tables I saw the servants tipping the leftover loaves and meats into great panniers which would be sold at a discount at the kitchen door. There was a trail of extravagance and dishonesty and waste that followed the king round the country like slime behind a snail. The poor people who had come to watch the jousting and stayed on to watch the court dine now gathered at the kitchen door to collect some food from the feast. They would be given the broken meats: the slicings from the loaves, the off-cuts from the meats, the puddings which had been half-eaten. Nothing would be wasted, the poor would take anything. They were as economical as keeping a pig.

It was these perks that made a place in the king's household such a joy for his servants. In every place, every servant could perform a little cheat, put a little by. The lowliest server in the kitchen had a little business in crusts of the pastry from the pies, in lard from the basting, in the juices of the gravy. My father was at the top of this heap of off-cuts, now that he was controller of the king's household: he would watch the slice that everyone took of their bit of business, and he would take a slice of his own. Even the trade of lady in waiting who looks as if she is there to provide company and little services for the queen is well-placed to seduce the king under her mistress's nose, and cause her the most grief that one woman can cause to another. She too has her price. She too has her secret work which takes place after the main dinner is over and when the company are looking the other way, and which trades in off-cuts of promises and forgotten sweetmeats of love-play.

We rode home as the light faded from the sky and it grew grey and cool. I was glad of my cloak which I tied round me, but I kept my hood pushed back so that I could see the way before me and the darkening skies above me, and the little pinpricks of stars showing in the pale grey sky. We had been riding for half the journey when the king's horse came alongside mine.

'Did you enjoy your day?' he asked.

'You dropped my kerchief,' I said sulkily. 'Your page gave it to Queen Mary and she gave it to Queen Katherine. She knew it at once. She gave it back to

me.'

'And so?'

I should have thought of the small humiliations which Queen Katherine managed, as part of the duty of queenship. She never complained to her husband. She took her troubles to God; and only then in a very low whispered prayer.

'I felt dreadful,' I said. 'I should never have given it to you in the first place.'

'Well now you have it back,' he said without sympathy. 'If it was so precious.'

'It's not that it was precious,' I pursued. 'It's that she knew without a doubt that it was mine. She gave it back to me in front of all the ladies. She dropped it to the ground, it would have fallen to the floor if I had not caught it.'

'So what has changed?' he demanded, his voice very hard, his face suddenly ugly and unsmiling. 'So what is the difficulty? She has seen us dancing together and talking together. She has seen me seeking your company, you have been handclasped with me before her very eyes. You didn't come to me then with your complaints and your nagging.'

'I'm not nagging!' I said, stung.

'Yes you are,' he said flatly. 'Without cause, and, may I say, without position. You are not my mistress, madam, nor my wife. I don't listen to complaints about my behaviour from anyone else. I am the King of England. If you don't like how I behave then there is always France. You could always go back to the French court.'

'Your Majesty ... I ...'

He spurred his horse and it went into a trot and then into a canter. 'I give you goodnight,' he said over his shoulder and he rode away from me with his cloak in a flurry and the plume in his hat streaming, and he left me with nothing to say to him, no way to call him back.



I would not speak to Anne that night though she marched me in silence from the queen's rooms to our own and expected a full account of everything that had been said and done.

'I won't say,' I said stubbornly. 'Leave me alone.'

Anne took off her hood and started to unplait her hair. I jumped onto the bed, threw off my gown, pulled on my night shift and slipped between the sheets without brushing my hair or even washing my face.

‘You’re surely not going to bed like that,’ Anne said, scandalised.

‘For God’s sake,’ I said into the pillow, ‘leave me alone.’

‘What did he ...?’ Anne started as she slid into bed beside me.

‘I won’t say. So don’t ask.’

She nodded, turned and blew out her candle.

The smell of the smoke from the snuffed wick blew towards me. It smelled like the scent of grief. In the darkness, shielded from Anne’s scrutiny, I turned over, lay on my back staring up at the tester above my head and considered what would happen if the king were so angry that he never looked at me again.

My face felt cold. I put my hand to my cheeks and found that they were wet with tears. I rubbed my face on the sheet.

‘What is it now?’ Anne asked sleepily.

‘Nothing.’



‘You lost him,’ Uncle Howard said accusingly. He looked down the long wooden dining table in the great hall at Eltham Palace. Our retainers stood on guard at the doors behind us, there was no-one in the hall but a couple of wolfhounds and a boy asleep in the ashes of the fire. Our men in Howard livery stood at the doors at the far end. The palace, the king’s own palace, had been made secure for the Howards so that we could plot in private.

‘You had him in your hand and you lost him. What did you do wrong?’

I shook my head. It was too secret to spill on the unyielding surface of the high table, to offer up to flint-faced Uncle Howard.

‘I want an answer,’ he said. ‘You lost him. He hasn’t looked at you for a week. What have you done wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ I whispered.

‘You must have done something. At the jousting he had your kerchief under his breastplate. You must have done something to upset him after that.’

I shot a reproachful look at my brother George: the only person who could have told Uncle Howard about my scarf. He shrugged and made an apologetic face.

‘The king dropped it and his page gave my scarf to Queen Mary,’ I said, my throat tight with nervousness and distress.

‘So?’ my father said sharply.

‘She gave it to the queen. The queen returned it to me.’ I looked from one

stern face to another. 'They all knew what it meant,' I said despairingly. 'When we rode home I told him that I was unhappy at him letting my favour be found.'

Uncle Howard exhaled, my father slapped the table. My mother turned her head away as if she could hardly bear to look at me.

'For God's sake.' Uncle Howard glared at my mother. 'You assured me that she had been properly brought up. Half her life spent in the French court and she whines at him as if she were a shepherd girl behind a haystack?'

'How could you?' my mother asked simply.

I flushed and dropped my head until I could see the reflection of my own unhappy face in the polished surface of the table. 'I didn't mean to say the wrong thing,' I whispered. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's not that bad,' George interceded. 'You're taking too dark a view. He won't stay angry for long.'

'He sulks like a bear,' my uncle snapped. 'Don't you think there are Seymour girls dancing for him at this very moment?'

'None as pretty as Mary,' my brother maintained. 'He'll forget that she ever said a word out of place. He might even like her for it. It shows she's not overly groomed. It shows there's a bit of passion there.'

My father nodded, a little consoled, but my uncle drummed the table with his long fingers. 'What should we do?'

'Take her away.' Anne spoke suddenly. She drew attention at once in the way that a late speaker always does, but the confidence in her voice was riveting.

'Away?' he asked.

'Yes. Send her down to Hever. Tell him that she's ill. Let him imagine her dying of grief.'

'And then?'

'And then he'll want her back. She'll be able to command what she likes. All she has to do –' Anne gleamed her spiteful little smile '–*All* she has to do when she returns is to behave so well that she enchants the most educated, the most witty, the most handsome prince in Christendom. D'you think she can do it?'

There was a cold silence while my mother and my father and my Uncle Howard and even George all inspected me in silence.

'Neither do I,' Anne said smugly. 'But I can coach her well enough to get her into his bed, and whatever happens to her after that is in the hands of God.'

Uncle Howard looked intently at Anne. 'Can you coach her in how to keep him?' he asked.

She raised her head and smiled at him, the very picture of confidence. 'Of

course, for a while,' she said. 'He's only a man after all.'

Uncle Howard laughed shortly at the casual dismissal of his sex. 'You have a care,' he urged. 'We men are not where we are today because of some sort of accident. We chose to get into the great places of power, despite the desires of women; and we chose to use those places to make laws which will hold us there forever.'

'True enough,' Anne granted. 'But we're not talking of high policy. We're talking of catching the king's desire. She just has to catch him and hold him for long enough for him to make a son on her, a royal Howard bastard. What more could we ask?'

'And she can do that?'

'She can learn,' Anne said. 'She's halfway there. She is his choice, after all.' The little shrug she gave indicated that she did not think much of the king's choice.

There was a silence. Uncle Howard's attention had moved from me and my future as the brood mare for the family. Instead he was looking at Anne as if he had seen her for the first time. 'Not many maids of your age think as clearly as you.'

She smiled at him. 'I'm a Howard like you.'

'I'm surprised you don't try for him yourself.'

'I thought of it,' she said honestly. 'Any woman in England today would be bound to think of it.'

'But?' he prompted her.

'I'm a Howard,' she repeated. 'What matters is that one of us catches the king. It hardly matters which one. If his taste is for Mary and she has his acknowledged son then my family becomes the first in the kingdom. Without rival. And we can do it. We can manage the king.'

Uncle Howard nodded. He knew that the king's conscience was a domesticated beast, given to easy herding but prone to sudden stubborn stops. 'It seems we have to thank you,' he said. 'You have planned our strategy.'

She acknowledged his thanks, not with a bow, which would have been graceful. Instead, she turned her head like a flower on the stem, a typically arrogant gesture. 'Of course I long to see my sister as the king's favourite. These things are my business quite as much as yours.'

He shook his head as my mother made a shushing noise at her overly confident eldest daughter. 'No, let her speak,' he said. 'She's as sharp as any of us. And I think she's right. Mary must go to Hever and wait for the king to send

for her.'

'He'll send,' Anne said knowledgeably. 'He'll send.'



I felt like a parcel, like the curtains for a bed, or the plates for the top table, or the pewter for the lower tables in the hall. I was to be packed up and sent to Hever as bait for the king. I was not to see him before I left, I was not to speak to anyone about my going. My mother told the queen that I was overtired and asked for me to be excused from her service for a few days so that I might go home and rest. The queen, poor lady, thought that she had triumphed. She thought that the Boleyns were in retreat.



It was not a long ride, a little more than twenty miles. We stopped to dine at the roadside, eating nothing more than bread and cheese which we had carried with us. My father could have called on the hospitality of any great house along the way, he was well enough known as a courtier high in the favour of the king, and we would have been nobly entertained. But he did not want to break the journey.

The high road was rutted and pitted with potholes, every now and then we saw a broken cart wheel where a traveller had been overturned. But the horses stepped out well enough on the dry ground and every now and then the going was so good that we broke into a canter. The verges on the side of the road were thick with the white of gypsy lace and big-faced white daisies, and lush with the early summer greenness of grass. In the hedges the honeysuckle twisted around the bursting growth of hawthorn and may, at the roots were pools of purple-blue self-heal and the gangly growth of ladies' smock with dainty flowers of white, veined with purple. Behind the hedges in the thick lush pastures were fat cows with their heads down, munching, and in the higher fields there were flocks of sheep with the occasional idle boy watching over them from the shade of a tree.

The common land outside of the villages was mostly farmed in strips and they made a pretty sight where they were gardenized in rows with onions and carrots drawn up like a retinue on parade. In the villages themselves the cottage gardens were tumbling confusions of daffodils and herbs, vegetables and primroses, wild beans shooting and hawthorn hedgerows in flower with a corner

set aside for a pig, and a rooster crowing on the dunghill outside the back door. My father rode in a quiet satisfied silence when the road took us onto our own land, downhill, through Edenbridge, and through the wet meadowlands towards Hever. The horses went slower as the going grew heavier on the damp road, but my father was patient now we were nearing our estate.

It had been his father's house before it was his; but it went no further back in our family than that. My grandfather had been a man of no more than moderate means who had risen by his own skills in Norfolk, apprenticed to a mercer, but eventually became Lord Mayor of London. For all that we clung to our Howard connection it was only a recent one, and only through my mother who had been Elizabeth Howard, a daughter of the Duke of Norfolk, a great catch for my father. He had taken her to our grand house at Rochford in Essex and then brought her to Hever where she had been appalled at the smallness of the castle, and the cosy poky private rooms.

At once he had set to rebuild it to please her. First he put a ceiling across the great hall, which had been open to the rafters in the old style. In the space he created above the hall he made a set of private rooms for us where we could dine and sit in greater comfort and privacy.

My father and I turned in at the gates of the park, the gatekeeper and his wife tumbling out to make their bow as we went by. We rode past them with a wave, and up the dirt road to the first river, which was spanned by a little wooden bridge. My horse did not like the look of this, she jibbed at it as soon as she heard the echo of her hoofbeats on the hollow wood.

'Fool,' my father said briefly, leaving me to wonder whether he meant me or the horse, and put his own hunter before mine and led the way across. My horse followed behind, very docile when she could see that there was no danger, and so I rode up to the drawbridge of our castle behind my father and waited while the men came out of the guard room to take our horses and lead them away to the stables at the back. My legs felt weak after the long ride when they lifted me down from the saddle but I followed my father across the drawbridge and into the shadow of the gatehouse, under the forbidding thick teeth of the portcullis and into the welcoming little castle yard.

The front door stood open, the yeoman of the ewry and the chief household men came out and bowed to my father, half a dozen servants behind them. My father ran his eyes over them: some were in full livery, some were not, two of the servant girls were hastily untying the hessian aprons they wore over their best aprons underneath, and disclosing some very dirty linen as they did so; the

spit boy, peeping out from the corner of the yard, was filthy with deeply engrained dirt and half-naked in his rags. My father took in the general sense of disorder and carelessness and nodded at his people.

‘Very well,’ he said guardedly. ‘This is my daughter Mary. Mistress Mary Carey. You have prepared rooms for us?’

‘Oh yes, sir.’ The groom of the bedchambers bowed. ‘Everything is ready. Mistress Carey’s room is ready.’

‘And dinner?’ my father demanded.

‘At once.’

‘We’ll eat in the private rooms. I’ll have dinner tomorrow in the great hall and people can come and see me. Tell them I will dine in public tomorrow. But this evening I won’t be disturbed.’

One of the girls came forward and dipped a curtsey to me. ‘Shall I show you your room, Mistress Carey?’ she asked.

I followed her at my father’s nod. We went through the broad front door and turned left along a narrow hall. At the end a tiny spiral stone staircase led us upwards to a pretty room with a small bed hung with curtains of pale blue silk. The windows looked out over the moat and the park beyond. A door out of the room would lead me into a small gallery with a stone fireplace which was my mother’s favourite sitting room.

‘D’you want to wash?’ the girl asked awkwardly. She gestured towards a jug and ewer filled with cold water. ‘I could get you some hot water?’

I stripped off my riding gloves and handed them to her. ‘Yes,’ I said. For a moment I thought of the palace at Eltham and the constant sycophantic service. ‘Get me some hot water and see that they bring my clothes up. I want to change out of this riding dress.’

She bowed and left the room by the little stone staircase. As she went I could hear her muttering to herself: ‘Hot water. Clothes,’ so as not to forget. I went to the windowseat, kneeled up and looked out of the little window through the leaded panes.

I had spent the day trying not to think of Henry and the court I was leaving behind me, but now at this comfortless homecoming I realised that I had not just lost the love of the king, I had lost the luxuries which had become essential to me. I did not want to be Miss Boleyn of Hever again. I did not want to be the daughter of a small castle in Kent. I had been the most favoured young woman in the whole of England. I had gone far beyond Hever and I did not want to come back.



My father stayed no more than three days, long enough to see his land agent and those tenants who urgently wanted to speak to him, time enough to solve a dispute about a boundary post and to order his favourite mare put to the stallion, and then he was ready to leave again. I stood on the drawbridge to bid him farewell and I knew that I must look sorrowful indeed since even he noticed as he swung himself up into the saddle.

‘What’s the matter?’ he demanded, bracingly. ‘Not missing court, are you?’

‘Yes,’ I said shortly. There was no point telling my father that indeed I missed the court, but that I missed most, unbearably, the sight of Henry.

‘No-one to blame but yourself,’ my father said robustly. ‘We have to trust to your brother and sister to set it right for you. If not, then God knows what will become of you. I’ll have to get Carey to take you back, and we’ll have to hope that he forgives you.’

He laughed aloud at the shocked look on my face.

I drew closer to my father’s horse and put my hand on his gauntlet where it rested on the reins. ‘If the king asks for me would you tell him that I am very sorry if I offended him?’

He shook his head. ‘We play this Anne’s way,’ he said. ‘She seems to think she knows how to manage him. You have to do as you are bid, Mary. You bodged it once, you have to work under orders now.’

‘Why should Anne be the one who says how things are done?’ I demanded. ‘Why d’you always listen to Anne?’

My father took his hand from under my grip. ‘Because she’s got a head on her shoulders and she knows her own value,’ he said bluntly. ‘Whereas you have behaved like a girl of fourteen in love for the first time.’

‘But I am a girl of fourteen in love for the first time!’ I exclaimed.

‘Exactly,’ he said unforgivingly. ‘That’s why we listen to Anne.’

He did not trouble to say goodbye to me, but turned his horse away, trotted over the drawbridge and then down the track towards the gates.

I raised my hand to wave in case he looked back; but he did not. He rode straight-backed, looking forward. He rode like a Howard. We never look back. We have no time for regrets or second thoughts. If a plan goes awry we make another, if one weapon breaks in our hands we find a second. If the steps fall down before us we overleap them and go up. It is always onwards and upwards for the Howards; and my father was on his way back to court and to the

company of the king without a backwards glance for me.



By the end of the first week I had taken a turn around every walk that there was in the garden and explored the park in every direction from my starting point at the drawbridge. I had started a tapestry for the altar of St Peter's church at Hever and completed a square foot of sky which was very boring indeed, being nothing but blue. I had written three letters to Anne and George and sent them off by messenger to the court at Eltham. Three times he had gone for me and come back with no reply except their good wishes.

By the end of the second week I was ordering my horse out of the stables in the morning and going for long rides on my own, I was too irritable even for the company of a silent servant. I tried to keep my temper hidden. I thanked the maid for any little service she did for me, I sat to eat my dinner and bowed my head when the priest said grace as if I did not want to leap up and scream with frustration that I was trapped in Hever while the court was on the move from Eltham to Windsor and I not with them. I did everything I could to contain the fury that I was so far from court, and so terribly left out of everything.

By the third week I had slid into a resigned despair. I heard nothing from anyone and I concluded that Henry did not want to send for me to return, that my husband was proving intractable and did not want a wife carrying the disgrace of being the king's flirtation – but not his mistress. Such a woman could not add to a man's prestige. Such a woman was best left in the country. I wrote to Anne and to George twice in the second week but still they did not reply. But then, on Tuesday of the third week, I received a scrawled note from George.

Don't despair – I wager you are thinking yourself quite abandoned by us all. He speaks of you constantly and I remind him of your many charms. I should think he will send for you within the month. Make sure that you are looking well!

Geo.

Anne bids me tell you that she will write in a little while.

George's letter was the only moment of relief during my long wait. As I entered my second month of waiting, the month of May, always the happiest month at court as the season for picnics and journeyings started again, it seemed to me

that my days were very long.

I had no-one to talk to, I had no company to speak of at all. My maid chattered to me while she dressed me. At breakfast I dined alone at the top table and spoke only to claimants who came to the house with business for my father to transact. I walked in the garden for a little while. I read some books.

In the long afternoons I had my hunter brought round and I rode in wider and wider sweeps of the countryside. I began to learn the lanes and byways that stretched around my home and even started to recognise some of our tenants on their little farms. I learned their names and started to rein in my horse when I saw a man working in the fields and ask him what he was growing, and how he was doing. This was the best time for the farmers. The hay was cut and drying in windrows, waiting to be pitchforked into great stacks and thatched to keep dry for winter feed. The wheat and barley and rye were standing tall in the fields and growing in height and plumpness. The calves were growing fat on their mothers' milk and the profits from this year's wool sales were being counted in every farmhouse and cottage in the county.

It was a time for leisure, a brief respite in the hard work of the year, and the farmers held little dances on the village green, and races and sports before the main work of harvesting.

I, who had first ridden into the Boleyn estate looking around me and recognising nothing, now knew the country all around the estate wall, the farmers and the crops they were growing. When they came to me at dinner time and complained that such a man was not properly farming his strip which he held by agreement with his village, I knew straightaway what they were speaking of because I had ridden that way the day before and seen the land left to grow weeds and nettles, the only wasted lot among the well-tended common fields. It was easy for me, as I ate my dinner, to warn the tenant that his land would be taken from him if he did not use it for growing a crop. I knew the farmers who were growing hops and the ones who were growing vines. I made an agreement with one farmer that if he should get a good crop of grapes then I would ask my father to send to London for a Frenchman to come on a visit to Hever Castle and teach the art of winemaking.

It was no hardship to ride around every day. I loved being outside, hearing the birds singing as I rode through the woods, smelling the flowering honeysuckle as it cascaded through the hedges on either side of the track. I loved my mare Jesmond, which the king had given me: her eagerness to canter, the alert flicker of her ears, her whinny when she saw me come into the stable yard,

a carrot in my hand. I loved the lushness of the meadows by the river, the way they shimmered white and yellow with flowers, and the blaze of red poppies in the wheatfields. I loved the weald and the buzzards circling in the sky in great lazy loops, even higher than larks, before turning on their broad wings and wheeling away.

It was all makeweight, it was all a way of filling the time since I could not be with Henry and could not be at court. But I had a growing sense that if I were never to go to court again, then I could at least be a good and fair landlord. The more enterprising young farmers outside Edenbridge could see that there was a market for lucerne. But they knew no-one who grew it, nor where they could get the seeds. I wrote for them to a farmer on my father's estate in Essex, and got them both seeds and advice. They planted a field while I was there, and promised to plant another when they saw how the crop liked the soil. And I thought, even though I was no more than a young woman, I had done a wonderful thing. Without me they would not have gone further than slapping their hands on the table at the Hollybush and swearing that a man could make some money from the new crops. With my help they were able to try it out, and if they made a fortune then there would be two more men rising up in the world, and if my grandfather's story were anything to go by, then no-one could tell how high they might aspire.

They were glad of it. When I rode out to the field to see how the ploughing was going they came across, kicking the mud off their boots, to explain how they were casting their seed. They wanted a lord who took an interest. In the absence of anyone else: they had me. And they knew well enough that if I took an interest in the crop I might be persuaded to take a share. I might have some money tucked away that I might invest, and then we could all grow prosperous together.

I laughed at that, looking down from my horse into their brown weatherbeaten faces. 'I have no money.'

'You're a great lady at court,' one of them protested. His gaze took in the neat tassels on my leather boots, the inlaid saddle, the richness of my dress and the golden brooch in my hat. 'There's more on your back today than I earn in a year.'

'I know,' I said. 'And that's where it stays. On my back.'

'But your father must give you money, or your husband,' the other man said persuasively. 'Better to gamble it on your own fields than on the turn of a card.'

'I'm a lady. It's none of it mine. Look at you. You're doing well enough – is

your wife a rich woman?’

He chuckled sheepishly at that. ‘She’s my wife. She does as well as I do. But she doesn’t own anything of her own.’

‘It’s the same for me,’ I said. ‘I do as my father does, as my husband does. I dress as is proper for their wife or their daughter. But I don’t own anything on my own account. In that sense I am as poor as your wife.’

‘But you are a Howard and I am a nobody,’ he observed.

‘I’m a Howard woman. That means I might be one of the greatest in the land or a nobody like you. It all depends.’

‘On what?’ he asked, intrigued.

I thought of the sudden darkening of Henry’s face when I displeased him. ‘On my luck.’

Summer 1522

In the middle of my third month of exile, the month of June, with the garden of Hever filled with heavy-headed roses and their scent hanging in the air like smoke, I had a letter from Anne.

It is done. I have put myself in his way and talked about you. I have told him that you miss him unbearably and you are pining for him. I have told him that you have displeased your family by showing too openly your love for him and you have been sent away to forget him. Such is the contrary nature of men that he is much excited at the thought of you in distress. Anyway, you can come back to court. We are at Windsor. Father says you can order half a dozen men from the castle to escort you and come at once. Make sure that you arrive quietly before dinner and come straight to our room where I will tell you how you are to behave.

Windsor Castle, one of Henry's prettiest castles, sat on the green hill like a grey pearl on velvet, the king's standard fluttering from the turret, the drawbridge open, and a continual coming and going of carts and pedlars and brewers' drays and wagons. The court sucked the wealth out of the countryside wherever it rested and Windsor was experienced in servicing the profitable appetites of the castle.

I slipped into a side door and found my way to Anne's rooms, avoiding anyone who knew me. Her room was empty. I settled myself down to wait. As I had expected, at three o'clock she came into the room, pulling her hood off her hair. She jumped when she saw me.

'I thought you were a ghost! What a fright you gave me.'

'You told me to come privately to your room.'

'Yes, I wanted to tell you how things are. I was speaking to the king just a moment ago. We were in the tiltyard watching Lord Percy. *Mon dieu!* It's so hot!'

'What did he say?'

‘Lord Percy? Oh he was enchanting.’

‘No, the king.’

Anne smiled, deliberately provoking. ‘He was asking about you.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘Let me think.’ She tossed her hood on the bed and shook her hair free. It tumbled in a dark wave down her back and she swept it up in one hand to leave her neck cool. ‘Oh, I can’t remember. It’s too hot.’

I was too experienced in Anne’s teasing to let her torment me. I sat quietly in the little wooden chair by the empty fireplace and did not turn my head while she washed her face and splashed her arms and neck and tied her hair back again, with many exclamations in French and complaints about the heat. Nothing made me look around.

‘I think I can remember now,’ she offered.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said. ‘I’ll see him myself at dinner. He can tell me anything he wants to tell me then. I don’t need you.’

She bridled at that at once. ‘Oh yes you do! How will you behave? You don’t know what to say!’

‘I knew enough to have him head over heels in love with me and ask for my kerchief,’ I observed coolly. ‘I should think I know enough to talk to him civilly after dinner.’

Anne stepped back and measured me. ‘You’re very calm,’ was all she said.

‘I’ve had time to think,’ I replied levelly.

‘And?’

‘I know what I want.’

She waited.

‘I want him,’ I said.

She nodded. ‘Every woman in England wants him. I never thought that you would prove exceptional.’

I shrugged off the snub. ‘And I know that I can live without him.’

Her gaze narrowed. ‘You’ll be ruined, if William doesn’t take you back.’

‘I could bear that too,’ I rejoined. ‘I liked it at Hever. I liked riding out every day and walking round the gardens. I was on my own there for nearly three months, and I’ve never been on my own in my whole life before. I realised that I don’t need the court and the queen and the king or even you. I liked riding out and looking at the farmland, I liked talking to the farmers and watching their crops and seeing how things grow.’

‘You want to become a farmer?’ she laughed scornfully.

‘I could be happy as a farmer,’ I said steadily. ‘I’m in love with the king –’ I snatched a breath ‘– oh, very much. But if it all goes wrong, I could live on a little farm and be happy.’

Anne went to the chest at the foot of the bed and drew out a new hood. She watched herself in the mirror as she smoothed back her hair and drew on the headdress. At once her dramatic dark looks took on a new elegance. She knew it, of course.

‘If I were in your shoes it would be the king or nothing for me,’ she said. ‘I’d put my neck on the block for a chance at him.’

‘I want the man. Not because he’s king.’

She shrugged. ‘They’re one and the same thing. You can’t desire him like an ordinary man and forget the crown on his head. He’s the best there is. There is no greater man than him in the kingdom. You’d have to go to France for King Francis or Spain for the emperor to find his equal.’

I shook my head. ‘I’ve seen the emperor and the French king and I wouldn’t look twice at either of them.’

Anne turned from the glass and tugged her bodice down a little lower so that the curve of her breasts showed. ‘Then you’re a fool,’ she said simply.

When we were ready she led me to the queen’s chambers. ‘She’ll accept you back, but she won’t give you a warm welcome,’ Anne threw over her shoulder as the soldiers before the queen’s door saluted us, and held the double doors open. The two of us, the Boleyn girls, walked in as if we owned half the castle.

The queen was sitting in the windowseat, the windows flung wide open for the cooler evening air. Her musician was beside her, singing as he played his lute. Her women were around her, some of them sewing, some of them sitting idle, waiting for the summons to dinner. She looked perfectly at peace with the world, surrounded by friends, in her husband’s home, looking out from her window over the little town of Windsor and the pewter-coloured curve of the river beyond. When she saw me her face did not change. She was too well-trained to betray her disappointment. She gave me a small smile. ‘Ah, Mistress Carey,’ she said. ‘You are recovered and returned to court?’

I sank into a curtsey. ‘If it please Your Majesty.’

‘You have been at your parents’ home, all this long time?’

‘Yes. At Hever Castle, Your Majesty.’

‘You must have rested well. There is nothing in that part of the world but sheep and cows, I think?’

I smiled. ‘It is farmland,’ I agreed. ‘But there was much for me to do. I

enjoyed riding out and looking at the fields and talking to the men who work them.'

For a moment, I could see that she was intrigued by the thought of the land, which after all her years in England she still only saw as a place for hunting and picnics and the summer progress. But she remembered why I had left court in the first place. 'Did His Majesty order your return?'

I heard a little warning hiss from Anne behind me but I disregarded it. I had a romantic, foolish thought, that I did not want to look this good woman in her honest eyes and lie to her. 'The king sent for me, Your Majesty,' I said respectfully.

She nodded and looked down at her hands where they were quietly clasped in her lap. 'Then you are fortunate,' was all she said.

There was a brief silence. I wanted very much to tell her that I had fallen in love with her husband but I knew that she was far above me. She was a woman whose spirit had been hammered and forged until she could only ring true. Compared with the rest of us she was silver, while we were pewter, a common mixture of lead and tin.

The great double doors swung open. 'His Majesty the king!' the herald announced and Henry strolled into the room. 'I am come to lead you into dinner,' he started, and then he saw me and stopped in his tracks. The queen's considering gaze flicked from his transfixed face to mine and back again.

'Mary,' he exclaimed.

I forgot even to curtsy. I just stared at him.

A little warning tut from Anne failed to recall me. The king crossed the room in three long strides and took my hands in his, and held them to his chest. I felt the scratch of his embroidered doublet under my fingers, the caress of his silk shirt through the slashings.

'My love,' he said in a low whisper. 'You are welcome back to court.'

'I thank you ...'

'They told me that you were sent away to learn a lesson. Did I do right to say you could come back unlearned?'

'Yes. Yes. Perfectly right,' I stumbled.

'You were not scolded?' he pressed.

I gave a little laugh and looked up at his intent blue gaze. 'No. They were a little cross with me, but that was all.'

'You wanted to come back to court?'

'Oh yes.'

The queen rose to her feet. 'So. Let us go to dinner, ladies,' she said generally. Henry threw a quick glance at her over his shoulder. She held out her hand to him, imperious as a daughter of Spain. He turned to her with the old habit of devotion and obedience and I could not think how to recapture him. I stepped behind her and bent low to arrange the train of her gown while she stood, queenly; despite her stockiness, beautiful; despite the weariness in her face.

'Thank you, Mistress Carey,' she said gently. And then she led us in to dinner with her hand resting lightly on her husband's arm, and he inclined his head to her to hear something she said, and he did not look back at me again.



George greeted me at the end of dinner, strolling to the queen's table where we ladies were seated with wine and sweetmeats before us. He brought me a sugared plum. 'Sweets for the sweet,' he said, planting a kiss on my forehead.

'Oh George,' I said. 'Thank you for your note.'

'You were bombarding me with desperate cries,' he said. 'Three letters I got from you in the first week. Was it so awful?'

'The first week was,' I said. 'But then I became accustomed. By the end of the first month I was rather taking to the country life.'

'Well, we all did our best for you here,' he said.

'Is Uncle at court?' I asked, looking around. 'I don't see him.'

'No, in London with Wolsey. But he knows all that is going on, don't you worry. He said to tell you that he will be hearing reports of you and he trusts you now know how to behave.'

Jane Parker leaned across the table. 'Are you going to be a lady in waiting?' she asked George. 'For you are sitting at our table and on a lady's stool.'

George rose unhurriedly. 'I beg your pardon, ladies. I did not mean to intrude.'

Half a dozen voices assured him that he did not intrude. My brother was a handsome young man and a popular visitor to the queen's rooms. No-one but his sour-tongued betrothed objected to him joining our table.

He bowed over her hand. 'Mistress Parker, thank you for reminding me to leave you,' he said courteously, his irritation clear behind his sweet tones. He bent and kissed me firmly on the lips. 'God speed you, little Marianne,' he whispered in my ear. 'You are carrying the hopes of your family.'

I caught his hand as he was about to go. 'Wait, George, I wanted to ask you something.'

He turned back. 'What?'

I tugged at his hand to make him lean down to me so that I could whisper in his ear. 'Do you think that he loves me?'

'Oh,' he said, straightening up. 'Oh, love.'

'Well, do you?'

He shrugged. 'Whatever does it mean? We write poems about it all day and sing songs about it all night but if there is such a thing in real life I'm damned if I know.'

'Oh George!'

'He wants you, I can tell you that. He's prepared to go through a degree of trouble to have you. If that means love to you then yes, he loves you.'

'That's enough for me,' I said with quiet satisfaction. 'Wants me, and is prepared to go through a degree of trouble. That sounds like love to me.'

My handsome brother bowed. 'If you say so, Mary. If that is good enough for you.' He straightened up and immediately stepped back. 'Your Majesty.'

The king stood before me. 'George, I cannot allow you to spend the evening talking to your sister, you are the envy of the court.'

'I am,' George said with all his courtier charm. 'Two beautiful sisters and not a care in the world.'

'I thought we should have some dancing,' the king said. 'Will you lead out Mistress Boleyn and I will take care of Mistress Carey, here?'

'I should be delighted,' George said. Without looking around for her, he snapped his fingers and, alert as ever, Anne appeared at his side.

'We're to dance,' he said shortly.

The king waved his hand and the musicians struck up a quick country dance so we arranged ourselves in a ring of eight people and started the flowing steps first one way then the other. At the opposite side of the circle I saw George's familiar beloved face and, beside him, Anne's smooth smile. She looked as she did when she was studying a new book. She was reading the king's mood as carefully as she might look at a psalter. She was looking from him to me as if to measure the urgency of his desire. And, while never turning her head, she was checking the mood of the queen, trying to get an idea of what she had seen or what she felt.

I smiled to myself. Anne had met her match in the queen, I thought. No-one could penetrate beneath the veneer of the daughter of Spain. Anne was a courtier

beyond all others but she had been born a commoner. Queen Katherine had been born a princess. From the moment she could talk she had been taught to guard her tongue. From the moment she could walk she had been taught to step carefully and speak kindly to both rich and poor, for you never knew when you might need both rich and poor. Queen Katherine had been a player in a highly competitive, highly wealthy court before Anne had even been born.

Anne might look around all she liked to see how the queen was bearing up under the sight of me, close to the king, our gazes locked on each other, desire very hot between us. Anne might look; but the queen never betrayed any emotion more than polite interest. She clapped at the end of the dances and once or twice cried out congratulations. And then suddenly the dance ended, and Henry and I were left stranded without musicians playing, without other dancers encircling us and hiding us. We were left alone, exposed, still handclasped with his eyes on my face and me looking up at him in silence, locked together as if we might stay that way forever.

‘Bravo,’ said the queen, her voice completely steady and confident. ‘Very pretty.’



‘He’ll send for you,’ Anne said that night as we undressed in the room. She shook out her dress and laid it carefully in the chest at the foot of the bed, her hood at the other end, her shoes carefully set side by side under the bed. She pulled on her night shift and sat before the mirror to brush her hair.

She handed the brush to me and she closed her eyes as I set about the long strokes from head to waist.

‘Perhaps tonight, perhaps during the day tomorrow. You’ll go.’

‘Of course I’ll go,’ I said.

‘Well, remember who you are,’ Anne warned. ‘Don’t let him just have you in a doorway or somewhere hidden and hurried. Insist on proper rooms, insist on a proper bed.’

‘I’ll see,’ I said.

‘It’s important,’ she cautioned me. ‘If he thinks he can take you like a slut then he’ll have you and forget you. If anything, I think you should hold out a little longer. If he thinks you’re too easy he’ll not have you more than once or twice.’

I took her soft hanks of hair in my hand and plaited them.

‘Ow,’ she complained. ‘You’re pulling.’

‘Well, you’re nagging,’ I said. ‘Leave me to do it my way, Anne. I’ve not done so badly so far.’

‘Oh that.’ She shrugged her white shoulders and smiled at her reflection in the mirror. ‘Anyone can attract a man. The trick is to keep him.’

The knock at the door startled us both. Anne’s dark eyes flew to the mirror, to my reflected image looking blankly back at her.

‘Not the king?’

I was already opening the door.

George was standing there, in the red suede doublet he had worn at dinner, the white fine linen shirt gleaming through the slashings, the red cap embroidered with pearls on his dark head.

‘*Vivat! Vivat Marianne!*’ He came quickly in and closed the door behind him. ‘He asked me to invite you to take a glass of wine with him. I’m to apologise for the lateness of the hour, the Venetian ambassador has only just left. They talked of nothing but war with France and now he is filled with passion for England, Henry and St George. I’m to assure you that you’re free to make your choice. You can take a glass of wine and come back to your own bed. You’re to be your own mistress.’

‘Any offer?’ Anne asked.

George raised a supercilious eyebrow. ‘Show a little elegance,’ he reprimanded her. ‘He’s not buying her outright. He’s inviting her for a glass of wine. We’ll fix the price later on.’

I put my hand to my head. ‘My hood!’ I exclaimed. ‘Anne, quick! Plait up my hair.’

She shook her head. ‘Go as you are,’ she said. ‘With your hair down around your shoulders. You look like a virgin on your wedding day. I’m right, aren’t I, George? That’s what he wants.’

He nodded. ‘She’s lovely like that. Loosen her bodice a bit.’

‘She’s supposed to be a lady.’

‘Just a bit,’ he suggested. ‘A man likes a glimpse of what he’s buying.’

Anne untied the laces at the back of my bodice until the boned stomacher was a little looser. She tugged it down at the waist so it sat lower and more invitingly. George nodded. ‘Perfect.’

She stepped back and looked at me as critically as my father had looked at the mare he had sent to the stallion. ‘Anything else?’

George shook his head.

‘She’d better wash,’ Anne suddenly decided. ‘Under her arms and her cunny at least.’

I would have appealed to George. But he was nodding, as intent as a farmer. ‘Yes, you should. He has a horror of anything rank.’

‘Go on.’ Anne gestured to the jug and ewer.

‘You two go out,’ I said.

George turned for the door. ‘We’ll wait outside.’

‘And your bum,’ Anne said as he closed the door. ‘Don’t skimp on it, Mary. You’ve got to be clean all over.’

The closing door cut off my response which was not that of a young lady. I washed myself briskly in cold water and rubbed myself dry. I took some of Anne’s flower water and patted it on my neck and hair and on the tops of my legs. Then I opened the door.

‘Are you clean?’ Anne asked sharply.

I nodded.

She looked at me anxiously. ‘Go on then. And you can resist for a bit, you know. Show a little doubt. Don’t just fall into his arms.’

I turned my face away from her. She seemed to me quite unbearably crass about the whole matter.

‘The girl can have a bit of pleasure,’ George said gently.

Anne rounded on him. ‘Not in his bed,’ she said sharply. ‘She’s not there for her pleasure but for his.’

I didn’t even hear her. All I could hear was the thud of my heart pounding in my ears and my knowledge that he had sent for me, that I would be with him soon.

‘Come on,’ I said to George. ‘Let’s go.’

Anne turned to go back into the room. ‘I’ll wait up for you,’ she said.

I hesitated. ‘I might not come back tonight.’

She nodded. ‘I hope you don’t. But I’ll wait up for you anyway. I’ll sit by the fire and watch the dawn come in.’

I thought for a moment about her keeping a vigil for me in her spinster bedroom while I was snug and loved in the King of England’s bed. ‘My God, you must wish it was you,’ I said with sudden acute delight.

She did not flinch from it. ‘Of course. He is the king.’

‘And he wants *me*,’ I said, hammering the point home.

George bowed and offered me his arm and led me down the narrow stairs to the lobby before the great hall. We went through it like a pair of interlinked

ghosts. No-one saw us pass. There were a couple of the scullions sleeping in the ashes of the fire and half a dozen men dozing head-down on tables around the room.

We went past the top table and through the doors where the king's private rooms began. There was a set of broad stairs richly hung with a beautiful tapestry, the colours drained from the bright silks by the moonlight. There were two men at arms before the presence chamber and they stood aside to let me pass when they saw me with my golden hair let down and the confident smile on my face.

The presence chamber behind the double doors was a surprise to me. I had only ever seen it crowded with people. This was where everyone came to have sight of the king. Petitioners would bribe senior members of the court to allow them to stand here in case the king noticed them and asked them how they did, and what they wanted of him. I had never seen this big vaulted room other than packed with people in their most handsome clothes, desperate for the king's attention. Now it was silent, shadowy. George pressed his hand on my cold fingertips.

Ahead of us were the doors to the king's private chambers. Two men at arms stood with pikes crossed. 'His Majesty commands our presence,' George said briefly.

There was a short chime as the pikes clashed, the two men presented arms, bowed, and swung the double doors open.



The king was seated before the fire, wrapped in a warm robe of velvet trimmed with fur. As he heard the door open he leaped to his feet.

I dropped into a deep curtsy. 'You sent for me, Majesty.'

He could not take his eyes from my face. 'I did. And I thank you for coming. I wanted to see ... I wanted to talk ... I wanted to take a little ...' He broke off finally. 'I wanted you.'

I stepped a little closer. He would smell Anne's perfume from that distance, I thought. I tossed my head and felt the weight of my hair shift. I saw his eyes go from my face to my hair and back again. Behind me, I heard the door closing as George went out without a word. Henry did not even see him go.

'I am honoured, Your Majesty,' I murmured.

He shook his head, not in impatience, but as the gesture of a man who cannot

waste time on play. 'I want you,' he said again, flatly, as if that were all that a woman would need to know. 'I want you, Mary Boleyn.'

I took a small step closer to him. I leaned towards him. I felt the warmth of his breath and then the touch of his lips on my hair. I did not move forward or back.

'Mary,' he whispered and his voice was choked with his desire.

'Your Majesty?'

'Please call me Henry. I want to hear my name on your lips.'

'Henry.'

'D'you want me?' he whispered. 'I mean as a man? If I were a farmer on your father's estate, would you want me then?' He put his hand under my chin to lift up my face so that he could look into my eyes. I met his bright blue gaze. Carefully, delicately I put my hand to his face and felt the softness of his curling beard under my palm. At once he closed his eyes at my touch and then turned his face and kissed my hand where it cupped his chin.

'Yes,' I said, caring not at all that it was nonsense. I could not imagine this man as anything but King of England. He could no more deny being king than I could deny being a Howard. 'If you were a nobody and I were a nobody I would love you,' I whispered. 'If you were a farmer with a field of hops I would love you. If I were a girl who came to pick the hops would you love me?'

He drew me closer to him, his hands warm on my stomach. 'I would,' he promised. 'I would know you anywhere for my true love. Whoever I was and whoever you were, I would know you at once for my true love.'

His head came down and he kissed me gently at first and then harder, the touch of his lips very warm. Then he led me by the hand towards the canopied bed and lay me down on it and buried his face in the swell of my breasts where they showed above the stomacher that Anne had helpfully loosened for him.



At dawn I raised myself on my elbow and looked out of the leaded panes of the window to where the sky was growing pale and I knew that Anne would be watching for the sun too. Anne would be watching the light slowly filling the sky and knowing that her sister was the king's mistress and the most important woman in England, second only to the queen. I wondered what she made of that as she sat in the windowseat and listened to the first birds tentatively sounding out their notes. I wondered how she felt, knowing that I was the one the king had

chosen, the one who was carrying the ambitions of the family. Knowing that it was me and not her in his bed.

In truth, I did not have to wonder. She would be feeling that disturbing mixture of emotions that she always summoned from me: admiration and envy, pride and a furious rivalry, a longing to see a beloved sister succeed, and a passionate desire to see a rival fall.

The king stirred. 'Are you awake?' he asked from half-under the covers.

'Yes,' I said, instantly alert. I wondered if I should offer to leave, but then he emerged head first from the tangle of bedding and his face was smiling.

'Good morrow, sweetheart,' he said to me. 'Are you well this morning?'

I found I was beaming back at him, reflecting his joy. 'I'm very well.'

'Merry in your heart?'

'Happier than I have ever been in my life before.'

'Then come to me,' he said, opening his arms, and I slid down the sheets and into the warm musky-scented embrace, his strong thighs pressing against me, his arms cradling my shoulders, his face burrowing into my neck.

'Oh Henry,' I said foolishly. 'Oh, my love.'

'Oh I know,' he said engagingly. 'Come a little closer.'



I did not leave him till the sun was fully up and then I was in a hurry to be back in my room before the servants were about.

Henry himself helped me into my gown, tied the laces at the back of my stomacher, put his own cloak around my shoulders against the chill of the morning. When he opened the door my brother George was lounging in the windowseat. When he saw the king, he rose to his feet and bowed, cap in hand, and when he saw me behind the king he gave me a sweet smile.

'See Mistress Carey back to her room,' the king said. 'And then send the groom of the bedchamber in, would you, George? I want to be up early this morning.'

George bowed again and offered me his arm.

'And come with me to hear Mass,' the king said at the door. 'You can come with me to my private chapel today, George.'

'I thank you.' George accepted with nonchalant grace the greatest honour that any courtier could receive. The door to the privy chamber closed as I curtsied and then we went quickly through the audience chamber and through

the great hall.

We were too late to avoid the lowest of the servants, the lads employed to keep the fires burning were dragging great logs into the hall. Other boys were sweeping the floor, and the men at arms who had slept where they had dined were opening their eyes and yawning and cursing the strength of the wine.

I put the hood of the king's cloak up over my dishevelled hair and we went quickly and quietly through the great hall and up the staircase to the queen's apartments.

Anne opened the door at George's knock and drew us in. She was white-faced with lack of sleep, her eyes red. I took in the delicious sight of my sister on the rack of jealousy.

'Well?' she asked sharply.

I glanced at the smooth counterpane on the bed. 'You didn't sleep.'

'I couldn't,' she said. 'And I hope you slept but little.'

I turned away from her bawdiness.

'Come now,' George said to me. 'We only want to know that all is well with you, Mary. And Father will have to know and Mother and Uncle Howard. You'd better get used to talking about it. It's not a private matter.'

'It's the most private matter in the world.'

'Not for you,' Anne said coldly. 'So stop looking like a milkmaid in springtime. Did he have you?'

'Yes,' I said shortly.

'More than once?'

'Yes.'

'Praise God!' George said. 'She's done it. And I have to go. He asked me to hear Mass with him.' He crossed the room and caught me up into a hard hug. 'Well done. We'll talk later. I have to go now.'

He banged the door indiscreetly as he left and Anne made a little tutting noise and then turned to the chest which held our clothes.

'You'd better wear your cream gown,' she said. 'No need to look the whore. I'll get you some hot water. You'll have to bathe.' She raised her hand to my protests. 'Yes, you will. So don't argue. And wash your hair. You have to be spotless, Mary. Don't be such a lazy slut. And get out of that gown and hurry, we have to go to Mass with the queen in less than an hour.'

I obeyed her, as I always did. 'But are you happy for me?' I asked as I struggled out of the stomacher and petticoat.

I saw her face in the mirror, the leap of jealousy veiled by the sweep of her

eyelashes. 'I am happy for the family,' she said. 'I hardly ever think about you.'



The king was in his private gallery, overlooking the chapel, hearing matins as we filed past to the queen's adjoining room. Straining my ears I could just hear the mutter of the clerk putting papers before the king for him to glance at and sign as he watched the priest in the chapel below go through the familiar motions of the Mass. The king always did his business at the same time as hearing the morning service, he followed his father in this tradition, and there were many who thought the work was hallowed. There were others, my uncle among them, who thought that it showed that the king was in a hurry to get the work out of the way and that he only ever gave it half his mind.

I kneeled on the cushion in the queen's private room, looking at the ivory gleam of my gown as it shimmered, hinting at the contours of my thighs. I could still feel the warmth of him in the tenderness between my legs, I could still taste him on my lips. Despite the bath which Anne had insisted that I took, I still fancied that I could smell the sweat from his chest on my face and in my hair. When I closed my eyes it was not in prayer, but in a reverie of sensuality.

The queen was kneeling beside me, her face grave, her head erect under the heavy gable hood. Her gown was open a little at the neck so that she might slide her finger inside and touch the hair shirt that she always wore next to her skin. Her sober face was drawn and tired, her head bowed over her rosary, the old slack skin on her chin and cheeks looking weary and pouched under her tightly closed eyes.

The Mass went on interminably. I envied Henry the distraction of the state papers. The queen's attention never wavered, her fingers were never idle on her beads, her eyes were always closed in prayer. Only when the service ended and the priest wiped the chalices in the white cloths and took them away did she give a lingering sigh, as if she had heard something that none of us had ears for. She turned and smiled on all of us, all her ladies, even me.

'And now let us go to break our fast,' she said pleasantly. 'Perhaps the king will eat with us.'

As we filed past his door, I felt myself dawdle, I could not believe that he would let me go by without a word. As if he sensed my desire, my brother George flung open the door at the exact moment that I was lingering and said loudly: 'A good morning to you, my sister.'

In the room behind him Henry looked up quickly from his work and saw me, framed in the doorway, in the cream gown that Anne had chosen for me, with my cream headdress pulling my rich hair off my young face. He gave a little sigh of desire at the sight of me and I felt my colour rise, and my smile warm my face.

‘Good day, sire. And good day to you, my brother,’ I said softly, while my eyes never left Henry’s face.

Henry rose to his feet and stretched out his hand as if to draw me in. He checked himself with a glance at his clerk.

‘I’ll take my breakfast with you,’ he said. ‘Tell the queen I will come along in a few moments. Just as soon as I have finished these ... these ...’ His vague gesture indicated that he had no idea what the papers were.

He came across the room, like a dazed trout swimming towards a poacher’s bright lantern. ‘And you, this morning, are you well?’ he said quietly, for my ears only.

‘I am.’ I shot a quick, mischievous glance up at his intent face. ‘A little weary.’

His eyes danced at the admission. ‘Did you not sleep well, sweeting?’

‘Hardly at all.’

‘Was the bed not to your liking?’

I stumbled, I was never as skilled as Anne at this sort of word-play. In the end I said nothing but what was simply true. ‘Sire, I liked it very well.’

‘Would you sleep there again?’

In a delicious moment I found the right response. ‘Oh sire. I was hoping I would not sleep there again very soon.’

He threw back his head and laughed, he snatched up my hand and, turning it over, pressed a kiss into the palm. ‘My lady, you have only to command me,’ he promised. ‘I am your servant in every way.’

I bowed my head to watch his mouth press my hand, I could not take my eyes from his face. He raised his head and we looked at each other, a long mutual look of desire.

‘I should go,’ I said. ‘The queen will wonder where I am.’

‘I shall follow you,’ he said. ‘Believe it.’

I shot him a quick smile then I turned and ran down the gallery after the queen’s ladies. I could hear my heels going tap tap tap on the stones beneath the rushes, I could hear the rustle of my silk gown. I could sense, in every part of my alert body, that I was young and lovely and beloved. Beloved by the King of

England himself.

He came to breakfast and smiled as he took his seat. The queen's pale eyes took in the rosy colour of my face, the rich gleam of my cream gown, and looked away. She called for some musicians to play for us while we ate, and for the queen's master of the horse to attend us.

'Will you go hunting today, sire?' she asked him pleasantly.

'Yes, indeed. Would any of your ladies care to follow the hunt?' the king invited.

'I am sure they would,' she said with her usual pleasant tone. 'Mademoiselle Boleyn, Mistress Parker, Mistress Carey? I know you three for keen riders. Would you like to ride with the king today?'

Jane Parker shot a swift malicious gleam at me for being named third. She does not know, I thought, inwardly hugging myself. She can triumph all she likes because she does not know.

'We would be enchanted to ride with the king,' Anne said smoothly. 'All three of us.'



In the great courtyard before the stables the king mounted his big hunter while one of the grooms lifted me up into the saddle of the horse he had given me. I hooked my leg firmly around the pommel and arranged my gown to fall becomingly to the ground. Anne scrutinised me, without missing the tiniest detail, as she always did, and I was pleased when her head, capped with the neatest of French hunting hats with a dainty plume, gave a small approving nod. She called to the groom to lift her up into the saddle and she brought her hunter up beside mine and held him steady while she leaned over.

'If he wants to take you off into the woods and have you, you're to say no,' she whispered. 'Try to remember that you are a Howard girl. You're not a complete slut.'

'If he wants me ...'

'If he wants you, he'll wait.'

The huntsman blew his horn and every horse in the courtyard stiffened with excitement. Henry grinned across at me like an excited boy and I beamed back. My mare, Jesmond, was like a coiled spring, and when the master of the hunt led the way over the drawbridge we trotted quickly after him, the hounds like a sea of brindle and white around the horses' hooves. It was a bright day but not too

hot, a cool wind moved the grass of the meadow as we trotted away from the town, the haymakers leaned on their scythes and watched us pass, doffing their caps as they saw the bright colours of the aristocratic riders, and then dropping to their knees as they saw the king's standard.

I glanced back at the castle. A casement window in the queen's apartments stood open and I saw her dark hood and her pale face looking out after us. She would meet us for dinner and she would smile at Henry and smile at me as if she had not seen us, riding side by side, out for a day's sport together.

The yelping of the hounds suddenly changed in tone and then they fell silent. The huntsman blew his horn, the long loud blast which meant that the hounds had taken a scent.

'Hulloa!' Henry shouted, spurring his horse forward.

'There!' I cried. At the end of the avenue of trees opening before us I saw the outline of a large stag, his antlers held flat on his back as he crashed away from the hunt. At once the hounds streamed out behind him, almost silent except for the occasional bark of excitement. They plunged into the undergrowth and we pulled up the horses and waited. The huntsmen trotted anxiously away from the hunt, criss-crossing the forest by the little rides, hoping to spot the deer break away. Then one of them suddenly stood high in his stirrups and blew a loud note on his horn. My horse reared with excitement at the sound and spun round towards him. I clung gracelessly to the pommel and to a handful of mane, caring nothing how I looked as long as I did not tumble off backwards into the mud.

The stag broke away and was racing for his life across the rough empty ground at the edge of the woods that led to the watermeadows and the river. At once the dogs poured after him and the horses after them in a breakneck race. The hooves pounded all around me, I had my eyes squinted, half-shut, as divots of mud flew up into my face, I crouched low over Jesmond's neck, urging her onwards. I felt my hat tear from my head and tumble away, then there was a hedge before me, white with summer blossom. I felt Jesmond's powerful hindquarters bunch up beneath me and with one great leap she cleared it, hit the ground on the far side, recovered and was pounding into her fastest gallop again. The king was ahead of me, his attention fixed on the stag which was gaining on us. I could feel the ripple of my hair as it shook out from the pins and I laughed recklessly to feel the wind in my face. Jesmond's ears went back to hear me laugh and then forward as we came to another hedge with a nasty little ditch before it. She saw it as I did and checked only for a moment and then made a mighty cat-jump: all four feet off the ground at once in order to clear it. I could

smell the perfume of crushed honeysuckle as her hooves clipped the top of the hedge, then we were on and on, even faster. Ahead of me the little brown dot that was the stag plunged into the river and started to swim strongly for the other side. The master of the hunt desperately blew for the hounds not to follow the beast into the water but to come back to him and to run down the bank to keep pace with the quarry to bait it as it came to shore. But they were too excited to listen. The whippers-in surged forward but half the pack were after the deer in the river, some of them swept away by the fast current, all of them powerless in the deep water. Henry pulled up his horse and watched the chaos develop.

I was afraid that it would make him angry but he threw back his head and laughed as if he delighted in the stag's cunning.

'Go then!' he shouted after him. 'I can eat venison here without cooking you! I have a larder of venison!'

Everyone around us laughed as if he had made a wonderful jest and I realised that everyone had been afraid that the failure of the hunt would turn his mood sour. Looking from one bright delighted face to another I thought for one illuminating moment what fools we were to make this one man's temper the very centre of our lives. But then he smiled towards me and I knew that for me at least, there was no choice.

He took in my mud-splashed face and my tumbling tangled hair. 'You look like a maid for country matters,' he said, and anyone could have heard the desire in his voice.

I pulled off my glove and put my hand to my head, ineffectually twisting a knot of hair and tucking it back. I gave him a little sideways smile which acknowledged his bawdiness and yet refused to answer it.

'Oh shush,' I ordered softly. Behind his intent face I saw Jane Parker suddenly gulp as if she had swallowed a horse fly and I saw that she had realised at last that she had better mind her manners around us Boleyns.

Henry dropped from his horse, threw the reins to his groom and came to my horse's head. 'Will you come down to me?' he asked, his voice warm and inviting.

I unhooked my knee and let myself slide down the side of my horse and into his arms. He caught me easily and set me on my feet but he did not release me. Before the whole court kissed me on one cheek and then another 'You are the Queen of the Hunt.'

'We should crown her with flowers,' Anne suggested.

'Yes!' Henry was pleased with the thought and within moments half the

court was plaiting honeysuckle garlands and I had a crown of haunting honey perfume to put on my tumbled golden-brown hair.

The wagons came up with the things for dinner and they put up a little tent for fifty diners, the king's favourites, and chairs and benches for the rest, and when the queen arrived, ambling on her steady palfrey, she saw me seated at the king's left hand and crowned with summer flowers.



Next month and England was finally at war with France, a war declared and formal, and Charles, the Emperor of Spain, aimed his army like a lance at the heart of France while the English army in alliance with him marched out of the English fort of Calais, and headed south down the road to Paris.

The court lingered near the City, anxious for news, but then the summertime plague came to London and Henry, always fearful of illness, ruled that the summer progress should start at once. We fled rather than moved to Hampton Court. The king ordered that all the food should be brought from the surrounding country, nothing could come from London. He forbade merchants and traders and artisans to follow the court from the unhealthy stews of the capital. The clean palace on the fresh water must be kept safe from illness.

The news from France was good, and the news from the City was bad. Cardinal Wolsey organised the court to go south and then west, staying at the great houses of the great men, entertained with masques and dinners and hunting and picnics and jousts, and Henry went like a boy, easily diverted by the passing scene. Every courtier living on the route had to play host to the king as if it were his greatest joy instead of his most dreaded expense. The queen travelled with the king, riding by his side through the pretty countryside, sometimes travelling in a litter if she were tired, and though I might be sent for during the night, he was attentive and loving to her during the day. Her nephew was the English army's only ally in Europe, the friendship of her family meant victory to an English army. But Queen Katherine was more to her husband than an ally in wartime. However much I might please Henry, he was still her boy – her lovely indulged spoilt golden boy. He might summon me or any other girl to his room, without disturbing the constant steady affection between them which had sprung from her ability, long ago, to love this man who was more foolish, more selfish, and less of a prince than she was a princess.

Winter 1522

The king kept his court at Greenwich for Christmas and for twelve days and nights there was nothing but the most extravagant and beautiful parties and feasting. There was a Christmas master of the revels – Sir William Armitage – and it was his task to dream up something new for every day. His daily programme followed a delightful pattern of something for us to do out of doors in the morning – a boat race to watch, jousting, or an archery competition, bear baiting, a dog fight, a cocking match, or a travelling show with tumblers and fire-eaters, followed by a great dinner in the hall with fine wine and ale and small beer and every day some enchanting pudding made of sculpted marchpane as fine as a piece of art. In the afternoon there would be a diversion: a play or a talk, some dancing or a masque. We all had parts to play, we all had costumes to wear, we all had to be as merry as we could be, for the king was always laughing this winter and the queen never stopped smiling.

The inconclusive campaign against France had ended with the cold weather, but everyone knew that come the spring there would be another series of battles and England and Spain would jointly venture against their enemy. The King of England and the queen from Spain were united in every sense of the word that Christmas season, and once a week without fail they dined privately together and he slept in her bed that night.

But every other night, also without fail, George would come to the room I shared with Anne and tap on the door and say: ‘He wants you,’ and I would go to my love, to my king, at the run.

I never stayed for the whole night. There were foreign ambassadors from all over Europe bidden to Greenwich for Christmas and Henry would not show such a snub to the queen before them. The Spanish ambassador in particular was a stickler for etiquette and he was a close friend to the queen. Knowing the part I played at court, he did not like me; and I would not have enjoyed bumping into him coming out of the king’s private rooms all flushed and dishevelled. Better by far that I should slip from the king’s warm bed and hurry back to my chamber with George yawning at my side, hours before the ambassador arrived to hear

Mass.

Anne was always up and waiting for me, with ale ready mulled and the fire banked in to warm our chamber. I would jump into bed and she would throw a woollen wrap around my shoulders and sit beside me and comb out the tangles from my hair while George put another log on the fire and sipped at his own cup.

‘It’s weary work, this,’ he said. ‘I fall asleep most afternoons. I cannot keep my eyes open.’

‘Anne puts me to bed after my dinner as if I were a child,’ I said resentfully.

‘What d’you want?’ Anne asked. ‘To be as haggard as the queen?’

‘She’s not looking too bonny,’ George agreed. ‘Is she ill?’

‘Just old age, I think,’ Anne said uncaringly. ‘And the effort of appearing happy all the time. She must be exhausted. Henry takes a lot of pleasing, doesn’t he?’

‘No,’ I said smugly, and the three of us laughed.

‘Has he said if he is giving you a special gift for Christmas?’ Anne asked. ‘Or George? Or any of us?’

I shook my head. ‘He hasn’t said.’

‘Uncle Howard sent a gold chalice wrought with our arms for you to give to him,’ Anne said. ‘It’s safe in the cupboard. It’s worth a fortune. I only hope we see some return on it.’

I nodded drowsily. ‘He has promised me a surprise.’ At once the two of them were alert. ‘He wants to take me to the shipyard tomorrow.’

Anne made a grimace of disdain. ‘I thought you meant a gift. Are we all to go? The whole court?’

‘Just a small party.’ I closed my eyes and started to drift off into sleep. I heard Anne get up from the bed and move about the room, unpacking my clothes from the chest and laying them out for the morning.

‘You must wear your red,’ she said. ‘And you can borrow my red cape trimmed with swansdown. It’ll be cold on the river.’

‘Thank you, Anne.’

‘Oh, don’t think I’m doing it for you. I am doing this for the advancement of the family. None of this is for you, as yourself.’

I hunched my shoulders against the coldness of her tone but I was too tired to retort. Dimly, I heard George put down his cup and rise from his chair. I heard his soft kiss on Anne’s forehead.

‘Weary work but everything to play for,’ he said quietly. ‘Goodnight, Annamaria – I leave you to your duties and go to mine.’

I heard her seductive chuckle. ‘The whores of Greenwich are a noble calling, my brother. I shall see you tomorrow.’



Anne’s cape looked wonderful over my red riding habit and she lent me her smart little French riding hat as well. Henry, Anne, I, George, my husband William, and half a dozen others rode alongside the river to the shipyard where they were building the king’s new ship. It was a bright wintry day, the sun sparkled on the water, the fields either side of the river were noisy with the sound of water birds, the geese from Russia overwintering at our milder watermeadows. Against their continual gabble, the quacking of ducks and the call of snipe and curlew were very loud. We cantered beside the river in a little group, my horse shouldering against the king’s big hunter, Anne and George on either side of us. Henry pulled up to a trot and then a walk as we came near to the dock.

The foreman came out as he saw our party approaching and pulled off his hat and bowed low to the king.

‘I thought to ride out and see how you do,’ the king said, smiling down on him.

‘We are honoured, Your Majesty.’

‘And how goes the work?’ The king swung himself down from the saddle and tossed the reins of his horse to a waiting groom. He turned and lifted me down and tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow and led me to the dry dock.

‘So what d’you think of her?’ Henry asked me, squinting up at the smooth oak side of the half-built ship as she rested on the great wooden rollers. ‘Don’t you think she is going to be most lovely?’

‘Lovely and dangerous,’ I said, looking at the gun doors. ‘Surely the French have nothing as good as this.’

‘Nothing,’ Henry said proudly. ‘If I’d had three beauties like this one at sea last year I would have destroyed the French navy as they skulked in port, and I should have been King of England and France in deed as well as word today.’

I hesitated. ‘The French army is said to be very strong,’ I ventured. ‘And Francis very resolute.’

‘He’s a peacock,’ Henry said crossly. ‘All show. And Charles of Spain will take him in the south as I come at him from Calais. The two of us will divide

France between us.' Henry turned to the shipwright. 'When will she be ready?'

'In spring,' the man answered.

'Is the draughtsman here today?'

The man bowed. 'He is.'

'I have a fancy to have a sketch made of you, Mistress Carey. Will you sit for a moment and let the man take your likeness?'

I flushed with pleasure. 'Of course, if you wish it.'

Henry nodded to the shipwright who shouted from the platform to the quay below us and a man came running. Henry helped me down the ladder and I sat on a pile of newly sawn planks while a young man in rough homespun cloth sketched a quick likeness of my face.

'What will you do with the picture?' I asked curiously, trying to keep still and hold a smile on my lips.

'Wait and see.'

The artist put his paper to one side. 'I have enough.'

Henry put out his hand to me and raised me to my feet. 'Then, sweeting, let's ride home to our dinner. I'll take you home around the watermeadows, there's a good gallop to the castle.'

The grooms were walking the horses around so that they did not catch cold. Henry threw me up into my saddle and then mounted his own horse. He glanced over his shoulder to see that everyone was ready. Lord Percy was tightening Anne's girth. She looked down and gave him her slow provocative smile. Then we all turned and rode back to Greenwich as the sun set primrose and cream in the cold winter sky.



Christmas dinner lasted for nearly all the day and I was sure that Henry would send for me that night. Instead he announced that he would visit the queen and I had to be among the ladies who sat with her, waiting for him to finish drinking with his friends and come to bed in the queen's apartments.

Anne pushed a half-sewn shirt into my hands and sat beside me, firmly planting herself on the skirts of my outspread gown so I could not rise without her letting me up. 'Oh leave me alone,' I said under my breath.

'Take that miserable look off your face,' she hissed. 'Do your sewing and smile as if you were enjoying it. No man is going to desire you when you look as sulky as a baited bear.'

‘But to spend Christmas night with her ...’

Anne nodded. ‘D’you want to know why?’

‘Yes.’

‘Some beggarly soothsayer told him that he would get a son tonight. He’s hoping the queen might give him an autumn child. Lord, what fools men are.’

‘A soothsayer?’

‘Yes. Foretold a son, if he forsook all other women. No need to ask who paid her.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘My guess is that we’d find Seymour gold in her pocket if we turned her upside down and shook her very hard. But it’s too late for that now. The damage is done. He’ll be in the queen’s bed tonight and every night till twelfth night. So you had better make sure that when he walks past you to do his duty he remembers what he’s missing.’

I bent my head lower over my sewing. Anne, watching me, saw a tear fall on the hem of the shirt and saw me blot it with my finger.

‘Little fool,’ she said roughly. ‘You’ll get him back.’

‘I hate the thought of him lying with her,’ I whispered. ‘I wonder if he calls her sweeting, too?’

‘Probably,’ Anne said bluntly. ‘Not many men have the wit to vary the tune. But he’ll do his duty by her and then look around again, and if you catch his eye and smile then it will be you again.’

‘How can I smile when my heart is breaking?’

Anne gave a little giggle. ‘Oh what a tragedy queen! You can smile when your heart is breaking because you are a woman, and a courtier, and a Howard. That’s three reasons for being the most deceitful creature on God’s earth. Now sshh – here he comes.’

George came in first with a quick smile for me and went to kneel at the queen’s feet. She gave him her hand with a pretty blush, she was glowing with pleasure that the king was coming to her. Henry came in next with my husband, William, and with his hand on Lord Percy’s shoulder. He walked past me with nothing more than a nod of his head though Anne and I stood as he entered the room and dipped low into a curtsy. He went straight to the queen, kissed her on the lips and then led the way into her privy chamber. Her maids went in with them and shortly came out and closed the door. The rest of us were left outside in silence.

William looked around and smiled at me. ‘Well met, good wife,’ he said

pleasantly. 'Shall you be keeping your present quarters for much longer, d'you think? Or will you want me as a bedfellow again?'

'That must depend on the command of the queen and of our uncle,' George said evenly. His hand slid along his belt to where his sword would hang. 'Marianne cannot choose for herself, as you know.'

William did not rise to the challenge. He gave me a rueful smile. 'Peace, George,' he said. 'I don't need you to explain it all to me. I should know by now.'

I looked away. Lord Percy had drawn Anne into an alcove and I heard her seductive giggle at something that he said. She saw me watching and said more loudly: 'Lord Percy is writing sonnets to me, Mary. Do tell him that his lines don't scan.'

'It's not even finished,' Percy protested. 'I was just telling you the first line and already you are too critical.'

"'Fair lady – thou dost treat me with disdain –'"

'I think that's a very good start,' I said helpfully. 'How would you go on, Lord Percy?'

'It's clearly not a good start,' George said. 'To start a courtship with disdain is the very worst start you could make. A kind start would be more promising.'

'A kind start would be certainly startling, from a Boleyn girl,' William said with a barb in his tone. 'Depending on the suitor, of course. But now I think of it – a Percy of Northumberland might get a kind start.'

Anne flashed him a look which was something less than sisterly but Henry Percy was so absorbed in his poem that he hardly heard him. 'It goes on with the next line, which I don't have yet, and then it goes something something something something, my pain.'

'Oh! To rhyme with disdain!' George declared provokingly. 'I think I'm beginning to get this.'

'But you must have an image that you pursue throughout the poem,' Anne said to Henry Percy. 'If you are going to write a poem to your mistress you must compare her to something and then twist the comparison round to some witty conclusion.'

'How can I?' Percy asked her. 'I cannot compare you to anything. You are yourself. What should I compare you to?'

'Oh very pretty!' George said approvingly. 'I say, Percy, your conversation is better than your poetry, I should stay on one knee and whisper in her ear, if I was you. You'll triumph if you stick to prose.'

Percy grinned and took Anne's hand. 'Stars in the night,' he said.

'Something something something something, some delight,' Anne rejoined promptly.

'Let's have some wine,' William suggested. 'I don't think I can keep up with this dazzling wit. And who will play me at dice?'

'I'll play,' George said before William could challenge me. 'What will the stakes be?'

'Oh a couple of crowns,' William said. 'I should hate to have you as my enemy for a gambling debt, Boleyn.'

'Or any other cause,' my brother said sweetly. 'Especially since Lord Percy here might write us a martial poem about fighting.'

'I don't think something something something, is very threatening,' Anne remarked. 'And that is all that his lines ever say.'

'I am an apprentice,' Percy said with dignity. 'An apprentice lover and an apprentice poet and you are treating me unkindly. "Fair lady – thou dost treat me with disdain –" is nothing but the truth.'

Anne laughed and held out her hand for him to kiss. William drew a couple of dice from his pocket and rolled them on the table. I poured him a glass of wine and put it by him. I felt oddly comforted to be serving him when the man that I loved was bedding his wife in the room next door. I felt that I had been put aside, and for all I knew I might have to stay to one side.

We played until midnight and still the king did not emerge.

'What d'you think?' William asked George. 'If he means to spend the night with her we might as well go to our beds.'

'We're going,' Anne said firmly. She held out a peremptory hand to me.

'So soon?' Percy pleaded. 'But stars come out at night.'

'Then they fade at dawn,' Anne replied. 'This star needs to veil herself in darkness.'

I rose to go with her. My husband looked at me for a moment. 'Kiss me goodnight, wife,' he ordered.

I hesitated and then I went across the room. He expected me to put a cool kiss on his cheek but instead I bent over and kissed him on his lips. I felt him respond as I touched him. 'Goodnight, husband. And I wish you a merry Christmas.'

'Goodnight, wife. My bed would have been warmer tonight with you in it.'

I nodded. There was nothing I could say. Without intending it, I glanced towards the closed door of the queen's privy chamber where the man I adored

slept in the arms of his wife.

‘Maybe we’ll all end up with our wives in the end,’ William said quietly.

‘For sure,’ George said cheerfully, shovelling his winnings from the table into his cap, and then pouring them into the pocket of his jacket. ‘For we will be buried alongside each other, whatever our preferences in life. Think of me, melting to dust with Jane Parker.’

Even William laughed.

‘When will it be?’ Percy asked. ‘Your happy nuptial day?’

‘Sometime after midsummer. If I can contain my impatience for that long.’

‘She brings a handsome dowry,’ William remarked.

‘Oh who cares for that?’ Percy exclaimed. ‘Love is all that matters.’

‘Thus speaks one of the richest men in the kingdom,’ my brother observed wryly.

Anne held out her hand to Percy. ‘Pay no attention, my lord. I agree with you. Love is all that matters. At any rate, that’s what I think.’



‘No you don’t,’ I said as soon as the door was shut behind us.

Anne gave me a tiny smile. ‘I wish you would take the trouble to see who I am talking to, and not what I am saying.’

‘Percy of Northumberland? You are talking of marriage for love to Percy of Northumberland?’

‘Exactly. So you can simper at your husband all you like, Mary. When I marry I shall do better than you by far.’

Spring 1523

In the early weeks of the New Year the queen found her youth again, and blossomed like a rose in a warm room, her colour high, her smiles ready. She put aside the hair shirt she usually wore under her gown, and the telltale rough skin at her neck and shoulders disappeared as if smoothed away by joy. She did not tell anyone the cause of these changes; but her maid told another that she had missed one of her courses, and that the soothsayer was right: the queen had taken with child.

Given her past history of not going full term, there was every reason for her to be on her knees, her face turned up to the statue of the Virgin Mary in the little prie dieu in the corner of her privy chamber, and every morning found her there, one hand upon her belly, one hand on her missal, her eyes closed, her expression rapt. Miracles could happen. Perhaps a miracle was happening for the queen.

The maids gossiped that her linen was clean again in February and we began to think that soon she would tell the king. Already he had the look of a man waiting for good news, and he walked past me as if I were invisible. I had to dance before him and attend his wife and endure the smirks of the ladies and know once again that I was nothing more than a Boleyn girl, and not the favourite any more.

‘I can’t stand it,’ I said to Anne. We were sitting by the fireplace in the queen’s apartments. The others were walking with the dogs, but Anne and I had refused to go out. The mist was coming off the river and it was a bitterly cold day. I was shivering inside a fur-lined gown. I had not felt well since Christmas night when Henry had gone past me into her room. He had not sent for me since then.

‘You are taking it hard,’ she observed contentedly. ‘That’s what comes of loving a king.’

‘What else could I do?’ I asked miserably. I moved to the windowseat to get more light on my sewing. I was hemming the queen’s shirts for the poor, and just because they were for old labouring men did not mean that I was allowed

sloppy work. She would look at the seams and if she thought they were clumsily executed she would ask me, very pleasantly, to do them again.

‘If she has a child and it’s a son then you might as well have stayed with William Carey and started your own family,’ Anne observed. ‘The king will be at her beck, and your days will be done. You’ll just be one of many.’

‘He loves me,’ I said uncertainly. ‘I’m not one of many.’

I turned my head away and looked out of the window. The mist was curling off the river in great coils, like dust under a bed.

Anne gave a hard little laugh. ‘You’ve always been one of many,’ she said brutally. ‘There are dozens of us Howard girls, all with good breeding, all well taught, all pretty, all young, all fertile. They can throw one after another on the table and see if one is lucky. It’s no real loss to them if one after another is taken up and then thrown aside. There’s always another Howard girl conceived, there’s always another whore in the nursery. You were one of many before you were even born. If he does not cleave to you then you go back to William, they find another Howard girl to tempt him, and the dance starts all over again. Nothing is lost for them.’

‘Something is lost for me!’ I cried out.

She put her head on one side and looked at me, as if she would sift the reality from the impatience of childish passion. ‘Yes. Perhaps. Something is lost for you. Your innocence, your first love, your trust. Perhaps your heart is broken. Perhaps it will never mend. Poor silly Marianne,’ she said softly. ‘To do one man’s bidding to please another man and get nothing for yourself but heartbreak.’

‘So who would come after me?’ I asked her, turning my pain into taunting. ‘Who d’you think the next Howard girl will be that they push into his bed? Let me guess – the other Boleyn girl?’

She flashed me a quick black glance and then her dark eyelashes swept down on her cheeks. ‘Not me,’ she said. ‘I make my own plans. I don’t risk being taken up and dropped again.’

‘You told me to risk it,’ I reminded her.

‘That was for you,’ she said. ‘I would not live my life as you live yours. You would always do as you were bid, marry where you were told, bed where you were ordered. I am not like you. I make my own way.’

‘I could make my own way,’ I said.

Anne smiled disbelievingly.

‘I’d go back to Hever and live there,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t stay at court. If I am

put aside I could go to Hever. At least I will always have that now.'

The door to the queen's apartment opened and I glanced up as the maids came out, lugging the sheets from the queen's bed.

'That's the second time this week she's ordered them to be changed,' one said irritably.

Anne and I exchanged a quick look. 'Are they stained?' Anne demanded urgently.

The maid looked at her insolently. 'The queen's sheets?' she asked. 'You ask me to show you the queen's own bed linen?'

Anne's long fingers went to her purse and a piece of silver changed hands. The maid's smile was triumphant as she pocketed the coin. 'Not stained at all,' she said.

Anne subsided and I went to hold the door open for the two women.

'Thank you,' the second one said, surprised at my politeness to a servant. She nodded to me. 'Rank with sweat, poor lady,' she said quietly.

'What?' I asked. I could hardly believe that she was giving me freely a piece of information that a French spy would pay a king's ransom for, and that every courtier in the land was longing to know. 'Are you saying the queen is having night sweats? That her change of life is on her?'

'If not now then very soon,' the maid said. 'Poor lady.'



I found my father with George in the great hall, head to head while the servants set the great trestle tables for dinner around them. He beckoned me to him.

'Father,' I said, dropping him a curtsey.

He kissed me coolly on the forehead. 'Daughter,' he said. 'Did you want to see me?'

For a chilling moment I wondered if he had forgotten my name. 'The queen is not with child,' I told him. 'She started her course, this day. She missed her other times because of her age.'

'God be praised!' George said exultantly. 'I bet myself a gold crown on this. That is good news.'

'The best,' my father said. 'The best for us, the worst for England. Has she told the king?'

I shook my head. 'She started to bleed this afternoon, she has not seen him yet.'

My father nodded. 'So we have the news before him. Anyone else know it?'

I shrugged. 'The maids who changed her linen, and so anyone who was paying them. Wolsey, I suppose. Perhaps the French might have bought a maid.'

'Then we have to be fast if we want to be the ones to tell him. Should I?'

George shook his head. 'Too intimate,' he said. 'What about Mary?'

'It puts her before him at the very moment of his disappointment,' my father mused. 'Better not.'

'Anne then,' George said. 'It should be one of us to remind him of Mary.'

'Anne can do it,' my father agreed. 'She could turn a polecat off the scent of a mouse.'

'She's in the garden,' I volunteered. 'At the archery butts.'

The three of us walked from the great hall into the bright light of the spring sunshine. There was a cold wind blowing through the yellow daffodils that nodded in the sunshine. We could see the little group of courtiers at the archery butts, Anne among them. As we watched she stepped up, sighted the target, drew her bow and we heard the twang of the string and the satisfying thud as the arrow hit the bullseye. There was a scattering of applause. Henry Percy strode up to the target and plucked Anne's arrow from it and tucked it into his own quiver, as if he would keep it.

Anne was laughing, holding out her hand for her arrow, as she glanced over and saw us. At once, she turned from the company and came towards us.

'Father.'

'Anne.' He kissed her more warmly than he had kissed me.

'The queen has started her courses,' George said bluntly. 'We think that you should tell the king.'

'Rather than Mary?'

'It makes her look low,' my father said. 'Tattling with chambermaids, watching them empty piss pots.'

For a moment I thought that Anne would remark that she did not want to look low either, but she shrugged her shoulders. She knew that serving the Howard family ambition always had a price attached.

'And make sure that Mary is back in his eye,' my father said. 'When he turns against the queen it must be Mary who picks him up.'

Anne nodded. 'Of course.' Only I could have heard the edge in her voice. 'Mary comes first.'



The king came to the queen's rooms that evening as usual to sit beside her at the fireside. We three of us watched him, certain that he must tire of this domestic peace. But the queen was skilful in entertaining him. There was always a game of cards or dice going on, she had always read the most recent books and could venture and defend an interesting opinion. There were always other visitors, learned or well-travelled men who would talk with the king, there was always the best music, and Henry loved good music. Thomas More was a favourite of hers and sometimes the three of them would walk on the flat roofs of the castle and look at the night skies. More and the king would speak of interpretations of the Bible and whether there would ever come a time when it would be right to allow an English Bible that common people could read. And there were always pretty women. The queen was wise enough to fill her rooms with the prettiest women in the kingdom.

This evening was no exception, she entertained him as if he were a visiting ambassador that she had to favour. After he had talked with her for a while someone asked if he would sing and he took the floor and sung us one of his own compositions. He asked for a lady to take the soprano part and Anne reluctantly and modestly came forward and said that she would try. Of course she had it note perfect. They sang an encore, well pleased with themselves, and then Henry kissed Anne's hand and the queen called for wine for our two songsters.

It was nothing more than a touch to his hand and Anne had him a little aside from the rest of the court. Only the queen and us Boleyns knew that the king had been drawn away. The queen called for one of the musicians to play us another air, she had too much sense ever to be caught glaring after her husband as he started another flirtation. She shot one quick look at me to see how I was taking the sight of my sister on the king's arm and I gave her a bland, innocent smile.

'You are becoming a fine courtier, my little wife,' William Carey remarked.

'I am?'

'When you first came to court you were a fresh piece of goods, hardly glazed by the French court, but now the gilt seems to be entering your soul. Do you ever do a thing without thinking twice?'

For a moment I would have defended myself but I saw Anne speak a sentence to the king and saw him glance back at the queen. Anne put her hand gently on his sleeve and said another soft word. I turned away from William, quite deaf to him, and instead watched the man I loved. I saw his broad

shoulders bend and drop down, as if half his power had gone from him. He looked at the queen as if she had betrayed him, his face vulnerable as a child. Anne turned so he was shielded from the rest of the court and George went forward to ask the queen if we might dance, to keep the attention away from Anne, pouring sorrow into the king's ear.

I could not bear it, I slipped away from the girls who were clamouring to dance and went to Henry, pushing past Anne to get to him. His face was pale, his eyes tragic. I took his hands and said only: 'Oh my dear.'

He turned to me at once. 'Did you know too? Do all her ladies know?'

'I think so,' Anne said. 'We cannot blame her for not wanting to tell you, poor lady, it was her last hope. It was your last chance, sire.'

I felt his fingers grip my hand a little tighter. 'The soothsayer told me ...'

'I know,' I said gently. 'She was probably bribed.'

Anne melted away, and the two of us were alone.

'And I lay with her and tried so hard, and hoped ...'

'I prayed for you,' I whispered. 'For you both. I was so hoping that you would have a son, Henry. Before God, I would rather that she gave you a legitimate son than any other wish in the world.'

'But she cannot now.' His mouth shut like a trap. He looked like a spoilt child, who cannot get what he wants.

'No, not any more,' I confirmed. 'It is over.'

Abruptly he dropped my hands and turned away from me. The dancers parted before his rapid advance as he strode through the sets. He went to the queen, who was seated smiling on her court and said, loud enough for everyone to hear: 'I'm told you are unwell, madam. I could wish you had told me yourself.'

At once she looked to me, her sharp gaze accusing me of betraying her most intimate secret. Minutely I shook my head. She looked for Anne in the dancers and saw her, with George's hand in hers. Blandly, Anne looked back.

'I am sorry, Your Majesty,' the queen said with her immense dignity. 'I should have chosen a more fitting time to discuss this with you.'

'You should have chosen a more immediate time,' he corrected her. 'But since you are unwell I suggest that you dismiss your court and bide by yourself.'

Those of the queen's court who grasped at once what was happening whispered quickly to their neighbours. But most of them stood and stared at the king's sudden storm of bad humour, and at the queen's white-faced endurance.

Henry turned on his heel, snapped his fingers for his friends: George, Henry,

William, Charles, Francis, as if he were calling his dogs, and marched out of the queen's rooms without another word. I was pleased to see that of all of them, my brother George swept her the deepest bow. She let them go without a word, and rose and went quietly into her own privy chamber.

The musicians who had been fiddling away sounding more and more ragged, found their tune had died and they looked around for orders.

'Oh go,' I said in sudden impatience. 'Can't you see there'll be no more dancing and no more singing for tonight? Nobody here needs music. God knows, nobody wants to dance.'

Jane Parker looked at me in surprise. 'I'd have thought you'd have been glad. The king on bad terms with the queen, and you ready to be picked up like a bruised peach in the gutter.'

'And I'd have thought you'd have had more sense than to say such a thing,' Anne said roundly. 'To speak thus of your sister-in-law to be! You had better take care or you won't be welcome in this family.'

Jane did not back down to Anne. 'There's no breaking a betrothal. George and I are as good as wed in church. It's just a question of settling the day. You can welcome me or you can hate me, Miss Anne. But you can't forbid me. We are promised before witnesses.'

'Oh what does it matter!' I cried out. 'What does any of it matter?' I turned and ran to my chamber. Anne slipped in after me.

'What's wrong?' she demanded tersely. 'Is the king angry with us?'

'No, though he should be, for we did a nasty piece of work in telling him the queen's secret.'

'Oh aye,' Anne nodded, quite unmoved. 'But he was not angry with us?'

'No, he's hurt.'

Anne went to the door.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'I'm going to get them to bring the bath here,' she said. 'You're going to wash.'

'Oh Anne,' I said irritably. 'He's heard the worst news in his life. He's in the worst of tempers. He's hardly going to send for me tonight. I can wash tomorrow, if I have to.'

She shook her head. 'I'm taking no chances,' she said. 'You wash tonight.'



She was wrong, but only by a day. The next day the queen sat alone in her room with her ladies and I dined in the privy chamber with my brother, with his friends, and with the king. It was a merry merry evening with music and dancing and gambling. And that night I was in the king's bed once more.



This time Henry and I were all but inseparable. The court knew that we were lovers, the queen knew, even the common people who came out from London to watch us dine knew. I wore his gold bracelet around my wrist, I rode his hunter to hounds. I had a pair of matched diamonds for my ears, I had three new gowns, one of cloth of gold. And one morning in bed he said to me:

‘Did you never wonder what came of that sketch that I asked the artist at the shipyard to do?’

‘I’d forgotten him,’ I said.

‘Come here and kiss me and I will tell you why I ordered him to draw you,’ Henry said lazily.

He lay back on the pillows of his bed. It was late in the morning but the curtains were still drawn around us, shielding us from the servants coming in to make up the fire, to bring him hot water, to empty the piss pot. I swarmed up the bed towards him, leaning my round breasts against his warm chest, letting my hair tumble forward in a veil of gold and bronze. My mouth came down on his, I inhaled the warm erotic scent of his beard, felt the soft prickle of the hairs around his mouth, pushed deeper against his lips and felt, as much as heard, his little groan of desire as I kissed him hard.

I raised my head and smiled into his eyes. ‘There is your kiss,’ I whispered throatily, feeling my desire rise with his. ‘Why did you order the artist to draw me?’

‘I shall show you,’ he promised. ‘After Mass. We’ll ride down to the river and you shall see my new ship and your likeness at the same time.’

‘Is the ship ready?’ I asked. I was reluctant to move away from him but he pulled back the covers and was ready to rise.

‘Yes. We’ll see her launched next week sometime,’ he said. He drew back the bed curtains a little and shouted for a servant to fetch George. I threw on my gown and my cloak and Henry held my hand to help me down from the bed. He kissed me on the cheek. ‘I’ll break my fast with the queen,’ he decided. ‘And then we’ll go out and see the ship.’



It was a lovely morning. I was wearing a new riding habit of yellow velvet, made for me with a bolt of cloth the king had given me. Anne was at my side in one of my old gowns. It gave me a fierce joy to see her wearing my hand-me-downs. But then, in the contradictory way of sisters, I admired what she had done with it. She had ordered it to be shortened and re-cut in the French way and she looked stylish. She wore it with a little French hat made from the material she had saved by cutting the skirt straighter. Henry Percy of Northumberland could not keep his eyes off her, but she flirted with equal charm with all of the king's companions. There were nine of us riding out. Henry and I side by side in the lead. Anne behind me with Percy and William Norris. George and Jane, a silent ill-matched couple, next, and Francis Weston and William Brereton came behind, laughing and cracking jokes. We were preceded only by a couple of grooms and followed by four mounted soldiers.

We rode by the river. The tide was coming in and the waves splashed on the shore, white-capped. The seagulls, blown inland, cried and wheeled above our heads, their wings as bright as silver in the spring sunshine. The hedgerows were greening with the fresh colour of spring growth, primroses like pale pats of creamy butter in the sunny spots on the banks. The track alongside the river was hard-packed mud and the horses cantered along at a good easy pace. As we rode, the king sang me a lovesong of his own composing, and when I heard it over the second time I sang it with him and he laughed at my attempt at harmony. I did not have Anne's talent, I knew. But it did not matter. That day nothing mattered, nothing could matter, but that my beloved and I were riding out together in the brightest of sunshine, on a little journey for pleasure, and he was happy, and I was happy in his sight.

We reached the shipyard sooner than I wanted and Henry himself stood beside my horse, lifted me down from the saddle and held me for a swift kiss when my feet were on the ground.

'Sweetheart,' he whispered. 'I have a little surprise for you.'

He turned me around and stepped to one side so that I could see his beautiful new ship. She was almost ready for the sea now, she had the characteristic high poop deck and prow of a fighting ship, built for speed.

'Look,' Henry said, seeing me taking in her lines but not the detail. He pointed to her name carved and enamelled in gold in bold curly letters at the ornate prow. It said: 'Mary Boleyn'.

For a moment I stared, reading the letters of my name but not understanding. He did not laugh at my astounded face, he watched me, seeing my surprise turn to puzzlement and then to dawning understanding.

‘You named her for me?’ I asked. I could hear my voice quaver. It was an honour too great for me. I felt too young, too small a person altogether to have a ship, and such a ship, named for me. And now everyone in the world would know that I was the king’s mistress. There could be no denial.

‘I did, sweetheart.’ He was smiling. He expected me to be delighted.

He tucked my cold hand under his elbow and urged me to the front of the ship. There was a figurehead, looking out with a proud beautiful profile, looking out over the Thames, out to sea, to France. It was me, with my lips slightly parted, slightly smiling, as if I was a woman to want such an adventure. As if I were not the cat’s-paw of the Howard family but a courageous lovely woman in my own right.

‘Me?’ I asked, my voice a thread above the sound of the water splashing at the side of the dry dock.

Henry’s mouth was at my ear, I could feel the warmth of his breath on my cold cheek.

‘You,’ he said. ‘A beauty, like you. Are you happy, Mary?’

I turned to him and his arms came around me and I stood up on tiptoe and buried my face in the warmth of his neck and smelled the sweet scent of his beard and his hair. ‘Oh Henry,’ I whispered. I wanted my face hidden from him, I knew that he would see no pleasure but a terror at rising so high, so publicly.

‘Are you happy?’ he insisted. He turned my face up, with a hand under my chin, so that he could scan me as if I were a manuscript. ‘It is a great honour.’

‘I know.’ My smile trembled on my lips. ‘I thank you.’

‘And you shall launch her,’ he promised me. ‘Next week.’

I hesitated. ‘Not the queen?’

I was fearful of taking her place to launch the newest and greatest ship that he had ever built. But of course it had to be me. How could she launch a ship that bore my name?

He shrugged her away as if they had not been husband and wife for thirteen years. ‘No,’ he said shortly. ‘Not the queen. You.’

I found a smile from somewhere and hoped that it was convincing and that it hid my terrified sense that I was going too far, too fast, and that the end of this road was not the sort of carefree joy that we had felt this morning, but something darker and more fearful. For all that we had ridden, singing out of tune together,

we were not a lover and his lass. If my name was on this ship, if I launched it next week, then I was a declared rival to the Queen of England. I was an enemy to the Spanish ambassador, to the whole nation of Spain. I was a powerful force in the court, a threat to the Seymour family. The higher I rose in the king's favour the greater the dangers that opened up around me. But I was a young woman of only fifteen years old. I could not yet revel in ambition.

As if she could read my reluctance, Anne was at my side. 'You do my sister a great honour, sire,' she said smoothly. 'It is a most exquisite ship, as lovely as the woman you named her for. And a strong and powerful ship – like yourself. God bless her and send her against our enemies. Whoever they may be.'

Henry smiled at the compliment. 'She is bound to be a lucky ship,' he said. 'With the face of an angel going before her.'

'D'you think she'll have to fight the French this year?' George asked, taking my hand and giving my fingers a quick hidden pinch to recall me to my work as a courtier.

Henry nodded, looking grim. 'Without doubt,' he said. 'And if the Spanish emperor will move in concert with me, we will follow my plan of our attack in the north of France, as he attacks in the south, then we cannot fail to curb Francis's arrogance. This summer we will do it, without fail.'

'If we can trust the Spanish,' Anne said silkily.

Henry's face darkened. 'It is they who have the greatest need of us,' he said. 'Charles had better remember that. This is not a matter of family or kinship. If the queen is displeased with me for one reason or another she must remember that she is a queen of England first, and a princess of Spain second. Her first loyalty must be to me.'

Anne nodded. 'I should hate to be so divided,' she said. 'Thank God we Boleyns are English through and through.'

'For all your French gowns,' Henry said with a sudden gleam of humour.

Anne smiled back at him. 'A gown is a gown,' she said. 'Like Mary's gown of yellow velvet. But you of all people would know that underneath there is a true subject with an undivided heart.'

He turned to me at that and smiled at me as I looked up at him. 'It is my pleasure to reward such a faithful heart,' he said.

I felt that there were tears in my eyes and I tried to blink them away without him seeing, but one stood on my eyelashes. Henry bent down and kissed it. 'Sweetest girl,' he said gently. 'My little English rose.'



The whole court turned out to launch the ship, the *Mary Boleyn*, and only the queen pleaded an indisposition and stayed away. The Spanish ambassador was there to watch the vessel slip into the water, and whatever reservations he felt about the name of the ship he kept to himself.

My father was in a silent frenzy of irritation at himself, at me, at the king. The great honour which had been done to me and to my family had turned out to have a price attached. King Henry was a subtle monarch in such matters. When my uncle and father had thanked him for the compliment of using their name he thanked them for the contribution that he was sure they would want to make to the fitting out of such a ship which would so redound to their credit as it carried the Boleyn name across the seas.

‘And so the stakes go up again,’ George said cheerfully as we watched the boat slide over the rollers into the salty river waters of the Thames.

‘How can they get any higher?’ I asked from the corner of my smiling mouth. ‘I have my life on the table.’

The shipyard workers, already half drunk on free ale, waved their caps and cheered. Anne smiled and waved in reply. George grinned at me. The wind stirred the feather in his cap, ruffled his dark curls. ‘Now it’s costing Father money to keep you in the king’s favour. Now it’s not just your heart and happiness on the table, my little sister, it’s the family fortune. We thought we were playing him for a lovesick fool, but it turns out he’s playing us for money lenders. Stakes go up. Father and Uncle will want to see a return for this investment. You see if they don’t.’

I turned away from George and found Anne. She was a little distance from the court, Henry Percy beside her as usual. They were both watching the ship as the barges towed her out into the river and then turned her, and, struggling against the current, brought her back alongside the jetty and started to tie her up so that she could be fished out as she lay in the water. Anne’s face was bright with the joy that flirtation always brought her.

She turned and smiled at me. ‘Ah, the Queen of the Day,’ she said mockingly.

I made a little grimace. ‘Don’t tease me, Anne. I have had enough from George.’

Henry Percy stepped forward and took my hand and kissed it. As I looked down at the back of his blond head I realised how high my star was rising. This

was Henry Percy, son and heir to the Duke of Northumberland. There was no other man in the kingdom who had fairer prospects or a greater fortune. He was the son of the richest man in England, second only to the king, and he was bowing his head to me and kissing my hand.

‘She shall not tease you,’ he promised me, coming up smiling. ‘For I shall take you in to dine. I’m told that the cooks from Greenwich were out here at dawn to get everything ready. The king is going in, shall we follow?’

I hesitated but the queen, who always created a sense of formality, was left behind at Greenwich, lying in a darkened room with a pain in her belly and fear in her heart. There was no-one at the dockside but the feckless idle men and women of the court. No-one cared about precedence, except in the sense that winners must come first. ‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Why not?’

Lord Henry Percy offered his other arm to Anne. ‘Shall I have two sisters?’

‘I think you would find the Bible forbids it,’ Anne said provocatively. ‘The Bible orders a man to choose between sisters and to stay with his first choice. Anything else is a cardinal sin.’

Lord Henry Percy laughed. ‘I’m sure I could get an indulgence,’ he said. ‘The Pope would surely grant me a dispensation. With two sisters like this, what man could be made to choose?’



We did not ride home until it was twilight and the stars were starting to come out in the pale grey sky of spring. I rode beside the king, my hand in his, and we let the horses amble along the riverside tow track. We rode under the archway of the palace and up to the opening front door. Then he pulled up his horse and he lifted me down from the saddle and whispered in my ear: ‘I wish you were queen for all the days, and not just for one day in a pavilion by the river, my love.’



‘He said what?’ my uncle asked.

I stood before him, like a prisoner under question before the court. Behind the table in the Howard rooms were seated Uncle Howard, Duke of Surrey, and my father and George. At the back of the room, behind me, Anne was sitting

beside my mother. I, alone before the table, stood like a disgraced child before my elders.

‘He said that he wished I was queen for all the days,’ I said in a small voice, hating Anne for betraying my confidence, hating my father and my uncle for their cold-hearted dissection of lovers’ whispers.

‘What d’you think he meant?’

‘Nothing,’ I said sulkily. ‘It’s just love talk.’

‘We need to see some repayment for all these loans,’ my uncle said irritably. ‘Has he said anything about giving you land? Or something for George? Or us?’

‘Can’t you hint him into it?’ my father suggested. ‘Remind him that George is to be married.’

I looked to George in mute appeal.

‘The thing is that he’s very alert for that sort of thing,’ George pointed out. ‘Everyone does it to him all the time. When he walks from his privy chamber to Mass every morning, his way is lined with people just waiting to ask him for a favour. I should think what he likes about Mary here is that she’s not like that. I don’t think she’s ever asked for anything.’

‘She has diamonds worth a fortune in her ears,’ my mother put in sharply from behind me. Anne nodded.

‘But she didn’t ask for them. He gave them freely. He likes to be generous when it’s unexpected. I think we have to let Mary play this her own way. She has a talent for loving him.’

I bit my lip on that, to stop myself saying a word. I did have a talent for loving him. It was perhaps the only talent I had. And this family, this powerful network of men, were using my talent to love the king as they used George’s talents at swordplay, or my father’s talent for languages, to further the interests of our family.

‘Court moves to London next week,’ my father remarked. ‘The king will see the Spanish ambassador. There’s little chance of him making any greater move towards Mary while he needs the Spanish alliance to fight the French.’

‘Better work for peace then,’ my uncle recommended wolfishly.

‘I do. I am a peacemaker,’ my father replied. ‘Blessed, aren’t I?’



The court in progress was always a mighty sight, part-way between a country fair, a market day, and a joust. It was all arranged by Cardinal Wolsey,

everything in the court or the country was done by his command. He had been at the king's side at the Battle of the Spurs in France, he had been almoner then to the English army and the men had never lain so dry at night nor eaten so well. He had a grasp of detail that made him attentive to how the court would get from one place to another, a grasp of politics that prompted him as to where we should stop and which lord should be honoured with a visit when the king was on his summer progress, and he was wily enough to trouble Henry with none of these things so the young king went from pleasure to pleasure as if the sky itself rained down supplies and servants and organisation.

It was the cardinal who ruled the precedence of the court on the move. Ahead of us went the pages carrying the standards with the pennants of all the lords in the train fluttering above their heads. Next there was a gap to let the dust settle and then came the king, riding his best hunter with his embossed saddle of red leather and all the trappings of kingship. Above his head flew his own personal standard, and at his side were his friends chosen to ride with him that day: my husband William Carey, Cardinal Wolsey, my father, and then trailing along behind them came the rest of the king's companions, changing their places in the train as they desired, lagging back or spurring forward. Around them, in a loose formation, came the king's personal guards mounted on horses and holding their lances at the salute. They hardly served to protect him – who would dream of hurting such a king? – but they kept back the press of people who gathered to cheer and gawp whenever we rode through a little town or a village.

Then there was another break before the queen's train. She was riding the steady old palfrey which she always used. She sat straight in the saddle, her gown awkwardly disposed in great folds of thick fabric, her hat skewered on her head, her eyes squinting against the bright sunshine. She was feeling ill. I knew because I had been at her side when she had mounted her horse in the morning and I had heard the tiny repressed grunt of pain as she settled into the saddle.

Behind the queen's court came the other members of the household, some of them riding, some of them seated in carts, some of them singing or drinking ale to keep the dust from the road out of their throats. All of us shared a careless sense of a high day and a holiday as the court left Greenwich and headed for London with a new season of parties and entertainments ahead of us, and who knew what might happen in this year?



The queen's rooms at York Place were small and neat and we took only a few days to get unpacked and have everything to rights. The king visited every morning, as usual, and his court came with him, Lord Henry Percy among them. His lordship and Anne took to sitting in the windowseat together, their heads very close, as they worked on one of Lord Henry's poems. He swore that he would become a great poet under Anne's tuition and she swore that he would never learn anything, but that it was all a ruse to waste her time and her learning on such a dolt.

I thought that it was something for a Boleyn girl from a little castle in Kent and a handful of fields in Essex to call the Duke of Northumberland's son a dolt, but Henry Percy laughed and claimed that she was too stern a teacher and talent, great talent, would out, whatever she might say.

'The cardinal is asking for you,' I said to Lord Henry. He rose up, in no particular hurry, kissed Anne's hand in farewell, and went to find Cardinal Wolsey. Anne gathered up the papers they had been working on and locked them in her writing box.

'Does he really have no talent as a poet?' I asked.

She shrugged with a smile. 'He's no Wyatt.'

'Is he a Wyatt in courtship?'

'He's not married,' she said. 'And so more desirable to a sensible woman.'

'Too high, even for you.'

'I don't see why. If I want him, and he wants me.'

'You try asking Father to speak to the duke,' I recommended sarcastically. 'See what the duke says.'

She turned her head to look out of the window. The long beautiful lawns of York Place stretched down below us, almost hiding the sparkle of the river at the foot of the garden. 'I won't ask Father,' she said. 'I thought I might settle matters on my own account.'

I was going to laugh then I realised she was serious. 'Anne, this is not something you can settle for yourself. He's only a young man, you're only seventeen, you can't decide these things for yourselves. His father is certain to have someone in mind for him, and our father and uncle are certain to have plans for you. We're not private people, we're the Boleyn girls. We have to be guided, we have to do as we are told. Look at me!'

'Yes, look at you!' She rounded on me with a sudden flare of her dark energy. 'Married when you were still a child and now the king's mistress. Half as clever as me! Half as educated! But you are the centre of the court and I am

nothing. I have to be your lady in waiting. I cannot serve you, Mary. It's an insult to me.'

'I never asked you to ...' I stammered.

'Who insists that you bathe and wash your hair?' she demanded fiercely.

'You do. But I ...'

'Who helps you choose your clothes and prompts you with the king? Who has rescued you a thousand times when you've been too stupid and tongue-tied to know how to play him?'

'You. But Anne ...'

'And what is there in this for me? I have no husband who can be given land to show the king's favour. I have no husband to win high office because my sister is the king's mistress. I get nothing from this. However high you rise I still get nothing. I have to have a place of my own.'

'You should have a place of your own,' I said weakly. 'I don't deny it. All I was saying was that I don't think you can be a duchess.'

'And you should decide?' she spat at me. 'You who are nothing but the king's diversion from the important business of making a son if he can and making war if he can raise an army?'

'I don't say I should decide,' I whispered. 'I just said that I don't think they'll let you do it.'

'When it's done, it's done,' she said with a toss of her head. 'And no-one will know until it's done.'

Suddenly, like a striking snake, she reached out and grabbed my hand in a fierce grip. At once she twisted it behind my back and held me so that I could move neither forward nor backwards but only cry out in pain: 'Anne! Don't! You're really hurting!'

'Well, hear this,' she hissed in my ear. 'Hear this, Mary. I am playing my own game and I don't want you interrupting. Nobody will know anything until I am ready to tell them, and then they will know everything too late.'

'You're going to make him love you?'

Abruptly she released me and I gripped my elbow and my arm where the bones ached.

'I'm going to make him marry me,' she said flatly. 'And if you so much as breathe a word to anyone, then I will kill you.'



After that I watched Anne with more care. I saw how she played him. Having advanced through all the cold months of the New Year at Greenwich, now, with the coming of the sun and our arrival in York Place, she suddenly retreated. And the more she withdrew from him the more he came on. When he came into a room she looked up and threw him a smile which went like an arrow to the centre of the target. She filled her look with invitation, with desire. But then she looked away and she would not look at him again for the whole of the visit.

He was in the train of Cardinal Wolsey and was supposed to wait on His Grace while the cardinal visited the king or the queen. In practice there was nothing for the young lord to do but to lounge around the queen's apartments and flirt with anyone who would talk to him. It was clear that he only had eyes for Anne and she walked past him, danced with anyone who asked her but him, dropped her glove and let him return it to her, sat near him but did not speak to him, returned his poems and told him that she could help him no longer.

She went into the most unswerving of retreats, having been unswervingly in advance, and the young man did not begin to know what he could do to recapture her.

He came to me. 'Mistress Carey, have I offended your sister in some way?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'She used to smile on me so charmingly and now she treats me very coldly.'

I thought for a moment, I was so slow at these things. On the one hand was the true answer: that she was playing him like a complete angler with a fish on the line. But I knew Anne would not want me to say that. On the other hand was the answer Anne would want me to give. I looked into Henry Percy's anxious baby face for a moment of genuine compassion. Then I gave him the Boleyn smile and the Howard answer. 'Indeed, my lord, I think she is afraid to be too kind.'

I saw the hope leap up in his trusting, boyish face. 'Too kind?'

'She was very kind to you, was she not, my lord?'

He nodded. 'Oh yes. I'm her slave.'

'I think she feared that she might come to like you too much.'

He leaned forward as if to snatch the words from my mouth. 'Too much?'

'Too much for her own peace of mind,' I said very softly.

He leaped up and took two strides away from me and then came back again. 'She might desire me?'

I smiled and turned my head a little so that he could not see my weariness at this deceit. He was not to be put off. He dropped to his knees before me and

peered up into my face.

‘Tell me, Mistress Carey,’ he begged. ‘I have not slept for nights. I have not eaten for days. I am a soul in torment. Tell me if you think that she loves me, if you think that she might love me. Tell me, for pity’s sake.’

‘I cannot say.’ Indeed, I could not. The lies would have stuck in my throat. ‘You must ask her yourself.’

He sprang up, like a hare out of bracken with the beagle hounds behind it. ‘I will! I will! Where is she?’

‘Playing at bowls in the garden.’

He needed nothing more, he tore open the door and ran out of the room. I heard the heels of his boots ring down the stone stairs to the door to the garden. Jane Parker, who had been seated across the room from us, looked up.

‘Have you made another conquest?’ she asked, getting the wrong idea as usual.

I gave her a smile as poisonous as her own. ‘Some women attract desire. Others do not,’ I said simply.



He found her at the bowling green, losing daintily and deliberately to Sir Thomas Wyatt.

‘I shall write you a sonnet,’ Wyatt promised. ‘For handing me victory with such grace.’

‘No, no, it was a fair battle,’ Anne protested.

‘If there had been money on it I think I would be getting out my purse,’ he said. ‘You Boleyns only lose when there is nothing to gain by winning.’

Anne smiled. ‘Next time you shall put your fortune on it,’ she promised him. ‘See – I have lulled you into a sense of safety.’

‘I have no fortune to offer but my heart.’

‘Will you walk with *me*?’ Henry Percy interrupted, his voice coming out far louder than he intended.

Anne gave a little start as if she had not noticed him there. ‘Oh! Lord Henry.’

‘The lady is playing bowls,’ Sir Thomas said.

Anne smiled at them both. ‘I have been so roundly defeated that I will take a walk and plan my strategy,’ she said and put her hand on Lord Henry Percy’s arm.

He led her away from the bowling green, down the winding path that led to a

seat beneath a yew tree.

‘Miss Anne,’ he began.

‘Is it too damp to sit?’

At once he swung his rich cloak from his shoulder and spread it out for her on a stone bench.

‘Miss Anne ...’

‘No, I am too chilled,’ she decided and rose up from the seat.

‘Miss Anne!’ he exclaimed, a little more crossly.

Anne paused and turned her seductive smile on him.

‘Your lordship?’

‘I have to know why have you grown so cold to me?’

For a moment she hesitated, then she dropped the coquettish play and turned a face to him which was grave and lovely.

‘I did not mean to be cold,’ she said slowly. ‘I meant to be careful.’

‘Of what?’ he exclaimed. ‘I have been in torment!’

‘I did not mean to torment you. I meant to draw back a little. Nothing more than that.’

‘Why?’ he whispered.

She looked down the garden to the river. ‘I thought it better for me, perhaps better for us both,’ she said quietly. ‘We might become too close in friendship for my comfort.’

He took a swift step from her and then back to her side. ‘I would never cause you a moment’s uneasiness,’ he assured her. ‘If you wanted me to promise you that we would be friends and that no breath of scandal would ever come to you, I would have promised that.’

She turned her dark luminous eyes on him. ‘Could you promise that no-one would ever say that we were in love?’

Mutely, he shook his head. Of course he could not promise what a scandal-mad court might or might not say.

‘Could you promise that we would never fall in love?’

He hesitated. ‘Of course I love you, Mistress Anne,’ he said. ‘In the courtly way. In the polite way.’

She smiled as if she were pleased to hear it. ‘I know it is nothing more than a May game. For me, also. But it’s a dangerous game when played between a handsome man and a maid, when there are many people very quick to say that we are made for each other, that we are perfectly matched.’

‘Do they say that?’

‘When they see us dance. When they see how you look at me. When they see how I smile at you.’

‘What else do they say?’ He was quite entranced by this portrait.

‘They say that you love me. They say that I love you. They say that we have both been head over heels in love while we thought we were doing nothing but playing.’

‘My God,’ he said at the revelation. ‘My God, it is so!’

‘Oh my lord! What are you saying?’

‘I am saying that I have been a fool. I have been in love with you for months and all the time I thought I was amusing myself and you were teasing me, and that it all meant nothing.’

Her gaze warmed him. ‘It was not nothing to me,’ she whispered.

Her dark eyes held him, the boy was transfixed. ‘Anne,’ he whispered. ‘My love.’

Her lips curved into a kissable, irresistible smile. ‘Henry,’ she breathed. ‘My Henry.’

He took a small step towards her, put his hands on her tightly laced waist. He drew her close to him and Anne yielded, took one seductive step closer. His head came down as her face tipped up and his mouth found hers for their first kiss.

‘Oh, say it,’ Anne whispered. ‘Say it now, this moment, say it, Henry.’

‘Marry me,’ he said.



‘And so it was done,’ Anne reported blithely in our bedroom that night. She had ordered the bath tub to be brought in and we had gone into the hot water, one after another, and scrubbed each other’s backs and washed each other’s hair. Anne, as fanatical as a French courtesan about cleanliness, was ten times more rigorous than usual. She inspected my fingernails and toenails as if I were a dirty schoolboy, she handed me an ivory earscoop to clean out my ears as if I were her child, she pulled the lice comb through every lock of my head, reckless of my whimpers of pain.

‘And so? What is done?’ I asked sulkily, dripping on the floor and wrapping myself in a sheet. Four maids came in and started to bale out the water into buckets so that the great wooden bath could be carried away. The sheets they used to line the bath were heavy and sodden, it all seemed like a great deal of effort for very little gain. ‘For all I have heard is more flirtation.’

‘He’s asked me,’ Anne said. She waited till the door was shut behind the servants and then wrapped the sheet more tightly around her breasts and seated herself before the mirror.

There was a knock at the door.

‘Who is it now?’ I called in exasperation.

‘It’s me,’ George replied.

‘We’re bathing,’ I said.

‘Oh let him come in.’ Anne started to comb through her black hair. ‘He can pull out these tangles.’

George lounged into the room and raised a dark eyebrow at the mess of water on the floor and wet sheets, at the two of us, half naked, and Anne with a thick mane of wet hair thrown over her shoulder.

‘Is this a masque? Are you mermaids?’

‘Anne insisted that we should bathe. Again.’

Anne offered him her comb and he took it.

‘Comb my hair,’ she said with her sly sideways smile. ‘Mary always pulls.’ Obediently, he stood behind her and started to comb through her dark hair, a strand at a time. He combed her carefully, as he would handle his mare’s mane. Anne closed her eyes and luxuriated in his grooming.

‘Any lice?’ she asked, suddenly alert.

‘None yet,’ he reassured her, as intimate as a Venetian hairdresser.

‘So what’s done?’ I demanded, returning to Anne’s announcement.

‘I have him,’ she said frankly. ‘Henry Percy. He has told me he loves me, he has told me that he wants to marry me. I want you and George to witness our betrothal, he can give me a ring, and then it’s done and unbreakable, as good as a marriage in a church before a priest. And I shall be a duchess.’

‘Good God.’ George froze, the comb held in the air. ‘Anne! Are you sure?’

‘Am I likely to bodge this?’ she asked tersely.

‘No,’ he allowed. ‘But still. The Duchess of Northumberland! My God, Anne, you will own most of the north of England.’

She nodded, smiling at herself in the mirror.

‘Good God, we will be the greatest family in the country! We’ll be one of the greatest in Europe. With Mary in the king’s bed and you the wife of his greatest subject, we will put the Howards so high they can never fall.’ He broke off for a moment as he thought through to the next step.

‘My God, if Mary was to fall pregnant to the king and to have a boy, then with Northumberland behind him he could take the throne as his own. I could be

uncle to the King of England.'

'Yes,' Anne said silkily. 'That was what I thought.'

I said nothing, watching my sister's face.

'The Howard family on the throne,' George murmured, half to himself. 'Northumberland and Howards in alliance. It's done, isn't it? When those two come together. They would only come together through a marriage and an heir for both of them to strive for. Mary could bear the heir, and Anne could weld the Percys to his future.'

'You thought I'd never achieve it,' Anne said, pointing a finger at me.

I nodded. 'I thought you were aiming too high.'

'You'll know another time,' she warned me. 'Where I aim, I will hit.'

'I'll know another time,' I concurred.

'But what about him?' George warned her. 'What if they disinherit him? Fine place you'll be in then, married to the boy who used to be heir to a dukedom, but now disgraced and owning nothing.'

She shook her head. 'They won't do that. He's too precious to them. But you have to take my part, George; and Father and Uncle Howard. His father has to see that we are good enough. Then they'll let the betrothal stand.'

'I'll do all I can but the Percys are a proud lot, Anne. They meant him for Mary Talbot until Wolsey came out against the match. They won't want you instead of her.'

'Is it just his wealth that you want?' I asked.

'Oh, the title too,' Anne said crudely.

'I mean, really. What d'you feel for him?'

For a moment I thought she was going to turn aside the question with another hard joke which would make his boyish adoration of her seem like nothing. But then she tossed her head and the clean hair flew through George's hands like a dark river.

'Oh, I know I'm a fool! I know he is nothing more than a boy, and a silly boy at that, but when he is with me I feel like a girl myself. I feel as if we are two youngsters, in love and with nothing to fear. He makes me feel reckless! He makes me feel enchanted! He makes me feel in love!'

It was as if the Howard spell of coldness had been broken, smashed like a mirror, and everything was real and bright. I laughed with her and snatched up her hands and looked into her face. 'Isn't it wonderful?' I demanded. 'Falling in love? Isn't it the most wonderful, wonderful thing?'

She pulled her hands away. 'Oh, go away, Mary. You are such a child. But

yes! Wonderful? Yes! Now don't simper over me, I can't stand it.'

George took a hank of her dark hair and twisted it onto the top of her head and admired her face in the mirror. 'Anne Boleyn in love,' he said thoughtfully. 'Who'd have believed it?'

'It'd never have happened if he hadn't been the greatest man in the kingdom after the king,' she reminded him. 'I don't forget what's due to me and my family.'

He nodded. 'I know that, Annamaria. We all knew that you would aim very high. But a Percy! It's higher than I imagined.'

She leaned forward as if to interrogate her reflection. She cupped her face in her hands. 'This is my first love. My first and ever love.'

'Please God that you are lucky and that it is your last love as well as your first,' George said, suddenly sober.

Her dark eyes met his in the mirror. 'Please God,' she said. 'I want nothing more in my life but Henry Percy. With that I would be content. Oh – George, I cannot tell you. If I can have and hold Henry Percy I will be so very content.'



Henry Percy came, at Anne's bidding, to the queen's rooms at noon the next day. She had chosen her time with care. The ladies had all gone to Mass, and we had the rooms to ourselves. Henry Percy came in and looked around, surprised at the silence and emptiness. Anne went up to him and took both his hands in hers. I thought for a moment that he looked, not so much courted as hunted.

'My love,' Anne said, and at the sound of her voice the boy's face warmed; his courage came back to him.

'Anne,' he said softly.

His hand fumbled in the pocket of his padded breeches, he drew a ring out of an inner pocket. From my station in the windowseat I could see the wink of a red ruby – the symbol of a virtuous woman.

'For you,' he said softly.

Anne took his hand. 'Do you want to plight our troth now, before witnesses?' she asked.

He gulped a little. 'Yes, I do.'

She glowed at him. 'Do it then.'

He glanced at George and me as if he thought one of us might stop him.

George and I smiled encouragingly, the Boleyn smile: a pair of pleasant

snakes.

‘I, Henry Percy, take thee, Anne Boleyn, to be my lawful wedded wife,’ he said, taking Anne by the hand.

‘I, Anne Boleyn, take thee, Henry Percy, to be my lawful wedded husband,’ she said, her voice steadier than his.

He found the third finger of her left hand. ‘With this ring I promise myself to you,’ he said quietly, and slipped it on her finger. It was too loose. She clenched a fist to hold it on.

‘With this ring, I take you,’ she replied.

He bent his head, he kissed her. When she turned her face to me her eyes were hazy with desire.

‘Leave us,’ she said in a low voice.



We gave them two hours, and then we heard, down the stone corridors, the queen and her ladies coming back from Mass. We knocked loudly on the door in the rhythm that meant ‘Boleyn!’ and we knew that Anne, even in a sated sleep, would hear it and jump up. But when we opened the door and went in, she and Henry Percy were composing a madrigal. She was playing the lute and he was singing the words they had written together. Their heads were very close so that they might both see the hand-written music on the stand, but excepting that intimacy, they were as they had been any day these last three months.

Anne smiled at me as George and I came into the room, followed by the queen’s ladies.

‘We have written such a pretty air, it has taken us all the morning,’ Anne said sweetly.

‘And what is it called?’ George asked.

‘“Merrily, merrily”,’ Anne replied. ‘It’s called “Merrily Merrily and Onward We Go”.’



That night it was Anne who left our bedchamber. She threw a dark cloak over her gown and went to the door as the palace tower bell rang for midnight.

‘Where are you going at this time of night?’ I demanded, scandalised.

Her pale face looked out at me from under the dark hood. 'To my husband,' she said simply.

'Anne, you cannot,' I said, aghast. 'You will get caught and you will be ruined.'

'We are betrothed in the sight of God and before witnesses. That's as good as a marriage, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I said unwillingly.

'A marriage could be overthrown for non-consummation, couldn't it?'

'Yes.'

'So I'm making it fast,' she said. 'Not even the Percy family will be able to wriggle out of it when Henry and I tell them that we are wedded and bedded.'

I kneeled up in the bed, imploring her to stay. 'But Anne, if someone sees you!'

'They won't,' she said.

'When the Percys know that you and he have been slipping out at midnight!'

She shrugged. 'I don't see the how or where makes much difference. As long as it is done.'

'If it should come to nothing –' I broke off at the blaze of her eyes. In one stride she was across the room and she had her hands at the neck of my nightdress, twisting it against my throat. 'That is why I am doing this,' she hissed. 'Fool that you are. So that it does not come to nothing. So that no-one can ever say that it was nothing. So that it is signed and sealed. Wedded and bedded. Done without possibility of denial. Now you sleep. I shall be back in the early hours. Long before dawn. But I shall go now.'

I nodded and said not a word until her hand was on the ring of the door latch. 'But Anne, do you love him?' I asked curiously.

The curve of her hood hid all but the corner of her smile. 'I am a fool to own it, but I am in a fever for his touch.'

Then she opened the door, and was gone.

Summer 1523

The court saw in the May with a day of revels, planned and executed by Cardinal Wolsey. The ladies of the queen's court went out on barges, all dressed in white, and were surprised by French brigands, dressed in black. A rescue party of freeborn Englishmen, dressed all in green, rowed to the rescue and there was a merry fight with water thrown from buckets, and water cannonade with pigs' bladders filled with water. The royal barge, decorated all over in green bunting and flying a greenwood flag, had an ingenious cannon that fired little water bombs which blasted the French brigands out of the water, and they had to be rescued by the Thames boatmen who were well paid for their trouble and then had to be prevented from joining in the fight.

The queen was thoroughly splashed in the battle and she laughed as merry as a girl to see her husband with a mask on his face and a hat on his head, playing at Robin of Nottingham and throwing a rose to me, as I sat in the barge beside her.

We landed at York Place and the cardinal himself greeted us on shore. There were musicians hidden in the trees of the garden. Robin of Greenwood, half a head taller than anyone else and golden-haired, led me into the dance. I saw the queen's smile never falter as the king took my hand and placed it on his green doublet, over his heart, and I tucked his rose into my hood so that it bloomed at my temple.

The cardinal's cooks had surpassed themselves. As well as stuffed peacock and swan, goose and chicken, there were great haunches of venison and four different sorts of roasted fish, including his favourite, carp. The sweetmeats on the table were a tribute to the May, all made into flowers and bouquets in marchpane, almost too pretty to break and eat. After we had eaten and the day started to grow chilly, the musicians played an eerie little tune and led us up through the darkening gardens into the great hall of York Place.

It was transformed. The cardinal had ordered it swathed in green cloth, fastened at every corner with great boughs of flowering may. In the centre of the room were two great thrones, one for the king and one for the queen, with the

king's choristers dancing and singing before them. We all took our places and watched the children's masque and then we all rose and danced too.

We made merry till midnight and then the queen rose and signalled to her ladies to leave the room. I was following in her train when my gown was caught by the king.

'Come to me now,' Henry said urgently.

The queen turned to make her farewell curtsey to the king and saw him, with his hand on the hem of my gown and me hesitating before him. She did not falter, she swept him her dignified Spanish curtsey.

'I give you good night, husband,' she said in her deep sweet tone. 'Good night, Mistress Carey.'

I dropped like a stone into a curtsey to her. 'Good night, Your Majesty,' I whispered, my head down. I wished that the curtsey might take me down further, into the floor, into the ground below the floor, so she could not see my scarlet burning face as I came up.

When I rose up she was gone and he was turned aside. He had forgotten her already, it was as if a mother had left the young people to play at last. 'Let's have some more music,' he said joyously. 'And some wine.'

I looked around. The ladies of the queen's court were gone with her. George smiled reassuringly at me.

'Don't fret,' he said in an undertone.

I hesitated but Henry, who had been taking a glass of wine, turned back to me with a goblet in his hand. 'To the Queen of the May!' he said, and his court, who would have repeated Dutch riddles if he had recited them, obediently replied: 'To the Queen of the May!' and raised their glasses to me.

Henry took me by the hand and led me up to the throne where Queen Katherine had been sitting. I went with him but I could feel my feet drag. I was not ready to sit on her chair.

Gently he urged me up the steps and I turned and looked down at the innocent faces of the children below me, and the more knowing smiles from Henry's court.

'Let's dance for the Queen of the May!' Henry said, and swept a girl into a set and they danced before me, and I, seated on the queen's throne, watching her husband dance, and flirt prettily with his partner, knew that I wore her tolerant mask-like smile on my own face.



A day after the May Day feast Anne came whirling into our room, white-faced. 'See this!' she hissed and threw a piece of paper on the bed.

Dear Anne, I cannot come to see you today. My lord cardinal knows everything and I am bidden to explain to him. But I swear I shall not fail you.

'Oh my God,' I said softly. 'The cardinal knows. The king will know too.'

'So what?' Anne demanded, like a striking adder. 'So what if they all know? It's a proper betrothal, isn't it? Why shouldn't they all know?'

I saw that the paper was shaking in my hand. 'What does he mean, he will not fail you?' I asked. 'If it is an unbreakable betrothal then he cannot fail. There can be no question of failure.'

Anne took three swift steps across the room, came up short against the wall, wheeled around and took three steps back again, prowling like a lion in the Tower. 'I don't know what he means by that,' she spat. 'The boy's a fool.'

'You said you loved him.'

'That doesn't mean he's not a fool.' She reached a sudden decision. 'I must go to him. He'll need me. He'll wilt beneath them.'

'You cannot. You'll have to wait.'

She flung open the clothes press and pulled out her cloak.

There was a thunderous knock on the door and we both froze. In one movement she had the cloak off her shoulders, slammed into the press and she was sitting on it, serene, as if she had been there all the morning. I opened the door. It was a serving man in the livery of Cardinal Wolsey.

'Is Mistress Anne within?'

I opened the door a little wider so he could see her, thoughtfully gazing out over the garden. The cardinal's barge with the distinctive red standards was moored at the bottom of the garden.

'Will you please come to the cardinal in the audience room,' he said.

Anne turned her head and looked at him without replying.

'At once,' he said. 'My lord the cardinal said that you were to come at once.'

She did not flare up at the arrogance of the command. She knew as well as I did that since Cardinal Wolsey ran the kingdom, a word from him carried the same weight as a word from the king. She crossed to the mirror, threw one glance at her reflection. She pinched her cheeks to draw a little colour to them, bit her upper lip and then her lower.

‘Shall I come too?’ I asked.

‘Yes, walk beside me,’ she said in a rapid undertone. ‘It’ll remind him that you have the ear of the king. And if the king is there – soften him if you can.’

‘I can’t demand anything,’ I whispered urgently.

Even at this moment of crisis she shot me a swift patronising smile. ‘I know *that*.’

We followed the servant through the great hall and to Henry’s audience room. It was unusually deserted. Henry was out hunting, the court with him. The cardinal’s men in their scarlet livery were at the doors. They stepped back to let us through and then barred the way once more. His lordship had made sure that we would not be interrupted.

‘Mistress Anne,’ he said as she entered the room. ‘I have heard a most distressing piece of news today.’

Anne stood very still, her hands folded, her face serene. ‘I am sorry to hear that, Your Grace,’ she said smoothly.

‘It seems that my page, young Henry of Northumberland, has presumed on his friendship with you and on the freedom which I allow him to dally in the queen’s rooms and prattle of love.’

Anne shook her head, but the cardinal would not let her speak.

‘I have told him this day that such freakish sports are not fitting in one who will inherit the counties of the North and whose marriage is a matter for his father, for the king, and for me. He is not a lad on a farm who can tumble the milkmaid into the haystack and no-one think the less. The marriage of a lord as great as he is a matter of policy.’ He paused. ‘And the king and I make the policy in this kingdom.’

‘He asked me for my hand in marriage and I gave it to him,’ Anne said steadily. I could see the gold ‘B’ she wore on the pearl choker around her neck bumping to her rapid heartbeat. ‘We are betrothed, my lord cardinal. I am sorry if the match is not to your liking but it is done. It cannot be undone.’

He shot her one dark look from under his plump hat.

‘Lord Henry has agreed to submit to the authority of his father and of the king,’ he said. ‘I am telling you this out of courtesy, Mistress Boleyn, and so that you may avoid giving offence to those set above you by God.’

She went white. ‘He never said that. He never said he would submit to his father’s authority instead of –’

‘Instead of yours? You know, I *did* wonder if that was how it was. Indeed, he did, Mistress Anne. All of this little matter is in the hands of the king and the

duke.'

'He is promised to me, we are betrothed,' she said fiercely.

'It was a de futuro betrothal,' the cardinal ruled. 'A promise to marry in the future if possible.'

'It was de facto,' Anne replied unswervingly. 'A betrothal made before witnesses, and consummated.'

'Ah.' One podgy hand was raised in caution. The heavy cardinal's ring winked at Anne as if to remind her that this man was the spiritual leader of England. 'Please do not suggest that such a thing could have happened. It would be too imprudent. If I say that the betrothal was de futuro then that is what it was, Mistress Anne. I cannot be in the wrong. If a lady bedded a man on such slender surety she would be a fool. A lady who had given herself and then found herself abandoned would be totally ruined. She would never marry at all.'

Anne shot a swift sideways glance at me. Wolsey must have been aware of the irony of preaching the virtues of virginity to a woman who was sister to the most notorious adulteress in the kingdom. But his gaze never wavered.

'It would be very injurious to you, Mistress Boleyn, if your affection for Lord Henry persuaded you to tell me such a lie.'

I could see her fighting her rising panic. 'My lord cardinal,' she said, and her voice quavered slightly. 'I would be a good Duchess of Northumberland. I would care for the poor, I would see justice done in the North. I would protect England from the Scots. I would be your friend forever. I would be eternally in your debt.'

He smiled a little, as if the thought of Anne's favour was not the greatest of bribes he had ever been offered. 'You would be a delightful duchess,' he said. 'If not of Northumberland then elsewhere, I am sure. Your father will have to make that decision. It will be his choice where you are wed, and the king and I will have some say in the matter. Rest assured, my daughter in Christ, I will be careful of your wishes. I will bear in mind,' he did not trouble to hide a smile, 'I will bear in mind that you wish to be a duchess.'

He held out his hand and Anne had to step forward, curtsy, and kiss the ring, and then walk backwards from the room.

When the door shut on us she did not say a word. She turned on her heel and headed for the stone staircase down to the garden. She did not speak until we had marched down the pretty winding paths and were deep in a bower of roses which were sprawling around a stone seat and opening their white and scarlet petals to the sunshine.

‘What can I do?’ she demanded. ‘Think! Think!’

I was about to answer that I could think of nothing, but she was not talking to me. She was talking to herself. ‘Can I outflank Northumberland? Get Mary to plead my case with the king?’ She shook her head for a moment. ‘Mary can’t be trusted. She’d bodge it.’

I bit back my indignant denial. Anne strode up and down the grass, her skirts swishing around her high-heeled shoes. I sank down to the seat and watched her.

‘Can I send George to stiffen Henry’s resolve?’ She took another turn. ‘My father, my uncle,’ she said rapidly. ‘It’s in their interest to see me rise. They could speak to the king, they could influence the cardinal. They might find me a dowry which would attract Northumberland. They would want me as duchess.’ She nodded with sudden determination. ‘They must stand by me,’ she decided. ‘They will stand by me. And when Northumberland comes to London they will tell him that the betrothal is done, and that the marriage has taken place.’



The family meeting was convened in the Howard house in London. My mother and father were seated at the great table, my uncle Howard between them. Myself and George, sharing Anne’s disgrace, were standing at the back of the room. And it was Anne who was before the table like a prisoner before the bar. She did not stand with her head bowed as I always did. Anne stood with her head high, one dark eyebrow slightly raised, and she met my uncle’s glare as if she were his equal.

‘I am sorry that you have learned French practices along with your style of dress,’ my uncle said baldly. ‘I warned you before that I would have no whisper against your name. Now I hear that you have allowed young Percy improper intimacies.’

‘I have lain with my husband,’ Anne said flatly.

My uncle glanced at my mother.

‘If you say that, or anything like it, ever again, you will be whipped and sent to Hever and never brought back to court,’ my mother said quietly. ‘I would rather see you dead at my feet than dishonoured. You shame yourself before your father and your uncle if you say such a thing. You make yourself a disgrace. You make yourself hateful to us all.’

Seated behind Anne I could not see her face, but I saw her fingers take in a fold of her gown, as a drowning man might catch at a straw.

‘You will go to Hever until everyone has forgotten about this unfortunate mistake,’ my uncle ruled.

‘I beg your pardon,’ Anne said bitingly. ‘But the unfortunate mistake is not mine but yours. Lord Henry and I are married. He will stand by me. You and my father must bring pressure to bear on his father, on the cardinal and the king, to let this marriage be made public. If you will do this then I am the Duchess of Northumberland and you have a Howard girl in the greatest duchy of England. I would have thought that gain was worth a little struggle. If I am duchess and Mary has a son then he is the nephew of the Duke of Northumberland and the king’s bastard. We could put him on the throne.’

Uncle’s gaze flared at her. ‘This king executed the Duke of Buckingham two years ago for saying less than that,’ he said very quietly. ‘My own father signed the death warrant. This is not a king who is careless of his heirs. You will never, ever speak like this again or you will find yourself not at Hever but behind the walls of a nunnery for life. I mean it, Anne. I will not have the safety of this family jeopardised by your folly.’

He had shocked her with his quiet rage. She gulped and tried to recover. ‘I will say no more,’ she whispered. ‘But this could work.’

‘Can’t be done,’ my father said flatly. ‘Northumberland won’t have you. And Wolsey won’t let us leap up that high. And the king will do what Wolsey says.’

‘Lord Henry promised me,’ Anne said passionately.

My uncle shook his head and was about to rise from the table, the meeting was over.

‘Wait,’ Anne said desperately. ‘We can achieve this. I swear to you. If you will stand by me then Henry Percy will stand by me, and the cardinal and the king and his father will have to come round to it.’

My uncle did not hesitate for a moment. ‘They won’t. You are a fool. You can’t fight Wolsey. There isn’t a man in the country who is a match for Wolsey. And we won’t risk his enmity. He would put Mary out of the king’s bed and pop a Seymour girl in her place. Everything we are striving to do with Mary will be upset if we support you. This is Mary’s chance, not yours. We won’t have you spoil it. We’ll have you out of the way for the summer at least, perhaps for a year.’

She was stunned into silence. ‘But I love him,’ she said.

There was a silence in the room.

‘I do,’ she said. ‘I love him.’

‘That means nothing to me,’ my father said. ‘Your marriage is the business

of the family and you will leave that to us. You'll go to Hever for at least a year's banishment from court and think yourself lucky. And if you write to him, or reply to him, or see him again, then it will be a nunnery for you. A closed order.'



'Well, that didn't go too badly,' George said with forced cheerfulness. He and Anne and I were walking down to the river to get the boat back to York Place. A servant in Howard livery went before us, pushing beggars and street sellers out of the way, and one came behind to guard us. Anne walked blindly, quite unaware of the eddy of disturbance all down the crowded street.

There were people selling goods from off the backs of carts, bread and fruit and live ducks and hens, fresh up from the country. There were fat London housewives bartering for the goods, quicker-tongued and quicker-witted than the countrymen and -women, who were slow and careful, hoping to get a fair price for their provender. There were pedlars with chapbooks and music sheets in their sacks, cobblers with sets of ready-made shoes trying to persuade people that they would fit all varieties of foot. There were flower sellers and watercress sellers, there were lounging pageboys and chimney sweeps, there were link boys with nothing to do till the dark came, and street sweepers. There were servants idling on their way to and from marketing, and outside every shop there was the wife of the owner, sat plump on her stool, smiling at the passers-by and urging them to step inside and see what was for sale.

George threaded Anne and me through this tapestry of business like a determined bodkin. He was desperate to get Anne home before the storm of her temper broke.

'Went very well indeed, I'd say,' he said staunchly.

We reached a pier leading out into the river and the Howard servant hailed a boat. 'To York Place,' George said tersely.

The tide was with us and we went quickly upriver, Anne looking blindly at the beach on either side strewn with the dirt of the city.

We landed at the York Place jetty and the Howard servants bowed and took the boat back to the City. George swept Anne and me up to our room and finally got the door closed behind us.

At once Anne whirled round on him and leaped like a wildcat. He grabbed her wrists in his hands and wrestled her away from his face.

‘Went pretty well!’ she shrieked at him. ‘Pretty well! When I have lost the man I love, and my reputation as well? When I am all but ruined and shall be buried in the country until everyone has forgotten about me? Pretty well! When my own father will not stand by me and when my own mother swears that she would rather see me dead? Are you mad, you fool? Are you mad? Or just dumb, blind, God-rotting stupid?’

He held her wrists. She made another slash at his face with her nails. I came from behind and pulled her backwards so that she should not stamp on his feet with her high heels. We reeled, the three of us, like drunkards in a brawl, I was crushed against the foot of the bed as she fought me as well as him, but I clung on around her waist, pulling her backwards as George gripped her hands to save his face. It felt as if we were fighting something worse than Anne, some demon that possessed her, that possessed all of us Boleyns: ambition – the devil that had brought us to this little room and brought my sister to this insane distress, and us to this savage battle.

‘Peace, for God’s sake,’ George shouted at her as he fought to avoid her fingernails.

‘Peace!’ she screamed at him. ‘How can I be at peace?’

‘Because you’ve lost,’ George said simply. ‘Nothing to fight for now, Anne. You’ve lost.’

For a moment she froze quite still, but we were too wary to let her go. She glared into his face as if she were quite demented and then she threw back her head and laughed a wild savage laugh.

‘Peace!’ she cried passionately. ‘My God! I shall die peacefully. They will leave me at Hever until I am peacefully dead. And I will never ever see him again!’

She gave a great heartbroken wail at that, and the fight went out of her and she slumped down. George released her wrists and caught her to him. She flung her arms around his neck and buried her face against his chest. She was sobbing so hard, so inarticulate with grief that I could not hear what she was saying, then I felt my own tears come as I made out what she was crying, over and over. ‘Oh God, I loved him, I loved him, he was my only love, my only love.’



They wasted no time. Anne’s clothes were packed and her horse saddled and George ordered to escort her to Hever that same day. Nobody told Lord Henry

Percy that she had gone. He sent a letter to her; and my mother, who was everywhere, opened it and read it calmly before thrusting it on the fire.

‘What did he say?’ I asked quietly.

‘Undying love,’ my mother said with distaste.

‘Should we not tell him that she’s gone?’

My mother shrugged. ‘He’ll know soon enough. His father is seeing him this morning.’

I nodded. Another letter came at midday, Anne’s name scrawled on the front in an unsteady hand. There was a smudge, perhaps a tearstain. My mother opened it, granite-faced, and it went the way of the first.

‘Lord Henry?’ I asked.

She nodded.

I rose from my place at the fireside and sat in the windowseat. ‘I might go out,’ I said.

She turned her head. ‘You’ll stay here,’ she said sharply.

The old habit of obedience and deference to her had a strong hold on me. ‘Of course, my lady mother. But can I not walk in the garden?’

‘No,’ she said shortly. ‘Your father and uncle have ruled that you are to stay indoors, until Northumberland has dealt with Henry Percy.’

‘I’m not likely to stand in the way of that, walking in the garden,’ I protested.

‘You might send a message to him.’

‘I would not!’ I exclaimed. ‘Surely to God you can all see that the one thing, the *one thing* is that I always, always, do as I am told. You made my marriage at the age of twelve, madam. You ended it just two years later when I was only fourteen. I was in the king’s bed before my fifteenth birthday. Surely you can see that I have always done as I have been told by this family? If I could not fight for my own freedom I am hardly likely to fight for my sister’s!’

She nodded. ‘Good thing too,’ she said. ‘There is no freedom for women in this world, fight or not as you like. See where Anne has brought herself.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘To Hever. Where at least she is free to go out on the land.’

My mother looked surprised. ‘You sound envious.’

‘I love it there,’ I said. ‘Sometimes I think I prefer it even to court. But you will break Anne’s heart.’

‘Her heart has to break and her spirit has to break if she is to be any use to her family,’ my mother said coldly. ‘It should have been done in her childhood. I thought they would teach you both the habits of obedience in the French court but it seems they were remiss. So it has to be done now.’

There was a tap at the door and a man in shabby clothes stood uneasily on the threshold.

‘A letter for Mistress Anne Boleyn,’ he said. ‘For none but her, and the young lord said I was to watch you read it.’

I hesitated, I glanced across at my mother. She gave me a quick nod of her head and I broke the red seal with the Northumberland crest, and unfolded the stiff paper.

My wife,

I will not be forsworn if you will stand by the promises we have made to each other. I will not desert you if you do not desert me. My father is most angry with me, the cardinal too, and I do fear for us. But if we hold to each other then they must let us be together. Send me a note, a word only, that you will stand by me, and I will stand by you.

Henry.

‘He said there should be a reply,’ the man said.

‘Wait outside,’ my mother said to the man, and closed the door in his face. She turned to me. ‘Write a reply.’

‘He’ll know her handwriting,’ I said unhelpfully.

She slid a piece of paper before me, put a pen in my hand and dictated the letter.

Lord Henry,

Mary is writing this for me as I am forbidden to put pen to paper to you. It is no use. They will not let us marry and I have to give you up. Do not stand against the cardinal and your father for my sake for I have told them that I surrender. It was only a betrothal de futuro and is not binding on either one of us. I release you from your half-promise and I am released from mine.

‘You will break both their hearts,’ I observed, scattering sand on the wet ink.

‘Perhaps,’ my mother said coolly. ‘But young hearts mend easily, and hearts that own half of England have something better to do than to beat faster for love.’

Winter 1523

With Anne away I was the only Boleyn girl in the world, and when the queen chose to spend the summer with the Princess Mary it was I who rode with Henry at the head of the court on progress. We spent a wonderful summer riding together, hunting, and dancing every night, and when the court returned to Greenwich in November I whispered to him that I had missed my course and I was carrying his child.

At once, everything changed. I had new rooms and a lady in waiting. Henry bought me a thick fur cloak, I must not for a moment get chilled. Midwives, apothecaries, soothsayers came and went from my rooms, all of them were asked the vital question: 'Is it a boy?'

Most of them answered yes and were rewarded with a gold coin. The eccentric one or two said 'no' and saw the king's pout of displeasure. My mother loosened the laces of my gown and I could no longer go to the king's bed at night, I had to lie alone and pray in the darkness that I was carrying his son.

The queen watched my growing body with eyes that were dark with pain. I knew that she had missed her courses too, but there was no question that she might have conceived. She smiled throughout the Christmas feasts and the masques and the dancing, and she gave Henry the lavish presents that he loved. And after the twelfth night masque, when there was a sense that everything should be made clear and clean, she asked him if she might speak with him privately and from somewhere, God knows where, she found the courage to look him in the face and tell him that she had been clean for the whole of the season, and she was a barren woman.

'Told me herself,' Henry said indignantly to me that night. I was in his bedroom, wrapped in my fur cloak, a tankard of mulled wine in my hand, my bare feet tucked under me before a roaring fire. 'Told me without a moment's shame!'

I said nothing. It was not for me to tell Henry that there was no shame in a woman of nearly forty ceasing her bleeding. Nobody had known better than he that if she could have prayed her way into childbed they would have had half a

dozen babies and all of them boys. But he had forgotten that now. What concerned him was that she had refused him what she should have given him, and I saw once again that powerful indignation which swept over him with any disappointment.

‘Poor lady,’ I said.

He shot me a resentful look. ‘Rich lady,’ he corrected me. ‘The wife of one of the wealthiest men in Europe, the Queen of England no less, and nothing to show for it but the birth of one child, and that a girl.’

I nodded. There was no point arguing with Henry.

He leaned over me to put his hand gently on the round hard curve of my belly. ‘And if my boy is in there then he will carry the name of Carey,’ he said. ‘What good is that for England? What good is that for me?’

‘But everyone will know he is yours,’ I said. ‘Everyone knows that you can make a child with me.’

‘But I have to have a legitimate son,’ he said earnestly, as if I or the queen or any woman could give him a son by wishing it. ‘I have to have a son, Mary. England has to have an heir from me.’

Spring 1524

Anne wrote to me once a week for all the long months of her exile and I was reminded of the desperate letters I had sent her when I had been banished from court. I remembered too that she had not bothered to reply. Now it was me at court and she was in outer darkness and I took a sister's triumph in my generosity in replying to her often, and I did not spare her news of my fertility, and Henry's delight in me.

Our Grandmother Boleyn had been summoned to Hever to be a companion to Anne, and the two of them, the young elegant woman from the French court, and the wise old woman who had seen her husband leap from next to nothing to greatness, quarrelled like cats on a stable roof from morning to night and made each other's lives a complete misery.

If I cannot return to court, I shall go mad,

Anne wrote.

Grandmother Boleyn cracks hazelnuts in her hands and drops the shells everywhere. They crunch underfoot like snails. She insists that we walk out in the garden together every day, even when it is raining. She thinks that rainwater is good for the skin, and says this is why Englishwomen have such peerless complexions. I look at her weatherbeaten old leather and know that I would rather stay indoors.

She smells quite dreadful and is completely unaware of it. I told them to draw a bath for her the other day and they tell me that she consented to sit on a stool and let them wash her feet. She hums under her breath at the dinner table, she doesn't even know she is doing it. She believes in keeping an open house in the grand old way and everyone, from the beggars of Tonbridge to the farmers of Edenbridge, is welcome into the hall to watch us eat as if we were the king himself with nothing to do with our

money but give it away.

Please, please, tell Uncle and Father that I am ready to return to court, that I will do their bidding, that they need fear nothing from me. I will do anything to get away from here.

I wrote a reply at once.

You will be able to come to court soon, I am sure, because Lord Henry is betrothed against his will to Lady Mary Talbot. He was said to be weeping when he made his promise. He has gone to defend the Scottish border with his own men from Northumberland under his standard. The Percys have to hold Northumberland safe while the English army goes to France again this summer and, with the Spanish as our allies, finish the work they started last summer.

George's wedding to Jane Parker is to take place this month at last, and I shall ask Mother if you can be present. She will surely not refuse you that.

I am well but very tired. The baby is very heavy and when I try to sleep at night it turns and kicks. Henry is kinder than I have ever known him, and we are both hoping for a boy.

I wish you were here. He is hoping for a boy so much. I am almost afraid as to what will happen if it is a girl. If only there was something one could do to make it be a boy. Don't tell me about asparagus. I know all about asparagus. They make me eat it at every meal.

The queen watches me all the time. I am too big now for concealment and everyone knows it is the king's baby. William has not had to endure anyone congratulating him on our first child. Everyone knows, and there is a sort of wall of silence that makes it comfortable for everyone but me. There are times when I feel like a fool: my belly going before me, breathless on the stairs, and a husband who smiles at me as if we were strangers.

And the queen ...

I wish to God I did not have to pray in her chapel every morning and night. I wonder what she is praying for, since all hope for her is gone. I wish you were here. I even miss your sharp

tongue.

Mary.

George and Jane Parker were finally to marry after countless delays in the little chapel at Greenwich. Anne was to be allowed up from Hever for the day, she could sit in one of the high boxes at the back where no-one would see her, but she was not allowed to attend the wedding feast. Most importantly for us, since the wedding was to take place in the morning, Anne had to ride up the day before and the three of us, George, Anne, and I, had the night together from dinner time till dawn.

We prepared ourselves for a night of talking like midwives settling in for a long labour. George brought wine and ale and small beer, I crept down to the kitchen and filched bread, meat, cheese and fruit from the cooks who were happy to pile a platter for me, thinking that it was my seven-month belly which was making me hungry.

Anne was in her cut-down riding habit. She looked older than her seventeen years and finer, her skin was pale. 'Walking in the rain with the old witch,' she said grimly. Her sadness had given her a serenity which had not been there before. It was as if she had learned a hard lesson: that chances in life would not fall into her lap like ripe cherries. And she missed the boy she loved: Henry Percy.

'I dream of him,' she said simply. 'I so wish I didn't. It's such a pointless unhappiness. I am so tired of it. Sounds odd, doesn't it? But I am so tired of being unhappy.'

I glanced across at George. He was watching Anne, his face full of sympathy.

'When is his wedding?' Anne asked bleakly.

'Next month,' he said.

She nodded. 'And then it will be over. Unless she dies, of course.'

'If she dies he could marry you,' I said hopefully.

Anne shrugged. 'You fool,' she said abruptly. 'I can hardly wait for him in the hope that Mary Talbot drops dead one day. I'm quite a card to play once I've lived this down, aren't I? Especially if you give birth to a boy. I'll be aunt to the king's bastard.'

Without meaning to, I put my hands protectively before my belly as if I did not want my baby to hear that it was only wanted if it was a boy. 'It'll carry the name of Carey,' I reminded her.

‘But what if it is a boy and born healthy and strong and golden-haired?’

‘I shall call him Henry.’ I smiled at the thought of a strong golden-haired baby in my arms. ‘And I don’t doubt but the king will do something very fine for him.’

‘And we all rise,’ George pointed out. ‘As aunts and uncles to the king’s son, perhaps a little dukedom for him, perhaps an earldom. Who knows?’

‘And you, George?’ Anne asked. ‘Are you merry, this merry merry night? I had thought you’d be out roistering and drinking yourself into the gutter, not sitting here with one fat lady and one broken-hearted one.’

George poured some wine and looked darkly into his cup. ‘One fat lady and one broken-hearted one almost exactly suits my mood,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t dance or sing to save my life. She is a most poisonous woman, isn’t she? My beloved? My wife-to-be? Tell me the truth. It’s not just me, is it? There is something about her that makes you shrink from her, isn’t there?’

‘Oh nonsense,’ I said roundly. ‘She’s not poisonous.’

‘She sets my teeth on edge and she always has,’ Anne said bluntly. ‘If ever there’s tittle-tattle or dangerous scandal, or someone telling tales of someone else, she’s always there. She hears everything and she watches everyone, and she’s always thinking the worst of everyone.’

‘I knew it,’ George said glumly. ‘God! What a wife to have!’

‘She may give you a surprise on your wedding night,’ Anne said slyly, drinking her wine.

‘What?’ George said quickly.

Anne raised an eyebrow over the cup. ‘She’s very well-informed for a virgin,’ she said. ‘Very knowledgeable about matters for married women. Married women and whores.’

George’s jaw dropped. ‘Never tell me she’s not a virgin!’ he exclaimed. ‘I could surely get out of it if she was not a virgin!’

Anne shook her head. ‘I’ve never seen a man do anything that was not from politeness,’ she said. ‘Who would, for God’s sake? But she watches and listens, and she doesn’t care what she asks or what she sees. I heard her whispering with one of the Seymour girls about someone who had lain with the king – not you –’ she said quickly to me ‘– there was very worldly talk about kissing with an open mouth, letting one’s tongue lick and suchlike, whether one should lie on a king or underneath him, and where one’s hands should go, and what could be done to give him such pleasure as he might never forget it.’

‘And she knows these French practices?’ George asked, astounded.

‘She talked as if she did,’ Anne said, smiling at his amazement.

‘Well, by God!’ said George, pouring himself another glass of wine and waving the bottle at me. ‘Perhaps I will be a happier husband than I thought. Where your hands should go, eh? And where should they go, Mistress Annamaria? Since you seem to have heard this conversation as well as my lovely wife-to-be?’

‘Oh don’t ask me,’ Anne said. ‘I’m a virgin. Ask anyone. Ask Mother or Father or my uncle. Ask Cardinal Wolsey, he made it official. I’m a virgin. I am an attested official sworn-to-it virgin. Wolsey, the Archbishop of York himself, says I am a virgin. You can’t be more of a virgin than me.’

‘I shall tell you all about them,’ George said more cheerfully. ‘I shall write to you at Hever, Anne, and you can read my letter aloud to Grandmother Boleyn.’



George was pale as a bride on his wedding morning. Only Anne and I knew it was not from heavy drinking the night before. He did not smile as Jane Parker approached the altar, but she was beaming broad enough for them both.

With my hands clasped over my belly I thought it was a long time since I had stood before the altar and promised to forsake all others and cleave to William Carey. He glanced across at me with a slight smile, as if he too was thinking that we had not foreseen this when we had been handclasped, and hopeful, only four years ago.

King Henry was at the front of the church, watching my brother take his bride, and I thought that my family were doing well out of my heavy belly. The king had come late to my wedding, and more to oblige his friend William than to honour the Boleyns. But he was at the forefront of the well-wishers when this pair turned from the altar and came down the aisle of the church, and the king and I together led the guests into the wedding feast. My mother smiled on me as if I were her only daughter, as Anne left quietly by the side door of the chapel and took her horse and rode home to Hever accompanied only by serving men.

I thought of her riding to Hever alone, seeing the castle from the lodge gate, as pretty as a toy in the moonlight. I thought of the way the track curved through the trees and came to the drawbridge. I thought of the rattle of the drawbridge coming down and the hollow sound that the hoof beats made as the horse stepped delicately on the timbers. I thought of the dank smell of the moat and then the waft of meat cooking on a spit as one entered the courtyard. I thought of

the moon shining into the courtyard and the haphazard line of the gable ends against the night sky, and I wished with all my contrary heart that I was squire of Hever and not the pretend queen of a masquing court. I wished with all my heart that I might have been carrying a legitimate son in my belly and that I could have leaned out of the window and looked out over my land, just a little manor farm perhaps, and known that it would be all his by right one day.

But instead I was the lucky Boleyn, the Boleyn blessed by fortune and the king's favour. A Boleyn who could not imagine the boundaries of her son's land, who could not dream how far he might rise.

Summer 1524

I withdrew from the court for the whole of the month of June to prepare for my lying in. I had a darkened room hung with thick tapestries, I should see no light nor breathe fresh air until I emerged six long weeks after the birth of my baby. Altogether I would be walled up for two and a half months. I was attended by my mother and by two midwives, a couple of serving maids and a lady's maid supported them. Outside the chamber, taking turn and turn about night and day, were two apothecaries waiting to be called.

'Can Anne be with me?' I asked my mother as I eyed the darkened room.

She frowned. 'Her father has ordered that she must stay at Hever.'

'Oh, please,' I said. 'It'll be such a long time and I'd like her company.'

'She can visit,' my mother ruled. 'But we can't have her present at the birth of the king's son.'

'Or daughter,' I reminded her.

She made the sign of the cross over my belly. 'Please God it is a boy,' she whispered.

I said nothing more, content to have carried my way by getting Anne to visit me. She came for a day and stayed for two. She had been bored at Hever, infuriated by our Grandmother Boleyn, desperate to get away, even to a darkened room and a sister biding her time by sewing little nightshirts for a royal bastard.

'Have you been over to Home Farm?' I asked.

'No,' she said. 'I've ridden past it.'

'I wondered how they were getting on with their strawberry crop?'

She shrugged.

'And the Peters' farm? Did you go over for the sheep shearing?'

'No,' she said.

'D'you know what hay crop we got this year?'

'No.'

'Anne, what on earth do you do all day?'

'I read,' she said. 'I practise my music. I have been composing some songs. I

ride every day. I walk in the garden. What else is there to do in the country?’

‘I go round and see the farms,’ I remarked.

She raised an eyebrow. ‘They’re always the same. The grass grows.’

‘What d’you read?’

‘Theology,’ she said shortly. ‘Have you heard of Martin Luther?’

‘Of course I’ve heard of him,’ I said, stung. ‘Enough to know that he’s a heretic and his books are forbidden.’

Anne gave her small secretive smile. ‘He’s not necessarily a heretic,’ she said. ‘It’s a matter of opinion. I have been reading his books and others who think like he does.’

‘You’d better keep it quiet,’ I said. ‘If Father and Mother find you’ve been reading banned books they’ll send you to France again, anywhere to get you out of the way.’

She shrugged. ‘No-one pays any attention to me, I’m quite eclipsed by your glory. There is only one way to come to the attention of this family and that is to climb into the king’s bed. You have to be a whore to be beloved by this family.’

I folded my hands over my swollen belly and smiled at her, quite unmoved by her malice. ‘There’s no need to pinch me because my stars have led me here. There was no need for you to set yourself at Henry Percy and onwards to disgrace.’

For a moment the mask of her beautiful face dropped and I saw the longing in her eyes. ‘Have you heard from him?’

I shook my head. ‘If he wrote to me they’d not let me have the letter,’ I said. ‘I think he’s still fighting against the Scots.’

She pressed her lips together to keep back a little moan. ‘Oh God, what if he is hurt or killed?’

I felt my baby stir and I put my warm hands on my loose stomacher. ‘Anne, he should be nothing to you.’

Her eyelashes flickered down over the heat in her gaze. ‘He is nothing to me,’ she replied.

‘He’s a married man now,’ I said firmly. ‘You will have to forget him if you ever want to get back to court.’

She pointed at my belly. ‘That is the problem for me,’ she said baldly. ‘All anyone can think of in this family is that you might be carrying the king’s son. I have written to Father half a dozen times and he has had his clerk reply to me once. He doesn’t think about me. He doesn’t care about me. All anyone cares about is you and your fat belly.’

‘We’ll know soon enough,’ I said. I was trying to sound serene but I was afraid. If Henry had got a girl on me and she was strong and lovely then he should be happy enough to show the world that he was potent. But this was no ordinary man. He wanted to show the world that he could make a healthy baby. He wanted to show the world that he could make a boy.



She was a girl. Despite all those months of hoping and whispered prayers and even special Masses said in Hever and Rochford church, she was a girl.

But she was *my* little girl. She was an exquisite little bundle with hands so tiny that they were like the palms of a little frog, with eyes so dark a blue that they were like the sky above Hever at midnight. She had a dusting of black hair on the crown of her head, as unlike Henry’s ruddy gold as anything one could imagine. But she had his kissable rosebud mouth. When she yawned she looked like a very king, bored with insufficient praise. When she cried, she squeezed real tears onto her outraged pink cheeks, like a monarch denied his rights. When I fed her, holding her in my arms and marvelling at the insistent powerful sucking on my breast, she swelled like a lamb and slept as if she were a drunkard lolling beside a tankard of mead.

I held her in my arms constantly. There was a wet nurse to attend her, but I argued that my breasts hurt so much that I must let her suckle, and I cunningly kept her to myself. I fell in love with her. I fell completely and utterly in love with her and I could not for a moment imagine that anything would have been any better if she had been a boy.

Even Henry melted at the sight of her when he visited me in the shadowy peace of the birthing room. He picked her up from her cradle and marvelled at the tiny perfection of her face, her hands, her little feet under the heavy embroidered gown. ‘We’ll call her Elizabeth,’ he said, rocking her gently.

‘May I choose her name?’ I asked, greatly daring.

‘You don’t like Elizabeth?’

‘I had another name in mind.’

He shrugged. It was a girl’s name. It did not matter much. ‘As you wish. Call her what you like. She’s a pretty little thing, isn’t she?’

He brought me a purse of gold and a necklace with diamonds. And he brought me some books, a critique of his own work of theology, some heavy works that Cardinal Wolsey had recommended. I thanked him for them and put

them to one side, and thought that I would send them to Anne and ask her to write me a synopsis so that I might bluff my way through a conversation.

We started his visit formally enough, seated on chairs either side of the fireplace, but he took me to the bed and lay beside me and kissed me gently and sweetly. After a little while he wanted to have me and I had to remind him that I was not yet churched. I was not clean. Timidly I touched at his waistcoat and with a sigh he took my hand and pressed it against his hardness. I wished that someone would tell me what he wanted of me. But then he himself guided my touch, and whispered in my ear what he wanted to do, and then after a little while of his movement and my blundering caresses he gave a sigh and lay still.

‘Is it enough for you?’ I asked timidly.

He turned and gave me his sweet smile. ‘My love, it is a great pleasure for me to have you, even like this, after this long time. When you go to be churched don’t confess it – the sin is all mine. But you would tempt a saint.’

‘And you do love her?’ I pressed him.

He gave an indulgent, lazy chuckle. ‘Why yes. She’s as lovely as her mother.’

He rose up after a few moments and straightened his clothes. He gave me his delicious roguish grin that still delighted me, though half my mind was on the baby in her cradle, and the other half on the ache in my milk-heavy breasts.

‘You shall have rooms nearer to mine when you are churched,’ he promised me. ‘I want you by me all the time.’

I smiled. It was a delicious moment. The King of England wanted me with him, constantly at his side.

‘I want a boy off you,’ he said bluntly.



My father was angry with me that the baby was a girl – or so my mother said – reporting from an outside world which seemed very remote. My uncle was disappointed but determined not to show it. I nodded as if I cared but I felt only a total delight that she had opened her eyes this morning and looked at me with a sort of bright intensity that made me certain that she had seen me and known me for her mother. Neither my father nor my uncle could be admitted into the birthing room, and the king did not repeat his single visit. There was a sense of this place being a refuge for us, a secret room where men and their plans and their treacheries would not come.

George came, breaking the conventions with his usual comfortable grace. 'Nothing too awful going on in here, is there?' he asked, putting his handsome head around the door.

'Nothing,' I said, welcoming him with a smile and my cheek to kiss. He bent over me and kissed me deeply on the mouth. 'Oh how delicious, my sister, a young mother, a dozen forbidden pleasures all at once. Kiss me again – kiss me like you kiss Henry.'

'Go away,' I said, pushing him off. 'Look at the baby.'

He peered at her as she lay sleeping in my arms. 'Nice hair,' he said. 'What shall you call her?'

I glanced at the shut door. I knew I could trust George. 'I want to call her Catherine.'

'Rather odd.'

'I don't see why. I am her lady in waiting.'

'But it's her husband's baby.'

I giggled, it was impossible for me not to revel in my sense of joy. 'Oh George, I know. But I have admired her from the moment I entered her service. And I want to show her that I respect her – whatever else has happened.'

Still he looked doubtful. 'D'you think she'll understand? Won't she think it's some kind of mockery?'

I was so shocked that I gripped Catherine a little. 'She cannot imagine that I would triumph over her.'

'Here, why are you crying?' George asked. 'There's no reason to cry, Mary. Don't cry, you'll curdle the milk or something.'

'I'm not crying,' I said, ignoring the tears on my cheeks. 'I'm not meaning to cry.'

'Well, stop,' he urged me. 'Stop it, Mary. Mother will come in and everyone will blame me for upsetting you. And they'll say that I shouldn't be here in the first place. Why don't you wait till you come out and then you can see the queen and ask her yourself if she would like the compliment? That's all I'd suggest.'

'Yes,' I said, feeling immediately more cheerful. 'I could do that, and then I might explain.'

'But don't cry,' he reminded me. 'She's a queen, she won't like tears. I bet you've never seen her cry, for all you've been with her day and night for four years.'

I thought for a moment. 'No,' I said slowly. 'D'you know, in these four years, I have never ever seen her cry.'

‘You never will,’ he said with satisfaction. ‘She’s not a woman who crumbles into distress. She’s a woman of most powerful will.’



My only other visitor was my husband, William Carey. He arrived, gracefully enough, bearing a bowl of early strawberries which he had ordered to be brought up from Hever.

‘A taste of home,’ he said kindly.

‘Thank you.’

He glanced into the cradle. ‘They tell me it’s a girl and she is well and strong?’

‘She is,’ I said, a little chilled by the indifference of his tone.

‘And what name are you calling her? Other than mine? I assume she is to carry my name, she isn’t to be Fitzroy or some other acknowledgement that she is a royal bastard?’

I bit my tongue and bowed my head. ‘I am sorry if you are offended, husband,’ I said meekly.

He nodded. ‘So what name?’

‘She is to be Carey. I thought Catherine Carey.’

‘As you wish, madam. I have been granted five good stewardships of land, and a knighthood. I am Sir William now, and you are Lady Carey. I have more than doubled my income. Did he tell you?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘I am in the highest of favour. If you had obliged us with a boy I might have looked for an estate in Ireland or France. I might have been Lord Carey. Who knows how high a boy bastard might have taken us?’

I did not reply. William’s tone was mild; but the words had a cutting ring to them. I did not think he was truly asking me to celebrate his good fortune in being England’s most famous cuckold.

‘You know, I had thought to be a great man at the king’s court,’ he said bitterly. ‘When I knew he liked my company, when my star was rising. I hoped to be something like your father, a statesman who might see the whole picture of the scene, who might play his part in arguing at the great courts of Europe, dealing one with the other and always taking his own country’s interest as his byword. But no, here I am, rewarded ten times over for doing nothing but looking the other way while the king takes my wife to his bed.’

I kept my silence, and my eyes down. When I looked up he was smiling at me, his ironical half-sad crooked smile. 'Ah, little wife,' he said gently. 'We did not have much time together, did we? We did not bed very well nor very often. We did not learn tenderness or even desire. We only had a little time.'

'I am sorry for that too,' I said softly.

'Sorry that we did not bed?'

'My lord?' I said, genuinely confused by the sudden sharpness in his tone.

'It has been suggested, very politely by your kinsmen, that perhaps I had dreamed it all and we did not bed at all. Is that your wish? That I deny ever having had you?'

I was startled. 'No! You know it is not my wishes that are consulted in these matters.'

'And they have not told you to tell the king that I was impotent on our wedding night and every night thereafter?'

I shook my head. 'Why would I say such a thing?'

He smiled. 'To get our marriage set aside,' he suggested. 'So that you are an unmarried woman. And the next baby is Fitzroy and perhaps Henry can be prevailed on to make him legitimate, the son and heir to the throne. Then you are the mother of the next King of England.'

There was a silence. I found I was staring blankly at him. 'They never want me to do that?' I whispered.

'Oh you Boleyns,' he said gently. 'What happens to you, Mary, if they have our marriage set aside and push you forward? It overthrows the state of marriage and it names you, without contradiction, as a whore, a pretty little whore.'

I felt my cheeks blaze but I kept my mouth shut. He looked at me for a moment and I saw the anger drain from his face and be replaced with a sort of weary compassion. 'Say what you have to say,' he recommended me. 'Whatever they order you. If they press you to say that on our bedding night I juggled with silver pomanders all night and never lay between your legs, you can say that, swear it if you have to – and you will have to. You are going to face the enmity of Queen Katherine herself, and the hatred of all of Spain. I shall spare you mine. Poor silly little girl. If it had been a boy in that cradle I think they would have pushed you into perjury the moment you were church'd, to get rid of me, and to lure Henry on.'

We looked at each other very steadily for a moment. 'Then, you and I must be the only people in the whole world who are not sorry it is a girl,' I whispered. 'Because I don't want more than I have now.'

He smiled his bitter courtier smile. 'But next time?'



The court went on its midsummer progress, down the dusty lanes to Sussex and on to Winchester and thence to the New Forest so that the king could hunt deer every day from dawn till twilight and then feast on venison every night. My husband went with his king, close at his side, boys together, no thought of jealousy when the court was on the move and the hounds were running ahead of the horses and yelping, and the hawks were coming behind in their special cart with their trainers riding alongside and singing to them to keep them calm. My brother went too, riding alongside Francis Weston, astride a new black hunter, a big strong beast which the king had given him from the royal stables, as a further token of his affection for me and mine. My father was in Europe, as part of the unending negotiations between England, France and Spain, trying to rein in the ambitions of three greedy bright young monarchs all jockeying for the title of the greatest king in Europe. My mother went with the court, with her own little train of servants. My uncle went, with his own men in Howard livery and with a wary eye always for the ambitions and pretensions of the Seymour family. The Percy family were there, Charles Brandon and Queen Mary, the London goldsmiths, the foreign diplomats: all the great men of England abandoned their fields, their farms, their ships, their mining, their trading, and their city houses to go hunting with the king, and not one dared to lag behind in case there was money being granted or land being dispensed, or favours to be had, or the king's dancing eyes might turn on a pretty daughter or a wife and a position might be gained.

I, thank God, was spared it this year, and I was glad to be away, riding slowly down the lanes to Kent. Anne met me in the neat courtyard of Hever Castle, her face as dark as a midsummer storm. 'You must be mad,' she said in greeting. 'What are you doing here?'

'I want to be here with my baby this summer. I need to rest.'

'You don't look like you need a rest.' She scrutinised my face. 'You look beautiful,' she conceded grudgingly.

'But look at her.' I pulled the white lace shawl back from Catherine's little face. She had slept for most of the journey, rocked by the jolting of the litter.

Anne politely glanced. 'Sweet,' she said, without much conviction. 'But why didn't you send her down with the wet nurse?'

I sighed at the impossibility of convincing Anne that there was anywhere

better to be than the court. I led the way into the hall and let the wet nurse take Catherine from my arms to change her swaddling clothes.

‘And then bring her back to me,’ I stipulated.

I sat on one of the carved chairs at the great hall table and smiled at Anne as she stood before me, as impatient as an interrogator.

‘I’m not really interested in the court,’ I said flatly. ‘It’s having a baby; you wouldn’t understand. It’s as if I suddenly know what the purpose of life is. It’s not to rise in the king’s favour nor to make one’s way at court. Nor even to raise one’s family a little higher. There are things that matter more. I want her to be happy. I don’t want her to be sent away as soon as she is old enough to walk. I want to be tender with her, I want her to be schooled under my eye. I want her to grow up here and know the river and the fields and the willows in the watermeadows. I don’t want her to be a stranger in her own country.’

Anne looked rather blank. ‘It’s just a baby,’ she said flatly. ‘And chances are she’ll die. You’ll have dozens more. Are you going to be like this over all of them?’

I flinched at the thought of it, but she didn’t even see. ‘I don’t know. I didn’t know I’d feel like this over her. But I do, Anne. She’s the most precious thing in the world. Much more important to me than anything else. I can’t think about anything but caring for her and seeing that she is well and happy. When she cries it’s like a knife in my heart, I can’t bear the thought of her crying at all. And I want to see her grow. I won’t be parted from her.’

‘What does the king say?’ Anne demanded, going to the one central point for a Boleyn.

‘I haven’t told him this,’ I said. ‘He was happy enough that I should go away for the summer and rest. He wanted to get off hunting. He was in a fever to go this year. He didn’t mind too much.’

‘Didn’t mind too much?’ she repeated incredulously.

‘He didn’t mind at all,’ I corrected myself.

Anne nodded, nibbling her fingers. I could almost see the calculations of her brain as she picked over what I was saying. ‘Very well then,’ she said. ‘If they don’t insist that you go to court I don’t see why I should worry. It’s more amusing for me to have you here, God knows. You can chatter to that merciless old woman at least and spare me her unending talk.’

I smiled. ‘You really are very disrespectful, Anne.’

‘Oh yes, yes, yes,’ she said impatiently, drawing up a stool. ‘But now tell me all the news. Tell me about the queen, and I want to know what Thomas More

has said about the new tract from Germany. And what are the plans for the French? Is it to be war again?’

‘I am sorry.’ I shook my head. ‘Someone was talking about it the other night but I wasn’t listening.’

She made a little noise and leaped to her feet. ‘Oh very well then,’ she said irritably. ‘Talk to me about the baby. That’s all you’re interested in, isn’t it? You sit with your head half-cocked listening for her all the time, don’t you? You look ridiculous. For heaven’s sake sit up straight. The nurse won’t bring her back any quicker for you looking like a hound on point.’

I laughed at the accuracy of her description. ‘It’s like being in love. I want to see her all the time.’

‘You’re always in love,’ Anne said crossly. ‘You’re like a big butter ball, always oozing love for someone or other. Once it was the king and we did very well out of that. Now it’s his baby, which will do us no good at all. But you don’t care. It’s always seep seep seep with you: passion and feeling and desire. It makes me furious.’

I smiled at her. ‘Because you are all ambition,’ I said.

Her eyes gleamed. ‘Of course. What else is there?’

Henry Percy hovered between us, tangible as a ghost. ‘Don’t you want to know if I have seen him?’ I asked. It was a cruel question and I asked it hoping to see pain in her eyes, but I got nothing for my malice. Her face was cold and hard, she looked as if she had finished weeping for him and as if she would never weep for a man again.

‘No,’ she said. ‘So you can tell them when they ask that I never mentioned his name. He gave up, didn’t he? He married another woman.’

‘He thought you’d abandoned him,’ I protested.

She turned her head away. ‘If he’d been a proper man he’d have gone on loving me,’ she said, her voice harsh. ‘If it had been the other way round I’d never have married while my lover was free. He gave in, he let me go. I’ll never forgive him. He’s dead for me. I can be dead for him. All I want to do is to get out of this grave and get back to court. All that there is left for me is ambition.’



Anne, Grandmother Boleyn, Baby Catherine and I settled down to spend the summer together in enforced companionship. As I grew stronger and the pain in my privates eased, I got back on my horse and started to ride out in the

afternoons. I rode all around our valley and up to the hills of the Weald. I watched the hay meadows turn green again after their first cut, and the sheep grow white and fluffy with new wool. I wished the reapers joy at the harvest when they went into the wheatfields to sickle the first of the crop and saw them load the grain into great carts and take it to the granary and the mill. We ate hare one night after the reapers had sent in the dogs after the animals trapped in the last stand of wheat. I saw the cows separated from their calves for weaning and felt my own breasts ache with sympathy when I saw them crowding around the gate and trying to break through the thick-set hedges, barging and tossing their heads and bellowing for their babies.

‘They’ll forget, Lady Carey,’ the cowman said to me consolingly. ‘They won’t cry for more than a few days.’

I smiled at him. ‘I wish we could leave them a little longer.’

‘It’s a hard world for man and beast,’ he said firmly. ‘They have to go, or how will you get your butter and your cheese?’

The apples swelled round and rosy in the orchard. I went into the kitchen and asked the cook to make us great fat apple dumplings for our dinner. The plums grew rich and dark and split their skins, and the lazy late-summer wasps buzzed around the trees and grew drunk on the syrup. The air was sweet with honeysuckle and the heady perfume of fruit fattening on the bough. I wanted the summer never to end. I wanted my baby always to stay this small, this perfect, this adorable. Her eyes were changing colour from the dark blue of birth to a darker indigo, almost black. She would be a dark-eyed beauty like her sharp-tempered aunt.

She smiled now when she saw me, I tested her over and over again, and I grew quite cross with my Grandmother Boleyn who claimed that a baby was blind until two or three years of age and that I was wasting my time hanging over her cradle, and singing to her, and spreading a carpet under the trees and lying on it with her and spreading her little fingers to tickle her palms, and taking up her tiny fat foot to nibble her toes.

The king wrote to me once, describing the hunting and the kills he had made. It sounded as if there would not be a deer left in the New Forest by the time he was satisfied. At the end of the letter he said that the court would be back at Windsor in October, and Greenwich for Christmas, and that he expected me there, without my sister of course, and without our baby to whom he sent a kiss. Despite the tenderness of the kiss to our child, I knew that the joy of my summer with my baby was at an end, whatever my wishes might be; and that like a

peasant woman who has to leave her child and go back to the field, it was time for me to go back to my work.

Winter 1524

I found the king at Windsor in merry mood. The hunting had gone well, the company had been excellent. There was a rumour about a flirtation with one of the queen's new ladies, one Margaret Shelton, a Howard cousin of mine, newly come to court, and another story, more comical than true, about a lady who took every fence neck and neck with the king until, in sheer despair of outriding her, he had her behind a bush, and rode away before she had rearranged her dress. She was stuck on the ground until someone came by who would lift her back up into the saddle, and her hope of taking my place was over.

There were bawdy tales of drinking bouts and my brother George had a bruise over one eye after a brawl in a tavern, and some running joke about a young page who had been besotted with George and had been sent home in disgrace after penning him a dozen lovesick sonnets all signed Ganymede. All in all the gentlemen of the court had been merry and the king himself was in high spirits.

He snatched me up and held me tight and kissed me hard when he saw me, before all the court, though, thank God, the queen was not there. 'Sweetheart, I have missed you,' he said exuberantly. 'Tell me that you have missed me too.'

I could not help but smile into his bright eager face. 'Of course,' I said. 'And I hear on all sides that Your Majesty has amused yourself.'

There was a little guffaw from the king's most intimate friends and he grinned a little sheepishly himself. 'My heart ached for you night and day,' he said with the exquisite mock courtesy of courtly love. 'I pined in outer darkness. And you are well? And our baby?'

'Catherine is very beautiful and grows well and strong,' I said with a tiny stress on her name to prompt him. 'She is most beautifully fashioned, a true Tudor rose.'

My brother George stepped forward and the king released me so that George could kiss my cheek.

'Welcome back to court, my sister,' he said cheerily. 'And how is the little princess?'

There was a moment of stunned silence. The smile was wiped from Henry's face. I gaped at George in blank horror at the terrible error he had made. He spun on his heel in a flash and turned to the king: 'I call little Catherine a princess because she is fawned over as if she were a queen in the making. You should see the clothes that Mary has sewn for her, embroidered with her own hands. And the bed linen that the little empress reclines on! Even her swaddling clouts have her initials. You would laugh, Your Majesty. You would laugh to see her. She is a little tyrant at Hever, it must all be done to her direction. She is a veritable cardinal. She is a pope of the nursery.'

It was a wonderful recovery. Henry relaxed and laughed at the thought of the little baby's dictatorship, all the courtiers instantly echoed his laughter with their own smiles and titters at George's description of the baby.

'Is it really so? Do you indulge her so much?' the king asked me.

'She is my first,' I excused myself. 'And all her clothes will be used again for the next one.'

It was a perfect note to hit. At once Henry thought of the next one and we had moved onwards. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'But what will the princess do with a rival in the nursery?'

'I hope she will be too small to know much about it,' George suggested smoothly. 'She might have a little brother before she is more than a year old. There are only months between Mary and Anne, remember. We are fertile stock.'

'Oh George, for shame,' my mother said, smiling. 'But a little boy at Hever would bring us all such joy.'

'Me too,' said the king, looking at me with warm eyes. 'A little boy would be a great joy to me.'



As soon as my father came home from France there was another family conference. This time I had a chair placed for me before the table. I was no longer a girl under instruction, I was a woman with the king's favour. I was no longer their pawn. I was at the very least a castle, a player in the game.

'Say she conceives again and this time it is a boy,' my uncle said softly. 'Say the queen is prompted by her own conscience to retire and set him free to remarry. He would be very tempted by a pregnant mistress.'

For a moment I thought I had dreamed this plan, and then I knew I had been

waiting for this moment. My husband William had warned me of this, and it had stayed in the back of my mind as a thought too awful to contemplate.

‘I am married already,’ I observed.

My mother shrugged. ‘No more than a few months. It was hardly consummated at all.’

‘It was consummated,’ I said steadily.

My uncle raised his eyebrow to prompt my mother.

‘She was young,’ my mother said. ‘How would she know what was happening? She could swear it was never fully done.’

‘I can’t do it.’ I spoke to my mother and then I turned to my uncle. ‘I dare not do it. I can’t take her throne, I can’t take her place. She’s a princess three times over, and I’m just a Boleyn girl. I swear to you: I can’t do it.’

It was nothing to him. ‘You need do nothing out of the ordinary,’ he said. ‘You will marry as you are bid, as you did once before. And I will order all the rest.’

‘But the queen will never retire,’ I said desperately. ‘She has said so herself, she told me herself. She said she would die first.’

My uncle exclaimed, pushed his chair back and took a step to look out of the window. ‘She’s in a strong position at the moment,’ he conceded. ‘While her nephew is in alliance with England, nobody can upset that agreement, least of all Henry, for a baby not yet conceived. But the moment the war against France is won, and the spoils divided, then she is nothing but a woman too old for him who can never give him an heir. She knows, as we all do, that she has to go.’

‘When the war is won, perhaps,’ my father worried. ‘But we dare not risk a breach with Spain just now. I have spent all this summer trying to broker such an alliance and make it stick.’

‘Which comes first?’ my uncle asked drily. ‘Country or family? Because we cannot use Mary as we should, without risking the well-being of the country.’

My father hesitated.

‘Of course, you’re not blood kin,’ my uncle said, quietly venomous. ‘Only a Howard by marriage.’

‘Family comes first,’ my father said slowly. ‘It must do.’

‘Then we may have to sacrifice the alliance with Spain against France,’ my uncle said coldly. ‘It is more important to us to get rid of Queen Katherine than it is to make peace in Europe. It is more important to get our girl into the king’s bed than to save the lives of Englishmen. There are always more men who can be pressed for soldiers. But this chance for us Howards comes once in a

century.'

Spring 1525

We heard the news from Pavia in March. A messenger burst in upon the king in the early morning while he was still half-dressed, and he came running like a boy to the queen, a herald flying before him to hammer on the door of the queen's apartments and shout: 'His Majesty is coming: the king!' so that we tumbled out of our rooms in different states of undress and only the queen was composed and elegant in a gown thrown over her nightshirt. Henry banged the door coming into the room and ran through us, while we twittered like an aviary of blind thrushes, straight to his queen. He did not even look at me, though I was deliciously rumpled with my hair in a cloud of gold around my face. But it was not to me that Henry raced with the best news he had ever heard. He brought the news to his queen, to the woman who had made for him an unbreakable alliance with her country of Spain. He had been unfaithful to her many times, he had been unfaithful to their policy many times. But when it triumphed, in this moment of intense joy, it was to her that he took the news, it was Katherine who was queen in his heart once more.

He threw himself at her feet and snatched up her hands and covered them with kisses and Katherine laughed like a girl again and cried out with impatience: 'What is it? Tell me! Tell me! What is it?' while Henry could do nothing more than say:

'Pavia! God be praised! Pavia!'

He leaped to his feet and danced her around the room, jumping like a boy. The gentlemen of his train came running in, he had outstripped them in the race to get to the queen. George came tumbling into the room with his friend Francis Weston, saw me and came to my side.

'What on earth is going on?' I asked, smoothing my hair back and tying my skirt around my waist.

'A great victory,' he said. 'A decisive victory. The French army is said to be all but destroyed. France lies open before us. Charles of Spain can have his pick of the south, we shall overrun the north. France is no more. It is destroyed. It will be the Spanish empire up to the borders of the English kingdom in France. We

have hammered the French army into the ground and we are the unquestioned masters of France, and joint rulers of most of Europe.'

'Francis defeated?' I asked disbelievingly, thinking of the ambitious dark prince who had been the rival of our golden king.

'Smashed to pieces,' Francis Weston confirmed. 'What a day for England! What a triumph!'

I looked across at the king and queen. He was no longer attempting to dance, he had lost the rhythm of the steps, instead he had wound her in his arms and was kissing her forehead, her eyes and her lips. 'My dearest,' he said. 'Your nephew is a great general, this is a great gift he has given us. We will have France at our feet. I shall be King of England and France in reality as well as title. And Richard de la Pole is dead – his threat to my throne is dead with him. King Francis himself is taken prisoner, France is destroyed. Your nephew and I are the greatest kings in Europe and our alliance will own everything. Everything that my father planned from you and your family has been given to us this day.'

The queen's face was radiant with joy, the years were stripped off her with his kisses. She was rosy, her blue eyes sparkling, her waist supple in his grasp.

'God bless the Spanish and the Spanish princess!' Henry bellowed suddenly and all the men of his court shouted it back to him in a full-throated reply.

George glanced sideways at me. 'God bless the Spanish princess,' he said quietly.

'Amen,' I said, and I found it in my heart to smile at her glow as she rested her head against her husband's shoulder and smiled on her cheering court. 'Amen, and God keep her as happy as she is at this moment.'



We were drunk with victory, that dawn and the four dawns that followed. It was like the twelfth night revels in the middle of March. From the leads of the castle we could see the beacon bonfires burning all the way to London and the city itself was red against the night sky with fires at every street corner and men spit-roasting carcasses of beef and lamb. We could hear church bells pealing, a constant chime as everyone in the country celebrated the total defeat of the oldest enemy of England. We ate special dishes which were given new names to mark the occasion: Pavia Peacock and Pavia Pudding, Spanish Delight, and Charles Blancmange. Cardinal Wolsey ordered a special High Mass of

celebration in St Paul's and every church in the land gave thanks for the victory at Pavia and the emperor who had won it for England – Charles of Spain, the beloved nephew of Queen Katherine.

There was no question now of who sat at the right hand of the king. It was the queen, who walked through the great hall wearing deepest crimson and gold with her head high and a little smile on her lips. She did not flaunt her return to favour. She took it as she had taken her eclipse: as the nature of royal marriage. Now that her star was risen again she walked as proudly as she had ever done when in shadow.

The king fell in love with her all over again as a thanksgiving for Pavia. He saw her as the source of his power in France, as the source of his joy at the victory. Henry was first and foremost a spoiled child; when he was given a wonderful present, he loved the giver.

He would love the giver of a gift right up to the moment that the present bored him, or it broke, or it failed to be what he wanted. And towards the end of March the first signs came to us that Charles of Spain might prove a disappointment.

Henry's plan had been that they should divide France between them, tossing only a share of the spoils to the Duke of Bourbon, and that Henry should become King of France in reality and take the old title which the Pope had conferred on him so many years ago. But Charles of Spain was in no hurry. Instead of making plans for Henry to go to Paris to be crowned King of France, Charles went to Rome for his own coronation as Holy Roman Emperor. And worse even than this was that Charles showed no interest in the English plan to capture the whole of France. He had King Francis as a prisoner; but now he was planning to ransom him back to France, to return him to the throne which had been so recently destroyed.

'In God's name, why? Why would he?' Henry bellowed at Cardinal Wolsey in a great explosion of rage. Even the most favoured gentlemen of the king's inner circle flinched. The ladies of the court visibly cowered. Only the queen, on her chair by the side of the king at the top table of the great hall, was impassive, as if the most powerful man in the country was not shaking with uncontrollable fury only one foot from her.

'Why would the mad Spanish dog betray us so? Why would he release Francis? Is he mad?' He turned on the queen. 'Is he insane, your nephew? Is he playing some costly double game? Is he double-crossing me, as your father would have double-crossed mine? Is there some vile traitorous blood in these

Spanish kings? What's your answer, madam? He writes to you, doesn't he? What did he write last? That he wants to release our worst enemy? That he is a madman or just a fool?'

She glanced at the cardinal to see if he would intercede; but Wolsey was no friend of the queen after this turn of events. He stayed dumb and met her sharp look of appeal with diplomatic serenity.

Isolated, the queen had to face her husband without support. 'My nephew does not write to me of all his plans. I did not know he was thinking of releasing King Francis.'

'I should hope not!' Henry yelled, bringing his face very close to hers. 'For you would be guilty of treason at the very least if you knew that the worst enemy this country has ever seen was to be set free by your nephew.'

'But I did not know,' she said steadily.

'And Wolsey tells me that he is thinking of jilting Princess Mary? Your own daughter! What d'you say to that?'

'I did not know,' she said.

'Excuse me,' Wolsey remarked softly. 'But I think Her Majesty has forgotten the meeting she had with the Spanish ambassador yesterday. Surely he warned you that the Princess Mary would be rejected.'

'Rejected!' Henry bounded from his chair, too inflamed to sit still. 'And you knew, madam?'

The queen rose, as she must, when her husband was on his feet. 'Yes,' she said. 'The cardinal is correct. The ambassador did mention that there were doubts over the betrothal of the Princess Mary. I did not speak of it because I would not believe it until I had heard it from my nephew himself. And I have not.'

'I am afraid there is no doubt at all,' Cardinal Wolsey interpolated.

The queen turned a steady gaze on him, noting that the cardinal had exposed her to her husband's rage, and had done it twice, and wilfully. 'I am sorry that you should think so,' she said.

Henry flung himself into his chair, too enraged to speak. The queen remained standing and he did not invite her to sit. The lace at the top of her gown stirred with her steady breath, she merely touched the rosary that hung from her waist with her forefinger. She could not be faulted for dignity or presence.

Henry turned to her, icily angry. 'Do you know what we will have to do, if we want to seize this opportunity which God has given to us and which your nephew is about to throw away?'

She shook her head in silence.

‘We will have to raise a huge tax. We will have to muster *another* army. We will have to mount another expedition to France, and we will have to fight another war. And we will have to do this alone, alone and without support because your nephew, *your nephew*, madam, fights and wins one of the most lucky victories that could ever come to a king, and then plays ducks and drakes with it, skims it away off the waves as if victory was a pebble on the beach.’

Even at that, she did not move. But her patience only inflamed him more. He leaped down from his chair again and there was a little gasp as he flung himself towards her. For a moment I even thought he might strike her but it was a pointing finger, not a fist, which she got in the face. ‘And you do not order him to be faithful to me?’

‘I do,’ she said through half-closed lips. ‘I commend him to remember our alliance.’

Behind her, Cardinal Wolsey shook his head in denial.

‘You lie!’ Henry yelled at the queen. ‘You are a Spanish princess more than an English queen!’

‘God knows that I am a faithful wife and Englishwoman,’ she replied.

Henry flung himself away and there was a sudden flurry as the court threw themselves out of his path and dropped into curtseys and bows. His gentlemen bowed briskly to the queen and followed his impetuous progress; but he checked at the door. ‘I shall not forget this,’ he shouted back at the queen. ‘I shall neither forgive nor forget your nephew’s insult to me, nor shall I forgive or forget your behaviour, your damned treasonous behaviour.’

She sank slowly and beautifully into her deep regal curtsey and held it like a dancer until Henry swore and banged out of the door. Only then did she rise up and look thoughtfully around her, at all of us who had witnessed her humiliation and who now looked away from her that she might not claim our service.



At dinner the next night I saw the king’s eyes on me as I walked demurely into the great hall behind the queen. After dinner, when they cleared a space for dancing, he came over to me, walking past the queen, all but turning his back on her as he stood before me and claimed me for a dance.

There was a little rustle of attention as he took me out on the dance floor. ‘The volte,’ Henry said over his shoulder and the other dancers, who had been

readying to form into a set and dance with us, fell back and formed a circle to watch instead.

It was a dance like no other, a dance of seduction. Henry did not take his blue eyes off my face, he danced towards me, stamped his foot and clapped his hands as if he would strip me naked then and there before the whole court. I banished the thought of the watching queen from my mind. I kept my head up and my eyes fixed on the king, and I danced towards him, the sly tripping steps, with a sway of my hips and a turn of my head. We faced one another and he snatched me up in the air and held me, there was a ripple of applause, he lowered me gently to my feet and I felt my cheeks burning with a potent combination of self-consciousness, triumph, and desire. We parted to the beat of the tabor and then came back as the dance turned our steps towards each other again. Once again he threw me up in the air and this time slid me down, so that my body was pressed against his. I felt him down every inch of my body: his chest, his hose, his legs. We paused, our faces so close that if he had leaned forward he could have kissed me. I felt his breath on my face and then he said very quietly: 'My chamber. Come at once.'



He took me to bed that night, and most of the nights that followed, with a steady desire. I should have been happy. Certainly my mother and my father and my uncle and even George were delighted that I was the king's first choice once more, and that everyone in the court was once again gravitating towards me. The ladies of the queen's chamber were as deferential to me as they were to her. Foreign ambassadors bowed to me as deeply as if I were a princess, the gentlemen of the king's bedchamber wrote sonnets to the gold of my hair and the curl of my lips, Francis Weston wrote a song for me and everywhere I went there were people ready to do me a service, to assist me, to pay court to me, and always, always to whisper to me that if I could mention a little thing to the king they would be greatly obliged to me.

I followed George's advice and I always refused to ask the king for anything, even for myself, and so he was comfortable with me in a way that he could never be with anyone else. We made an odd little domestic haven behind the closed door of the privy chamber. We dined alone, after the dinner had been served in the great hall. We had the company only of the musicians and perhaps one or two chosen friends. Thomas More would take Henry up on to the leads and look

at the stars and I would go too, looking up at the dark night sky and thinking that the same stars were shining down on Hever, gleaming through the arrow-slit windows to light my baby's sleeping face.

I missed my course in May, and in June I missed again. I told George who put his arm around me and pressed me close to him. 'I'll tell Father,' he said. 'And Uncle Howard. Pray God that it's a boy this time.'

I wanted to tell Henry myself but they decided that news so momentous and so rich with the possibility of profit should come from my father to the king, that the Boleyns could garner the full credit for my fertility. My father asked for a private audience; and the king, thinking it was something to do with Wolsey's long negotiations with France, drew him into a window embrasure, out of the court's hearing, and invited him to speak. My father spoke a short, smiling sentence, and I saw Henry look from my father to me, where I sat with the ladies, and then heard his loud whoop of delight. He rushed across the room and was about to snatch me up when he suddenly checked himself for fear of hurting me, and caught my hands instead, and kissed them.

'Sweetheart!' he exclaimed. 'The best news! The best I could hear!'

I glanced around at the agog faces, and then back to the king's joy.

'Your Majesty,' I said carefully. 'I am so glad to make you happy.'

'You could do nothing to make me more joyful,' he assured me. He urged me to my feet and drew me to one side. To one woman the ladies craned forward and simultaneously looked away, desperate to know what was going on and equally desperate not to appear to be eavesdropping. My father and George stepped before the king and started talking loudly about the weather and how soon the court would leave on its summer progress, blocking out the whispered conversation between the king and me.

Henry pressed me into the windowseat and laid his hand gently on my stomacher. 'Not laced too tight?'

'No,' I said, smiling up at him. 'It is very early days yet, Your Majesty. I hardly show.'

'Pray God it is a boy this time,' he said.

I smiled up at him, with all the Boleyn recklessness. 'I am sure it is,' I said. 'Remember that I never said so with Catherine. But this time I am sure of it. I am sure that he will be a boy. Perhaps we will call him Henry.'



The reward for my pregnancy came quickly to my family that summer. My father became Viscount Rochford and George became Sir George Boleyn. My mother became a viscountess and entitled to wear purple. My husband had another grant of land to add to his growing estate.

‘I am to thank you for this I think, madam,’ he said. He had chosen to sit beside me at dinner and serve me with the very best cuts of meat. Looking up the hall to the high table I saw that Henry’s eyes were on me and I smiled up at him.

‘I am glad to be of service to you,’ I said politely.

He leaned back in his chair and smiled at me but his eyes were dull, drunkard’s eyes, filled with regret. ‘And so we spend another year with you at court and me in the king’s train and we never meet, and we rarely talk. You are a mistress and I a monk.’

‘I did not know that you had chosen a celibate life,’ I observed mildly.

He had the grace to smile. ‘I am married and not married,’ he pointed out. ‘Where am I to get heirs for my new lands if not on my wife?’

I nodded. There was a brief silence. ‘Yes, you’re right. I am sorry,’ I said shortly.

‘If you have a girl and his interest wanes they will send you home to me. You will be my wife again,’ William remarked conversationally. ‘How do you think we shall fare? Us and the two little bastards?’

My eyes flew to his face. ‘I don’t like to hear you speak like that.’

‘Careful,’ he cautioned me. ‘We’re being watched.’

At once my face glazed with an empty social smile. ‘Watched by the king?’ I asked, carefully not looking around.

‘And your father.’

I took a piece of bread and nibbled it, turned my head as if we were talking of nothing important. ‘I don’t like to hear you talk of my Catherine like that,’ I said. ‘She bears your name.’

‘And that should make me love her?’

‘I think you would love her if you saw her,’ I said defensively. ‘She is a most beautiful child. I don’t see how you could fail to love her. I hope to be with her this summer at Hever. She will be learning to walk.’

The hard look left his face. ‘And is that your greatest wish, Mary? You, the mistress of the King of England? And your greatest wish is that you could live in a little manor castle and teach your daughter to walk?’

I gave a little laugh. ‘Absurd, aren’t I? But yes. I would like nothing more than to be with her.’

He shook his head. 'Mary, you correct me,' he said gently. 'When I think that I have been abused by you and I am angry with you and this wolfpack of your family I suddenly see that we are all of us doing very well off you. All of us are thriving very handsomely and in the middle of it all, like a piece of soft manchet bread nibbled by ducks, is you, being eaten alive by every one of us. Perhaps you should have married a man who would have loved and kept you and given you a baby that you could have suckled yourself, without interruption.'

I smiled at the picture.

'Don't you wish you had married a man like that? Sometimes I wish you had. I wish that you had married a man who would have loved you and kept you, whatever the advantages to handing you over. And when I am drunk and sad I sometimes wish that I had had the courage to have been that man.'

I let the silence extend until the attention of our neighbours had been distracted by something else.

'What's done is done,' I said gently. 'It was all decided for me before I was old enough to think for myself. I am sure, my lord, that you were right to do as the king desired.'

'I will exert my power to do one thing,' William said. 'I will get him to consent to you going to Hever this summer. I can do that for you at least.'

I looked up. 'I would be so glad,' I whispered. I felt my eyes filling with tears at the thought of seeing Catherine again. 'Oh, my lord. I would be so glad of that.'



William was as good as his word. He spoke to my father, he spoke to my uncle, and then finally he spoke to the king. And I was allowed to Hever for the whole of the summer so that I could be with Catherine and walk with her in the apple orchards of Kent.

George came to visit without warning twice through the summer months, riding into the castle courtyard hatless and in his shirtsleeves, sending the housemaids into a frenzy of desire and anxiety. Anne would ply him with questions as to what was doing at court, and who was seeing whom, but he was quiet and weary and often during the heat of midday he would go up the stone stairs to the little chapel alongside his room where the watery reflections from the moat beneath danced on the white-washed ceiling, and he could kneel in silence and pray or daydream as he wished.

He was most ill-suited in his wife. Jane Parker never came with him to Hever, he would not allow her. These days with us were to be unsullied by her bright curious gaze, her avaricious desire for scandal.

‘She really is a monster,’ he remarked idly to me. ‘She is quite as bad as I had feared.’

We were seated in the heart of the ornamental garden before the main entrance of the castle. Around us the hedges and plants were sculpted like a painting, each bush in its place, each plant blowing just so. We three were sprawled on the stone seat before the fountain which pattered soothingly, like rain on a roof, as George rested his dark head in my lap and I leaned back and closed my eyes.

Anne at the end of the stone bench looked at us. ‘How bad?’

He opened his eyes, too lazy to sit up. He raised his hand and counted off her sins on his fingers. ‘One, she’s vilely jealous. I can’t step out of the door without her watching me go, and she shows her jealousy by mock battles.’

‘Mock?’ Anne queried.

‘You know,’ he said impatiently. He adopted a falsetto whine. “‘If I see that lady look at you again, Sir George, I shall know what to think of you! If you dance with that girl one more time, Sir George, I shall have words with her and with you!’”

‘Oh,’ Anne said. ‘How vile.’

‘Two,’ he said, continuing the list. ‘She’s light-fingered. If there’s a shilling in my pocket that she thinks I won’t miss, it disappears. If there’s a bauble lying around she snaps it up like a magpie.’

Anne was enchanted. ‘No, really? I missed some gold ribbon once. I always thought she took it.’

‘Three,’ he continued. ‘And worst of all. She chases me round the bed like a bitch on heat.’

I snorted with surprised laughter. ‘George!’

‘She does,’ he confirmed. ‘Scares the life out of me.’

‘You?’ Anne asked scornfully. ‘I’d have thought you’d be glad.’

He sat up and shook his head. ‘It’s not like that,’ he said earnestly. ‘If she was hot I wouldn’t mind, provided she kept her heat indoors and didn’t shame me. But it’s not like that. She likes ...’ He broke off.

‘Oh do tell!’ I begged.

Anne silenced me with a quick frown. ‘Ssh. This is important. What does she like, George?’

‘It’s not like lust,’ he said uneasily. ‘I can deal with lust. And it’s not variety – I like a little taste of the wild myself. But it’s as if she wanted some kind of power over me. The other night she asked me if I would like a maid brought in. She offered to bring me in a girl and worse: she wanted to watch.’

‘She likes to watch?’ Anne demanded.

He shook his head. ‘No, I think she likes to arrange. I think she likes to listen at doors, to spy through keyholes. I think she likes to be the one that makes things happen and watches others at the business. And when I said “no”...’ He stopped abruptly.

‘What did she offer you then?’

George flushed. ‘She offered to get me a boy.’

I gave a little shriek of scandalised laughter, but Anne was not laughing at all.

‘Why would she offer you that, George?’ she asked quietly.

He looked away. ‘There’s a singer at court,’ he said shortly. ‘A lad so sweet, pretty as a maid but with the wit of a man. I’ve said nothing and done nothing. But she saw me laugh with him once and clap him on the shoulder – and she thinks everything is lust.’

‘This is the second lad whose name has been linked with yours,’ Anne observed. ‘Was there not some pageboy? Sent back to his home last summer?’

‘That was nothing,’ George said.

‘And now this?’

‘Nothing again.’

‘A dangerous nothing,’ Anne said. ‘A dangerous brace of nothings. Wenching is one thing but you can be hanged for this.’

We were silent for a moment, a dark little group under a midsummer blue sky. George shook his head. ‘It’s nothing,’ he reiterated. ‘And it’s my own business. I’m sickened by women, by the constant desire and talk of women. You know all the sonnets and all the flirting and all the empty promises. And a boy is so clean and so clear ...’ He turned away. ‘It’s a whim. I won’t regard it.’

Anne looked at him, her eyes narrowed with calculation. ‘It’s a cardinal sin. You’d better let this whim go by.’

He met her gaze. ‘I know it, Mistress Clever,’ he said.

‘What about Francis Weston?’ I asked.

‘What about him?’ George rejoined.

‘You’re always together.’

George shook his head impatiently. ‘We’re always in service to the king,’ he

corrected me. 'We're forever waiting for the king. And all there is to do is to flirt with the girls at court and talk scandal with them. It's no wonder I am sick of it. The life I live makes me weary to the soul of the vanity of women.'

Autumn 1525

When I returned to court in the autumn a family conference was convened. I noted wryly that this time I had one of the big carved chairs with arms, and a velvet cushion in the seat. This year I was a young woman who might be carrying the king's son in her belly.

They decided that Anne might come back to court in the spring.

'She's learned her lesson,' my father said judicially. 'And with Mary's star rising so high we should have Anne at court. She should be married.'

My uncle nodded, and they moved on to the more important topic of what might be in the king's mind since the same settlement which had ennobled my father had also made Bessie Blount's boy a duke. Henry Fitzroy, a little lad of only six, was the Duke of Richmond and Surrey, the Earl of Nottingham and Lord High Admiral of England.

'It's absurd,' my uncle said flatly. 'But it shows how his mind is working. He's going to make Fitzroy the next heir.'

He paused. He looked round the table at the four of us: my mother and father, George and me. 'It tells us that he's getting truly desperate. He must be thinking of a new marriage. It's still the safest, fastest way to an heir.'

'But if Wolsey brokers a new marriage he'll never favour us,' my father observed. 'Why should he? He's no friend of ours. He'll look for a French princess, or Portuguese.'

'But what if she has a son?' my uncle asked, nodding towards me. 'When the queen is out of the way? Here's a girl of good birth, as good as Henry's mother's. Pregnant for the second time by him. Every chance in the world that she might be carrying his son. If he marries her he has an heir. At once. A complete solution.'

There was a silence. I looked around the table and saw that they were all nodding. 'But the queen will never leave,' I said simply. It was always me that reminded them of that one fact.

'If the king has no need of her nephew, then the king has no need of her,' my uncle said brutally. 'The Treaty of the More which has taken Wolsey so much

trouble has opened the door for us. Peace with France is the end of the alliance with Spain, is the end of the queen. Whether she wills it or no, she is no more than any unwanted wife.'

He let the silence hang in the room. It was outright treason that we were talking now and my uncle feared nothing. He looked me in the face and I felt the weight of his will like a thumb pressed on my forehead. 'The end of the alliance with Spain is the end of the queen,' he said. 'The queen is going whether she likes it or not. And you are going into her place, whether you like it or not.'

I searched my soul for courage and I rose to my feet and went behind my chair so that I could hold onto the thick carved wooden back.

'No,' I said, and my voice came out steadily and strong. 'No, Uncle, I am sorry but I can't do it.' I looked down the long dark wood table and met his gaze, as sharp as a falcon with black eyes that missed nothing. 'I love the queen. She's a great lady and I can't betray her. I cannot take her place. I cannot push her out and take the place of the Queen of England. It's to overthrow the order of things. I daren't do it. I can't do it.'

He smiled at me, his wolfish smile. 'We are making a new order,' he said. 'A new world. There is talk of the end of the authority of the Pope, the map of France and Spain is being redrawn. Everything is changing, and here we are, at the very front of the change.'

'If I refuse?' I asked, my voice very thin.

He gave me his most cynical smile that left his eyes as cold as wet coals. 'You don't,' he said simply. 'The world's not changed that much yet. Men still rule.'

Spring 1526

Anne was finally allowed back to court and took over my duties as lady in waiting to the queen as I grew weary. It was a hard pregnancy this time, the midwives swore that it was because I was carrying a big strong boy and he was sapping my strength. I certainly felt the weight of him when I walked around Greenwich, always longing for my bed.

When I lay in bed the weight of the baby pressed on my back so that my feet and toes would seize with the cramps and I would suddenly cry out in the night, and Anne would groggily wake and burrow down to the end of the bed to massage my clenched toes.

‘For God’s sake go to sleep,’ she said angrily. ‘Why do you toss and turn the whole time?’

‘Because I cannot get comfortable,’ I snapped back. ‘And if you cared more for me and less for yourself you would get me an extra pillow for my back and a drink, instead of lying there like a fat bolster.’

She giggled at that and sat up in the darkness and turned to see me. The embers of the fire lit the bedroom.

‘Are you really ill, or just making a fuss over nothing?’

‘Really ill,’ I said. ‘Truly, Anne, I ache in every bone in my body.’

She sighed and got out of bed and took the candle to the glowing fire and lit it. She held it close to my face so that she could see me.

‘You’re as white as a boggart,’ she said cheerfully. ‘You look old enough to be my mother.’

‘I am in pain,’ I said steadily.

‘D’you want some hot ale?’

‘Yes please.’

‘And another pillow?’

‘Yes please.’

‘And a piss as usual?’

‘Yes please. Anne, if you had ever carried a child you would know what this feels like. I swear to you it’s no small matter.’

‘I can see that it is not,’ she said. ‘I only have to look at you to know that you feel like a woman of ninety years old. God knows how we will keep the king if this goes on.’

‘I don’t have to do anything,’ I said irritably. ‘All he ever looks at these days is my belly.’

Anne thrust the poker in the fire and set the ale at the hearthside with a couple of mugs. ‘Does he play with you?’ she asked interestedly. ‘When you go to his room after dinner?’

‘Not once in the past month,’ I said. ‘The midwife said that I should not.’

‘Sound advice to the mistress of a king,’ Anne muttered irritably, bending over the fire. ‘I wonder who paid her to tell you that? You’re such a fool to listen.’ She drew the hot poker from the embers and thrust it into the jar of ale where it hissed and seethed. ‘What did you tell the king?’

‘The baby matters more than anything.’

Anne shook her head and poured the ale. ‘We matter more than anything else,’ she reminded me. ‘And no woman has ever kept a man by giving him children. You have to do both, Mary. You can’t stop pleasing him just because he’s got a child on you.’

‘I can’t do everything,’ I said plaintively. She passed my cup and I took a sip. ‘Anne, all I really want to do is to rest and let this baby grow strong inside me. I have been at one court or another since I was four years old. I am tired of dancing, I am tired of feasting, I am tired of watching jousting and dancing in the masque and being amazed to see that the man who looks exactly like the king in disguise is indeed the king in disguise. If I could, I would go back to Hever tomorrow.’

Anne piled back into bed beside me, mug in hand. ‘Well you can’t,’ she said flatly. ‘You’ve got everything to play for now. If the queen is set aside, then there’s no knowing how far you might rise. You’ve come this far. You have to go on.’

I paused for a moment, looking at her over the top of my mug. ‘Hear me,’ I said softly. ‘My heart’s not in it.’

She met my gaze. ‘That’s as may be,’ she said frankly. ‘But you’re not free to choose.’



It was a cold winter, and that made it worse for me. Cooped up indoors with

nothing to think of but each new strange pain every day, I started to fear the birth. I had carried my first baby in such happy ignorance; but now I knew that before me was the month of darkness and enclosure, and after that the interminable pain with the midwives threatening to pull the baby out of me, while I clung to the sheets tied to the bedposts and screamed with terror and pain.

‘Smile,’ Anne would snap at me when the king came to my rooms, and the ladies around me would flutter and take up a lute or a tabor. And I would try to smile but the ache in my back and the constant need to use the piss pot made my smile fade and I drooped on my stool.

‘Smile,’ Anne would say under her breath. ‘And sit up straight, you lazy slut.’

Henry looked across at the two of us. ‘Lady Carey, you look weary,’ he said.

Anne gleamed at him. ‘She is carrying a heavy burden,’ she said with a smile. ‘And who should know it better than Your Majesty?’

He looked a little surprised. ‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘You are forward, madam.’

Anne did not blink. ‘I should think any woman would move forward to Your Majesty,’ she said with a little sparkle. ‘Unless she had good cause to make haste away.’

He was intrigued. ‘And would you haste away, Mistress Anne?’

‘Never too fast,’ she said quickly.

He laughed out loud at that and the ladies, Jane Parker among them, looked over to see what I had said to amuse him. He patted my knee. ‘I am glad we brought your sister back to court,’ he said. ‘She will keep us merry.’

‘Very merry,’ I said as sweetly as I could.



I said nothing to Anne until we were on our own and she was undressing me at bedtime. She unlaced the tight ties on my bodice and I sighed with relief as my swollen belly was released. I scratched at the skin and saw the red weals left by my nails, and I straightened my back trying to ease the ache that I had with me always.

‘And what d’you think you’re doing with the king?’ I asked acidly. ‘Hasting away, are you?’

‘Open your eyes,’ she said tersely. She helped me out of my skirt and into my nightgown. My new maid poured water into an ewer and under Anne’s

critical scrutiny I washed myself as thoroughly as I could be bothered in the cool water.

‘And your feet,’ Anne ordered.

‘I can’t even see my feet, much less wash them.’

Anne gestured for the bowl to be lifted down to the floor so that I could sit on the stool while the maid washed my feet.

‘I’m doing as I’m told,’ Anne said coldly. ‘I thought you would see it at once.’

I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensation of having my dirty feet soaped. Then I heard the warning note in her voice. ‘Told by whom?’

‘By our uncle. By our father.’

‘To do what?’

‘To keep the king’s mind on you, to keep him engaged with you. To keep you before him.’

I nodded. ‘Well, of course.’

‘And failing that, to flirt with him myself.’

I sat up straighter and paid a little more attention. ‘Uncle told you to flirt with the king?’

Anne nodded.

‘When did he tell you this? Where?’

‘He came down to Hever.’

‘He went all the way to Hever in midwinter to tell you to flirt with the king?’

She nodded, unsmiling.

‘Good God, did he not know that you would do it anyway? That you flirt as naturally as you breathe?’

Anne gave an unwilling laugh. ‘Clearly not. He came to tell me that our first task, yours and mine, is to make sure that wherever the king goes for diversion during your confinement and after the birth, it is not into the petticoats of a Seymour girl.’

‘And how am I to prevent this?’ I demanded. ‘I will be in the birthing chamber for half the time.’

‘Exactly. I am to prevent it for you.’

I thought for a moment and went straight to the anxiety of my childhood. ‘But what if he comes to like you best?’

Anne’s smile was as sweet as poison. ‘What matter? So long as it is a Boleyn girl?’

‘Uncle Howard thinks this? Does he think nothing of me, in childbed, while

my sister is set on to flirt with the father of my child?’

Anne nodded. ‘Yes. Exactly. He thinks nothing of you at all.’

‘I didn’t want you to come back to court to be my rival,’ I said sulkily.

‘I was born to be your rival,’ she said simply. ‘And you mine. We’re sisters, aren’t we?’



She did it beautifully, with such light charm that no-one even knew it was being done. She played cards with the king and she played so well that she only ever lost by a couple of points. She sang his songs and preferred them to any written by any other man. She encouraged Sir Thomas Wyatt and half a dozen others to hang around her so that the king learned to think of her as the most alluring young woman in the court. Wherever Anne went there was a continual ripple of laughter and chatter and music – and she moved in a court which was hungry for entertainment. In the long winter days all the courtiers had an absolute duty to keep the king entertained; but Anne was the courtier without match. Only Anne could get through the day being fascinating and charming and challenging and always look as if she was being nothing but herself.

Henry sat with me, or with Anne. He called himself a thorn between two roses, a poppy between two ripe ears of wheat. He rested his hand on the small of my back as he watched her dance. He followed the score where I held it in my broadening lap as she sang a new song for him. He staked me when I played cards against her. He watched her take the choicest cuts of meat from her plate and put them on mine. She was sisterly, she was tender, she could not have been sweeter or more attentive to me.

‘You are the lowest of things,’ I said to her one night as she combed her hair before the mirror and then plaited it into one thick dark rope.

‘I know,’ she said complacently, looking at her reflection.

There was a tap outside and George put his head around the door. ‘Can I come in?’

‘Come,’ Anne said. ‘And shut the door, there’s a gale blowing down that corridor.’

Obediently, George closed the door for her, and waved a pitcher of wine at the two of us. ‘Anyone share a glass of wine with me? Not Milady Fruitfulness? Not Milady Spring?’

‘I thought you’d have gone down to the stews with Sir Thomas,’ Anne

remarked. 'He said he was roistering tonight.'

'The king kept me back,' George said. 'Wanted to ask me about you.'

'Me?' Anne said, suddenly alert.

'Wanted to know how you might respond to an invitation.'

Without realising it I had spread my fingers like claws on the red silk sheet of the bed. 'What sort of invitation?'

'To his bed.'

'And you said?' Anne prompted him.

'As I've been bid. That you're a maid and the flower of the family. There'll be no bedding before you're wed. Whoever asks.'

'And he said?'

'Oh.'

'That was all?' I pressed George. 'He just said "Oh"?''

'Yes,' George said simply. 'And followed Sir Thomas's boat down the river to visit whores. I think you have him on the run, Anne.'

She lifted her nightdress high and got into bed. George watched her naked feet with a connoisseur's gaze. 'Very nice.'

'I think so,' she said complacently.



I went into the birthing chamber in the middle of January. What went on while I was enclosed in darkness and silence I did not need to know. I heard there was a joust and Henry carried a favour under his surcoat that was not given to him by me. On his shield he wore the motto 'Declare, I dare not!' which puzzled half the court, thinking it was meant as a compliment to me, but an odd misfiring compliment since I saw neither joust nor motto, locked in the shadowy silence of the birthing chamber with no court and no musicians but just a gaggle of old ladies drinking ale and biding their time: my time actually.

And there were those who thought my star was very high on the rise: 'Declare, I dare not!' was a signal to the court a son and heir might be declared. Only a very few people thought to look from the king, jousting with the ambiguous promise on his shield, to my sister as she sat at the queen's shoulder, her dark eyes on the horsemen, the smallest of smiles on her lips, the tiniest consciousness in the turn of her head.

She visited me that evening, and complained of the stuffiness of the chamber and the darkness of the room.

‘I know,’ I said shortly. ‘They say it has to be like this.’

‘I don’t see why you bear it,’ she said.

‘Think a moment,’ I counselled her. ‘If I insist on having the curtains drawn and the windows open and then I lost the baby or it is born dead, what d’you think our lady mother would say to me? The king’s anger would be sweet in comparison.’

Anne nodded. ‘You can’t afford to do one thing wrong.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘It’s not all pleasure being the king’s sweetheart.’

‘He wants me. He is on the brink of telling me so.’

‘You’ll have to step back if I have a boy,’ I warned her.

She nodded. ‘I know. But if it is a girl they may tell me to step onwards.’

I leaned back on the pillows, too weary to argue. ‘Step onwards or back, for all I care.’

She looked at my hugely rounded belly with unsympathetic curiosity. ‘You are gross. He should have named a barge after you, not a warship.’

I looked at her bright animated face and the exquisite hood which drew her hair back from her smooth complexion. ‘When they launch snakes you shall have your namesake,’ I promised her. ‘Go away, Anne. I’m too tired to quarrel with you.’

She rose at once and went to the door. ‘If he desires me instead of you, then you will have to help me as I have helped you,’ she warned me.

I closed my eyes. ‘If he desires you then I shall take my new baby, God willing, and go to Hever and you can have the king, and the court, and day after day of envy and spite and gossip with my blessing. But I don’t think he is a man who will bring his woman much joy.’

‘Oh I shan’t be his woman,’ she said disdainfully. ‘You don’t think I’d be a whore like you, do you?’

‘He’ll never marry you,’ I predicted. ‘And even if he would, you should think twice. You look at the queen before you aim for her chair. You look at the suffering in that woman’s face and ask yourself if marriage to her husband is likely to bring you joy.’

Anne paused before opening the door. ‘You don’t marry a king for joy.’



I had one more visitor in February. My husband William Carey came to see me early one morning, while I was breaking my fast on bread and ham and ale.

‘I did not mean to interrupt you as you ate,’ he said politely, hovering in the doorway.

I waved my hand at my maid. ‘Take it away.’ I felt at a disadvantage, so fat and heavy against his sleek handsomeness.

‘I came to bring you the king’s good wishes. He asked me to tell you that he has kindly given me some stewardships. I am in your debt, once again, madam.’

‘I’m glad.’

‘I understand from this generosity that I am to give your child my name?’

I shifted a little awkwardly in the bed. ‘He has not told me what he wants. But I would have thought ...’

‘Another Carey. What a family we are making!’

‘Yes.’

He took my hand and kissed it as if he suddenly repented of teasing me. ‘You are pale and you look weary. Is it not so easy, this time?’

I felt tears prickling under my eyelids at his unexpected kindness. ‘No. It is not so easy this time.’

‘Not afraid?’

I put my hand on my swelling belly. ‘A little.’

‘You’ll have the best midwives in the kingdom,’ he reminded me.

I nodded. There was no point in saying that I had been attended by the best midwives before and they had spent three nights standing around the bed telling the most evil tales any woman ever had to hear about the deaths of babies.

William turned to the door. ‘I will tell His Majesty that you are looking bonny and blithe.’

I smiled a shallow smile. ‘Please do, and give him my obedient duty.’

‘He’s much engaged with your sister,’ William remarked.

‘She’s a very engaging woman.’

‘You’re not afraid she might take your place?’

I gestured at the dark chamber and the heavy hangings on the bed, the hot fire and my own lumpish body. ‘My God, husband, any woman in the world could take my place with my blessing if she would do it this morning.’

He laughed out loud at that, swung his hat to me in his bow, and went out through the door. I lay for a while in silence, watching the hangings of the bed move slowly in the still air. It was February, my baby was not due until the middle of the month. It felt like a lifetime.

Thank God he came early. And thank God he was a boy. My little baby boy was born on the fourth day of February. A boy: the king’s acknowledged healthy

boy; and the Boleyns had everything to play for.

Summer 1526

But they could not play me.

‘What in God’s name is wrong with you?’ my mother demanded. ‘It has been three months since the birth, and you are as white as if you were sickening for the plague. Are you ill?’

‘I cannot stop bleeding.’ I looked into her face for some sympathy. She was blank and impatient. ‘I am afraid I will bleed to death.’

‘What do the midwives say?’

‘They say that it will stop in time.’

She tutted at that. ‘You’re so fat,’ she complained. ‘And you’re so ... you’re so dull, Mary.’

I looked up at her and felt my eyes fill with tears. ‘I know,’ I said humbly. ‘I feel dull.’

‘You have given the king a son.’ My mother was trying to be encouraging but I could hear her impatience. ‘Any woman in the world would give her right hand to do what you have done. Any woman in the world would be up and out of her bed and at his side, laughing at his jests and singing his songs, and riding out with him.’

‘Where is my son?’ I asked flatly.

She hesitated for a moment, confused. ‘You know where. At Windsor.’

‘D’you know when I last saw him?’

‘No.’

‘Two months ago. I came back from churcing and he was gone.’

She was completely blank. ‘But of course he was taken away,’ she said. ‘Of course we made arrangements that he should be cared for.’

‘By other women.’

‘Why should that matter?’ My mother was genuinely uncomprehending. ‘He is well cared for, and named Henry for the king.’ She could not keep the exultation from her voice. ‘With everything before him!’

‘But I miss him.’

For a moment it was as if I were speaking another language altogether,

something incomprehensible: Russian or Arabic.

‘Why?’

‘I miss him and I miss Catherine.’

‘And this is why you are so dull?’

‘I am not dull,’ I said flatly. ‘I am sad. I am so sad that I want to do nothing but lie on my bed and put my face into my pillows and weep and weep.’

‘Because you miss your child?’ My mother had to have confirmation, the thought was so strange to her.

‘Did you never miss me?’ I cried out. ‘Or if not me, then Anne? We were taken away from you when we were little more than babies and sent to France. Did you not miss us then? Someone else taught us to read and write, someone else picked us up when we fell, someone else taught us to ride on our ponies. Did you never think that you would have liked to have seen your children?’

‘No,’ she said simply. ‘I could not have found you a better place than the royal court of France. I would have been a poor mother if I had kept you at home.’

I turned away. I could feel my tears very wet on my cheeks.

‘If you could see your baby would you be happy again?’ my mother asked.

‘Yes,’ I breathed. ‘Oh yes, Mother, yes. I would be happy if I could see him again. And Catherine.’

‘Well, I will tell your uncle,’ she said grudgingly. ‘But you must be really happy: smiling, laughing, dancing blithe, pleasing to the eye. You must win the king back to your side.’

‘Oh, has he strayed so very far?’ I asked acidly.

She did not look ashamed, not for a moment. ‘Thank God Anne has him in her toils,’ she said. ‘She plays with him like you might tease the queen’s dog. She has him on a thread.’

‘Why not use her then?’ I demanded spitefully. ‘Why bother with me at all?’

The swiftness of her answer warned me that this had already been decided at a family council.

‘Because you have the king’s son,’ she said simply. ‘Bessie Blount’s bastard is made Duke of Richmond, our Baby Henry has as good a claim. It is nothing to annul your marriage to Carey, and next to nothing to annul the marriage to the queen. We are looking to have him marry you. Anne was our decoy while you were in childbed. But we are placing our fortunes with you.’

She was silent for a moment as if she expected me to respond with joy. When I said nothing she spoke again, a little more sharply. ‘So get up now, and

get the maid to brush your hair and lace you tightly.'

'I can come to dinner because I am not ill,' I said grimly. 'They say the bleeding does not matter and perhaps it does not. I can sit near the king and I can laugh at his jokes and ask him to sing for us. But I cannot be merry in my heart, Mother. Do you understand me at all? I cannot make myself merry any more. I have lost my joy. I have lost my joy. And no-one but me even knows what this feels like, and how dreadful it is.'

She looked at me with a hard determined stare. 'Smile,' she ordered me.

I drew back my lips and felt my eyes fill with tears.

'That's good enough,' she said. 'Stay like that, and I will make arrangements for you to see your children.'



My uncle came to my new rooms after dinner. He looked around with some pleasure, he had not seen how richly I was housed since I came out of the birthing chamber. Now I had a privy chamber as large as the queen's and four ladies of my household to sit with me. I had a pair of personal maids for my service and a pageboy. The king had promised me a musician of my own. Behind the privy chamber was my bedchamber which I shared with Anne, and a little retiring room where I could go to read and be alone. Most days I went in there, closed the door tightly behind me and wept without anyone seeing.

'He's keeping you very fine.'

'Yes, Uncle Howard,' I said politely.

'Your mother says you are pining for your babies.'

I bit my lip to try to stop the tears coming to my eyes.

'What in God's name are you looking like that for?'

'Nothing,' I whispered.

'Smile then.'

I showed him the same gargoyle face that had satisfied my mother and he stared at me rudely and then nodded. 'Well enough. Don't think you can be idle and spoiled just because you have his boy. The baby is no use to us unless you take the next step.'

'I can't make him marry me,' I said quietly. 'He's still married to the queen.'

He snapped his finger. 'Good God, woman, d'you know nothing? That never mattered less. He's one step away from war with her nephew now. He's all but in alliance with France and the Pope and Venice against the Spanish emperor.'

Are you so ignorant that you don't know that?'

I shook my head.

'You should make it your business to know these things,' he said sharply. 'Anne always does. The new alliance will fight against Charles of Spain and if they start to win then Henry will join them. The queen is the aunt of the enemy of all of Europe. She has no influence with him any more. She is the aunt of a pariah.'

I shook my head in disbelief. 'It's not long since Pavia when she was the country's saviour.'

He snapped his fingers. 'Forgotten. Now, as to you. Your mother says that you are not well?'

I hesitated. The impossibility of confiding in my uncle was very apparent to me. 'No.'

'Well, you have to be back in the king's bed by the end of this week, Mary. You do that or you'll never see your children again. D'you understand?'

I gave a little gasp at the cruelty of the bargain and he turned his hawk-face towards me and looked at me with his dark eyes. 'I'll settle for nothing less.'

'You cannot forbid me the sight of my children,' I whispered.

'You'll find that I can.'

'I have the king's favour.'

His hand slammed the table with a sound like a pistol shot. 'You do not! That is my very point! You do not have the king's favour, and without it, you do not have mine. Get back into his bed and you can do whatever you like. You can ask him to set up a nursery for you, you can dandle your babies on the throne of England. You can banish me! But outside his bed you are nothing but a silly used whore that no-one cares for.'

There was a dead silence in the room.

'I understand,' I said stiffly.

'Good.' He moved away from the fireplace and pulled down his jerkin. 'You'll thank me for this on your coronation day.'

'Yes,' I said. I could feel my knees giving way. 'May I sit?'

'No,' he said. 'Learn to stand.'



That night there was dancing in the queen's rooms. The king had brought his musicians to play for her. It was apparent to everyone that though he sat beside

her, he was there to enjoy watching her ladies as they danced. Anne was among them. She was wearing a gown of dark blue, a new gown, and she had a matching hood. She was wearing her usual necklace of pearls with the 'B' in gold as if she wanted to flaunt her status as a single woman.

'Dance,' George said to me very quietly, his mouth next to my ear. 'They're all waiting for you to dance.'

'George, I dare not. I'm bleeding. I might faint.'

'You have to get up and dance,' he said. He looked at me with a bright smile on his face. 'I swear it, Mary. You have to do it or you're lost.' He held out his hand.

'Hold me tight,' I said. 'If I start to fall then catch me.'

'Into the breach. Come on. It has to be done.'

He led me to join the circle of dancers. I saw Anne's quick gaze take in the strength of George's grip under my elbow, and the whiteness of my face. For a moment she turned her back and I knew she would have been happy to see me drop to the floor. But then she saw the gaze of our uncle upon us, and our mother's bright demanding stare, and she gave up her place to me in the set of dancers, summoning her partner Francis Weston away, and George led me down the line towards the king and I looked up and smiled at His Majesty.

I danced that set, and then the next, and then the king himself came towards us and said to George: 'I'll take your place and dance with your sister, if she's not too tired.'

'She'd be honoured.'

I smiled radiantly. 'I could dance all night if Your Majesty was my partner.'

George bowed and stepped back. I saw him take a fold of Anne's dress in his fingers and draw her away to the wall of the room.

The king and I touched hands, turned towards each other, and started the dance. The steps drew us close and then led us apart, his eyes never left me.

Beneath the tight lacing of my stomacher my belly ached as if I were filled with poison. I could feel the sweat trickling down between my tightly strapped breasts. I kept smiling my bright mirthless smile. I thought if I could get Henry alone I might persuade him to let me see my children at Hever when he went hunting this summer. The thought of my baby son made my breasts prickle with pain as the milk tried to flow under the tight strapping. I smiled as if I were filled with joy. I looked across the circle of dancers at the father of my children and I smiled at him as if I could not wait to lie with him for his own sake, and not for what he could do for me and mine.



Anne supervised my washing that evening with a spiteful efficiency which caused her to slap me with a cold washing sheet, and complain of the bloodstained water.

‘Good God, you disgust me,’ she said. ‘However will he bear it?’

I wrapped myself in a sheet and combed my own hair before she could fly at me with the lice comb and rip the hairs from my head under the pretext of making me clean.

‘Perhaps he won’t send for me,’ I said. I was so tired from the dancing and from patiently standing for half an hour while Henry took his formal leave of the queen that I wanted to do nothing more than to tumble into bed.

There was a tap at the door, George’s knock. He put his head around the door. ‘Good,’ he said, seeing me washed and half-naked. ‘He wants you. You can just put on a robe and come.’

‘He’s a brave man then,’ Anne said spitefully. ‘Her breasts still leak milk, she’s still bleeding, and at the smallest thing she bursts into tears.’

George giggled like a boy. ‘Bless you, Annamaria, you are the sweetest sister. I should think she wakes every day and thanks God she has a bedfellow like you to comfort and cheer her.’

Anne had the grace to look discomfited.

‘And I have something for the bleeding,’ he said. He pulled a small piece of wadding from his pocket. I looked at it with suspicion.

‘What is it?’

‘One of the whores told me about it. You push it up your cunny and it stops the bleeding for a while.’

I made a face. ‘Doesn’t it get in the way?’

‘She says not. Do it, Marianne. You have to get into his bed tonight.’

‘Look away then,’ I said. George turned to the window and I went to the bed and struggled with unskilful fingers to do as he told me.

‘Let me,’ Anne said crossly. ‘God knows I do everything else for you.’

She thrust the stuff up inside me and then pushed again. I let out a hoarse gasp of pain and George half-turned. ‘No need to murder the girl,’ he said mildly.

‘It’s got to go up, hasn’t it?’ Anne demanded, flushed and cross. ‘She’s got to be plugged, hasn’t she?’

George offered me a hand. I tumbled off the bed, wincing with pain. ‘Good

God, Anne, if you ever leave court you could set up as a witch,' he said pleasantly. 'You have all the gentleness already.'

She scowled at him.

'Why are you so sour?' he asked as I tied the gown around me and stepped into my shoes with the high scarlet heels.

'Nothing,' Anne said.

'Oho!' he said with sudden understanding. 'I see it all, little Mistress Anne. They've told you to step back and leave him to Mary. You are to be nothing more than lady in waiting to the old queen while your sister mounts up to the throne.'

She scowled at him, her beauty completely erased by jealousy. 'I am nineteen years of age,' she said bitterly. 'Half the court thinks I'm the most beautiful woman in the world. All of them know that I am the wittiest and the most stylish. The king cannot take his eyes off me. Sir Thomas Wyatt has gone to France to escape me. But my sister, a year younger than me, is married and has two children by the king himself. When is it going to be my turn? When am I to be wed? Who is going to be the match for me?'

There was a little silence. George put his hand to her flushed cheek. 'Oh Annamaria,' he said tenderly. 'There couldn't be a match for you. Not the King of France himself or the Emperor of Spain. You are a perfect piece, finished in every way. Be patient. When you are sister to the Queen of England we could look anywhere. Better to secure Mary where she might be well-placed to serve you, than throw yourself away on some paltry duke.'

She gave an unwilling chuckle at that and George bent his dark head and brushed her cheek with his lips. 'You are,' he assured her. 'You are indeed utterly perfect. We all of us adore you. Keep it up, for God's sake. If anyone ever knows what you are truly like in private we'll all be lost.'

She drew back and would have slapped him but he jerked his head out of the way and laughed at her and snapped his fingers to me. 'Come on, little queen in the making!' he said. 'All ready? All prepared?' He turned to Anne. 'He can get his cock up, yes? You've not packed her too tight, like a ship's keel?'

'Of course,' she said crossly. 'But I should think it'll hurt like the devil.'

'Well, we won't worry about that, will we?' George smiled at her. 'After all, this is our meal ticket and our fortune that we are sending to his bed, hardly a girl at all. Come, child! You have work to do for us Boleyns, and we are counting on you!'

He kept up a flow of chatter as we went through the great hall and up the

shadowy stairs to the king's chambers. When we entered Cardinal Wolsey was sitting with Henry and George drew me to a windowseat and brought me a glass of wine while we waited for the king and his most trusted counsellor to finish their low-voiced talk.

‘Probably counting the scraps from the kitchen,’ George whispered to me mischievously.

I smiled. The cardinal's attempts to make the king's court run with less waste was a source of continual amusement to those courtiers, my family among them, whose comfort and profit came from exploiting its folly and extravagance.

Behind us, the cardinal bowed and nodded to his page to gather up his papers. He nodded to George and to me as George led me forward to sit in his chair by the fireside.

‘I shall bid you goodnight, Your Majesty, madam, sir,’ he said and left the room.

‘Will you take a glass of wine with us, George?’ the king asked.

I shot a swift glance of appeal to my brother.

‘I thank Your Majesty,’ George said and poured wine for the king, for me, and for himself. ‘You are working late, sire?’

Henry waved a dismissive hand. ‘You know how the cardinal is,’ he said. ‘Unceasing in his labours.’

‘Deadly dull,’ George suggested impertinently.

The king chuckled disloyally. ‘Deadly dull,’ he agreed.



He sent George away by eleven o'clock and we were in bed by midnight. He caressed me gently and praised the plumpness of my breasts and the roundness of my belly, and I stored his words up so that when my mother next reproached me for being fat and dull I could claim that the king liked me this way. But it was no joy to me. Somehow, when they had taken my baby away they had stolen away a part of me too. I could not love this man, knowing that he would not listen to me, knowing that I was not allowed even to show him my sadness. He was the father of my children and yet he would have no interest in them until they were old enough for him to use as counters in the game of inheritance. He had been my lover for years and yet it had been my task to make sure that he never knew me. As he lay on me, and moved inside me, I felt as lonely as if I were the ship which bore my name, out all alone at sea.

Henry fell asleep almost as soon as he had done, breathing heavily, half-sprawled across me with his beard hot against my neck, his sour breath in my face. I could have screamed at the weight and the smell of him but I lay very still. I was a Boleyn. I was not some slut of a kitchen maid who could not bear a little discomfort. I lay still and thought of the moon shining on the moat of Hever Castle and wished myself in my own little room in the comfort of my bed. I took care not to think of my children: little Catherine in her bed at Hever, or Henry in his crib at Windsor. I could not risk tears when I was in the king's bed. I must be ready to turn to him with a smile whenever he might wake.

To my surprise he stirred at about two in the morning. 'Light a candle,' he said. 'I can't sleep.'

I rose from the bed and felt myself ache in every bone of my body from the discomfort of lying unmoving under his weight. I stirred up the logs of the fire and then lit a candle from the flame. Henry sat up and pulled the covers around his naked shoulders. I put on my robe and sat by the fire and waited to know what his pleasure might be.

I noted with dread that he did not look happy. 'What is the matter, my lord?'

'Why d'you think the queen could not give me a son?'

I was so surprised at this turn of thought that I could not answer quickly and smoothly, like a courtier. 'I don't know. I'm sorry, sire. It's too late for her now.'

'I know that,' he said impatiently. 'But why didn't it happen before? When I married her I was a young man of eighteen and she was twenty-three. She was beautiful, beautiful, I can't tell you. And I was the handsomest prince in Europe.'

'You still are,' I said swiftly.

He gave me a little complacent smile. 'Not Francis?'

I waved away the French king. 'Nothing compared with you.'

'I was virile,' he said. 'And potent. Everyone knows that. And she took with child straightaway. D'you know how soon after the wedding she felt her baby quicken?'

I shook my head.

'Four months!' he said. 'Think of it. I had her in foal in the first month of marriage. How is that for potency?'

I waited.

'Stillborn,' he said. 'Only a girl. Stillborn in January.'

I looked away from his discontented face to the flames of the fire.

‘She took again,’ he said. ‘This time a boy. Prince Henry. We had him christened, we had a tournament in his honour. I’ve never been happier in my life. Prince Henry, named for me and for my father. My son. My heir. Born the first of January. He was dead by March.’

I waited, chilled at the thought of my Henry, taken away from me, who too might be dead in three months. The king was far away from me, back in the past when he had been a youth not much older than I was now.

‘Another baby on the way before I went to war against the French,’ he said. ‘Miscarried in October. An autumn loss. It took the shine off the victory against the French. It took the shine off her. Two years after that, in the spring: another baby born dead, another boy. Another baby who would have been Prince Henry if he had lived. But he didn’t live. None of them lived.’

‘You had the Princess Mary,’ I reminded him in a half-whisper.

‘She came next,’ he said. ‘And I was sure that we had broken the pattern. I thought – God knows what I hoped for – but I had a thought that there had been some ill luck, or some illness, or some such thing that had worked itself out. That once she could bear one baby who lived then others would follow. But it took two years for her even to conceive after Mary. And then it was a baby girl – and born dead.’

I took a breath, I had been holding my breath listening to this familiar story. The terrible listing of the babies’ deaths by their father was as painful as watching his wife on her prie dieu naming the lost ones over her rosary.

‘But I knew,’ Henry said, heaving himself off his pillows and turning to me, his face no longer filled with sorrow but flushing with anger, ‘I knew that I was potent and fertile. Bessie Blount had my boy while the queen was labouring over the last dead baby. Bessie had a boy from me while all I had from the queen were little corpses. Why should that be? Why should that be?’

I shook my head. ‘How should I know, sire? It’s the will of God.’

‘Yes,’ he said with satisfaction. ‘Exactly so. You are right, Mary. That is what it is. It has to be.’

‘God could not wish such a thing on you,’ I said, choosing my words with care, studying his profile in the darkness, longing for Anne’s advice. ‘Of all the princes in Christendom you must be his favourite.’

He turned to look at me, his blue eyes robbed of their colour in the darkness. ‘So what could be wrong?’ he prompted me.

I found I was gaping at him, my mouth half-open like an idiot dawdling on a village stile, trying to think of what he might want me to say.

‘The queen?’

He nodded. ‘My marriage to her was cursed,’ he said simply. ‘It must have been so. Cursed from the beginning.’

I bit back my instant denial.

‘She was my brother’s wife,’ he said. ‘I should never have married her. I was advised against it, but I was young and headstrong and I believed her when she swore that he had never had her.’

I was on the brink of telling him that the queen was incapable of a lie. But I thought of us Boleyns and our ambitions, and I held my peace.

‘I should never have married her,’ he said. He repeated it once, twice, and then his face crumpled like a tearful boy and he put his arms out to me and I hurried to the bedside to hold him. ‘Oh God, Mary, see how I am punished? Our two children, and one of them a boy, and Bessie’s Henry born out of wedlock; but no son to follow behind me on the throne unless he has the courage and the skill to fight his way through. Or else the Princess Mary takes it and holds it and England has to bear whatever husband I can get for her. Oh God! See how I am punished for the Spanish woman’s sin! See how betrayed I am! And by her!’

I felt his tears wet upon my neck and I held him close to me and rocked him as if he had been my baby. ‘You still have time, Henry,’ I whispered. ‘You’re a young man. And potent and virile. If the queen should release you then you can still have an heir.’

He was inconsolable. He sobbed like a child and I rocked him, no longer trying to assure him of anything but just to caress him and pet him and whisper, ‘There. There. There,’ until his storm of tears blew out and he fell asleep, still in my arms, with his eyelashes dark with the wetness of his tears and his rosebud mouth downturned.

Again I did not sleep. His head rested heavily in my lap, my arms supported him around his shoulders, I spent the night willing myself not to move. This time my mind was busy. For the first time I had heard of a threat to the queen, from lips other than those of my family. This was the word of the king; and that was far more serious for the queen than anything that had gone before.



Henry stirred before dawn and pulled me down into the bed with him. He had me quickly, without even opening his eyes and dozed off to sleep again and then woke as the groom of the bedchamber came in with the ewers of hot water for

him to wash, and the pageboy came to stir the fire. I drew the curtains of the bed around the two of us and put on my robe and stepped into my high-heeled shoes.

‘Will you hunt with me today?’ Henry asked.

I straightened my back which was stiff from holding his weight all night long, and smiled as if I were not weary through and through. ‘Oh yes!’ I said delightedly.

He nodded. ‘After Mass,’ he said, dismissing me.

I went out. George was waiting for me in the ante-room, faithful as ever, swinging a gilt pomander stuffed with herbs and sniffing at it. He took a second look at my face as I came from the king’s room.

‘Trouble?’ he asked.

‘Not for us.’

‘Oh good. Who for?’ he asked cheerfully, drawing my arm through his and strolling by my side through the room and then down the stairs to the great hall.

‘Will you keep it secret?’

He made an uncertain face. ‘Just tell me and let me be the judge.’

‘D’you think I am an utter fool?’ I asked irritably.

He gave me his most engaging smile. ‘Sometimes,’ he said. ‘Now tell me, what is the secret?’

‘It’s Henry,’ I said. ‘He wept last night for being accursed by God in not having sons.’

George stopped his stride. ‘Accursed? Did he say accursed?’

I nodded. ‘He thinks that God will not give him sons because he married his brother’s wife.’

A look of pure delight illuminated my brother’s face. ‘Come,’ he said. ‘Come at once.’

He drew me down the second stairs to the old part of the palace.

‘I’m not dressed.’

‘Doesn’t matter. We’re going to Uncle Howard.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the king has finally got to where we want him to be. At last. At last.’

‘We want him to think that he’s accursed?’

‘Good God, yes.’

I stopped and would have pulled my hand from the crook of his elbow but he held me tight and pulled me onwards. ‘Why?’

‘You are a fool as I thought,’ he said simply, and hammered on my uncle’s

door.

It swung open. 'This had better be important,' my uncle said with threatening courtesy before the door revealed us. 'Come in.'

George thrust me in and closed the door behind us.

My uncle was seated before the little fire in his privy chamber, a pot of ale beside him, a sheaf of papers before him, wearing his fur-lined robe. No-one else was stirring in his household. George took a quick glance around the room. 'Is it safe to speak?'

My uncle nodded and waited.

'I've just brought her from the king's bed,' he said. 'The king told her that he is childless because of the will of God. He's calling himself accursed.'

My uncle's sharp gaze switched to my face. 'He said that? He said accursed?'

I hesitated. Henry had wept in my arms, had held me as if I were the only woman in the world who could pity his pain. Something of the sense of betrayal must have shown in my face because my uncle laughed shortly, kicked a log into a spurt of flame on the fire, and gestured to George to seat me on a stool at the fireside. 'Tell me,' he said, with quiet menace. 'If you want to see your babies at Hever this summer. Tell me, if you want to see your son before he is breeched.'

I nodded, drew a breath, and told my uncle word for word what the king had said to me in the silence and privacy of his bed, what I had answered, and how he had wept and slept. My uncle's face was like a death mask in marble. I could read nothing from it. Then he smiled.

'You can write to the wet nurse and tell her to take your baby to Hever. You will visit him within the month,' he said. 'You've done very well, Mary.'

I hesitated, but he waved me away. 'You can go. Oh, one thing. Are you hunting with His Majesty today?'

'Yes,' I said.

'If he speaks more of it today, or at any time, do as you are doing. Just play on.'

I hesitated. 'How is that?'

'Delightfully stupid,' he said. 'Don't prompt him at all. We have scholars who can advise him on theology, and lawyers who can advise him on divorce. You just keep on being sweetly stupid, Mary. You do it beautifully.'

He could see that I was insulted and he smiled past me to George. 'She is much the sweeter of the two,' he said. 'You were right, George. She is the perfect step on our upward stair.'

George nodded, and swept me from the room.

I found I was shaking with a mixture of distress at my own disloyalty and anger at my uncle. 'A step?' I spat out.

George offered me his arm and I took it and he pressed his hand down on my trembling fingers. 'Of course,' he said gently. 'It is our uncle's task to think of the family moving upwards and upwards. Each one of us is nothing more than a step on the way.'

I would have pulled away from him but he held me tightly. 'I don't want to be a step!' I exclaimed. 'If I could be one thing I would be a small farm-owner in Kent with my two children sleeping in my bed at night and my husband a good man who loves me.'

In the shadowy courtyard George smiled down at me, turned my face towards him with one finger under my chin and kissed me lightly on the lips. 'We all would,' he assured me with joyful insincerity. 'We are all simple people at heart. But some of us are called to great things and you are the greatest Boleyn at court. Be happy, Mary. Think how sick this news will make Anne.'



I rode out that day with the king on a long hunt that took us along the river for miles, chasing a deer which the hounds finally pulled down in the water. I was nearly crying with exhaustion by the time we got back to the palace and there was no time to rest. That evening there was a picnic by the river with musicians on barges and a tableau of the queen's ladies. The king, the queen, her ladies in waiting, and I watched from the shore as three barges came slowly upriver, a haunting song drifting across the fast-flowing water. Anne was on one barge, scattering rose petals into the flow, posed at the front like a figurehead, and I saw that Henry's eyes did not leave her. There were other ladies on the boat who stood beside her and flirted with their skirts as they were helped to disembark. But only Anne had that deliciously self-conscious way of walking. She moved as if every man in the world was watching her. She walked as if she were irresistible. And such was the power of her conviction that every man at court did look at her, did find her irresistible. When the last note of the music had finished and the gentlemen who had been on the rival barge sprang ashore there was a little rush towards her. Anne stood back on the gangplank and laughed as if she were surprised at the foolishness of the young men of the court, and I saw a smile on Henry's lips at the arpeggio of her laughter. Anne tossed her head and

walked away from them all, as if no-one could be good enough to please her, and went straight towards the king and queen and swept them a curtsy.

‘Did the tableau please Your Highnesses?’ she asked, as if it had been her treat laid before them, and not a dance of the queen’s ordering to entertain the king.

‘Very pretty,’ the queen said dampeningly.

Anne shot one blaze of a look at the king from under lowered eyelashes. Then she swept another low curtsy and strolled over towards me and sat on the bench at my side.

Henry returned to his conversation with his wife. ‘I shall visit the Princess Mary when I am on progress this summer,’ he said.

The queen hid her surprise. ‘Where will we meet her?’

‘I said *I* will meet her,’ Henry said coldly. ‘And she will come to wherever I command.’

She did not flinch. ‘I should like to see my daughter,’ she persisted. ‘It is many months since I was last with her.’

‘Perhaps,’ Henry said, ‘she can come to you. Wherever you are.’

The queen nodded, noting, as every member of the court strained to hear, that she was not to travel with the king this summer.

‘Thank you,’ the queen said with simple dignity. ‘You are very good. She writes to me that she is making much progress in her Greek and Latin. I hope you will find that she is an accomplished princess.’

‘Greek and Latin will be of little help to her in the making of sons and heirs,’ the king said shortly. ‘She had better not be growing into a stooped scholar. It is a princess’s first duty to be the mother of a king. As you know, madam.’

The daughter of Isabella of Spain, one of the most intelligent and educated women in Europe, folded her hands in her lap and looked down at the rich rings on her thin fingers. ‘I know it indeed.’

Henry sprang to his feet and clapped his hands. The musicians broke off at once and waited to know his command. ‘Play a country dance!’ he said. ‘Let’s dance before dinner!’

At once they started a bright infectious jig and the courtiers turned to take their places. Henry came towards me, I rose up to dance with him but he only smiled at me, and held out his hand to Anne. Eyes downcast, she went past me without a glance. Dismissively, her gown brushed my knees as if I should have drawn further back, out of her way, as if everyone should always step back to let Anne through. Then she was gone and as I looked up I met the queen’s eyes. She

looked blankly at me as I might look at a rivalry of birds fluttering in the dovecote. It was not as if it mattered. They would all be eaten in time.



I was in a fever for the court to set off on its summer progress so that I might go to Hever to my children, but we were delayed as Cardinal Wolsey and the king could not agree where the court should go first. The cardinal, deep in negotiations with England's new allies of France, Venice and the Pope, against the Spanish, wanted the court to stay close to London, so that he might reach the king easily if matters came to war.

But there was plague in the city and plague in all the port towns, and Henry was terrified of illness. He wanted to go far out into the countryside where the water was sweet and where the crowds of supplicants and beggars would not follow him from the city stews. The cardinal argued as best he could, but Henry, running from sickness and death, was unstoppable. He would go as far as Wales itself to see the Princess Mary, but he would not stay near London.

I was allowed to go nowhere without the king's express permission and George's escort. I found them both playing at tennis in the hot sunshine of the enclosed court. As I watched, a good hit from George bounced on the overhanging roof with a crack and rolled into the court but Henry was already there and struck it powerfully into the corner.

George acknowledged the shot with a hand thrown up like a swordsman and served again. Anne was sitting at the side of the court, in the shade with a few other ladies in waiting, as posed and as cool as little statues in a fountain, all exquisitely dressed, all awaiting favour. I gritted my teeth against my instant desire to sit beside her, to outshine her, and instead I stood at the back, waiting for the king to finish the game.

He won, of course. George took him to the final point and then lost convincingly. All the ladies clapped and the king turned, flushed and smiling, and saw me.

'I hope you did not stake your brother.'

'I would never gamble against Your Majesty at any game of skill,' I said. 'I am too careful of my little fortune.'

He smiled at that, and took a napkin from his page to mop his rosy face.

'I am here to ask a favour,' I said quickly before anyone could interrupt us. 'I want to see our son, and our daughter, before the court leaves on its travels.'

‘God knows where we are to go,’ Henry said, a frown puckering his face. ‘Wolsey keeps saying ...’

‘If I might go today I could be back within the week,’ I said quietly. ‘And then travel with you, wherever you decide to go.’

He did not want me to leave him. His mouth lost its smile. I shot a quick look at George, prompting him to help me.

‘And you can come back and tell us how the baby is faring!’ George said. ‘And if he is as handsome and strong as his father. Does the nurse say that he is fair?’

‘As golden as a Tudor,’ I said quickly. ‘But no-one can tell me that he is more handsome than his father.’

We had caught Henry on the cusp of his mood before he fell into ill humour. The smile returned. ‘Ah, you are a flatterer, Mary.’

‘I should so like to see him well cared for before I go away with you, Your Majesty,’ I said.

‘Oh very well,’ he said negligently. His eyes went past me to Anne. ‘I shall find something to do.’

All the other ladies around her smiled when they saw him look in their direction. The more daring tossed their heads and turned their shoulders and coquetted like trained ponies in a ring. Only Anne glanced at him, and then looked away, as if his attention were a matter of indifference. She looked away and smiled at Francis, and the turn of her head was as inviting as any other woman’s whispered promise. Francis was at her side in a moment and her hand was taken, and carried to his mouth for a kiss.

I saw the king’s face darken, and I marvelled at Anne’s recklessness. The king put the napkin around his neck and opened the door of the tennis court. At once the ladies, all surprised, rose to their feet and sank into their curtsies. Anne glanced around, leisurely reclaimed her hand from Sir Francis’s caress, and swept a little curtsy of her own.

‘Did you see any of the game at all?’ the king asked her abruptly.

Anne rose up from the curtsy and smiled into his face as if his disfavour meant nothing. ‘I watched about half,’ she said negligently.

His face darkened. ‘Half, madam?’

‘Why would I watch your opponent, Your Majesty? When you are on the court?’

There was a second of silence and then he laughed aloud and the court sycophantically laughed with him, as if they had not been holding their breath at

her impertinence just a second before. Anne smiled her dazzling mountebank smile.

‘The game would make no sense to you then,’ Henry said. ‘Since you see only half the play.’

‘I see all the sun and none of the shadow,’ she riposted. ‘All the day and none of the night.’

‘You call me the sun?’ he asked.

She smiled at him. ‘Dazzling,’ she whispered and the word was the most intimate of blandishments. ‘Dazzling.’

‘You call me dazzling?’ he asked.

She opened her eyes wide as if his misunderstanding surprised her. ‘The sun, Your Majesty. The sun is dazzling today.’



Hever was a small grey turreted island among the green lushness of the fields of Kent. We entered the park through a gate carelessly left open at the east end and rode towards the castle as the sun set behind it. The jumbled red-tiled roofs glowed in the golden light, the grey stone of the walls was reflected in the still waters of the moat so it looked like two castles, one floating on another, like a dream world of my home. There were a pair of wild swans on the moat, nebs nibbling against each other, making a heart shape with their arched necks. Their mirrored reflection made four swans, the reflected castle flickering in the water around them.

‘Pretty,’ George said shortly. ‘Makes you wish we could be here all the time.’

We skirted the moat and crossed the flat planked bridge where the track went over the river. A brace of snipe darted up from the reeds and made my tired horse flinch at their clatter. They had cut the hay in the meadows on either side of the river and the sweet green smell hung on the evening air. Then we heard a shout and a couple of my father’s men in their livery tumbled out of the guard room and arrayed themselves on the drawbridge, shading their eyes against the light.

‘It’s the young lord, and my lady Carey,’ one of the soldiers exclaimed. A lad at the back turned and ran with the news into the courtyard, and we slowed the horses down to a walk as the bell rang and the guards came rushing out of the guard room and the servants scrambled into the inner courtyard.

George shot me a rueful smile at the inefficiency of our soldiers, and reined back his horse so that I could go across the drawbridge first and under the portcullis in the arched gateway. Everyone was running into the courtyard, from the lads who turned the spit in the kitchen in their dirt and rags, to the housekeeper who was opening the doors to the great hall and calling sharply to a servant inside.

‘My lord, Lady Carey,’ she said, coming forward. The yeoman of the servery stepped forward with her and they both bowed. A groom caught my reins and the captain of the guard helped me as I dropped from the saddle.

‘How is my baby?’ I asked the housekeeper.

She nodded to the stairway in the corner of the courtyard. ‘There he is.’

I turned quickly, the wet nurse was bringing my baby out into the sunlight. First of all I had to absorb his growth. I had last seen him when he was just a month old, and he had been a small baby at birth. Now, I could see his cheeks had become rounded and rosy pink. The wet nurse had her hand cupped over his fair head, and I felt a pang of jealousy so powerful that it made me almost sick at the sight of her big red workaday hand on the head of the king’s son, my son. He was tight-swaddled, rolled in bandages, strapped on his swaddling board. I held out my arms to him and his nurse passed him over to me, like a meal on a platter.

‘He is well,’ the nurse said defensively.

I held him up so I could see his face. His little hands and arms were strapped to his sides, his swaddling even held his head still. Only his eyes could move and they took in my face, scanning from my mouth to my eyes and then taking in the sky behind me and the ravens whirling around the tower above my head.

‘He is lovely,’ I whispered.

George, dismounting in a more leisurely fashion from his horse, tossed the reins to a stable lad and looked over my shoulder. At once the dark blue eyes switched to scrutinise the new face.

‘Looking at his uncle,’ George said with satisfaction. ‘Good. Mark me well, lad. We shall make each other’s fortune. Isn’t he a Tudor, Mary? He’s the very spit of the king. Well done.’

I smiled looking at the rosy cheeks and the golden hair which gleamed in threads from under the lace cap, at the dark blue eyes which looked from George’s face to mine with such calm confidence. ‘He is, isn’t he?’

‘It’s odd.’ George lowered his voice to a whisper for my ears only. ‘Just think, we might swear fealty to this little scrap. He might be King of England one day. He might be the greatest man in Europe and you and I might have all

our dependence on him.'

I tightened my grip on the board and felt the warm little body strapped tight to the wooden frame. 'Please God keep him safe, whatever his future,' I whispered.

'Keep us all safe,' George returned. 'For it will not be an easy road to get him onto the throne.'

He took the baby from me and handed him casually to his nurse, as if he were impatient of speculating, and led me towards the front door of the house. I checked, just on the doorstep was a tiny girl of two years old, dressed in the short clothes of babyhood, looking up at me. A woman had firm grip of her hand. Catherine, my daughter, looked up into my face as if I were a stranger.

I dropped to my knees on the stone cobbles of the courtyard. 'Catherine, d'you know who I am?'

Her little pale face trembled but did not crumple. 'My mother.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I wanted to come and see you before but they would not let me. I have missed you, my daughter. I have wanted to have you with me.'

She glanced upwards at the maidservant holding her little hand. A squeeze of her palm told her to reply. 'Yes, Mother,' she said in a small voice.

'Did you remember me at all?' I asked. The pain in my voice was evident to everyone within earshot. Catherine looked up to the maid who held her hand, she looked back to my face. Her lip trembled, her face crumpled, she burst into tears.

'Oh God,' George said wearily. His firm hand under my elbow forced me up and over the threshold into my home, then he pushed me firmly towards the great hall. The fire was lit, even though it was midsummer, and the big chair before the fire was occupied by Grandmother Boleyn.

'How do,' George said succinctly. He turned on the household which had followed us into the hall. 'Out. And go about your business,' he said shortly.

'What's the matter with Mary?' my grandmother asked him.

'Heat, and sun,' George improvised at random. 'And horse riding. After giving birth.'

'Is that all?' she asked acidly.

George thrust me into a chair and dropped into a seat himself. 'Thirst,' he said pointedly. 'I should think that she is half-dead for a glass of wine. I know that I am, madam.'

The old lady beamed at his rudeness and gestured at the heavy sideboard behind her. George got to his feet and poured a glass of wine for me and one for himself. He downed his in one gulp and poured another.

I rubbed my face with the back of my hand and looked around. 'I want Catherine brought to me,' I said.

'Leave it,' George counselled me.

'She hardly knows me. She looks as if she has forgotten me altogether.'

'That's why I said leave it.'

I would have argued but George persisted. 'She would have been dragged out of her nursery when they heard the bell, and stuffed into her best gown and taken downstairs and told to greet you politely. Poor child was probably sick with fright. Lord, Mary, don't you remember the fuss when we knew that Father and Mother were coming? It was worse than going to court for the first time. You used to vomit in terror and Anne used to go around in her best dress for days at a time. It's always terrifying when your mother comes to see you. Give her a little while to become comfortable again and then go quietly to her room and sit with her.'

I nodded at the good sense, and settled back into my chair.

'All well at court?' the old lady asked. 'How is my son? And your mother?'

'Well,' George said briefly. 'Father has been in Venice for the last month, working for the alliance. Wolsey's business. Mother is well, in attendance on the queen.'

'The queen well?'

George nodded. 'She's not on progress with the king this year. Much diminished at court.'

The old lady nodded at the familiar story of a woman travelling too slowly towards her death. 'And the king? Is Mary still his favourite?'

'Mary or Anne,' George said, smiling. 'He seems to have a taste for Boleyn girls. Mary is still favourite.'

My grandmother turned her acute bright gaze on me. 'You're a good girl,' she said approvingly. 'How long are you here for?'

'A week,' I said. 'That's all I was allowed.'

'And you?' she asked, turning to George.

'I think I'll stay a few days,' he said idly. 'I had forgotten how pretty Hever is in summer. I might stay and take Mary home when we have to go back to court.'

'I shall be with the children all day,' I warned him.

'That's all right,' he smiled. 'I shan't need company. I shall write. I think I shall become a poet.'



I took George's advice and did not approach Catherine until I had gone to my little room, up the tiny winding stair, washed my face in the bowl of water, and looked out of the leaded windows over the darkening parkland around the castle. I saw a flicker of white of a barn owl and heard his interrogative hoot, and then the answer from his mate in the woods. I heard a fish jump in the moat, and saw the stars start to prick silver dots in the blue-grey sky. Then, and only then, I went to the nursery to find my daughter.

She was seated in front of the fire on her stool, a bowl of milk with bread on her lap, her spoon suspended halfway to her mouth as she listened to the talk over her head as her nursemaid gossiped with another maid. When they saw me, they leaped to their feet and Catherine would have dropped her bowl if the nursemaid had not been quick to snatch it from her. The other maid disappeared with a flick of her gown, and the nursemaid seated herself beside Catherine and made a fine show of watching my daughter eat, and making sure that she was not too close to the fire.

I took a seat and said nothing, until the fuss subsided a little and I could watch Catherine as she spooned the last of her supper. Her nursemaid took the bowl out of her hands and I nodded to her to leave the room and she went without saying another word.

I felt in the pocket of my gown. 'I have brought you a little present,' I said. It was an acorn on a string, cleverly carved into a face. The little cup of the acorn made a hat on the head. At once she smiled and put out her hand for it. Her palm was plump like a baby's still, her fingers tiny. I put the acorn into her hand and felt the softness of the skin.

'Shall you give him a name?' I asked.

A little frown puckered the smoothness of her forehead. Her golden-bronze hair was pulled away from her face and half-hidden by her nightcap. I gently touched the ribbon of the nightcap and then the golden ringlets which bobbed below the brim. She did not flinch from my touch, she was all-absorbed in the acorn.

'What shall I call him?' Her blue eyes flashed up at me.

'He's from an oak tree. He is an acorn,' I said. 'That's the tree that the king wants us all to plant. It grows into strong wood for his ships.'

'I shall call him Oakey,' she said with decision. She clearly had no interest in the king or his ships. She twitched the string and the little acorn bobbed.

‘Dancing,’ she said with satisfaction.

‘Would you like to sit on my lap with Oakey and I could tell you a story about him going to a great revel and dancing with all the other acorns?’ I asked.

For a moment she hesitated.

‘The hazelnuts came too,’ I said temptingly. ‘And the chestnuts. It was a great woodland ball. I think the berries were there.’

It was enough. She rose from her stool and came towards me and I lifted her onto my lap. She was heavier than I remembered: a child of solid flesh and bone, not the dream child that I thought of night after night. I put her on my knee and felt the warmth and strength of her. I rested my cheek against the warm cap and felt her curls tickle my neck. I inhaled the sweet scent of her skin, that wonderful baby-child scent.

‘Tell,’ she commanded and sat back to listen, as I started the story of the Woodland Revel.



We had a wonderful week together: George, the babies and me. We walked in the sunshine and took picnics out into the hay meadows where the soft grass was starting to grow through the stubble again. When we were out of sight of the castle I would strip the swaddling off Baby Henry and let him kick his legs in the warm air and move freely. I would play ball with Catherine, and hide and seek: not a very challenging game in an open meadow, but she was still at the age where she believed that if she shut her eyes and buried her head under a shawl then she could not be seen. And George and Catherine ran races in which he was more and more outrageously handicapped so at first he had to hop, and then he had to crawl, and at the end of the week he could only be trundled along on his hands with me holding his feet in order to make it fair, so that she could win on her unsteady little feet.

The night we were due to go back to court I could not eat my dinner, I was so sick with grief, I could not bring myself to tell her that I was leaving. I stole away in the dawn like a thief and told her nursemaid to tell her when she woke that her mother would come back again as soon as she could, and to be a good girl and look after Oakey. I rode until midday in a haze of misery and did not notice that it had been raining since we set out until George remarked at noon: ‘For pity’s sake let’s get out of this rain and find something to eat.’

He had halted before a monastery where the bell was starting to toll for

Nones and he dropped to the ground and lifted me down from the saddle. 'Have you cried all the way?'

'I suppose so,' I said. 'I can't bear to think of ...'

'Don't think of it then,' he said briskly. He stood back while one of our men rang the big bell and announced us to the gatekeeper. When the big gate swung open George marched me into the courtyard and up the steps to the refectory. We were early, there were only a couple of monks laying out pewter plates on the table and pewter mugs for ale or wine.

George snapped his fingers at one of them and sent him scurrying for wine for the two of us, and then pressed the cold metal goblet into my hand. 'Drink up,' he said firmly. 'And stop crying. You have to be at court tonight and you can't arrive with a white face and red eyes. They'll never let you go again if it makes you ugly. You're not a woman who can please herself.'

'You show me a woman in the world who can please herself,' I said, passionately resentful, and made him laugh.

'No,' he said. 'I don't know one. How glad I am that Baby Henry and me are men.'



We did not get to Windsor until evening and then we found the court on the brink of departure. Not even Anne could spare time from her packing to inspect me. She was in a flurry of preparation and I saw two new gowns disappearing into her box.

'What are those?'

'Gift from the king,' she said shortly.

I nodded, saying nothing. She shot me a sideways smile and then put in the matching hoods. I saw, as she undoubtedly meant that I should, that at least one was thickly sewn with seed pearls. I went to the windowseat and watched her put her cape over the top of them all and then call for her maid to come and strap up the box. When the girl had come and the porter followed her to lug the box away, Anne turned to me challengingly: 'So?'

'What's going on?' I asked. 'Gowns?'

She turned, her clasped hands behind her back, demure as a schoolgirl. 'He's courting me,' she said. 'Openly.'

'Anne, he is my lover.'

Lazily, she shrugged. 'You weren't here, were you? You'd strolled off to

Hever, you wanted your children more than him. You weren't exactly ...' She paused. 'Hot.'

'And you are?'

She smiled, as if at some inner jest. 'There is a certain heat in the air, this summer.'

I set my teeth on my temper. 'You were supposed to keep him interested in me, not fling him off course.'

She shrugged again. 'He's a man. Easier to interest than turn away.'

'I am curious about one thing,' I said. If the words had been knives I would have thrown them blade-first into her self-satisfied, smiling face. 'Clearly, you have his attention if he is giving you such gifts. You have moved upwards at court. You are the favourite.'

She nodded, her satisfaction hung around her like the warm scent of a stroked cat.

'Clearly you do this despite the fact that he is my acknowledged lover.'

'I was told to,' she said insolently.

'You were not told to supplant me,' I said sharply.

She shrugged, all innocent. 'I can't help it if he desires me,' she said, her tone like milk. 'The court is filled with men who desire me. Do I encourage them? No.'

'It's me you're talking to, remember,' I said grimly. 'Not one of your fools. I know that you encourage everybody.'

She gave me that same bland smile.

'What d'you hope for, Anne? To be his mistress? To push me out of my place?'

At once the smug joy in her face was replaced by an absorbed thoughtfulness. 'Yes, I suppose so. But it's a risk.'

'Risk?'

'If I let him have me, the chances are he'll lose interest. He's hard to hold.'

'I don't find him so.' I scored a small point.

'You get nothing. And he married off Bessie Blount to a nobody when he had finished with her. She gained nothing from it either.'

I bit my tongue so hard that I could taste the blood in my mouth. 'If you say so, Anne.'

'I think I'll hold out. Hold out till he sees that I am not a Bessie Blount, and not a Mary Boleyn. A greater thing by far. Hold out till he sees that he has to make me an offer, a very great offer.'

I paused for a moment. 'You'll never get Henry Percy back if that's what you're hoping,' I warned her. 'He won't give you Percy for your favour.'

She was across the room in two great strides and she snatched both of my wrists, her fingernails digging in. 'You never mention his name again,' she hissed. 'Never!'

I wrenched my hands away, and grabbed her by the shoulders. 'I'll say what I want to you,' I swore. 'Just as you say what you want to me. You're accursed, Anne, you lost your one love and now you want anything that's not yours. You want anything that's mine. You've always wanted anything that was mine.'

She pulled out of my grip and flung open the door. 'Leave me,' she ordered.

'You can go,' I corrected her. 'This is *my* room, remember.'

For a moment we glared at each other, stubborn as cats on the stable wall, full of mutual resentment and something darker, the old sense between sisters that there is only really room in the world for one girl. The sense that every fight could be to the death.

I moved away first. 'We're supposed to be on the same side.'

She slammed the door shut. 'It's our room,' she stipulated.



The lines between Anne and me were now clearly drawn. All our childhood it had been a question as to which of us was the best Boleyn girl, now our girlhood rivalry was to be played out on the greatest stage in the kingdom. By the end of the summer one of us would be the acknowledged mistress of the king; the other would be her maid, her assistant, perhaps her Fool.

There was no way I could defeat her. I would have plotted against her but I had no allies and I had no power. None of my family saw any disadvantage in the king having me in his bed at night and Anne on his arm every day. To them it was an ideal situation, the clever Boleyn girl as his companion and advisor, the fecund Boleyn girl as his lover.

Only I saw what it cost her. At night, after dancing and laughing and continually drawing the attention of the court to her, she would sit before the mirror and pull off her hood and I would see her young face drained and exhausted.

Often George would come to our room and bring a glass of port wine for her and the two of us. George and I would put her into bed, draw the sheets up under her chin and watch her as she drained the glass and the colour came slowly back

into her cheeks.

‘God knows where this is taking us,’ George muttered to me one evening as we watched her sleep. ‘The king is besotted with her; the court is mad about her. What in God’s name is she hoping for?’

Anne stirred in her sleep.

‘Hush,’ I said, drawing the curtains around the bed. ‘Don’t wake her. I can’t stand another moment of her, I really cannot.’

George cocked a bright look at me. ‘That bad?’

‘She sits in my place,’ I said flatly.

‘Oh, my dear.’

I turned my head away. ‘Everything I have gained she has taken from me,’ I said, my voice low with passionate resentment.

‘But you don’t want him so much now, do you?’ George asked.

I shook my head. ‘That doesn’t mean I want to be pushed aside by Anne.’

He strolled with me to the door with his hand round my waist, idly resting on my hip. He kissed me full on the lips like a lover. ‘You know you’re the sweetest.’

I smiled at him. ‘I know I am a better woman than her. She’s ice and ambition, and she would see you on the gallows before surrendering her ambition. And I know that in me he has a lover who loves him for himself. But Anne has dazzled him, and dazzled the court, and dazzled even you.’

‘Not me,’ George said gently.

‘Uncle likes her best,’ I said resentfully.

‘He likes nobody. But he wonders how far she might go.’

‘We all wonder that. And what price she’s prepared to pay. Especially if it’s me that pays it.’

‘It’s not an easy dance she’s leading,’ George admitted.

‘I hate her,’ I said simply. ‘I could happily watch her die of her ambition.’



The court was to visit the Princess Mary at Ludlow Castle and we travelled due west all summer. She was only ten but she was old for her years, educated and schooled in the formal strict style which her mother had known at the Spanish court. She had a priest and a set of tutors, a lady companion and her own household in Wales where she was princess. We expected a dignified little woman, a girl on the brink of womanhood.

What we saw was someone very different.

She came into the great hall where her father was at dinner and had the ordeal of walking from doorway to high table with the eyes of everyone upon her. She was tiny, as small as a six-year-old, a perfect little doll with pale brown hair under her hood and a grave pale-skinned face. She was as dainty as her mother had been when she had first come to England, but she was tiny, a little child.

The king greeted her tenderly enough but I could see the shock on his face. He had not seen her for more than six months, he had expected her to have grown and bloomed into womanhood. But this was no princess who could be married within a year and sent to her new home, confident that within another two or three years she would be ready to bear children. This was a child herself, and a pale thin shy little child at that.

He kissed her and she was seated at his right hand at the high table where she looked down the hall and saw every eye on her. She ate hardly anything. She drank not at all. When he spoke to her she answered in whispered monosyllables. Undoubtedly she was learned, we had all her tutors troop in one after another to assure the king that she could speak Greek and Latin, and compile addition tables and knew the geography of her principality and of the kingdom. When they played some music and she danced she was graceful and light on her feet. But she did not look like a girl who was robust and buxom and fertile. She looked like a girl who could quite easily fade away, catch a little cold and die of it. This was the only legitimate heir to the throne of Henry's father, and she did not look strong enough to lift the sceptre.

George came for me early that night in Ludlow Castle. 'He's foul with temper,' he warned.

Anne stirred in our bed. 'Not happy with his little dwarf?'

'It's amazing,' George remarked. 'Even half-asleep, you're still as sweet as poison, Anne. Come on, Mary, he can't be kept waiting.'

Henry was standing by the fire when I entered, one foot resting against a log, pushing it deeper into the red embers. He barely glanced up as I came into the room then he stretched out one peremptory hand for me and I went swiftly into his arms.

'This is a blow,' he said softly into my hair. 'I had thought that she would be grown, nearly a woman. I had thought to marry her to Francis or even to his son, and bind us with an alliance to France. A girl is no good for me, no good at all. But a girl who cannot even be married!' He broke off, abruptly turned away and

took two swift angry steps across the room. A game of cards was laid out on the table, the hands face down, half-finished. With one angry swipe he knocked them off the table, knocked the table over. At the crash there was a shout from the guard outside the door.

‘Your Majesty?’

‘Leave me!’ Henry bellowed back.

He rounded on me. ‘Why would God do this to me? Why such a thing to me? No sons and a daughter who looks like the next winter might blow her away? I have no heir. I have no-one to come after me. Why would God do such a thing to me?’

I kept silent and shook my head, waiting to see what he wanted.

‘It’s the queen, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘That’s what you’re thinking. That’s what they’re all thinking.’

I did not know whether to agree or disagree. I kept a wary watch on him and held my peace.

‘It’s that damned marriage,’ he said. ‘I should never have done it. My father didn’t want it. He said she could stay in England as a widowed princess, ours for the ordering. But I thought ... I wanted ...’ He broke off. He did not want to remember how deeply and faithfully he had loved her. ‘The Pope gave us a dispensation but it was a mistake. You can’t dispense against the word of God.’

I nodded gravely.

‘I should not have married my brother’s wife. Simple as that. And because I married her I have been accursed with her barrenness. God has not given this false marriage his blessing. Every year he has turned his face from me and I should have seen it earlier. The queen is not my wife, she is Arthur’s wife.’

‘But if the marriage was never consummated ...’ I started.

‘Makes no difference,’ he said sharply. ‘And anyway, it was.’

I bowed my head.

‘Come to bed,’ Henry said, suddenly weary. ‘I cannot stomach this. I have to be free of sin. I have to tell the queen to leave. I have to cleanse myself of this dreadful sin.’

Obediently, I went to the bed and slipped my cloak from my shoulders. I turned back the sheets and got into bed. Henry fell to his knees at the foot of the bed and prayed fervently. I listened to the muttered words and found that I was praying too: one powerless woman praying for another. I was praying for the queen now that the most powerful man in England was blaming her for leading him into mortal sin.

Autumn 1526

We returned to London, to Greenwich, one of the king's most beloved palaces, and still his dark mood did not lift. He spent much time with clerics and with advisors, some people thought that he was preparing another book, another study of theology. But I, who had to sit with him most nights while he read and wrote, knew that he was struggling with the words of the Bible, struggling to know whether it was the will of God that a man should marry his brother's widow – and thus care for her; or whether it was the will of God that a man should put his brother's widow away – because to look on her with desire was to shame his brother. God on this occasion was ambiguous. Different passages in the Bible said different things. It would take a college full of theologians to decide which rule should take precedence.

It seemed obvious to me that a man should marry his brother's widow so that his brother's children could be brought up in a godly home and a good woman well cared for. Thank God that I did not venture this opinion at Henry's evening councils. There were men disputing in Greek and Latin, going back to original texts, consulting the fathers of the church. The last thing they wanted was a bit of common sense from an immensely ordinary young woman.

I was no help to him. I could be no help to him. It was Anne who had the brain he needed, and Anne alone who had the ability to turn some theological tangle into a joke that could make him laugh, even as he puzzled over it.

They walked together, every afternoon, her hand tucked in the crook of his elbow, their heads as close together as a pair of conspirators. They looked like lovers but when I lingered beside them I would hear Anne say: 'Yes, but St Paul is very clear in his discussion of this ...' and Henry would reply: 'You think that is what he means? I always thought that he was referring to another passage.'

George and I would walk behind them, malleable chaperones, and I watched as Anne pinched Henry's arm to drive home a point or shook her head in disagreement.



‘Why does he not just tell the queen that she must leave?’ George asked simply. ‘There’s not a court in Europe that would condemn him. Everyone knows he has to have a son.’

‘He likes to think well of himself,’ I explained, watching the turn of Anne’s head and hearing her ripple of low laughter. ‘He could not bring himself to turn off a woman just because she’s become old. He has to find a way to see that it is God’s will that he leaves her. He has to find a greater authority than his own desires.’

‘My God, if I was a king like him I’d follow my desires and I wouldn’t worry myself whether it was God’s will or no,’ George exclaimed.

‘That’s because you’re a grasping greedy Boleyn. But this is a king who wants to do the right thing. He can’t move forward until he knows that God is on his side.’

‘And Anne is helping him,’ George observed mischievously.

‘What a keeper of a conscience!’ I said spitefully. ‘Your immortal soul would be safe in her hands.’



They called a family conference. I had been waiting for it. Ever since we had come home from Ludlow my uncle had been watching the two of us, Anne and I, with a silent intensity. He had been with the court this summer, he had seen how the king spent his days with Anne, how he was irresistibly drawn to wherever she might be. But how habitually he summoned me to him at nightfall. My uncle was baffled by the king’s desire for us both. He did not know how Henry should be steered, to do the best for the Howards.

George and Anne and I were ranged before the big table in my uncle’s room. He sat on the other side of it, my mother beside him on a smaller chair.

‘The king obviously desires Anne,’ my uncle began. ‘But if she merely supplants Mary as the favourite then we are no further on. Worse off, in fact. For she’s not even married, and while this is going on no-one can have her, and once it’s finished she’s worthless.’

I looked to see if my mother flinched at this discussion of her oldest daughter. Her face was stern. This was family business, not sentiment.

‘So Anne must withdraw,’ my uncle ruled. ‘You’re spoiling the game for Mary. She’s had a girl and a boy off him and we have nothing to show for it but some extra lands ...’

‘A couple of titles,’ George murmured. ‘A few offices ...’

‘Aye. I don’t deny it. But Anne is taking the edge off his appetite for Mary.’

‘He has no appetite for Mary,’ Anne said spitefully. ‘He has a habit for Mary. A different thing. You’re a married man, Uncle, you should know that.’

I heard George’s gasp. My uncle smiled at Anne and his smile was wolfish.

‘Thank you, Mistress Anne,’ he said. ‘Your quickness of wit would much become you, if you were still in France. But since you are in England I have to remind you that all English women are required to do as they are bid, and look happy while doing it.’

Anne bowed her head and I saw her colour up with temper.

‘You’re to go to Hever,’ he said abruptly.

She started up. ‘Not again! For doing what?’

‘You’re a wild card and I don’t know how to play you,’ he said with brutal frankness.

‘If you leave me at court I can make the king love me,’ she promised desperately. ‘Don’t send me back to Hever! What is there for me?’

He raised his hand. ‘It’s not forever,’ he said. ‘Just for Christmas. It’s obvious that Henry’s very taken with you but I don’t know what we can do with this. You can’t bed him, not while you’re a maid. You have to be married before you can go to his bed, and no man of any sense will marry you while you are the king’s favourite. It’s a mess.’

She bit back her reply and dropped a tiny curtsy. ‘I am grateful,’ she said through her teeth. ‘But I cannot see that sending me to Hever for Christmas all on my own, far from the court, far from the king, is going to help my chances to serve this family.’

‘It gets you out of the way so you don’t spoil the king’s aim. As soon as he is divorced from Katherine he can marry Mary. Mary, with her two bonny babies. He can get a wife and an heir in one ceremony. You just muddle the picture, Anne.’

‘So you would paint me out?’ she demanded. ‘Who are you now? Holbein?’

‘Hold your tongue,’ my mother said sharply.

‘I’ll get you a husband,’ my uncle promised. ‘From France if not from England. Once Mary is Queen of England she can get a husband for you. You can take your pick.’

Anne’s fingernails dug into her clenched hands. ‘I shan’t have a husband as her gift!’ she swore. ‘She won’t ever be queen. She’s risen as far as she can go. She’s opened her legs and given him two children and *still* he does not care for

her. He liked her well enough when he was courting her, can't you see? He's a huntsman, he likes the chase. Once Mary was caught the sport was over, and God knows, never was a woman easier caught. He's used to her now, she's more a wife than a mistress – but a wife without honour, a wife without respect.'

She had said exactly the wrong thing. My uncle smiled. 'Like a wife? Oh I hope so. So I think we'll have a little rest from you for now and see what Mary can do with him when you're not there. You've been rivalling Mary and she is our favourite.'

I curtsied with a sweet smile to Anne. 'I am the favourite,' I repeated. 'And she is to disappear.'

Winter 1526

I sent Christmas fairings for my babies in Anne's trunk when she went down to Hever. To Catherine I sent a little marchpane house with roof tiles of roasted almonds and windows of spun sugar. I begged Anne to give it to Catherine on twelfth night and tell her that her mother loved her and missed her and would come again soon.

Anne dropped down into her hunter's saddle as gracelessly as a farmer's wife riding to market. There was no-one to watch her, there was no benefit to being light and laughing.

'God knows why you don't defy them and go down, if you love your babies so much,' she said, tempting me to trouble.

'Thank you for your good advice,' I said. 'I am sure you meant it for the best.'

'Well, God knows what they think you can do without me here to advise you.'

'God knows indeed,' I replied cheerfully.

'There are women that men marry and there are women that men don't,' she pronounced. 'And you are the sort of mistress that a man doesn't bother to marry. Sons or no sons.'

I smiled up at her. I was so much slower in wits than Anne that it was a great joy to me when once in a while a weapon came to my sluggish hand. 'Yes,' I said. 'I expect you're right. But there is clearly a third sort and that is the woman that men neither marry nor take as their mistress. Women that go home alone for Christmas. And that seems to be you, my sister. Good day.'

I turned on my heel and left her and she had nothing to do but to nod to the soldiers who were to ride with her and trot out through the gateway and down the road to Kent. A few flakes of snow swirled in the air as she went.



It was clear what would become of the queen as soon as we were settled in

Greenwich for the feast of Christmas. She was to be neglected and ignored and everyone in the court knew that she was out of favour. It was a vile thing to see, like an owl being mobbed in daytime by the lesser birds.

Her nephew, the Emperor of Spain, knew something of what was going on. He sent a new ambassador to England, Ambassador Mendoza, a wily lawyer who might be relied on to represent the queen to her husband, and to bring Spain and England into accord once more. I saw my uncle in a whispered conference with Cardinal Wolsey and guessed that he was not smoothing Ambassador Mendoza's way.

I was right. For all of the Christmas feast the new ambassador was not allowed to come to court, his papers were not recognised, he was not allowed to make his bow to the king, he was not allowed even to see the queen. Her messages and letters were watched, she could not even receive presents without them being inspected by the grooms of the bedchamber.

Christmas went into twelfth night and still the new Spanish ambassador was not allowed to see the queen. Not until mid-January did Wolsey stop his cat-and-mouse game and acknowledge that Ambassador Mendoza was indeed a genuine representative of the Emperor of Spain and might bring his papers to court and his messages to the queen.

I was in the queen's rooms when a page came from the cardinal to say that the ambassador had asked to attend on her. The colour rose to her cheeks, she leaped to her feet. 'I should change my gown, but there's no time.'

I stood behind her chair, the only lady attending her, everyone else was walking in the garden with the king.

'Ambassador Mendoza will bring me news of my nephew.' The queen seated herself in her chair. 'And I trust he will create an alliance between my nephew and my husband. Families should not quarrel. There has been an alliance between Spain and England for as long as I can remember. It's all wrong when we are divided.'

I nodded and then the door opened.

It was not the ambassador with his retinue, bringing gifts and letters and private documents from her nephew. It was the cardinal, the queen's greatest enemy, and he led the ambassador into her room as a mountebank might lead a dancing bear. The ambassador was captured. He could not speak to the queen alone, any secrets he might have carried in his luggage had been ransacked long ago. This was not a man who would bring the king back into alliance with Spain. This was not a man who could bring the queen back to her true status at court.

This was a man all but kidnapped by the cardinal.

Her hand, when she gave it to him to kiss, was steady as a rock. Her voice was sweet and perfectly modulated. She greeted the cardinal with pleasant courtesy. No-one would ever have known from her behaviour that it was her doom that came in that day, along with the sulky ambassador and the smiling cardinal. She knew at that moment that her friends and her family were powerless to help her. She was horribly, vulnerably, completely alone.



There was a joust at the end of January, and the king refused to ride. George was chosen to carry the royal standard instead. He won for the king, and got a new pair of leather gloves by way of thanks.

That night I found the king in a sombre mood, wrapped in a thick gown before the fire of his chamber, with a bottle of wine half-empty beside him and another empty bottle lolling in the white ash of the fireplace and draining its lees into a red puddle.

‘Are you well, Your Majesty?’ I asked cautiously.

He looked up and I saw that his blue eyes were bloodshot, his face slack.

‘No,’ he said quietly.

‘What’s the matter?’ I spoke to him as tenderly and easily as I might speak to George. He did not seem like a king of terror tonight. He was a boy, a sad boy.

‘I didn’t ride in the joust today.’

‘I know.’

‘And I won’t ride again.’

‘Ever?’

‘Perhaps never.’

‘Oh, Henry, why not?’

He paused. ‘I was afraid. Isn’t that shameful? When they started to strap me into my armour I realised that I was afraid.’

I didn’t know what to say.

‘It’s a dangerous business, jousting,’ he said resentfully. ‘You women in the stands with your favours and your wagers, listening to the heralds sound the trumpets, you don’t realise. It’s life or death if you’re down in the joust. It’s not play down there.’

I waited.

‘What if I die?’ he asked blankly. ‘What if I die? What happens then?’

For one dreadful moment I thought that he was asking me about his immortal soul. 'No-one knows for certain,' I said hesitantly.

'Not that.' He waved it away. 'What becomes of the throne? What becomes of my father's crown? He put this country together after years of fighting, no-one thought that he could do it. No-one but him could have done it. But he did it. And he had two sons. Two sons, Mary! So when Arthur died there was still me to inherit. He made the kingdom safe by his work on the battlefield and his work in bed. I inherited a kingdom as safe as it could be: secure borders, obedient lords, a treasury filled with gold, and I have no-one to hand it on to.'

His tone was so bitter that there was nothing I could say. I bowed my head.

'This business of a son is wearing me down. I walk every day in unholy terror that I will die before I can get a son to put on the throne. I cannot joust, I cannot even hunt with a light heart. I see a fence before me and instead of throwing my heart over and trusting to my horse to jump clean I have this flash before my eyes and I see myself dead of a broken neck in a ditch and the crown of England hanging on a thorn bush for anyone to pick up. And who could do it? Who would do it?'

The agony in his face and in his voice was too much for me. I reached for the bottle and refilled his glass. 'There's time,' I said, thinking how my uncle would like me to say such a thing. 'We know that you are fertile with me. Our son Henry is the very picture of you.'

He huddled his cape around him a little closer. 'You can go,' he said. 'Will George be waiting to take you back to your room?'

'He always waits,' I said, startled. 'Don't you want me to stay?'

'I am too dark in my heart tonight,' he said frankly. 'I have had to face the prospect of my own death and it does not make me feel like playing between the sheets with you.'

I curtsied. At the doorway I paused and looked back at the room. He had not seen me go. He was still hunched in his chair, wrapped in his cloak, staring at the embers as if he would see his future in the red ashes.

'You could marry me,' I said quietly. 'And we have two children already, and one of them a boy.'

'What?' He looked up at me, his blue eyes hazy with his own despair.

I knew that my uncle would have wanted me to press forward. But I was never a woman who could press forward like that.

'Goodnight,' I said gently. 'Goodnight, sweet prince,' and I left him with his own darkness.

Spring 1527

The queen's fall from power became more and more visible. In February the court entertained envoys from France. They were not delayed while their papers were scrutinised, they were welcomed with feasting and banquets and all sorts of parties, and it soon became clear that they were in England to arrange for the marriage of Princess Mary to either King Francis of France or to his son. Princess Mary was summoned from the quiet retreat of Ludlow Castle and presented to the envoys, encouraged to dance and to play and to sing and to eat. My God! How they made that child eat! As if she might swell in size before their very eyes in time to be of a marriageable girth within the months of the negotiations. My father, home from France in their train, was everywhere – advising the king, translating for the envoys, in secret conference with the cardinal as to how they should re-draw the alliances of Europe, and finally, plotting with my uncle how the family could be advanced through these turbulent times.

They decided between the two of them that Anne should be returned to court. People were starting to wonder why she had gone away. My father wanted the French envoys to see her. My uncle stopped me on the stair on my way to the queen's rooms to tell me that Anne would be returning.

'Why?' I asked, as close to rudeness as I dared. 'Henry was speaking to me of his desire for a son only the other night. If she comes back she'll spoil everything.'

'Did he speak of your son?' he asked me bluntly, and at my silence he shook his head. 'No. You make no progress with the king, Mary. Anne was right. We move forward not at all.'

I turned my head and looked out of the window. I knew I looked sullen. 'And where d'you think Anne will take you?' I burst out. 'She won't work for the good of the family, she won't do as she is bid. She'll go for her own profits and her own lands and her own titles.'

He nodded, stroking the side of his nose. 'Aye, she's a self-seeking woman. But he keeps asking for her, he's hot for her in a way he never was for you.'

‘He has two children by me!’

My uncle’s dark eyebrows shot up at my raised voice. At once I dropped my head again. ‘I am sorry. But what more can I do? What can Anne do that I have not done? I have loved him and bedded him and borne him two strong children. No woman could do more. Not even Anne, though she’s so precious to everyone.’

‘Perhaps she can do more,’ he said, ignoring my irrelevant spite. ‘If she were to conceive a child by him right now, he might marry her. He’s so desperate for her he might do that. He’s desperate for her, he’s desperate for a child, the two desires might come together.’

‘And what about me?’ I cried.

He shrugged. ‘You can go back to William,’ he said as if it did not matter at all.

A few days later, Anne returned to court as discreetly as she had left and within the day was the centre of everyone’s attention. I had my bedfellow and my companion again, and I found myself tying the laces of her dresses when we woke in the morning and combing her hair at night. She commanded my service just as once she had been forced to give me hers.

‘Didn’t you fear I would have won him back?’ I asked curiously as I was brushing her hair before we went to bed.

‘You don’t matter,’ she said confidently. ‘Not for a moment. This is my spring, this will be my summer. I will have him dancing at the end of my string. Nothing will set him free of my spell. It doesn’t matter what you do, it doesn’t matter what any woman does. He is besotted. He is mine for the taking.’

‘Just for the spring and the summer?’ I asked.

Anne looked thoughtful. ‘Oh, who can hold a man for long? He’s on the very crest of the wave of his desire, I can hold him there; but at the end of it, the wave has to break. No-one stays in love forever.’

‘If you want to marry him you’ll have to hold him for a lot longer than a couple of seasons. D’you think you can hold him for a year? For two?’

I could have laughed aloud to see the confidence drain from her face.

‘By the time he gets free to wed, *if* he ever gets free to wed, he won’t be hot for you any more anyway. You’ll be on the wane, Anne. You’ll be half-forgotten. A woman who has had her best years, has reached her mid-twenties, and still unmarried.’

She thumped down in the bed and slapped the pillow. ‘Don’t you ill-wish me,’ she said crossly. ‘My God, sometimes you sound like an Edenbridge crone.’

Anything could happen for me, I can make anything happen for me. It is you who'll be on the wane, because it is you who is too lazy to make your own destiny. But I wake every day with an utter determination to have my own way. Anything could happen for me.'



By May the business with the French envoys was all but finished. Princess Mary was to marry either the French king or his second son as soon as she was a woman. They held a great tennis tournament to celebrate and Anne was made mistress of the order of the players and made great work of a chart listing all the men of the court with their names on little flags. The king found her poring over it with one little flag absent-mindedly pressed to her heart.

'What have you there, Mistress Boleyn?'

'The order of the tennis tournament,' she said. 'I have to match each gentleman fairly so that all can play and we are certain of a true winner.'

'I meant what have you there, in your hand?'

Anne started. 'I forgot I was holding it,' she said quickly. 'Just one of the names. I am placing the names in the order of play.'

'And who is the gentleman that you hold so close?'

She managed to blush. 'I don't know, I had not looked at the name.'

'May I?' He held out his hand.

She did not give him the little flag. 'It means nothing. It was just the flag that was in my hand as I was puzzling. Let me put it where it should be on the board and we'll consider the order of play together, Your Majesty.'

He was alert. 'You seem ashamed, Mistress Boleyn.'

She flared up a little. 'I am ashamed of nothing. I just don't want to seem foolish.'

'Foolish?'

Anne turned her head. 'Please let me put this name down and you can advise me on the order of play.'

He put out his hand. 'I want to know the name on the flag.'

For an awful moment I thought that she was not play-acting with him. For an awful moment I thought he was about to discover that she was cheating so that our brother George had the best place in the draw. She was so completely confused and distressed by his pressing to know the name that even I thought that she had been caught out. The king was like one of his best pointer dogs on

the scent. He knew that something was being hidden and he was racked by his curiosity and his desire.

‘I command it,’ he said quietly.

With tremendous reluctance Anne put the little flag into his outstretched hand, swept a curtsey and walked away from him. She did not look back; but once she was out of sight we all heard her heels patter and her dress swish as she ran away from the tennis court back up the stone-flagged path to the castle.

Henry opened his hand and looked at the name on the flag that she had been holding to her breast. It was his own name.



Anne’s tennis tournament took two days to complete and she was everywhere, laughing, ordering, umpiring and scoring. At the end there were four matches left to play: the king against our brother George, my husband William Carey against Francis Weston, Thomas Wyatt, newly returned from France, against William Brereton, and a match between a couple of nobodies which would take place while the rest of us were dining.

‘You had best make sure that the king doesn’t play Thomas Wyatt,’ I said to Anne in an undertone as our brother George and the king went onto the court together.

‘Oh why?’ she asked innocently.

‘Because there’s too much riding on this. The king wants to win in front of the French envoys and Thomas Wyatt wants to win in front of you. The king won’t take kindly to being beaten in public by Thomas Wyatt.’

She shrugged. ‘He’s a courtier. He won’t forget the greater game.’

‘The greater game?’

‘Whether it is tennis or jousting or archery or flirtation the game is to keep the king happy,’ she said. ‘That’s all we are here for, that’s all that matters. And we all know that.’

She leaned forward. Our brother George was in place, ready to serve, the king alert and ready. She raised her white handkerchief and dropped it. George served, it was a good one, it rattled on the roof of the court and dropped down just out of Henry’s reach. He lunged for it and got it back over the net. George, quick on his feet and twelve years younger than the king, smashed the ball past the older man and Henry raised his hand and conceded the point.

The next serve was an easy one for the king to reach and he did a smooth

passing shot that George did not even attempt to chase. The play ebbed and flowed, both men running and hitting the ball as hard as they could, apparently giving no quarter and allowing no favours. George was steadily and consistently losing but he did it so carefully that anyone watching would have thought the king the better player. Indeed, he probably was the better player in terms of skill and tactics. It was only that George could have outrun him twice over. It was only that George was lean and fit, a young man of twenty-four, while the king was a man with a thickening girth, a man heading towards the middle years of his life.

They were near the end of the first set when George sent up a high ball. Henry leaped to smash it past George and take the point but then he fell and crashed down on the court and let out a terrible cry.

All the ladies of the court screamed, Anne was on her feet at once, George jumped the net and was first at the king's side.

'Oh God, what is it?' Anne called.

George's face was white. 'Get a physician,' he shouted. A page went flying up to the castle, Anne and I hurried to the gate of the court, tore it open and went in.

Henry was red-faced and cursing with the pain. He reached for my hand and clung to it. 'Damnation. Mary, get rid of all these people.'

I turned to George. 'Keep everyone out.'

I saw the quick embarrassed look Henry shot towards Anne and realised that the pain he was suffering was less than the injury to his pride at the thought of her seeing him on the ground with tears squeezing from under his eyelids.

'Go, Anne,' I said quietly.

She did not argue. She withdrew to the gate of the tennis court and waited, as the whole court waited, to hear what had struck the king down in the very moment of his triumphant shot.

'Where is the pain?' I asked him urgently. My terror was that he would point to his breast or to his belly and it would be something torn inside him, or his heart missing its beat. Something deep and irreparable.

'My foot,' he said, choking on the words. 'Such a fool. I came down on the side of it. I think it's broken.'

'Your foot?' The relief made me almost laugh out loud. 'My God, Henry, I thought you were dead!'

He looked up at that and grinned through his scowl. 'Dead of tennis? I have given up jousting to keep myself safe and you think that I might be dead of

tennis?’

I was breathless with relief. ‘Dead of tennis! No! But I thought perhaps ... it was so sudden, and you went down so fast ...’

‘And at the hand of your brother!’ he finished, and then suddenly the three of us were howling with laughter, the king’s head cradled in my lap, George gripping his hands, and the king torn between the intense pain of his broken foot and the ludicrous thought that the Boleyns had attempted to assassinate him with tennis.



The French envoys were due to leave, their treaties signed, and we were to have a great masque and party to bid them farewell. It was to take place in the queen’s apartments, without her invitation, without even her desire. The master of the revels merely arrived and abruptly announced that the king had ordered that the masque should take place in her rooms. The queen smiled as if it was the very thing that she wanted and let him measure up for awnings and tapestries and scenery. The queen’s ladies were to wear gowns of gold or silver and to dance with the king and his companions who would enter disguised.

I thought how many times the queen had pretended not to recognise her husband when he came into her rooms disguised, how many times she had watched him dance with her ladies, how often he had led me out before her and that now she and I would watch him dance with Anne. Not a flicker of resentment crossed her face for even a moment. She thought that she would choose the dancers, as she had always done before, a little piece of patronage, one of the many ways to control the court. But the dancing master already had a list of the ladies who were to play the parts. They had been named by the king, and the queen was left with nothing to do, she was a cipher in her own rooms.

It took them all day to prepare for the masque, and the queen had nowhere to sit while they hammered the draperies into the wooden panelling. She retired to her privy chamber while the rest of us tried on our gowns and practised our dance, too excited to care that we could hardly hear the beat of the music over the noise of the workmen. The queen went to bed early to get away from the noise and the disruption while the rest of us feasted late in the hall.

The next day the French envoys came to dine at noon in the great hall. The queen sat at Henry’s right hand but his eyes were on Anne. The trumpets sounded and the servers marched in like soldiers, all in step in their bright

liveries, bringing dish after dish to the top table and then to the other tables in the hall. It was a feast of quite ludicrous proportions, every sort of beast had been killed and gutted and cooked to demonstrate the wealth of the king and the richness of his kingdom. The pinnacle of the feast was the dish of fowls with a peacock cooked and presented all in its feathers, a great towering piece of fancy. It was stuffed with a swan which had been stuffed with chicken which had been stuffed with a lark. The carver's task was to get a perfect slice from every bird without disturbing the beauty of the dish. Henry took a taste of everything but I saw Anne refuse all that she was offered.

Henry beckoned the server with one crook of his finger and whispered in his ear. He sent Anne the heart of the dish, the lark. She looked up as if she were surprised – as if she had not been following every move that he had made – and she smiled at him and bowed her head in thanks. Then she tasted the meat. As she put a small slice in her smiling mouth, I saw him shudder with desire.

After dinner the queen and her ladies, Anne and I among them, retired from the great hall and hurried to our rooms to change. Anne and I helped each other lace into the tight stomachers of our cloth of gold gowns, and Anne complained as I pulled her laces tight.

‘Too much lark,’ I said unsympathetically.

‘Did you see how he watches me?’

‘Everyone saw.’

She pushed her French hood far back on her head so that her dark hair showed, and straightened the gold ‘B’ that she always wore round her neck.

‘What d’you see when my hood is set back like this?’

‘Your smug face.’

‘A face without a line on it. Hair that is glossy and dark without one thread of grey.’ She stepped back from the mirror and admired the golden gown. ‘Dressed like a queen,’ she said.

There was a knock on the door and Jane Parker put her head into the room. ‘Talking secrets?’ she asked hungrily.

‘No,’ I said unhelpfully. ‘Just getting ready.’

She opened the door and slipped inside. She was wearing a silver gown, cut low to show her breasts, and then tugged down a bit lower still; and a silver hood. When she saw how Anne was wearing her hood she at once went to the mirror and pushed her own back a little. Anne winked at me behind her back.

‘He does favour you above all others,’ she said confidentially to Anne. ‘Anyone can see that he desires you.’

‘Indeed.’

Jane turned to me. ‘Doesn’t it make you feel jealous? Isn’t it odd bedding a man who desires your sister?’

‘No,’ I said shortly.

Nothing would halt the woman. Her speculation was like the slime trail after a snail. ‘I would find it very odd. And then, when you come from his bed, you get into bed with Anne and the two of you are side by side and all but naked. He must wish he could come to your room and have both of you at once!’

I was stunned. ‘That’s filthy talk. His Majesty would be much offended.’

She gave a smile which would have been better in a bawdy house than in a lady’s room. ‘Of course, there’s only one man who comes in here to the two beautiful sisters, after their bed time, and that’s my husband. I know he visits most nights. For sure he’s never in my bed.’

‘Good God, who can blame him?’ Anne exclaimed roundly. ‘For I’d rather sleep with a worm than have you whispering in my ear all the night. Go, Jane Parker, and take your foul mouth and your worse mind to the necessary room where it belongs. Mary and I are going to dance.’



Almost as soon as the French envoys were gone, as if he had been waiting for quietness and secrecy, Cardinal Wolsey created a hidden court of law and summoned witnesses, prosecutors, and defendants. He was judge, of course. That way it seemed to be Wolsey, only Wolsey, acting on principle and not on instruction. That way a divorce could be ordered by the Pope, and not requested by the king. Amazingly, Wolsey’s court remained a secret. No-one except those ferried quietly downriver to Westminster knew of it. Not Mother, always alert for the family’s benefit, not Uncle Howard, the spymaster. Not I, warm from the king’s bed, not Anne, enfolded in his confidence. Most importantly, not even the queen knew of her court. For three days they had an innocent woman’s marriage on trial and she did not even know it.

For Wolsey’s secret court at Westminster was to try Henry himself for cohabiting unlawfully with the wife of his dead brother Arthur: a charge so grave and a court so preposterous that they must have been pinching themselves as they swore themselves in and watched their king walk, head penitently bowed, into the dock, accused of sin by his own Lord Chancellor. Henry confessed that he had married his brother’s wife on the basis of a mistaken papal

dispensation. He said that at the time, and after, he had 'grave doubts'. Wolsey unblinkingly ordered that the matter should be put before a papal legate – his unbiased self – and the king agreed, named a lawyer and withdrew from the proceedings. The court sat for three days and then summoned theologians to give evidence that it was unlawful to marry the wife of a dead brother. My uncle's spy network finally picked up news of the secret court when he heard of an inquiry made to the Bishop of Lincoln. At once Anne, George and I were summoned before him to his rooms at Windsor.

'Divorced for what purpose?' he demanded, his voice tight with excitement.

Anne was almost panting at the news. 'He must be doing it for me. He must be planning to set aside the queen for me.'

'Has he proposed?' my uncle demanded, straight to the point.

She met his gaze. 'No. How can he? But I will wager any prize you like that he will ask me the moment he is free of the queen.'

My uncle nodded. 'How long can you hold him?'

'How long can it take?' Anne countered. 'The court is in session now. It will hand down a judgement, the queen will be set aside, the king will be free at last; and *voilà!* Here am I!'

Despite himself he smiled at her assurance. '*Voilà.* So you are,' he concurred.

'So you agree, it is to be me.' Anne drove a bargain with him. 'Mary shall leave court or stay as I require. The family will support me with the king, as I need. We play this only for my benefit. There is no choice, Mary is not reinstated, you do not urge her on. I am the only Boleyn girl we put forward.'

My uncle looked at my father. My father looked from one daughter to the other and shrugged. 'I doubt either of them,' he said flatly. 'Surely he'll aim higher than a commoner. Clearly it won't be Mary. She's had her heyday and he's cooled towards her.'

I felt myself chilled all through at this loveless analysis. But my father did not even look at me. This was business. 'So it won't be Mary. But I doubt very much if his passion for Anne will take him forward in preference to a French princess.'

My uncle thought for a moment. 'Which do we support?'

'Anne,' my mother recommended. 'He's mad for Anne. If he can rid himself of his wife this month I think he might have Anne.'

My uncle looked from my sister to me as one might choose an apple to eat. 'Anne then,' he said.

Anne did not even smile. She just gave a little sigh of relief.

My uncle pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

‘What about me?’ I asked awkwardly.

They all looked towards me as if for a moment they had forgotten I was there.

‘What about me? Am I to go to his bed if he sends for me? Or am I to refuse?’

My uncle did not decide. That was the moment when I felt Anne’s supremacy. My uncle, the head of my family, the fount of authority in my world, looked to my sister for her decision.

‘She can’t refuse,’ she said. ‘We don’t want some slut getting into his bed and diverting him. He must keep Mary as his mistress for the nights and he’ll go on falling in love with me during the day. But you must be dull, Mary, like a dull wife.’

‘I don’t know I can do that,’ I said irritably.

Anne gave her sexy gurgle of laughter. ‘Oh you can,’ she said with a sly sideways smile at my uncle. ‘You can be wonderfully dull, Mary. Don’t underrate yourself.’

I saw my uncle hide a smile and I felt my cheeks burn with rage. George leaned towards me and I felt his comforting weight against my shoulder, as if to remind me that it would do me no good to protest.

Anne raised an eyebrow at my uncle and he nodded that we could leave. She led the way from the room, I followed the hem of her gown as I had always dreaded that I would have to do. I kept my eyes down as she led us out into the sunshine and walked up by the archery butts and looked out over the garden and the steeply stepped terraces down to the moat, and then the little town and the river beyond. George touched my hand with his fingers but I hardly felt him. I was consumed with rage that I had been put aside for my sister. My own family had decided that I was to be the whore and she was to be the wife.

‘So I shall be queen,’ Anne said dreamily.

‘I shall be brother-in-law to the King of England,’ George said, as if he could hardly believe it.

‘And what shall I be?’ I spat. I would not be the king’s favourite, I would not be the centre of the court. I would lose the place I had worked for ever since I was twelve years old. I would be last year’s whore.

‘You’ll be my lady in waiting,’ Anne said sweetly. ‘You’ll be the other Boleyn girl.’



No-one knew how much the queen knew of the disaster which was being prepared for her. She was a queen of ice and stone in these spring days, while the cardinal trawled the universities of Europe for evidence against a wife who was completely innocent of any sin. As if to challenge the fates the queen started work on yet another new altar cloth, a match of the one she had started before; the two of them would be a massive project which would take years, and a full court of ladies in waiting, to complete. It was as if everything, even her sewing, must demonstrate to the world that she would live and die as queen of England. How else could it be? No queen had ever been set aside before.

She had asked me to help her by blocking in the blue sky above the angels. It had been drawn for her by a Florentine artist and was very much in the new style, with luscious rounded bodies half-hidden by the angels' feathery wings, and bright expressive faces on the shepherds around the crib. It was as good as a play to look at the drawing the artist had made, the people were as vivid as if they were alive. I was glad that it would not be me who had to follow the tiny detailed lines with my needle. Long before the sky was done Wolsey would have passed sentence, the Pope confirmed it and she would be divorced and in a nunnery, and the nuns could sew the difficult draperies and the feathery wings while we Boleyns closed the trap on the bachelor king. I finished one long hank of blue silk for a tiny square of sky and took my needle to the light of the narrow window when I suddenly saw the brown head of my brother race up the steps which ran around the moat and then he was out of sight, though I craned forward to see why he was running.

'What is it, Lady Carey?' the queen asked from behind me, her voice absolutely expressionless.

'My brother running in,' I said. 'May I go down and see him, Your Majesty?'

'Of course,' she said calmly. 'If there is important news you might bring it straight to me, Mary.'

I kept the needle in my hand as I left the room and hurried down the stone steps to the great hall. George had just burst in through the door.

'What's happened?' I asked.

'I must find Father,' he said. 'The Pope's been captured.'

'What?'

'Where is Father? Where is he?'

‘Perhaps with the clerks.’

At once George turned to go to their offices. I hurried after him and grabbed his sleeve but he pulled himself free. ‘Wait, George! Captured by who?’

‘By the army of Spain,’ he said. ‘Mercenaries, in the employ of Charles of Spain, and the word is that they ran out of control, they sacked the Holy City and captured His Holiness.’

I stood stock still for a moment, shocked into silence. ‘They’ll let him go,’ I said. ‘They couldn’t be so ...’ The very words failed me. George was almost hopping from one foot to another in his urgency to run onwards.

‘Think!’ he counselled me. ‘What does it mean if the Pope is captured by the armies of Spain? What does it mean?’

I shook my head. ‘That the Holy Father is in danger,’ I said feebly. ‘You cannot capture the Pope ...’

George laughed out loud. ‘Fool!’ He took me by the hand and pulled me after him, up the stairs to the offices of the clerks. He hammered on the door and put his head around it. ‘Is my father here?’

‘With the king,’ someone replied. ‘In his privy chamber.’

George spun on his heel and ran back down the stairs. I picked up the long skirt of my gown and pattered after him. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Who can grant the king a divorce?’ George demanded, pausing on the turn of the stair. He looked up at me, his brown eyes ablaze with excitement. I hesitated above him, like a defender of the circular stair.

‘Only the Pope,’ I stumbled.

‘Who holds the Pope?’

‘Charles of Spain, you say.’

‘Who is Charles of Spain’s aunt?’

‘The queen.’

‘So d’you think the Pope is going to grant the king a divorce now?’

I paused. George jumped up two steps and kissed my open mouth. ‘Silly girl,’ he said warmly. ‘This is disastrous news for the king. He’s never going to get free of her. It’s all gone awry and we Boleyns gone awry with it.’

I snatched at his hand as he would have run away from me. ‘So why are you so happy? George! If we are ruined? Why are you so merry?’

He laughed up at me. ‘I’m not happy, I’m maddened,’ he half-shouted. ‘For a moment I had started to believe our own madness. I had started to believe that Anne would be his wife and the next Queen of England. And now I am sane again. Thank God. That is why I laugh. Now let me go, I have to tell Father. I

had the news from a boatman come upriver with a message for the cardinal. Father will like to know first, if I can find him.'

I let him go, in his wildness there was no holding him.

I heard his boots rattle down the stone stairs and then the bang of the opening door of the great hall, a few hasty steps across the stone floor of the hall, the yelp of a dog as he kicked it aside, and then the door creaked shut. I sank down on the stairs, where he had left me, the queen's embroidery needle still in my hand, wondering where we Boleyns were now, since all the power had shifted back to the queen again.

George had not told me whether or no I might tell the queen and I judged it safer to say nothing when I went back to her rooms. I smoothed out my face, pulled down the stomacher of my dress, and composed myself before I opened the door.

She knew already. I could tell by the way the altar cloth was flung aside and she was standing at the window, looking out, as if she could see all the way to Italy and her victorious young nephew who had promised to love and reverence her, riding in triumph into Rome. When I came in the room she shot one quick cautious glance at me and then gave a little giggle, when she saw my stunned expression.

'You have heard the news?' she guessed.

'Yes. My brother was running to my father with it.'

'It will make a difference to everything,' she asserted. 'Everything.'

'I know it.'

'And your sister will be in such a difficult position when she hears,' she said slyly.

An irresistible giggle escaped me. 'She called herself a storm-tossed maiden!' I said with a wail of laughter.

The queen clapped her hand to her mouth. 'Anne Boleyn? Storm-tossed?'

I nodded. 'Gave him a jewel engraved with a maiden in a storm-tossed boat!'

The queen crammed the knuckles of her hand into her mouth. 'Hush! Hush!'

We heard the noise of people outside the door and in one quick movement she was back in her place, the big frame of embroidery pulled towards her, her heavy gable hood bent over her work, her face grave. She glanced at me and nodded me towards my work. I took the needle and thread that I had carried all this while, so that when the guards opened the door the queen and I were industriously stitching in silence.

It was the king himself, without companions. He came in, saw me, checked

for a moment and then came on, as if he was glad to have me as a witness for what he might say to his wife of so many years.

‘It appears that your nephew has committed the most awful of crimes,’ he said without preamble, his voice hard and angry.

She raised her head. ‘Your Majesty,’ she said, and sank into a curtsy.

‘I say, the most awful of crimes.’

‘Why, what has he done?’

‘His army has captured the Holy Father and imprisoned him. A blasphemous act, a sin against St Peter himself.’

A small frown creased her weary face. ‘I am sure he will release the Holy Father and restore him at once,’ she said. ‘Why would he not?’

‘He would not, because he knows that if he holds the Pope in his power then he holds all of us in his hand! He knows that we are cat’s-paws! He seeks to rule us all by ruling the Pope!’

The queen’s head was turned to her work again but I could not take my gaze from Henry. This was a new man, one I had not seen before. He was not angry in his usual red rage. He was coldly angry; today he had all the power of a grown man who has been a tyrant since eighteen.

‘He is a very ambitious young man,’ she concurred sweetly. ‘As you were at his age, I remember.’

‘I did not seek to command all of Europe and destroy the plans of greater men!’ he said, biting.

She looked up at him and smiled with her constant, pleasant confidence. ‘No,’ she agreed. ‘It is almost as if he is divinely guided, is it not?’



My uncle ruled that we should all behave as if we were not defeated. So, as if nothing had gone wrong for us, as if the Boleyns were not overthrown, the laughter, the music and the flirtations continued in Anne’s rooms. No-one called them my rooms any more, though they had once been given to me and furnished for me. Just as the queen had become a ghost, I had become a shadow. Anne had lived and bedded with me; but now she was the substance and I was the shadow. It was Anne who called for cards, and Anne who called for wine, and Anne who looked up and smiled that sleek confident smile when the king came into the room.

There was nothing I could do but take second place and smile. The king

might bed me at night, but all the day he was Anne's. For the first time in all the long while that I had been his lover I felt like a whore indeed, and it was my own sister who shamed me.

The queen, left alone for much of the time, continued work on the altar cloth, spent hours before her prie dieu, and met constantly with her confessor, John Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester. For many hours he was with the queen and when he came out of her chamber he was grave and quiet. We used to watch him walk down the cobbled hill to his boat on the river and laugh at his slow pace. He walked with his head bent, as if weighed down by thought.

'She must have sinned like the devil,' Anne remarked. Everyone listened, waiting for the jest.

'Oh why?' George prompted her.

'Because she confesses for hours every day,' Anne exclaimed. 'God knows what that woman must have done, but she confesses for longer than I dine!'

There was a roar of easy, sycophantic laughter, and Anne clapped her hands and called for music. Couples lined up to dance. I stayed at the window, watching the bishop walk away from the castle and from the queen and wondered indeed what the two of them did discuss in such length. Could it be that she knew exactly what the king was planning? Could it be that she was hoping to turn the church, the very church in England, against him?

I squeezed past the dancers and went to the queen's rooms. As usual these days, there was silence; no music pouring from the open windows, the doors were shut where they used to be flung wide open to visitors. I opened them and went in.

Her receiving room was empty. The altar cloth was where she had left it, spread over stools. The sky was only half-finished, it would never be done while she had no-one to work with her. I wondered that she could bear to sew alone at one corner and see the yards and yards of empty material ahead of her. The fire was out in the hearth, the place was cold. I had a moment of real apprehension. For a moment I thought – what if she has been taken? It was a mad thought, for who could arrest a queen? Where could a queen be taken? But just for a moment I thought that the silence and emptiness of the room could only mean one thing, that Henry had suddenly snapped, and, refusing to wait for a moment longer, had sent his soldiers to take her away.

Then I heard a tiny sound. It was so pitiful that I thought it was the wail of a child. It came from her privy chamber.

I didn't stop to think, there was something in that heartbroken cry that would

call to anyone; I opened the door, and went in.

It was the queen. Her head was buried in the rich covers on her bed, her hood pushed askew. She was kneeling as if to pray but she had the covers stuffed into her mouth and all the sound that she could make was this dreadful, heartbroken keening. The king was standing behind her, hands on hips like an executioner on Tower Green. He glanced over his shoulder at the sound of the opening door and saw me; but he showed no sign of recognition. His face was blank and stern, like a man driven beyond himself.

‘And so I must tell you that the marriage was indeed unlawful and must and will be annulled.’

The queen raised her tearstained face from the bed. ‘We had a dispensation.’

‘A Pope cannot dispense with the law of God,’ Henry said firmly.

‘It is not the law of God ...’ she whispered.

‘Don’t argue with me, madam,’ Henry interrupted. He feared her intelligence. ‘You must learn that you will no longer be my wife and my queen. You must step aside.’

She turned her tearstained face to him. ‘I cannot step aside,’ she said. ‘Even if I wished to. I am your wife and your queen. Nothing can prevent that. Nothing can put it aside.’

He headed for the door, desperate to be away from her agony. ‘I have told you, so you have heard it from my own lips,’ he said at the doorway. ‘You cannot complain that I have not been honest with you. I have told you that this is how it must be.’

‘I have loved you for years,’ she cried after him. ‘I gave my womanhood to you. Tell me, in what way have I offended you? What have I ever done which was displeasing?’

He was nearly gone, I pressed back against the panelled wall so that he could get past me; but at that final plea he checked and turned for a moment.

‘You had to give me a son,’ he said simply. ‘You did not do that.’

‘I tried! God knows, Henry! I tried! I bore you a son, that he did not live was no fault of mine. God wanted our little prince in heaven; that was no fault of mine.’

The pain in her voice shook him, but he moved away. ‘You had to give me a son,’ he repeated. ‘I have to have a son for England, Katherine. You know that.’

Her face was bleak. ‘You have to reconcile yourself to God’s will.’

‘It is God himself who has prompted me to this,’ Henry shouted. ‘God himself has warned me that I must leave this false marriage of sin and start

again. And if I do, I shall have a son. I know it, Katherine. And you –'

'Yes?' she said, as quick as her own greyhound on the scent, all her courage suddenly flaring up. 'What for me? A nunnery? Old age? Death? I am a Princess of Spain and the Queen of England. What can you offer me instead of these?'

'It is God's will,' he repeated.

She laughed at that, a dreadful sound, as wild as her crying had been. 'God's will that you should turn aside from your true wedded wife and marry a nobody? A whore? The sister of your whore?'

I froze, but Henry was gone, pushing past me out of the door. 'It is God's will and my will!' he shouted from the outer chamber, and then we heard the door slam.

I crept backwards, desperate that she should not know that I had seen her cry, desperate that she should not see me, whom she had named as his whore. But she raised her head from her hands and said simply:

'Help me, Mary.'

In silence I went forward. It was the first time in the seven years that I had known her that she had asked for help. She put out her arm to be dragged to her feet and I saw that she could hardly stand. Her eyes were bloodshot with crying.

'You should rest, Your Majesty,' I said.

'I cannot rest,' she replied. 'Help me to my prie dieu and give me my rosary.'

'Your Majesty ...'

'Mary,' she croaked, her voice hoarse from that dreadful gape-mouthed whimpering. 'He will destroy me, he will disinherit our daughter, he will ruin this country, and he will send his immortal soul to hell. I have to pray for him, for me, and for our country. And then I have to write to my nephew.'

'Your Majesty, they will never let a letter reach him.'

'I have ways to send it to him.'

'Don't write anything that could be held against you.'

She checked at that, hearing the fear in my voice. And then she smiled an empty bitter smile that did not reach her eyes. 'Why?' she asked. 'Do you think it can be worse than this? I cannot be charged with treason, I am the Queen of England, I *am* England. I cannot be divorced, I am the wife of the king. He has run mad this spring and he will recover by autumn. All I have to do is get through the summer.'

'The Boleyn summer,' I said, thinking of Anne.

'The Boleyn summer,' she repeated. 'It cannot last more than a season.'

She grasped the velvet upholstered prayer cushion of the prie dieu with her age-spotted hands and I knew that she could hear and see nothing in this world any more. She was close to her God. I went out quietly, closing the door behind me.



George was in the shadows of the queen's public rooms, lurking like an assassin. 'Uncle wants you,' he said shortly.

'George, I cannot go. Make an excuse for me.'

'Come on.'

I stepped into the shaft of light streaming in through the open window and I blinked at the brightness. Outside I could hear someone singing and Anne's carefree ripple of laughter.

'Please George, tell him you couldn't find me.'

'He knows you were with the queen. I was ordered to wait until you came out. Whenever that was.'

I shook my head. 'I can't betray her.'

George crossed the room with three swift steps, got hold of me under my elbow and marched me towards the door. He went so fast I had to run to keep up with him and as he strode down the stairs I would have lost my footing but for his vice-like grip on my arm.

'What's your family?' he demanded through clenched teeth.

'Boleyn.'

'What's your kin?'

'Howards.'

'What's your home?'

'Hever and Rochford.'

'What's your kingdom?'

'England.'

'Who's your king?'

'Henry.'

'Then serve them. In that order. Did I say the Spanish queen once in that list?'

'No.'

'Remember it.'

I struggled against his determination. 'George!'

‘Every day I give up my desires for this family,’ he said in a savage undertone. ‘Every day I dance attendance on one sister or the other and play pander to the king. Every day I deny my own desire, my own passion, I deny my own soul! I make my life a secret to myself. Now you come.’

He pushed me through the door of Uncle Howard’s private room without knocking. My uncle was seated at his desk, the sunlight falling brightly on his papers, a posy of early roses before him on the table. He glanced up when I came in and his keen gaze took in my rapid breathing and the distress in my face.

‘I need to know what passed between the king and the queen,’ he said without preamble. ‘A maid said you were in there with them.’

I nodded. ‘I heard her cry and I went in.’

‘She cried?’ he demanded incredulously.

I nodded.

‘Tell me.’

For a moment I was silent.

He looked at me once more and there was a world of power in his dark piercing gaze. ‘You tell me,’ he repeated.

‘The king told her that he is seeking an annulment because the marriage is invalid.’

‘And she?’

‘She accused him of Anne, and he did not deny it.’

A flame of fierce joy leaped into my uncle’s eyes. ‘How did you leave her?’

‘Praying,’ I said.

My uncle rose from the desk and walked around to me. Thoughtfully, he took my hand and spoke quietly. ‘You like to see your children in the summer, don’t you, Mary?’

My longing for Hever, for little Catherine and for my baby boy, made me dizzy. I closed my eyes for a moment and I could see them, I could feel them in my arms. I could smell that sweet baby smell of clean hair and sun-warmed skin.

‘If you serve us well in this I shall let you go to Hever for the whole summer while the court is on progress. You can spend all summer with your children and no-one will trouble you. Your work will be done, I will release you from court. But you must assist me in this, Mary. You must tell me exactly what you think the queen plans to do.’

I gave a little sigh. ‘She said that she would write to her nephew. She said she knew a way to get a letter to him.’

He smiled. ‘I expect you to find out how she sends letters to Spain and to

come and tell me. Do that and you shall be with your children a week later.'

I swallowed my sense of treachery.

He went back to his desk and turned to his papers. 'You can go,' he said carelessly.



The queen was at the table when I came into the room. 'Ah, Lady Carey, can you light another candle for me? I can hardly see to write.'

I lit another candlestick and put it close to her paper. I could see she was writing in Spanish.

'Would you send for Señor Felipez?' she asked me. 'I have an errand for him.'

I hesitated but she raised her head from the paper and gave me a little nod so I curtsied and went to the door where a manservant was on guard. 'Fetch Señor Felipez,' I said shortly.

In a moment he came. He was a yeoman of the ewery, a middle-aged man who had come over from Spain when Katherine was married. He had stayed in her household and despite marrying an Englishwoman and siring English children, he had never lost his Spanish accent nor his love of Spain.

I showed him into the room and the queen glanced at me. 'Leave us,' she said. I saw her fold the letter and seal it with her own sealing ring, the pomegranate of Spain.

I stepped outside the door and sat in a windowseat and waited like the spy I was until I saw him come out, tucking the letter into his jerkin, and then wearily I went to find Uncle Howard and tell him everything.



Señor Felipez left court next day and my uncle found me walking up the twisting path to the summit of Windsor Castle.

'You can go to Hever,' he said briefly. 'You've done your work.'

'Uncle?'

'We'll pick up Señor Felipez as he sets sail from Dover for France,' he said. 'Far enough from the court for no word of it to get back to the queen. We'll have her letter to her nephew and that will be her ruin. It'll be proof of treason.'

Wolsey's at Rome, the queen will have to agree to a divorce to save her own skin. The king will be free to remarry. This summer.'

I thought of the queen's belief that if she could only hold on till autumn, she would be safe.

'Betrothal this summer, public wedding and coronation when we all return to London in the autumn.'

I swallowed. The icy knowledge that my sister would be Queen of England and I would be the king's discarded whore froze me inside. 'And I?'

'You can go to Hever. When Anne is queen you can come back to court and serve as her lady in waiting, she'll need her family around her then. But for now your work is done.'

'Can I go today?' was all I asked.

'If you can find someone to take you.'

'Can I ask George?'

'Yes.'

I curtsied to him and turned to walk up the hill, my pace quicker.

'You did well with Felipez,' my uncle said as I hurried away. 'It's bought us the time that we needed. The queen thinks that help is on its way but she is all alone.'

'I am glad to serve the Howards,' I said shortly. It was better that no-one ever knew that I would have buried the Howards, every one of them, except George, in the great family vault and never thought that there was a loss.



George had been riding with the king and was not willing to get back into the saddle again. 'I have a thick head. I was drinking and gambling last night. And Francis is impossible ...' He broke off. 'I won't set out for Hever today, Mary, I can't stand it.'

I took his hands in mine and made him look me in the face. I knew there were tears in my eyes and I did nothing to stop them flowing down my cheeks. 'George, please,' I said. 'What if Uncle changes his mind? Please help me. Please take me to my children. Please take me to Hever.'

'Oh, don't,' he said. 'Don't cry. You know I hate it. I'll take you. Of course I'll take you. Send someone down to the stables and tell them to saddle our horses and we'll start at once.'

Anne was in our room when I burst in to pack a few things in a bag and to

see the chest corded up to send on after me in a wagon.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Hever. Uncle Howard says I can.’

‘But what about me?’ she demanded.

At the desperate tone in her voice I looked at her more closely. ‘What about you? You have everything. What in God’s name do you want more?’

She dropped to the stool before the little looking glass, rested her head on her hands and stared at herself. ‘He’s in love with me,’ she said. ‘He’s mad for me. I spend all my time bringing him close and holding him off. When he dances with me I can feel his hardness like a codpiece. He’s desperate to have me.’

‘So?’

‘I have to keep him like that, like a sauce pot on a charcoal burner. I have to keep him at the simmer. If he boils over what would become of me? I’d be scalded to death. If he cools off and goes and dips his wick somewhere else then I have a rival. That’s why I need you here.’

‘To dip his wick?’ I repeated her crude image.

‘Yes.’

‘You’ll have to manage without,’ I said. ‘You have only a few weeks. Uncle says that you’ll be betrothed this summer and married this autumn. I’ve played my part, and I can go.’

She did not even ask me what part I had played. Anne always had a vision like a lantern with the shutters down. She only ever shone in one direction. It was always Anne and then the Boleyns and then the Howards. She would never have needed the catechism that George shouted at me to remind me of my loyalties. She always knew where her interests lay.

‘I can do it for a few weeks more,’ she said. ‘And then I shall have it all.’

Summer 1527

After George left me at Hever I heard nothing from either him or Anne as the court made its progress through the English countryside in the sunny days of that perfect summer. I did not care. I had my children and my home to myself and no-one watched me to see if I looked pale or jealous. No-one whispered to another behind a shielding hand that I was in better or worse looks than my sister. I was free of the constant observation of the court, I was free of the constant struggle between the king and the queen. Best of all, I was free from my own constant jealous tally between Anne and myself.

My children were of an age where the whole day could fly by in a set of tiny activities. We fished in the moat with pieces of bacon on strings. We saddled up my hunter and each child took a turn in sitting on her for a walk. We went on expeditions across the castle drawbridge and into the garden to pick flowers or into the orchard for fruit. We ordered a cart lined with hay and I took the reins myself and drove us out of the park all the way to Edenbridge and drank small ale in the house there. I watched them kneel for Mass, their eyes round at the raising of the Host. I watched them as they fell asleep at the end of the day, their skin flushed with sunshine, their long eyelashes sweeping their plump cheeks. I forgot that there was such a thing as court and king and favourite.

Then, in August, I had a letter from Anne. It was brought to me by her most trusted groom, Tom Stevens, who had been born and bred in Tonbridge. 'From my mistress, to be given to your own hands,' he said reverently on his knee before me in the dining hall.

'Thank you, Tom.'

'And none but you has seen it,' he said.

'Very good.'

'And none but you will see it for I shall stand guard over you while you read it and then put it in the fire for you and we shall watch it burn, my lady.'

I smiled but I began to feel uneasy. 'Is my sister well?'

'As a young lamb in the meadow.'

I broke the seal and spread the papers.

Be glad for me for it is done and my fate is sealed. I have it. I am to be Queen of England. He asked me to marry him this very night and promised that he will be free within the month, when Wolsey is acting Pope. I had Uncle and Father join us at once, saying that I wanted to share my joy with my family, and so there are witnesses and he cannot withdraw. I have a ring from him which I am to keep hid for the meantime but it is a betrothal ring and he is sworn to be mine. I have done the impossible. I have caught the king and sealed the fate of the queen. I have overturned the order. Nothing will ever be the same for any woman in this country again.

We are to be married as soon as Wolsey sends word that he has annulled their marriage. The queen will know of it on our wedding day, and not before. She is to go to a nunnery in Spain. I don't want her in my country.

You can be happy for me and for our kin. I shall not forget that you helped me to this and you will find that you have a true friend and sister in Anne, Queen of England.

I rested the letter on my lap and looked at the embers of the fire. Tom stepped forward.

‘Shall I burn it now?’

‘Let me read it once more,’ I said.

He stepped back but I did not look at the excited scrawl of black ink again. I did not need to remind myself what she had written. Her triumph was in every line. The end of my life as the favourite of the English court was complete. Anne had won and I had lost and a new life would start for her, she would be, as she already signed herself: Anne, Queen of England. And I would be next to nothing.

‘So, at last,’ I whispered to myself.

I handed Tom the letter and watched him push it to the very centre of the red embers. It twisted in the heat and browned and then blackened. I could still read the words: *I have overturned the order. Nothing will ever be the same for any woman in this country again.*

I did not need to keep the letter to remember the tone. Anna triumphant. And she was right. Nothing would be the same for any woman in this country again. From this time onwards no wife, however obedient, however loving, would be

safe. For everyone would know that if a wife such as Queen Katherine of England could be put aside for no reason, then any wife could be put aside.

The letter burst suddenly into bright yellow flame, I watched it burn to soft white ash. Tom put a poker into the fire and mashed it into dust.

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘If you go to the kitchen they will give you food.’ I drew a silver coin from my pocket and gave it to him. He bowed and left me looking at the little specks of white ash floating on the smoke up the chimney and out to the night sky, which I could see through the great arch of brick and soot.

‘Queen Anne,’ I said, listening to the words. ‘Queen Anne of England.’



I was watching over the children having their morning nap when I saw a horseman with grooms, from the high window. I hurried down, expecting George. But the horse that came clattering into the courtyard belonged to my husband, William. He smiled at my surprise.

‘Don’t blame me for being the harbinger of gloom.’

‘Anne?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘Outflanked.’

I led him into the great hall and seated him in my grandmother’s chair nearest the fire.

‘Now,’ I said, when I checked that the door was shut and the room empty. ‘Tell me.’

‘You remember Francisco Felipez, the queen’s servant?’

I nodded, admitting nothing.

‘He requested safe conduct from Dover to Spain but it was a feint. He had a letter from the queen to her nephew and he tricked the king. He went by specially hired ship out of London that very morning and by sea to Spain. By the time they realised they’d lost him he’d gone. He’s got the queen’s letter to Charles of Spain; and all hell has broken loose.’

I found my heart was pounding. I put my hand to my throat as if I would still it. ‘What sort of hell?’

‘Wolsey’s still in Europe but the Pope is forewarned and won’t have him as deputy. None of the cardinals will support him and even the peace deal has fallen through. We’re back at war with Spain. Henry’s sent his secretary flying off to Orvieto, straight to the Pope’s prison, to ask him to annul the marriage himself, and allow Henry to marry any woman he pleases, *even* one whose sister

he has had, *even* one he has had. Either a whore herself or a whore's sister.'

I gasped. 'He's getting permission to marry a woman he's had? Dear God, not me?'

William's sharp laugh barked out. 'Anne. He's making provision for bedding her before marriage. The Boleyn girls don't come out of this very well, do they?'

I sat back in my chair and took a little breath. I did not want my husband to taunt me about unchastity. 'And so?'

'And so it all rests with the Holy Father who is reposing in the care of the queen's nephew at Orvieto Castle and very very unlikely, I would think – wouldn't you? – to issue a papal bull which legitimises the most unchaste behaviour one can think of: sleeping with a woman, sleeping with her sister, and marrying one of them. Least of all to a king whose legitimate wife is a woman of unsullied reputation, whose nephew holds the power in Europe.'

I gasped. 'So the queen has won?'

He nodded. 'Again.'

'How is Anne?'

'Enchanting,' he said. 'First up in the morning. Laughing and singing all day, delighting the eye, diverting the mind, up with the king to hear Mass, riding out with him all day, walking in the gardens with him, watching him play tennis, sitting beside him while the clerks read the letters to him, playing word games, reading philosophy with him and discussing it like a theologian, dancing all night, choreographing masques, planning entertainments, last to bed.'

'She is?' I asked.

'A perfect perfect mistress,' he said. 'She never stops. I should think she's dead on her feet.'

There was a silence. He drained his cup.

'So we are as we were,' I said disbelievingly. 'No further forward at all.'

He smiled his warm smile at me. 'No, I think you are worse than you were,' he said. 'For now you are out in the open and every huntsman knows the quarry. The Howards have broken cover. Everyone knows now that you are playing for the throne. Before, you all looked as if you were only after wealth and places, much like the rest of us, only a touch more predatory. Now we all know that you are aiming for the highest apple on the tree. Everyone will hate you.'

'Not me,' I said fervently. 'I'm staying here.'

He shook his head. 'You're coming to Norfolk with me.'

I froze. 'What d'you mean?'

'The king has no use for you, but I have. I married a girl and she is still my

wife. You shall come with me to my home and we shall live together.'

'The children ...'

'Will come with us. We shall live as I wish.' He paused. 'As *I* wish,' he repeated.

I got to my feet, I was suddenly afraid of him, this man whom I had married and bedded and never known. 'I still have powerful kin,' I warned him.

'You should be glad of it,' he said. 'For if you had not, I would have put you aside five years ago when you first crammed cuckold's horns on my head. This is not a good time for wives, madam, I think you and your family will find in the mess you have made you may all slip and tumble down.'

'I have done nothing but obey my family and my king.' My voice was steady, I did not want him to know that I was afraid.

'And now you will obey your husband,' he said, his voice all silk. 'How glad I am that you have such years of training.'

Anne –

William says that us Boleyns are lost and he is taking me and the children to Norfolk. For pity's sake speak to the king for me, or to Uncle Howard or to Father, before I am taken away and cannot get back.

M

I slipped down the little stone stairs that led into my father's study and from there out into the courtyard. I beckoned one of the Boleyn men and told him to ride with my note to the court which would be somewhere on the road between Beaulieu and Greenwich.

He tipped his hat to me and took the letter. 'Make sure it gets to Mistress Anne,' I said. 'It is important.'

We had dinner in the great hall. William was urbane as ever, the perfect courtier, keeping up a stream of news and gossip about the court. Grandmother Boleyn could not be comforted. She was resentful, but she did not dare openly to complain. Who could tell a man that he might not take his wife and children to his home?

As soon as they brought the candles in she heaved herself to her feet.

'I'm for my bed,' she said sulkily. William rose to his feet and bowed to her as she left the room.

Before he sat he reached inside his doublet and took out a letter. I recognised

my writing at once. It was my letter to Anne. He tossed it down on the table before me.

‘Not very loyal,’ he remarked.

I picked it up. ‘Not very polite to stop my servants and read my letters.’

He smiled at me. ‘My servants and my letters,’ he said. ‘You are my wife. Everything that is yours is mine. Everything that is mine I keep. Including the children and the woman who carries my name.’

I sat opposite him and I put my hands flat on the table. I drew a breath to steady myself. I reminded myself that although I was a woman of only nineteen years, for four and a half of those years I had been the mistress of the King of England, and I had been born and bred a Howard.

‘Now hear this, husband,’ I said steadily. ‘What is past, is past. You were happy enough to get your title and your lands and your wealth and the favour of the king, and we all know why those came to you. I have no shame in it, you have no shame in it. Anyone in our position would have been glad of it, and both you and I know that it is no sinecure earning and keeping the king’s favour.’

William looked taken aback at my sudden frankness.

‘The Howards will not fall over this mischance of Wolsey’s. It is Wolsey’s miscalculation, not ours. The game is far from over yet, and if you knew my Uncle Howard as well as I do you would be in no hurry to assume that he is defeated.’

William nodded.

‘I am very sure that our enemies are at our heels, that the Seymours are ready to take our place at a moment’s notice, that already some Seymour girl somewhere in England is being primed to take the king’s eye. That’s always true. There’s always a rival. But right now, whether or not he is free to marry her, Anne’s star is in the ascendancy, and all of us Howards – and you too, husband – serve our own interests best if we support her rise.’

‘She looks like she is skating on melting ice,’ he said abruptly. ‘She is trying too hard. She is sweating to keep her place at his side, she never lets up for a moment. Anyone watching carefully could see it.’

‘What does it matter who sees it, as long as he does not?’

William laughed. ‘Because she can’t keep it up. She is dancing him at her fingertip ends, she can’t do that forever. She might have held him till the autumn but no woman can do it forever. No man can be held the way she will have to hold him. She could hold him for weeks; but now Wolsey has failed it might be months. It could be years.’

I was checked for a moment at the thought of Anne getting old while making merry. 'But what else can she do?'

'Nothing,' he said with a wolfish grin. 'But you and I can go to my house and start to live as a married couple. I want a son who looks like me, not a little blond Tudor. I want a daughter with my dark eyes. And you are going to give them to me.'

I bowed my head. 'I won't be reproached.'

He shrugged. 'You will bear whatever treatment I give you. You are my wife, are you not?'

'Yes.'

'Unless you too would like an annulment, since marriage seems to be out of fashion? You could be enclosed in a nunnery if you wish?'

'No.'

'Then go to my bed,' he said simply. 'I shall be up in a minute.'

I froze at that. I had not thought of it. He looked at me over the top of his cup of wine. 'What?'

'Can we wait till we get to Norfolk?'

'No,' he said.



I undressed slowly, wondering at my own reluctance. I had bedded with the king a dozen times when I felt no desire at all but merely followed his wishes and satisfied him. Every time in this last year when I knew that he desired Anne, I had forced myself to hold him and whisper 'sweetheart' and known myself to be a whore – and the man a fool not to know the false coin from the real.

So I was no thirteen-year-old virgin as I had been when I had first been put to bed with this man to consummate the marriage. But I was not yet a woman of such cynicism that I could prepare without dread for bed with a man who seemed half-enemy. William had a score to settle with me, and I was afraid of him.

He took his time. I climbed slowly into bed and feigned sleep when the door opened and he came in. I heard him moving around the room, stripping naked and getting into bed beside me. I felt the weight of the covers lift as he pulled them up around his bare shoulders.

'Not asleep then?'

'No,' I admitted.

In the darkness his hands came out for me and found my face, stroked my neck to my shoulders, and thence to my waist. I was wearing my linen shift but I could feel the coldness of his hands through the fine cloth. I heard his breathing come a little faster. He pulled me towards him and I yielded, and spread myself ready for him as I always did for Henry. For a moment I checked, thinking that I did not know what to do for any man but Henry.

‘You’re not willing?’ he asked.

‘Of course I am willing. I am your wife,’ I said levelly.

I feared he might trap me into a refusal which would allow him to put me aside; but his little sigh of disappointment showed me that he was genuinely hoping for a warmer response. ‘We’ll sleep then.’

I was so relieved that I dared not say a word in case he changed his mind. I lay perfectly still until he turned his back on me, pulled the covers up over his shoulders, thumped his head down on the pillows and was quiet. Then, and only then, did I let my belly unknot and wiped the insincere Howard smile from my face. I let myself drift into sleep. I had survived another night, I was still at Hever, the Howards had everything to play for. Anything might happen tomorrow.



We were woken by a knocking on the door. I was up and out of bed before William could wake and catch my hand. I opened the door and said sharply: ‘Hush. My lord is sleeping,’ as if that were my only concern and not that I was determined to get out of his bed as quickly as possible.

‘Urgent message from Mistress Anne,’ the servant said and offered me a letter.

I dearly wanted to throw on a cloak and read it far away from William but he was awake and sitting up. ‘Our dear sister,’ he said with a mocking smile. ‘And what does she say?’

I had no choice but to open the letter before him and hope to God that Anne was thinking of someone else for once in her selfish life.

*Sister,
The king and I bid you and your husband come to meet us at
Richmond where we will all be merry.
Anne*

William held out his hand for the letter. I handed it over.

‘She guessed I was coming for you when I left court,’ he observed. I said nothing. ‘And so hip-hop, with one bound you are free of me,’ he said bitterly. ‘And we are back where we were.’

He had spoken my very thought but behind the hardness of his tone I saw his hurt. Cuckold’s horns are not a comfortable headdress and he had been wearing them now for five years. Slowly I went to the bed. I put out my hand to him. ‘I am your wedded wife,’ I said gently. ‘And I never forgot it, though our lives took us far apart. If we ever have to be married in very truth, William, you will find me a good wife to you.’

He looked up at me. ‘Is this a Howard speaking who fears the turning of the tide and thinks that life as Lady Carey would be a safer bet than being the other Boleyn girl when the first Boleyn girl is ruined?’

His guess was so precise that I had to turn my head rather than risk him seeing the truth in my eyes. ‘Oh, William,’ I said reproachfully.

He drew me down to him and turned my face towards him with his finger under my chin. ‘Dearest wife,’ he said sarcastically.

I closed my eyes rather than meet his scrutiny and then, to my surprise, felt the warmth of his face and tender, gentle little kisses on my lips. I felt desire well up in me like a long-forgotten spring. I put my hands around his neck and pulled him a little closer.

‘I made a bad beginning last night,’ he said gently. ‘So not now, and not here. But perhaps somewhere soon, don’t you think, little wife?’

I smiled up at him, hiding my relief at not being taken to Norfolk. ‘Somewhere soon,’ I agreed. ‘Whenever you wish, William.’

Autumn 1527

Anne at Richmond was queen in all but name. She had new apartments, which were adjacent to the king's, she had ladies in waiting, she had a dozen new gowns, she had jewels, she had a couple of hunters to ride out with the king, she sat with him when his counsellors discussed the matters of the country with him, she had her own chair at his side. Only in the great hall when the true queen came in to dinner was Anne demoted to a table on the floor of the hall while Katherine sat down to dinner in her majesty.

I was to sleep in Anne's apartments, partly to give her countenance so that no-one might think that the king's constant companionship meant that they were lovers, but in truth, to help her keep him at arm's length. He was desperate to have her, arguing that since they were betrothed they might bed. Anne played every trick she could summon. She protested her virginity and said that she would never forgive herself if she gave away her maidenhead before marriage, though God knew how much she desired him. She said that she would never forgive herself if she did not come before him on their wedding night a maid untouched – though God knew how much she desired him. She said that if he loved her as much as he said he did he would love the holy purity of her soul – though God knew la la la – and she said that she was afraid, that she both yearned for and shrank from him, that she needed time.

'How long can it take?' she snarled at George and me. 'For God's sake! For some damn clerk to ride to Rome, get a paper signed and ride back? How long can it take?'

We were tucked away in our bedroom at the back of her privy chamber, the only private place in the whole of the palace. Everywhere else we were on unending public show. Everyone watched Anne for the slightest clue that the king was losing interest, or that he had finally had her. She was scanned by a hundred eyes for any sign of either desertion or pregnancy. George and I felt like her bodyguard some days, on other days like today we felt like jailers. She was prowling up and down in the small space, swishing between bed and window, unable to stop moving, unable to stop muttering.

George caught her hands and brought her to a standstill. One glance over her head warned me to grab her from behind if she went into one of her rages.

‘Anne, be calm. We have to go out and watch the boatmen race at any moment. You have to be calm.’

She quivered in his grip and then the anger went out of her and her shoulders slumped. ‘I’m so tired,’ she whispered.

‘I know,’ he said steadily. ‘But this could go on for a long while yet, Anne. You’re playing for the greatest prize in the world. You have to prepare yourself for a long game of skill.’

‘If she would only die!’ she suddenly flared up.

George’s glance went at once to the solid wooden door. ‘Hush. She might,’ he said. ‘Or Wolsey might have pulled it off. He could be sailing up the river right now, and you could be wed tomorrow and in the king’s bed tomorrow night and pregnant the next morning. Be at peace, Anne. Everything rests on you keeping your looks.’

‘And your temper,’ I supplemented quietly.

‘You dare advise me?’

‘He won’t stand for tantrums,’ I warned her. ‘He’s spent all his married life with Katherine and she never raised so much as an eyebrow at him, let alone her voice. He’ll let you go far because he’s mad for you. But he won’t stand for one of your scenes.’

She looked as if she might flare up again, but then she nodded as she acknowledged the sense of it. ‘Yes, I know. That’s why I need you two.’

We both stepped a little closer to her, George still grasping her hands, and I put my hands on her hips and held her tightly.

‘I know,’ George said. ‘We’re in this together. This is for all of us: Boleyns and Howards. We all rise or fall on this. We’re all waiting and playing the long game. You have to lead the charge, Anne. But we’re all behind you.’

She nodded and turned to the new large mirror mounted on the wall, reflecting the light from the gardens and the river outside. She pushed back her hood, she straightened the pearl necklace. She turned her head and looked sideways at her reflection and tried that mischievous, promising smile. ‘I’m ready,’ she said.

We made way for her as if she were queen already. As she went out of the door with her head held high George and I exchanged a swift look of players who have pushed the principal on stage, and we followed behind her.

My husband was on the royal barge to watch the boatmen race and he smiled

at me and made a place beside him on the bench. George joined the young men of the court, Francis Weston among them. I glanced to see that Anne was seated beside the king. By the flighty turn of her head and her sideways glance at him I could see that she was in full control of herself and of him, once more.

‘Walk with me in the gardens before dinner,’ my husband said quietly in my ear.

At once I was alert. ‘Why?’

He laughed at me. ‘Oh, you Howards! Because I like your company, because I ask it of you. Because we are man and wife and we may live as man and wife any day now.’

I smiled ruefully. ‘I don’t forget it.’

‘Perhaps you will learn to anticipate it with pleasure?’

‘Perhaps,’ I said sweetly.

He looked out over the river where the afternoon sun was sparkling on the water. The boats of the noblemen all manned by their liveried rowers were drawn up under the starter’s orders. They made a colourful sight with the oars held high like trumpets, waiting for the command to start. They all looked towards the king, who took a scarlet silk kerchief and gave it to Anne. She stepped up to the edge of the royal barge and held it high over her head. For a moment she held the pose, well aware that all eyes were on her. From where I was sitting with William we could see her in profile, her head flung back, her hood well back from her face, her pale skin flushing with pleasure, her dark green gown tight around her breasts and slim waist. She was the very essence of desire. She dropped the red kerchief and the boats leaped forward under the thrust of the oars. She did not go back to her seat at the king’s side, she had a moment where she forgot to play the queen. She leaned over the rail so that she could see as the Howard boat pulled ahead of the Seymours.

‘Come on, Howards!’ she suddenly shouted. ‘Come on!’

As if they heard her call above all the other shouting from the riverbank the rowers quickened their stroke and the boat surged forward, paused, and surged forward again to a quicker tempo than the Seymours’. I was on my feet now, everybody was cheering, the royal barge dipped precariously as the whole court forgot its dignity and crowded onto one side and yelled for their favourite house. The king himself, laughing like a boy again with his arm around Anne’s waist, was watching, careful not to shout for one lord or another, but clearly willing the Howards to win since that would delight the girl in his arms.

They went faster, the oars a blur of splashing water and light, and at the line

they were unquestionably half a length before the Seymours. There was a great drum roll and a blast of trumpets to tell the Seymours that it was all over for them, that we had won the boat race, that we had won the race to be the first family in the kingdom, and that it was our girl in the arms of the king with her eye on the throne of England.



Cardinal Wolsey came home, not in triumph with an annulment in his pocket, but in disgrace, and found that he could not even talk to Henry alone. The man who had managed every single thing from the amount of wine served at banquets to the terms of the peace with France and Spain found that he had to make his report before Anne and Henry, side by side, as if they were joint monarchs. The girl he had scolded for unchastity and for aiming too high sat at the right hand of the King of England and looked at him with narrowed eyes as if she were not very impressed with what he had to say.

The cardinal was too old and wily a courtier to let any surprise show on his face. He bowed very pleasantly to Anne and made his report. Anne smiled very equably and listened, leaned forward, whispered a little poison in Henry's ear, and listened some more.



'Idiot!' she stormed in our little room. I was sitting on the bed, my feet drawn out of the way. She was on her track running from window to bedpost like one of the lions in the Tower, I thought idly that she would leave a mark on the polished floorboards and we could show it to those who like relicts and signs. We could call it 'Anne's Martyrdom to Time'.

'He's a fool, and we have got nowhere!'

'What does he say?'

'That it is a serious matter to put aside the aunt of the man who holds the Pope and half of Europe in his grasp, and that, God willing, Charles of Spain will be defeated by Italy and France together when they go to war, and that England should promise support but not risk a man nor loose an arrow.'

'We wait?'

She threw her hands above her head and screamed. 'We wait? No! You can

wait! The cardinal can wait! Henry can wait! But I have to dance on the spot, I have to be seen to make progress while actually making none. I have to retain the illusion of things happening, I have to make Henry feel more and more intensely loved, I have to give him the belief that things are getting better and better because he is a king and all his life everyone has told him that he shall have the very best. He has been promised cream and gold and honey, I cannot give him “wait”. How am I to keep going? How am I to do it?’

I wished that George was here. ‘You’ll manage,’ I said. ‘You’ll go on as you have been going. You’ve done wonderfully well, Anne.’

She gritted her teeth. ‘I will be old and exhausted before this is done.’

Gently I took her and turned her towards her grand Venetian glass mirror. ‘Look,’ I said.

Anne could always be comforted by the sight of her own beauty. She paused and took a breath.

‘And you’re brilliant as well,’ I reminded her. ‘He is always saying that you have the sharpest mind in the kingdom and if you were a man he would have you for cardinal.’

She smiled a little sharp feral smile. ‘That must please Wolsey.’

I smiled back, my face next to hers in the mirror, the two of us, as ever, a contrast in looks, in colouring, in expression. ‘I’m sure,’ I said. ‘But there’s nothing Wolsey can do.’

‘He doesn’t even see the king without an appointment now,’ she gloated. ‘I’ve seen to that. They don’t wander off together for their friendly little talks as they used to. Nothing is decided without me being there. He cannot come to the palace for a meeting with the king without notifying the king and notifying me. He is pushed out of power and I am inside it.’

‘You’ve done wonderfully well,’ I said, the words sickening me as they soothed her. ‘And you have years and years ahead of you, Anne.’

Winter 1527

William and I slipped into a comfortable routine which was almost domestic, though it revolved around the wishes of the king and of Anne. I still slept in her bed at night and to all intents and purposes lived with her in the rooms that we shared. To the outer world we were both still the queen's ladies in waiting, no more and no less than the others.

But from morning to night Anne was with the king, as close to his side as a newly wed bride, as a chief counsellor, as a best friend. She would return to our chamber only to change her gown or lie on the bed and snatch a rest while he was at Mass, or when he wanted to ride out with his gentlemen. Then she would lie in silence, like one who has dropped dead of exhaustion. Her gaze would be blank on the canopy of the bed, her eyes wide open, seeing nothing. She would breathe slowly and steadily as if she were sick. She would not speak at all.

When she was in this state I learned to leave her alone. She had to find some way to rest from the unending public performance. She had to be unstoppably charming, not just to the king but to everyone who might glance in her direction. One moment of looking less than radiant and a rumour storm would swirl around the court and engulf her, and engulf us all with her.

When she rose up from her bed and went to the king, William and I would spend time together. We met almost as strangers and he courted me. It was the oddest, simplest and sweetest thing that an estranged husband has ever done for an errant wife. He sent me little posies of flowers, sometimes sprigs of holly leaves and the rose-pink berries of yew. He sent me a little gilt bracelet. He wrote me the prettiest poems praising my grey eyes and my fair hair and asking for my favour as if I were his lady love. When I sent for my horse to ride out with Anne I would find a note tucked into my stirrup leather. When I pulled back my sheets to get into bed with Anne at night I would find a sweetmeat wrapped in gilt paper. He showered me with little gifts and little notes and whenever we were together at a court banquet or at the archery butts, or watching the players on the tennis court, he would lean towards me and whisper out of the side of his mouth:

‘Come to my room, wife.’

I would giggle as if I were his new mistress instead of a wife of many years’ standing and I would step back from the crowd, and a few moments later he would slip away, to meet in the confined space of his bedchamber on the west wall of Greenwich Palace. Then he would take me in his arms and say delightfully, promisingly: ‘We have only a moment, my love, only an hour at the most: so this shall be all for you.’

He would lie me on the bed, unlace my tight stomacher, caress my breasts, stroke my belly, and pleasure me in every way he could think of until I cried out in joy: ‘Oh William! Oh my love! You are the best, you are the best, you are the very very best.’

And at that moment, with the smile of the well-praised man through all the ages, he would let himself pour into me and rest on my shoulder with a shuddering sigh.

For me it was desire, and only a small part calculation. If Anne should fall, and we Boleyns fall with her, then I would be very glad to have a husband who loved me and who had a handsome manor in Norfolk, a title and wealth. And besides, the children carried his name, and he could order them to his house at a moment’s notice if he so pleased. I would have told the devil himself that he was the best, the very very best, if it kept me with my children.



Anne was merry at the Christmas feast. She danced as if nothing would stop her from dancing all day and all night. She gambled as if she had a queen’s fortune to lose. She had an understanding with me and with George; we immediately returned the money later, in private. But when she lost to the king her hard-earned money disappeared into the royal purse and was never seen again. And she had to lose to him whenever they played: he hated it when anyone else won.

He showered her with gifts and with honour, he led her out at every dance. She was the crowned queen in every masque. But still Katherine sat at the head table and smiled on Anne as if the honour was in her gift, as if Anne was her deputy, by her consent. And the Princess Mary, the little thin white-faced princess, sat beside her mother and smiled at Anne as if she were enormously amused at this light-footed pretender to the throne.

‘God, I hate her,’ Anne said, as she was getting undressed at night. ‘She is the very image of them both, the moon-faced thing.’

I hesitated. There was no point in arguing with Anne. Princess Mary had grown to be a girl of rare prettiness, with a face so filled with character and determination that you could not doubt for a moment that she was her mother's daughter through and through. When she looked down the hall at Anne and at me it was as if she looked straight through us, as if we were nothing but clear panes of Venetian glass and all she wanted to know was what might be beyond. She did not seem to envy us, nor see us as rivals to her father's attention or even as a danger to her mother's place. She saw us as a pair of light women, so insubstantial that the wind might blow us away in a merciful puff.

She was a witty girl, only eleven years old but capable of making a pun or turning a jest in English, French, Spanish or Latin. Anne was quick and a scholar, but she had not had the teaching of this little princess and she envied her that too. And the girl had all of her mother's presence. Whether or not Anne ever became queen she had been born and bred to be a snapper-up of privilege and place. Princess Mary had been born to rights that we could only dream of. She had an assurance that neither of us could ever learn. She had a grace that came from absolute confidence in her position in the world. Of course Anne hated her.

'She's nothing,' I said comfortingly. 'Let me brush your hair.'

There was a quiet tap at the door and George slid into the room before we could call out 'Enter'.

'I'm in a terror of being seen by my wife,' he said by way of excuse. He waved a bottle of wine at us and three pewter cups. 'She's been dancing and she's hot tonight. She all but ordered me to our bed. If she saw me come in here she'd be wild.'

'She's bound to have seen you.' Anne took a glass of George's wine. 'She misses nothing, that woman.'

'She should have been a spy. She would have loved to have been a spy specialising in fornication.'

I giggled and let him pour me a measure of wine. 'Wouldn't take much skill to track you down,' I pointed out. 'You're always in here.'

'It's the only place I can be myself.'

'Not the whorehouse?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'I don't go any more, I've lost my taste for it.'

'Are you in love?' Anne asked cynically.

To my surprise he glanced away and flushed. 'Not I.'

'What is it, George?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'Something and nothing. Something I cannot tell you and

nothing I dare to do.'

'Someone at court?' Anne demanded, intrigued.

He pulled up a stool before the fire and looked deep into the embers. 'If I tell you, then you must swear to tell no-one.'

We nodded, absolutely sisters in our determination to know everything.

'More than that, you won't even say anything to each other when I am gone. I don't want your comments behind my back.'

This time we hesitated. 'Swear to not even talk among ourselves?'

'Yes, or I say nothing.'

We hesitated, and then curiosity overcame us. 'All right,' said Anne, speaking for us both. 'We swear.'

His young handsome face crumpled and he buried his face into the rich sleeve of his jacket. 'I'm in love with a man,' he said simply.

'Francis Weston,' I said at once.

His silence told me that I had guessed right.

Anne's face was one of stunned horror. 'Does he know?'

He shook his head, still buried among the rich red velvet of his embroidered sleeve.

'Does anyone else know?'

Again his brown head shook.

'Then you must never give any hint of it, never tell anyone,' she ordered him. 'This must be the first and last time you speak of it to anyone, even to us. You must cut him out of your heart and mind and never even look at him again.'

He looked up at her. 'I know it's hopeless.'

But her advice was not for his benefit. 'You endanger me,' she said. 'The king'll never marry me if you bring shame to us.'

'Is that it?' he demanded, in sudden rage. 'Is that all that matters? Not that I am in love and tumbled like a fool into sin. Not that I can never be happy, married to a snake and in love with a heartbreaker, but only, *only*, that Mistress Anne Boleyn's reputation must be without blemish.'

At once she flew at him, her hands spread like claws, and he caught her wrists before she could rake his face. 'Look at me!' she hissed. 'Didn't I give up my only love, didn't I break my heart? Didn't you tell me then that it was worth the price?'

He held her away but she was unstoppable. 'Look at Mary! Didn't we take her from her husband and me from mine? And now you have to give up someone too. You have to lose the great love of your life, as I have lost mine, as

Mary lost hers. Don't whimper to me about heartbreak, you murdered my love and we buried it together and now it is gone.'

George was struggling with her and I gripped her from behind, pulling her off him. Suddenly, the fight went out of her and the three of us stood still, like masquers forming a tableau, me, hugging her waist, him holding her wrists, her stretched hands still inches from his face.

'Good God, what a family we are,' he said wonderingly. 'Good God, what have we come to?'

'It's where we're going that matters,' she said harshly.

George met her gaze and nodded slowly, like a man taking an oath. 'Yes,' he sighed. 'I won't forget.'

'You'll give up your love,' she stipulated. 'And never mention his name again.'

Again the defeated nod.

'And you'll remember that nothing matters more than this, my road to the throne.'

'I'll remember.'

I felt myself shudder, and I let go her waist. There was something in that whispered pledge that felt not like a pact with Anne but like a promise to the devil.

'Don't say it like that.'

They both looked at me, the matching brown dark eyes of the Boleyns, the long straight noses, that impertinent quirky little mouth.

'It's not worth life itself,' I said, trying to make light of it.

Neither of them smiled.

'It is,' Anne said simply.

Summer 1528

Anne danced, rode, sang, gambled, sailed on the river, went picnicking, walked in the gardens and played in the tableau as if she had no care in the world. She grew whiter and whiter. The shadows under her eyes went darker and darker and she started to use powder to hide the hollows under her eyes. I laced her more and more loosely as she lost weight, and then we had to pad her gown to make her breasts show plump as they used to.

She met my eyes in the mirror as I was lacing her and she looked every inch the older sister. She looked years older than me.

‘I’m so tired,’ she whispered. Even her lips were pale.

‘I warned you,’ I said without sympathy.

‘You’d have done the same if you had the wit and the beauty to hold him.’

I leaned forward so that my face was close to hers and she could see the bloom on my cheeks and my eyes bright, and my colour high beside her own drawn fatigue. ‘I don’t have wit or beauty?’ I repeated.

She turned to the bed. ‘I’m going to rest,’ she said ungraciously. ‘You can go.’

I saw her into bed, and then I went out, running down the stone stairs to the gardens outside. It was a wonderful day, the sun was bright and warm and the light was sparkling on the river. The little boats plying across the river wove in and out of the bigger ships waiting for the tide to set sail for the sea. There was a light wind coming upriver and it brought the smell of salt and adventure into the well-kept garden. I saw my husband walking with a couple of men on the lower terrace and I waved at him.

At once, he excused himself and came towards me, resting one foot on the flight of steps and looking up at me.

‘How now, Lady Carey? I see you are as beautiful as ever this day.’

‘How are you, Sir William?’

‘I am well. Where is Anne, and the king?’

‘She’s in her room. And the king is going out to ride.’

‘So are you at liberty?’

‘As a bird in the sky.’

He smiled at me, his secret knowing smile. ‘May I have the pleasure of your company? Shall we take a little walk?’

I went down the steps towards him, enjoying the sensation of his eyes on me. ‘Certainly.’

He drew my hand into the crook of his arm and we walked along the lower terrace, he matched his pace to mine and leaned towards me to whisper in my ear. ‘You are the most delicious thing, my wife. Tell me we don’t have to walk for too long.’

I kept my face forward but I could not help but giggle. ‘Anyone who saw me come from the palace will know I have been in the garden for no more than half a moment.’

‘Oh but if you are obeying your husband,’ he pointed out persuasively. ‘An admirable thing in a wife.’

‘If you order me,’ I suggested.

‘I do,’ he said firmly. ‘I absolutely command you.’

I caressed the fur trim of his doublet with the back of my hand. ‘Then what can I do but obey?’

‘Excellent.’ He turned and guided us in by one of the little garden doors and the moment it was shut behind us he took me in his arms and kissed me, and then led me up to his bedroom where we made love for all of the afternoon while Anne, the lucky Boleyn girl, the favoured Boleyn girl, lay sick with fear on her spinster bed.



That evening there was an entertainment and a dance. Anne as usual had the leading part and I was one of the dancers. Anne was paler than ever, white-faced in a silver gown. She was such a ghost of her former beauty that even my mother noticed. She summoned me with a crook of her finger from where I was waiting to say my piece in the play and dance my dance.

‘Is Anne ill?’

‘No more than usual,’ I said shortly.

‘Tell her to rest. If she loses her looks she will lose everything.’

I nodded. ‘She does rest, Mother,’ I said carefully. ‘She lies on her bed, but there is no resting from fear. I have to go and dance now.’

She nodded and let me go. I circled the hall and then made my entrance in

the masque. I was a star descending from the western sky and blessing the earth with peace. It was some kind of reference to the war in Italy and I knew the Latin words but had not troubled myself with the meaning. I saw Anne grimace and knew that I had pronounced something wrong. I should have felt ashamed but my husband, William, winked at me and stifled a laugh. He knew that I should have been learning my lines when I had been in bed with him that afternoon.

The dance was completed and a handful of strange gentlemen entered the room wearing masks and dominoes and picked out their partners to dance. The queen was amazed. Who could they be? We were all amazed, and none more so than Anne who smiled when a thick-set man, taller than most of the rest, asked her to dance with him. They danced together till midnight and Anne laughed at her own surprise when at unveiling she discovered that it was the king. She was still as white as her gown at the end of the evening, not even the dancing had flushed her skin.

We went to our room together. She stumbled on the stair and when I put out a hand to steady her I felt her skin was cold and wet with sweat.

‘Anne, are you sick?’

‘Just tired,’ she said faintly.

In our room when she washed the powder off her face I could see that her colour had drained to that of vellum. She was shivering, she did not want to wash or comb her hair. She tumbled into bed and her teeth chattered. I opened the door and sent a servant running for George. He came, pulling his cape over his nightshirt.

‘Get a doctor,’ I said. ‘This is more than tiredness.’

He looked past me into the room where Anne was hunched up in bed, the covers piled around her shoulders, her skin as yellow as a little old lady, her teeth chattering with cold.

‘My God, the sweat,’ he said, naming the most terrifying illness after the plague itself.

‘I think so,’ I said grimly.

He looked at me with fear in his eyes. ‘What will happen to us if she dies?’



The sweat had come to court with a vengeance. Half a dozen people who had been dancing were in their chambers. One girl had already died, Anne's own

maid was sick as a dog in the rooms which she shared with half a dozen others, and while I was waiting for the physician to send some medicines for Anne, I had a message from William telling me not to come near him, but to take a bath with spirit of aloes in the water, for he had the sweat and prayed to God that he had not given it to me.

I went along to his chamber and spoke to him from the doorway. He had the same yellowish tinge to his face as Anne, and he too was piled with blankets and still shivering with cold.

‘Don’t come in,’ he ordered me. ‘Don’t come any closer.’

‘Are you being cared for?’ I asked.

‘Yes, and I’ll take a wagon to Norfolk,’ he said. ‘I want to be home.’

‘Wait a few days and go when you are better.’

He looked at me from the bed, his face contorted with the pain of the illness. ‘Ah, my silly child-wife,’ he said. ‘I can’t afford to wait. Care for the children at Hever.’

‘Of course I will,’ I said, still not understanding him.

‘D’you think we made another baby?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know yet.’

William closed his eyes for a moment as if he were making a wish. ‘Well, whatever happens is in the hands of God,’ he said. ‘But I should have liked to have made a true Carey on you.’

‘There’ll be plenty of time for that,’ I said. ‘When you are better.’

He gave me a little smile. ‘I’ll think of that, little wife,’ he said tenderly, though his teeth still chattered. ‘And if I am not at court for a while, do you take care of yourself and of our children.’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘But you will come back, as soon as you are better?’

‘The moment I am well again I will come back,’ he promised. ‘You go to Hever and be with the children.’

‘I don’t know when they’ll let me go.’

‘Go today,’ he advised. ‘There’ll be uproar when they know how many people have taken the sweat. It’s very bad, my love. It’s very bad in the City. Henry will be off like a hare, mark my words. No-one will look for you for a week, and you can be safe with the children in the country. Find George and get him to take you. Go now.’

I hesitated for a moment, tempted to do as he told me.

‘Mary, if this was the last thing I told you to do I could not be more serious. Go to Hever and care for the children while the court is sick. It would be very

bad if your babies were to lose both mother and father to the sweat.'

'But what d'you mean? You won't die?'

He managed a smile. 'Of course not. But I'll be happier in my mind on my journey to my home if I know you are safe. Find George and tell him that I commanded you to go, and him to escort you safely.'

I took half a step inside the room.

'Don't come any closer!' he snapped. 'Just go!'

His tone was rude, and I turned on my heel and went out of the room in something of a pet and closed the door behind me with a little slam, so that he should know that I was offended.

It was the last time that I ever saw him alive.



George and I had been at Hever for little more than a week when Anne arrived travelling almost alone, in an open wagon. She was faint with exhaustion when she arrived and neither George nor I had the courage to nurse her ourselves. A wise woman from Edenbridge came in and took her to the tower room and sent for enormous portions of food and wine, some of which, we hoped, were actually eaten by Anne. The whole country was either sick or in a terror of sickness. Two maids left the castle to nurse their parents in nearby villages and both of them died. It was a most fearsome disease and George and I woke every morning in a sweat of terror and spent the rest of the day wondering if we too were destined to die.

The king, at the first signs of sickness, had left at once and gone to Hunsdon. That in itself was bad enough for the Boleyns. The court was in chaos, the country gripped by death. Worse for us: Queen Katherine was well, the Princess Mary was well, and the two of them, with the king, travelled together for the whole of the summer, as if they were the only ones blessed by heaven, untouched in a sea of sickness.

Anne fought for life, as she had fought for the king, a long dogged battle in which she brought all her determination to bear against almost impossible odds. Love letters came from the king, marked Hunsdon, Tittenhanger, Ampthill, recommending one cure or another, promising that he had not forgotten her and that he still loved her. But clearly, the divorce could not progress while there was no business being done at all, when even the cardinal himself was sick. It was half-forgotten and the queen was at the king's side and their engaging little

princess was their best companion and greatest entertainment. Everything had somehow stopped for the summer and Anne's sense of the flying of time, and Anne's desperation, were nothing to a man whose greatest fear was illness, and who was miraculously blessed with good health amid a sea of misery.

By our good fortune, the Boleyn luck, the sweat did not come to Hever and the children and I were safe in the familiar green fields and meadows. I had a letter from William's mother which told me that he had reached his home, as he had wanted, before he had died. It was a short cold letter which at the end congratulated me on being a free woman again; as if she rather thought that my marriage vows had never constrained me very much in the past.

I read the letter in the garden, on my favourite seat, looking towards the moat and the stone walls of the castle. I thought of the man I had cuckolded and who, in the last few months, had become such a delightful lover and husband. I knew that I had never given him his due. He had been married to a child and left by a girl, and when I came back to him as a woman it was always with an element of calculation in my kiss.

Now I realised that his death had set me free. If I could escape another husband, I might buy a little manor farm on my family's lands in Kent or Essex. I might have land that I could call my own and crops that I could watch grow. I might at last become a woman in my own right instead of the mistress of one man, the wife of another, and the sister of a Boleyn. I might bring up my children under my own roof. Of course, I had to get some money from somewhere, I had to persuade some man, Howard, Boleyn, or king, to give me a pension so that I could raise my children and feed myself, but it might be possible for me to gain enough to be a modest widow living in the country on my own little farm.

'You cannot really want to be a nobody,' George exclaimed as I outlined this plan as we were walking together in the woods. The children were hiding behind trees and stalking us as we walked slowly ahead of them. We were to play the parts of a pair of deer. George was wearing a bunch of twigs in his hat to signify antlers. Now and then we could hear little Henry's irresistible chuckle of excitement as he crashingly approached, believing himself completely unseen and unheard. I could not help thinking of his father's enthusiasm for disguises and how he too always thought that people were baffled by the simplest stratagem. Now, I indulged my son and pretended that I did not hear his noisy dash from tree to tree nor see him run from shadow to bush.

'You have been the favourite of the court,' George protested. 'Why would

you not want to make a grand marriage? Father or Uncle could get the pick of England for you. When Anne becomes queen then you could have a French prince.'

'It's still woman's work whether it's done in a great hall or in the kitchen,' I said bitterly. 'I know it well enough. It's earning no money for yourself and everything for your husband and master. It's obeying him as quickly and as well as if you were a groom of the servery. It's having to tolerate anything he chooses to do, and smile as he does it. I've served Queen Katherine in these last few years. I've seen how life has been for her. I wouldn't be a princess, not even for a princess's dowry. I wouldn't even be a queen. I have seen her shamed and humiliated and insulted, and all she could do was kneel on her prie dieu, pray for a little help, and get to her feet and smile at the woman who was triumphing over her. I don't think much of that, George.'

Catherine behind us made an excited little rush and caught at my gown. 'Caught you! I caught you!'

George turned and lifted her up, tossed her in the air and handed her to me. She was heavy now, a firm-bodied little four-year-old smelling of sunshine and leaves.

'Clever girl,' I said. 'You are a great hunter.'

'And what about her?' George asked. 'Would you deny her a great place in the world? She will be the Queen of England's niece. Think of that.'

I hesitated. 'If women could only have more,' I said longingly. 'If we could have more in our own right. Being a woman at court is like forever watching a pastrycook at work in the kitchen. All those good things, and you can have nothing.'

'What about Henry then?' he said, temptingly. 'Your Henry is the nephew of the King of England, known well enough as his son. If (God forbid) Anne does not have a son, then Henry could claim the throne of England, Mary. Your son is the son of a king, and he could be his heir.'

I did not glow at the thought. I looked fearfully into the wood where my staunch little boy was struggling to keep up with us and muttering to himself hunting songs of his own composing.

'Please God he is safe,' was all I said. 'Please God he is safe.'

Autumn 1528

Anne survived her illness and grew stronger in the clean air of Hever. When she came from her chamber I still would not sit with her, I was so afraid of taking the sickness to my children. She tried to be witty about my fears but there was an edge to her voice. She had felt betrayed by the king when he had fled the court, and she was mortally offended that he had spent the summer with Queen Katherine and with the Princess Mary.

She was determined to find him as soon as the cooler weather came, and the sweating sickness passed away. I was hoping that I might be overlooked in the rush to get Anne on the throne.

‘You have to come back with me,’ Anne said flatly.

We were at our favourite seat by the moat of the castle. Anne was seated on the stone bench, George sprawled on the grass before her. I was seated on the grass, leaning back against the bench, watching my children solemnly paddling their little feet in the water. It was shallow water at the bank, but I could not take my gaze off them.

‘Mary!’ Anne’s voice was sharp.

‘I heard you,’ I said, not turning my head.

‘Look at me!’

I glanced up at her.

‘You have to come back with me, I can’t manage without you.’

‘I don’t see why –’

‘I do,’ George said. ‘She has to have a bedfellow that she can trust. When she closes her bedroom door behind her she has to know that no-one is going to prattle to the queen that she’s crying, or tell Henry that she’s furious. She’s acting a part every day of her life, she needs a band of travelling players to be with. She has to have some people around her that she can know, that can know her. It can’t be all masquerade.’

‘Yes,’ Anne said, surprised. ‘That’s just how it is. How did you know?’

‘Because Francis Weston is a friend to me,’ George said frankly. ‘I need someone to whom I am not brother or son or husband.’

‘Nor lover,’ I prompted.

He shook his head. ‘Just friend. But I know how Anne needs you, because I need him.’

‘Well I need my children,’ I said stubbornly. ‘And Anne manages well enough without me.’

‘I am asking you as my sister.’ Something in her tone made me look at her a little more closely. This illness had knocked some of the arrogance out of her, she sounded for a moment like a woman who needed a sister’s tenderness. Slowly, very slowly, in an unfamiliar gesture, Anne stretched out her hand to me.

‘Mary ... I can’t do this on my own,’ she whispered. ‘It nearly killed me last time. I knew something would break inside me if I had to keep going. And now I have to go back to court and it will start all over again.’

‘Can’t you keep the king without such effort?’

She leaned back and closed her eyes. For a moment she did not look like the most determined, the most brilliant young woman in a brilliant court. She looked like an exhausted girl who has seen the depths of her own fear. ‘No. The only way I know is always to be the best there is.’

I reached out and touched her hand and felt her fingers grip mine. ‘I’ll come and help.’

‘Good,’ she said quietly. ‘I do need you, you know. Stay beside me, Mary.’



Back at court, at Bridewell Palace, the game had changed again. The Pope, weary at last of the endless demands from England, was sending an Italian theologian, Cardinal Campeggio, to London to resolve finally and absolutely the matter of the king’s marriage. Far from being threatened by this new development the queen seemed to welcome it. She was looking well. There was a glow on her skin from the summer sun and she had been happy in the company of her daughter. The king, shaken by his terror of infection, had been easy to entertain. Together they had discussed the cause of the illness which had swept the country, planned measures for prevention, and composed special prayers which they had ordered to be said in every church. Together they had worried about the health of the country which they had ruled for so long. Anne, though never far from the king’s thoughts, lost some of her glamour when she was merely one of the many sick. Once again, the queen was his only constant and

reliable friend in a dangerous world.

I could see the difference in her the moment we came into her apartment in the palace. She wore a new gown of dark red velvet which suited the warm colour of her skin. She did not look like a young woman – she would never be a young woman again; but she had a confident poise which Anne could never learn.

She welcomed Anne and me with a faint ironic smile. She inquired after my children, she asked after Anne's health. If she thought for a moment that the country would have been a better place if the sweat had carried off my sister, as it had taken so many others, there was no sign of that in her face.

In theory, we were still her ladies in waiting, though the presence chamber and the privy chamber which had been allocated to us were almost as large as the queen's own rooms. Her ladies flitted from her rooms to ours, to the king's presence chambers. The steady discipline of the court was breaking down, there was a sense now that almost anything could happen. The king and queen were on terms of quiet courtesy. The papal legate was on his way from Rome but taking an inordinate time over the journey. Anne was back at court indeed, but the king had spent a happy summer without her, it might be that his passion had cooled.

No-one dared to predict which way events might move and so there was a steady stream of people arriving to pay their respects to the queen and moving from her rooms to visit Anne. They crossed with another flow whose money was on the other horse. There was even talk that Henry would, in the end, come back to me and our growing nursery. I paid no attention until I heard my uncle had laughed with the king about his handsome boy at Hever.

I knew well enough, as did Anne, as did George, that my uncle never did anything by accident. Anne took George and me into her privy chamber and stood before us to accuse us.

'What's going on?' she demanded.

I shook my head but George looked shifty.

'George?'

'It's always true that your stars rise and fall in opposition,' he said awkwardly.

'What d'you mean?' she asked frostily.

'They had a meeting of the family.'

'Without me?'

George flung up his hands like a defeated fencer. 'I was summoned. I didn't

speak. I didn't say a thing.'

Anne and I were on him at once. 'They met without us there? What are they saying? What do they want now?'

George put us both at arm's length. 'All right! All right! They don't know which way to jump. They don't know which way to go. They didn't want Anne to know for fear of offending her. But now that you are so luckily widowed, Mary, and he lost interest in Anne this summer, they are wondering if he might not be brought round to you again.'

'He did not lose interest!' Anne swore. 'I won't be supplanted.' She rounded on me. 'You she-dog! This would be your plan!'

I shook my head. 'I've done nothing.'

'You came back to court!'

'You insisted on it. I've hardly looked at the king, I've hardly said two words to him.'

She turned from me and pitched face down on the bed as if she could not bear to look at either of us. 'But you've got his son,' she wailed.

'That's it really,' George said gently. 'Mary's got his son and now she's free to marry. The family think that the king might settle for her. And his dispensation applies to either of you. He can marry her if he wants.'

Anne rose up from the pillows, tearstained.

'I don't want him,' I said, exasperated.

'It doesn't matter, does it?' she said bitterly. 'If they tell you to go forward then you will go forward and take my chair.'

'As you took mine,' I reminded her.

She sat up. 'One Boleyn girl or the other.' Her smile was as bitter as if she had been biting on a lemon. 'We might either of us be Queen of England and yet we'll always be nothing to our family.'



Anne spent the next weeks entrancing the king all over again. She drew him away from the queen, away even from his daughter. Slowly the court came to realise that she had won him back. There was nobody but Anne.

I watched the seduction with the detachment of a widow. Henry gave Anne a London house of her own. Durham House on The Strand, her own apartments over the tiltyard at Greenwich Palace for the Christmas season. The king's council publicly ruled that the queen should not dress too finely nor go out to be

seen by the people. It was apparent to everyone that it was only a matter of time before Cardinal Campeggio ruled for divorce, Henry could marry Anne, and I could go home to my children and make a new life.

I was still Anne's chief confidante and companion and one day in November she insisted that she and George and I walk by the flooded river at Greenwich Palace.

'You must be wondering what will become of you, now that you have no husband,' Anne started. She seated herself on a bench and looked up at me.

'I thought I would live with you while you need me, and then go back to Hever,' I said cautiously.

'I can ask the king to allow that,' she said. 'It is in my gift.'

'Thank you.'

'And I can ask him to provide for you,' she said. 'William left you almost nothing, you know.'

'I know,' I said.

'The king used to pay William a pension of one hundred pounds a year. I can have that pension transferred to you.'

'Thank you,' I repeated.

'The thing is,' Anne said lightly, turning her collar up against the cold wind, 'I thought I would adopt Henry.'

'You thought what?'

'I thought I would adopt little Henry as my own son.'

I was so astounded, I could only look at her. 'You don't even like him very much,' I said, the first foolish thought of a loving mother. 'You never even play with him. George has spent more time with him than you.'

Anne glanced away, as if seeking patience from the river and the jumbled roof tops of the City beyond. 'No. Of course. That's not why I would adopt him. I don't want him because I like him.'

Slowly, I started to think. 'So that you have a son, Henry's son. You have a son who is a Tudor by birth. If he marries you then in the same ceremony he gets a son.'

She nodded.

I turned and took a couple of steps, my riding boots crunching on the frozen gravel. I was thinking furiously. 'And of course, this way, you take my son away from me. So I am less desirable to Henry. In one move you make yourself the mother of the king's son and you take away my great claim to his attention.'

George cleared his throat, and leaned against the river wall, arms folded

across his chest, his face a picture of detachment. I rounded on him. 'You knew?'

He shrugged. 'She told me after she'd done it. She did it as soon as we told her that the family thought that you might take the eye of the king again. She only told Father and Uncle after the king had agreed and the deed was done. Uncle thought it a keen bit of play.'

I found my throat dry and I swallowed. 'A keen bit of play?'

'And it means that you are provided for,' George said fairly. 'It puts your son close to the throne, it concentrates all the benefits on Anne, it's a good plan.'

'This is *my* son!' I could hardly say the words, I was choking on my grief. 'He is not for sale like some Christmas goose driven into market.'

George rose from the wall and put his arm around my shoulders, turned me to face him. 'No-one's selling him, we're making him all but a prince,' he said. 'We're claiming his rights for him. He could be the next King of England. You should be proud.'

I closed my eyes and felt the onshore wind on the cold skin of my face. I thought for a moment that I might faint or vomit, and more than anything else I longed for that, to be struck down so sick that they had to take me home to Hever and leave me there forever with my children.

'And Catherine? What about my daughter?'

'You can keep Catherine,' Anne said precisely. 'She's only a girl.'

'If I refuse?' I looked up into George's dark honest eyes. I trusted George, even though he had kept this from me.

He shook his head. 'You can't refuse. She's done it legally. Signed and sealed already. It's done.'

'George,' I whispered. 'This is my boy, my little boy. You know what my boy is to me.'

'You'll still see him,' George said consolingly. 'You'd be his aunt.'

It was like a physical blow. I staggered, and would have lost my footing but for George's arm. I turned to Anne who was sweetly silent, the smuggest of small smiles curving her lips. 'It's everything for you, isn't it?' I said, shaken by the depth of my hatred. 'You have to have everything, don't you? You have the King of England at your beck and call and you have to have my son too. You're like a cuckoo that eats all the other babes in the nest. How far do we all have to go for your ambition? You'll be the death of us all, Anne.'

She turned her head away from the hatred on my face. 'I have to be queen,' was all she said. 'And you all have to help me. Your son Henry can play his part

in the advancement of this family and we will help him upwards, in return. You know that's how it is, Mary. Only a fool rails against the way the dice fall.'

'They're weighted dice when I play with you,' I said. 'I shan't forget this, Anne. On your deathbed I'll remind you that you took my son because you were afraid that you could not make one of your own.'

'I can make a son!' she said, stung. 'You did it! Why shouldn't I?'

I gave a little triumphant laugh. 'Because you're older every day,' I said spitefully. 'And so is the king. Who knows that you can make a child at all? I was so fertile with him that I had two children from him one after another, and one the most beautiful boy that God ever put on this earth. You'll never have a boy like my Henry, Anne. You know in your very bones that you'll never have a boy to match him. All you can do is steal my son because you know you'll never have your own.'

She was so white that she looked as if the sweat had come back to her.

'Stop it,' George said. 'Stop it, you two.'

'Never say that again,' she hissed at me. 'It's to curse me. And if I fall, then you go down too, Mary. And George, and all of us. Never dare to say that again or I'll have you sent to a nunnery and you'll never see either of your children again.'

She leaped up from her seat and swirled away in a ripple of fur-trimmed brocade. I watched her run up the path to the palace and thought what a dangerous enemy she was. She could run to Uncle Howard, she could run to the king. Anne had the ear of everyone who might command me. And if she wanted my son, if she wanted my life, she had only to tell either of them and it would be done.

George put his hand on mine. 'I'm sorry,' he said awkwardly. 'But at least this way your children stay at Hever and you can see them.'

'She takes everything,' I said. 'She has always taken everything. But I will never forgive her this.'

Spring 1529

Anne and I were in the hall of Blackfriars monastery, hidden by a curtain at the back. We could not stay away. Nobody who had the smallest pretext to be in court could bear to stay away. Nothing like it had ever happened in England before. It was the place they had chosen to hear the evidence for and against the marriage of the King and Queen of England, a most extraordinary hearing, a most extraordinary event.

The court was at Bridewell Palace – just next door to the monastery. The king and queen would sit down to dinner in the great hall of Bridewell every night, and every day they would go to the court at Blackfriars and hear if their marriage had ever been valid, in all its long loving twenty years' duration.

It was a dreadful day. The queen was dressed in one of her finest gowns, she had clearly decided to defy the council's command that she dress very plain. She was in her new red velvet gown with a petticoat of golden brocade. Her sleeves and the hem of the gown were trimmed with the rich black fur of sable. Her dark red hood framed her face and she did not look weary and sad, as she had done for the past two years; she looked fiery and animated, ready for battle.

When the king was asked to speak to the court he said that he had had doubts about the validity of the marriage from the very beginning and the queen interrupted him – as no-one else in the world would dare to do – and said, very reasonably, that he had left his doubts silent for a long time. The king raised his voice and continued to the end of his prepared speech, but he was rattled.

He said that he had over-ruled his own doubts because of the great love he felt for the queen, but he could not ignore his anxieties any more. I felt Anne beside me tremble like a horse held in from the hunt. 'Such nonsense!' she whispered passionately.

They called the queen to reply to the king's statement. The court crier called her name: once, twice, three times; but she ignored him completely though he stood beside her throne and shouted. She walked through the court, her head very high, and she went straight to Henry, seated on his throne. She knelt before him. Anne craned around the curtain: 'What's she doing?' she demanded.

‘She can’t do that.’

I could hear the queen though we were right at the back of the court. Every word was perfectly clear though her accent was as strong as ever.

‘Alas, sir,’ she said gently, almost intimately. ‘Where have I offended you? I take God and all the world to witness that I have been to you a true, humble and obedient wife. These twenty years and more I have been your true wife, and by me you have had many children though it pleased God to call them out of this world. And when you had me at the first I was a true maid, without touch of man —’

Henry shifted in his seat and looked to the head of the court, imploring them to interrupt her, but she never took her eyes from his face.

‘If that is true or not I put to your conscience.’

‘She can’t do this!’ Anne hissed disbelievingly. ‘She has to call her lawyers to give evidence. She can’t speak to the king in public.’

‘She is, though,’ I said.

There was complete silence in the hall, everyone was listening to the queen. Henry, pressed against the back of his throne, was pale with embarrassment. He looked like a fat spoiled child confronted by an angel. I found that I was smiling at the sight of her, I found I was grinning, though it was my family whose cause was sinking with every word she spoke. I was near to delighted laughter because Katherine of Aragon was speaking out for the women of the country, for the good wives who should not be put aside just because their husbands had taken a fancy to another, for the women who walked the hard road between kitchen, bedroom, church and childbirth. For the women who deserved more than their husband’s whim.

Katherine referred her cause to God and the law, and there was uproar when she finished speaking. The cardinals hammered for order, the clerks shouted, and the excitement spread to the people outside the hall and in the streets outside the barred gates of the monastery who repeated her words one to another and then shouted in a great clamour of support for Katherine, the true Queen of England.

And Anne, at my side, burst into tears, laughing and crying at the same time. ‘She will be my death or I will be hers!’ she swore. ‘I will see her dead, please God, before she is the end of me.’

Summer 1529

It should have been Anne's summer of triumph. Cardinal Campeggio's court to hear the matter of the marriage was finally in session, its decision a certainty however persuasive the queen might be. Cardinal Wolsey was Anne's declared friend and chief supporter, the King of England was as much in love as ever, and the queen, after her one triumphant moment, had stepped back, even failing to appear in the court again.

But there was no joy for Anne. When she heard that I was packing to go to Hever to spend the summer with my children she came into the room as if all the fiends in hell were biting at her heels.

'You can't leave me while the cardinals' court is still sitting, I have to have you beside me.'

'Anne, I do nothing. I don't understand half of it and the rest of it I don't want to hear. All this stuff about what Prince Arthur said the morning after their wedding night, and all this servants' gossip from a lifetime ago. I don't want to hear it, it makes no sense to me.'

'You think I want to hear it?' she demanded.

I should have been warned by the wildness in her voice. 'You must do, for you're always in court,' I said reasonably. 'But they'll be finished soon, won't they? They'll say that the queen was married to Prince Arthur, the marriage consummated, and the marriage between her and Henry invalid. Then it's done. What do you need me here for?'

'Because I'm afraid!' she suddenly burst out. 'I'm afraid! I'm afraid all the time. You can't leave me here alone, Mary. I need you here.'

'Now, Anne,' I said persuasively. 'What is there to fear? The court is not hearing the truth nor looking for it. It is under the command of Wolsey who is the king's man through and through. It is under the command of Campeggio, who has orders from the Pope to see this business to the finish. Your path is straight before you. If you don't want to be here at Bridewell Palace, then go to your new house in London. If you don't want to sleep alone then you have six ladies in waiting. If you are fearful of the king and some new girl at court, then

order him to send her away. He does everything that you want. Everyone does everything that you want.'

'You don't!' Her voice was sharp and resentful.

'I don't have to, I'm only the other Boleyn girl. No money, no husband, no future unless you say so. No children unless I am allowed to see them. No son ...' My voice quavered for a moment. 'But I am allowed to go to see them, and I am going to go, Anne. You can't stop me. No power in the world can stop me.'

'The king can stop you,' she warned me.

I turned to face her and my voice was like iron. 'Hear this, Anne. If you tell him to ban me from my children, I will hang myself with your gold girdle in your new palace of Durham House and you will be accursed forever. There are some things which are too great for even you to play with. You cannot stop me seeing my children this summer.'

'My son,' she stressed.

I had to swallow back my rage, I had to hold back my desire to push her out of the damned window and let her break her selfish neck on the stone flags of the terrace below. I took a breath and then I had myself under control. 'I know it,' I said steadily. 'And now I am going to him.'



I went to say goodbye to the queen. She was alone in her silent rooms, stitching at the huge altar cloth. I hesitated in the doorway. 'Your Majesty, I am come to bid you farewell, I am going to my children for the summer.'

She looked up. We were both aware that I no longer needed to ask for her permission to be absent from court.

'You are fortunate to see so much of them,' she said.

'Yes.' I knew she was thinking of the Princess Mary, who had been kept from her since last Christmas.

'But your sister has taken your son,' she remarked.

I nodded. I did not trust myself to speak.

'Mistress Anne plays a strong hand. She wants my husband and your son as well. She wants a full suit.'

I did not dare even look up, I feared that she would see the deep resentment in my eyes.

'I shall be glad to go away this summer,' I said quietly. 'It is good of Your Majesty to spare me.'

Queen Katherine showed me a small flash of a smile. 'I am so well served,' she said ironically. 'I shall hardly miss you in the crowds that gather around me.'

I stood awkwardly, not knowing what to say in the silent rooms which I had once known so happy and so busy. 'I hope to serve Your Majesty again when I come back to court in September,' I said carefully.

She put her needle to one side and looked at me. 'Of course you will serve me. I shall be here. There is no doubt of that.'

'No,' I agreed, traitorous to my fingertips.

'You have never been anything other than courteous and a good servant to me,' she said. 'Even when you were young and very foolish you were a good girl, Mary.'

I felt myself swallow my guilt. 'I wish I had been able to do more,' I said, very low. 'And there were times when I was sorry that I had to serve others, and not Your Majesty.'

'Oh, you mean Felipez,' she said easily. 'Dear Mary, I knew you would tell your uncle or your father, or the king. I made sure that you saw the note and knew who was to be the messenger. I wanted them to watch the wrong port. I wanted them to think they had caught him. He got the message to my nephew. I chose you as my Judas. I knew you would betray me.'

I flushed a deep mortified scarlet. 'I cannot ask you to forgive me,' I whispered.

The queen shrugged. 'Half of the ladies in waiting report to the cardinal or to the king or to your sister every day,' she said. 'I have learned to trust no-one. For the rest of my life I will know that I can trust no-one. I shall die a woman who has been disappointed in my friends. But I am not disappointed in my husband. He is ill advised at the moment, he is dazzled at the moment. But he will come to his senses. He knows that I am his wife. He knows that he can have no other wife but me. He will come back to me.'

I rose up. 'Your Majesty, I am afraid that he never will. He has given his word to my sister.'

'It is not his to give away,' she said simply. 'He is a married man. He cannot promise anything to another woman. His word is my word. He is married to me.'

There was nothing more I could say. 'God bless Your Majesty.'

She smiled a little sadly, as if she knew as well as I did that this was goodbye. She would not be at court when I returned. She raised her hand in blessing over my head as I curtsied to her. 'God grant you a long life and much joy of your children,' she said.



Hever was warm in the sunshine and Catherine had learned to write all of our names, to spell out her little book, and to sing a song in French. Henry, determinedly ignorant, would not even rid himself of the little lisp which made him say 'w' for 'r'. I should have corrected him more severely but I found him too enchanting. He called himself 'Henwy' and he called me his 'deawest' and it would have been a mother with a heart of stone who could have told him he was speaking wrongly. Nor did I tell him that I was his mother only by grace; in law he was Anne's son. I could not bring myself to tell him that he had been stolen from me and I had been forced to let him go.

George stayed with us in the country for two weeks, as relieved as I was to be away from the court which was waiting, like the hounds in a ring around a wounded doe, for the moment that the queen could be dragged down. Neither of us wanted to be there the moment that the cardinals' court ruled against the innocent queen and sent her in disgrace from the country that she had called her home. And then George received a letter from our father.

George,

It has gone awry. Campeggio announced today that he can take no decision without the Pope. The court is adjourned, Henry is black with rage and your sister beside herself.

We are all to leave on progress at once and the queen is to be left behind in disgrace.

You and Mary must come and be with Anne, no-one but you can manage her temper.

Boleyn.

'I shan't go,' I said simply.

We were sitting together in the great hall after dinner. Grandmother Boleyn had gone to bed, the children were fast asleep in their own little beds after a day of running and hiding and playing catch.

'I'll have to,' George said.

'They said I could spend the summer with my children. They promised me that.'

'If Anne needs you –'

'Anne always needs me, she always needs you. She always needs all of us.'

She is trying to do something impossible – push a good woman out of marriage, push a queen off her throne. Of course she needs an army. You always need an army for a treasonous insurrection.’

George glanced to see that the doors to the hall were shut. ‘Careful.’

I shrugged. ‘This is Hever. This is why I come to Hever. So that I can speak. Tell them that I was sick. Tell them I might have the sweat. Tell them I said I would come as soon as I am well again.’

‘This is our future.’

I shrugged my shoulders. ‘We’ve lost. Everyone knows it but us. Katherine will keep the king, as in very justice she should. Anne will become his mistress. We’ll never make it to the throne of England. Not in this generation. You’ll have to hope that Jane Parker gives you a pretty girl. And you can throw her into that den of wolves and see who snaps her up.’

He laughed shortly at that. ‘I’ll leave tomorrow. We cannot all surrender.’

‘We’ve lost,’ I said flatly. ‘No shame in surrender when you are completely and utterly defeated.’

Dear Mary,

George tells me that you do not come to court because you think my cause is lost. Be very careful to whom you say this. Cardinal Wolsey will lose his house, his lands and his fortune, he will be displaced from the Lord Chancellorship, he will be a ruined man because he failed in my business. So do not you forget that you too are to work at my business, and I will not tolerate a servant with half a heart.

I have the king under my thumb and dancing to my bidding. I am not going to be defeated by two old men and their lack of courage. You speak too soon when you speak of my defeat. I have staked my life on becoming Queen of England. I have said that I shall do it, and I will do it.

Anne

Come to Greenwich in the autumn without fail.

Autumn 1529

Everything that Anne had threatened against Wolsey came true, and it was our Uncle Howard with the Duke of Suffolk, the king's dear friend and brother-in-law, who had the pleasure of taking the Great Seal of England off the disgraced cardinal. They would have the pickings of his enormous fortune too.

'I said I would bring him down,' Anne remarked smugly to me. We were reading in the windowseat of her presence chamber of her new London house: Durham House. By standing at the window and craning her head Anne could just see York Place where the cardinal had once reigned supreme and where she had courted Henry Percy.

There was a tap at the door. Anne looked at me to answer for her. 'Come in!' I called.

It was one of the king's pages, a handsome young man of about twenty. I smiled at him, his eyes danced at the attention. 'Sir Harold?' I asked politely.

'The king begs his sweet mistress to accept this gift,' the youth said and dropped to one knee before Anne, holding out a small box.

She took it from him and opened it. She gave a little satisfied purr at the contents.

'What?' I asked, unable to restrain my curiosity.

'Pearls,' she said shortly. She turned to the page. 'Tell the king that I am honoured by his gift,' she said. 'And that I will wear them at dinner tonight to thank him myself. Tell him,' she smiled as if at some private joke, 'that he will find he has a kind mistress and not a cruel one.'

The young man nodded solemnly, got to his feet, made a deep bow to Anne and a flirtatious bob to me, and took himself out of the room. Anne closed the box and tossed it across to me. I looked at the pearls, they were magnificent, set on a chain of gold.

'What did your message mean?' I asked. 'That you will be kind and not cruel?'

'I can't give myself to him,' she said, as prompt as any huckster who knows the value to a penny. 'But we had words this morning because he wanted to take

me into his privy chamber after Mass and I would not go.'

'What did you say?'

'I lost my temper,' she confessed. 'I swore that he wanted to treat me as a whore and dishonour me and dishonour himself and destroy any chance we had of a proper decision from Rome. If anyone thinks that I am his whore then I will never supplant Katherine. I'd be no better than you.'

'You lost your temper?' I asked, going at once to the worst part of this. 'What did he do?'

'Fell back,' Anne said ruefully. 'Shot out of the room like a cat scalded by a falling pan. But see what comes of it? He cannot bear me to be displeased with him. I have him dancing like a boy for me.'

'At the moment,' I said warningly.

'Oh, tonight I shall be kind as I promised. I shall dress and sing and dance only for him.'

'And after dinner?'

'I let him touch me,' she said unwillingly. 'I let him stroke my breasts and I let him put his hand up my skirt. But I never take off my gown for him. I really don't dare.'

'D'you pleasure him?'

'Yes,' she said. 'He insists on it and I can't see how to avoid it. But sometimes –' She rose from the windowseat and paced to the centre of the room. 'When he has stripped off his hose he pushes it into my hand and I hate him for it. It feels like an insult to me, to use me like this and then ...' She broke off, speechless with temper. 'Then he reaches his pleasure and he spouts like a stupid whale, such a mess and wetness and I think ...' She slammed her fist into her palm. 'I think God, oh God – I need a baby and there is all this going to waste! Going to waste in my hand when it should be in my belly! For God's sake! Apart from it being a sin, it's such madness!'

'There's always more,' I said practically.

The look she turned on me was haunted. 'There's not always more of me,' she said. 'He's mad to touch me now but he's been waiting three years. What if we have to wait another three years? How am I to keep my looks? How am I to stay fertile? He might well be lusty till he is sixty, but what about me?'

'Does he not think badly of you?' I asked. 'These are whore's tricks you are playing with him.'

Anne shook her head. 'I have to do something to keep him hot for my touch. I have to keep him coming forward and hold him off, all at the same time.'

‘There are other things you can do,’ I volunteered.

‘Tell me.’

‘You can let him watch you.’

‘Let him watch me do what?’

‘Let him watch you while you touch yourself. He loves that. It makes him almost weep with lust.’

She looked intensely uncomfortable. ‘For shame.’

I laughed shortly. ‘You let him watch you undress, one thing then another, very slowly. Last of all you lift your shift and put your fingers to your cunny and open it up to show him.’

She shook her head. ‘I couldn’t do it ...’

‘And you can take him in your mouth.’ I hid my amusement at her shrinking.

‘What?’ She looked at me with unveiled disgust.

‘You can kneel before him and take it in your mouth. He loves that too.’

‘You’ve done that with him?’ she demanded, her nose wrinkled.

I looked her straight in the eye. ‘I was his whore,’ I said. ‘And our brother has his stewardships and our father is a wealthy man because of it. When he lay on his back I would lie on him and kiss him down from his mouth to his parts and then lick his parts like a cat lapping at milk. Then I would take him in my mouth and suck on it.’

Anne’s face was a picture of curiosity and revulsion. ‘And did he like that?’

‘Yes,’ I said, brutally frank. ‘He adored it; it gave him as great a pleasure as anything else. And you can look as if you cannot bear the thought of it, you can set yourself up as high as you like; but if you have to hold him with whore’s tricks then you had better learn some new whore’s tricks and do them well.’

For a moment I thought that she would flare up, but she went quiet and nodded her head.

‘I’m sure that the queen never did such a thing,’ she said with deep resentment.

‘No,’ I said, exercising my constant resentment for a brief moment. ‘But she was his beloved wife that he married for love; and you and I are just whores.’



The tricks Anne learned to play with the king soothed his temper, but made her more irritable than ever. I opened the door to her chamber one day and I heard her voice raised in a breaking storm.

Henry was facing the door as I came in, and the look that he shot me was almost pleading. I stared aghast as Anne railed at him. She had her back to me, she did not even hear the door click, she was in such a rage as to be blind and deaf except to her own loud words.

‘And then to find that she, *she!* is still sewing your shirts, and she mocks me with this, she took them out in front of me and asked me to thread her needle. Asked me before all the ladies to thread the needle as if I were some serving woman.’

‘I never asked her ...’

‘Oh? What happens? Does she go to your rooms and steal your shirts away in the night? Does the groom of the bedchamber filch them and pass them on to her? Do you sleepwalk and carry them to her by accident?’

‘Anne, she is my wife. She has sewed my shirts for twenty years. I had no idea that you would object. But I will tell her that I don’t want her to do them any more.’

‘You had no idea that I would object? Why don’t you go back to her bed and see if I object to that! I sew as well as she does, a good deal better actually, since I am not so old and short-sighted that someone else has to thread my needle for me. But you do not bring your shirts to me. You snub me ...’ Her voice quavered. ‘Before the whole court you snub me by taking your shirts to her.’ She grew stronger with indignation. ‘You might as well say to the world: this is my wife and the woman I trust, and this is my mistress who is for the night and for play.’

‘Before God ...’ the king started.

‘Before God, you have hurt me with this, Henry!’

At the quaver in her voice he was quite unmanned. He opened his arms to her but she shook her head. ‘No, no, I won’t run to you and have you kiss my tears away and make me tell you that it doesn’t matter. It does matter, it matters more than anything.’

She put her hand to her eyes and walked past him, she opened the door to her privy chamber and went in without even glancing at him. In the silence that followed we heard her close the door and turn the key in the lock.

The king and I looked at each other.

He looked stunned. ‘Before God, I never meant to hurt her.’

‘About some shirts?’

‘The queen still sews my shirts for me. Anne didn’t know. She has taken it badly.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

Henry shook his head. ‘I shall tell the queen she shall no longer sew them for me.’

‘I think that would be wise,’ I said gently.

‘And when she comes out, will you tell her that I was much grieved to have caused her so much pain? And tell her that the offence will never be repeated?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’ll tell her.’

‘I shall send for a goldsmith and have him make her something pretty,’ he said, warming to the thought. ‘And when she is happy again she will forget that this quarrel ever took place.’

‘She will be happy by the time she has rested,’ I said hopefully. ‘Of course it’s hard for her, waiting to be married to you. She loves you so very much.’

For a moment he looked like the boy who had been in love with Katherine. ‘Yes, that’s why she calls up such a storm. Because she loves me so much.’

‘Of course,’ I reassured him. The last thing I wanted was for Henry to see how disproportionate Anne’s anger was to the facts.

He looked tender again. ‘I know. I have to be patient with her. And she’s very young, and she knows almost nothing of the world.’

I kept my mouth shut, thinking of the young girl I had been when my family had handed me over to him, and how I had never been allowed a whispered protest, let alone a temper tantrum.

‘I’ll get her some rubies,’ he said. ‘A virtuous woman, rubies, you know.’

‘She’ll like that,’ I said with certainty.



Henry gave her rubies, and she rewarded him with more than a smile. She came back to her room very late one night with her gown all dishevelled and her hood in her hand. I had been asleep in bed, I never waited up for her as she used to do for me. She pulled the covers off me to make me wake up and unlace her.

‘I did what you said and he adored it,’ she said. ‘And I let him play in my hair and with my breasts.’

‘So you are friends again,’ I said. I unlaced her stomacher and pulled the petticoat over her head.

‘And Father is to become an earl,’ Anne said with quiet satisfaction. ‘Earl of Wiltshire and Ormonde. I am to be Lady Anne Rochford and George will be Lord Rochford. Father is to go back to Europe to make the peace, and Lord

George our brother is to go with him. Lord George our brother is to become one of the king's most favoured ambassadors.'

I gasped at this tumble of favours. 'An earldom for Father?'

'Yes.'

'And George will be Lord Rochford! How grand for him, he'll love it! And an ambassador!'

'As he has always wanted.'

'And me?' I asked. 'What is there for me?'

Anne fell into bed and let me pull her shoes off her feet and peel down her stockings. 'You stay as the widow Lady Carey,' she said. 'Just the other Boleyn girl. I can't do everything, you know.'

Christmas 1529

The court was to meet at Greenwich, and the queen was to be present. She was to receive every honour and Anne was not to be seen.

‘What now?’ I asked George. I sat on his bed while he lounged in the windowseat. His man was packing his trunks for his trip to Rome, and every now and then George would look up and shout at his impassive servant: ‘Not the blue cape, it has the moth.’ Or: ‘I hate that hat, give it to Mary for young Henry.’

‘What now?’ He repeated my question.

‘I’ve been summoned to the queen’s apartments and I am to live in my old room in her wing of the palace. Anne is to be in her rooms at the tiltyard all on her own. I think Mother is to stay with her, but I, and all the ladies in waiting, are to wait on the queen, not on Anne.’

‘It can’t be a bad sign,’ George said. ‘He’s expecting a lot of people out of the City to watch them dine over the days of Christmas. The last thing he can afford are the merchants and the city traders saying that he is incontinent. He wants everyone to think that he has chosen Anne for the benefit of England, not for lust.’

I glanced a little nervously at the servant.

‘Joss is all right,’ George said. ‘Rather deaf, thank God. Aren’t you, Joss?’

The man did not turn his head.

‘Oh well, leave us,’ George said. Still the man went on, stolidly packing.

‘All the same you should take care,’ I said.

George raised his voice. ‘Leave us, Joss. You can finish later.’

The man started, looked round, bowed to George and to me, and went out.

George left the windowseat and sprawled on the bed at my side. I pulled his head down so that it rested in my lap and made myself comfortable against the headboard.

‘D’you think it will ever happen?’ I asked idly. ‘It feels as if we have been planning this wedding for a hundred years.’

He had closed his dark eyes but now he opened them and looked up at me. ‘God knows,’ he said. ‘God knows what it will have cost when it does come: the

happiness of a queen, the safety of the throne, the respect of the people, the sanctity of the church. Sometimes it seems to me as if you and I have spent our lives working for Anne, and I don't even know what we have gained from it.'

'And you an heir to an earldom? To two earldoms?'

'I wanted to go on crusade and murder unbelievers,' he said. 'I wanted to come home to a beautiful woman in a castle who would worship me for my courage.'

'And I wanted a hop field and an apple orchard and a sheep run,' I said.

'Fools,' George said, and closed his eyes.

He was asleep in a few minutes. I held him gently, watching his chest rise and fall, and then I leaned my head back against the brocade covering the headboard and closed my eyes and drifted into sleep myself.

Still in my dream I heard the door opening and I lazily opened my eyes. It was not George's servant returning, it was not Anne coming to look for us. It was a stealthy turning of the handle and a sly opening of the door and then Jane, George's wife, now Lady Jane Rochford, put her head into the room and looked around for us.

She did not jump when she saw us on the bed together, and I – still half-asleep and frozen into stillness with a sort of fear at her furtiveness – did not move either. I kept my eyelids half-closed and I watched her through my eyelashes.

She kept very still, she did not enter nor leave, but she took in every inch of us: George's head turned into my lap, the spread of my legs under my gown. My head tipped back, my hood tossed on the windowseat, my hair tumbled about my sleeping face. She took us in as if she were studying us to paint a miniature, as if she were collating evidence. Then, as silently as she had come, she slid out again.

At once I shook George and put my hand over his mouth as he woke.

'Sssh. Jane was here. She may still be outside the door.'

'Jane?'

'For God's sake, Jane! Your wife, Jane!'

'What did she want?'

'She said nothing. She just came in and looked at us, asleep together on the bed, she looked all around and then she crept away.'

'She didn't want to wake me.'

'Perhaps,' I said uncertainly.

'What's the matter?'

‘She looked – odd.’

‘She always looks odd,’ he said carelessly. ‘On the scent.’

‘Yes, exactly,’ I said. ‘But when she looked at us I felt quite ...’ I broke off, I could not find the words. ‘I felt quite dirty,’ I said eventually. ‘As if we were doing something wrong. As if we were ...’

‘What?’

‘Too close.’

‘We’re brother and sister,’ George exclaimed. ‘Of course we’re close.’

‘We were on the bed asleep together.’

‘Of course we were asleep!’ he exclaimed. ‘What else should we be doing together on the bed? Making love?’

I giggled. ‘She makes me feel like I shouldn’t even be in your room.’

‘Well, you should,’ he said stoutly. ‘Where else can we talk without half the court as well as her prowling round and listening? She’s just jealous. She’d give a king’s ransom to be on the bed with me in the afternoon, and I’d as soon put my head into a mantrap as into her lap.’

I smiled. ‘You don’t think she matters at all?’

‘Not at all,’ he said lazily. ‘She’s my wife. I can manage her. And the way the fashion is for marriage, I might just throw her off and marry a pretty one instead.’



Anne absolutely refused to spend the Christmas feast at Greenwich if she were not to be the centre of the attention. Although Henry tried again and again to explain to her that it was for the good of their cause she railed at him for preferring the queen at his side.

‘I shall go!’ she threw at him. ‘I shan’t stay here and be insulted by neglect. I shall go to Hever. I shall spend the Christmas feast there. Or perhaps I shall go back to the French court. My father is there, I could spend a happy time there, I think. I was always very much admired in France.’

He went white as if she had knifed him. ‘Anne, my own love, don’t say such things.’

She rounded on him. ‘Your own love? You don’t even want me at your side on Christmas Day!’

‘I want you there, on that day and every day. But if Campeggio is even now reporting to the Pope I want everyone to know that I am putting the queen aside

for the purest of reasons, for the very best of reasons.'

'And I am impure?' she demanded, snatching at the word.

The quickness of wits that she had brought to flirtation was now being exercised on Henry as a weapon. And he was as helpless now as he had been then.

'My own true love, you are an angel to me,' he said. 'And I want the rest of the world to know it. I have told the queen that you shall be my wife because you are the finest that England can offer. I told her that.'

'You discuss me with her?' She gave a little breathy scream. 'Oh no! This is to add insult to insult. And she tells you that I am not, perhaps. She tells you that when I was her lady in waiting I was no angel. She tells you that I am not fit to make your shirts, perhaps!'

Henry dropped his head in his hands. 'Anne!'

She spun away from him and turned to the window. I kept my head down over the book I was supposed to be reading and passed my finger along the line of the words but I saw nothing. Covertly, the two of us, king and former mistress, both watched her. The strain in her shoulders made her shudder for a couple of sobs, and then her shoulders eased, and she turned back to him. Her eyes were shining with tears, her anger had flushed colour into her cheeks. She looked aroused. She went towards him and she took his hands.

'Forgive me,' she cooed. 'Forgive me, love.'

He looked up at her as if he could not believe his luck. He opened his arms and she slithered onto his lap and wound her arms around his neck.

'Forgive me,' she whispered.

As quietly as I could I rose from my seat and went to the door. Anne nodded for me to leave, and I went out. As I closed the door behind me I heard her say: 'But I shall go to Durham House and you shall pay for me to keep Christmas there.'



The queen welcomed me back into her rooms with a small triumphant smile. She thought, poor lady, that Anne's absence meant a weakening of Anne's influence. She had not heard, as I had, the list of penances that Anne had set her lover to pay for her absence from court. She did not know, as the rest of the court knew only too well, that Henry's politeness to her over the Christmas feast was to be a matter of form.

She found it out soon enough. He never dined with her alone in her rooms. He never spoke to her unless someone was watching. He never danced with her at all. Indeed, he excused himself from much of the dancing and merely watched the dancers. There were some new girls at court who were twirled by their partners under his eyes, a new Percy heiress, a new Seymour girl. From every county in England that could gain a place at court came a new girl to enchant the king and perhaps get a chance at the throne. But the king was not to be diverted. He sat beside his wife looking drawn, and he thought of his mistress.

That night the queen knelt for a long while before her prie dieu and the other ladies fell asleep in their seats waiting for her to dismiss us and send us to our beds. When she rose up and turned around there was only me still awake.

‘Half a dozen Peters,’ she said, looking at their neglect of her in her time of sadness.

‘I am sorry for it,’ I said.

‘Whether she is here or whether she is gone seems to make no difference,’ she said with a forlorn wisdom. She bowed her head under the weight of the hood and I stepped forward and slipped off the pins and lifted it from her head. Her hair was very grey now, I thought she had aged more in this last year than she had done in the previous five.

‘It is just a passion that he will overcome,’ she said, more to herself than to me. ‘He would tire of her, as he tired of them all. Bessie Blount, you, Anne is only one of a line.’

I did not reply.

‘As long as he does not fall into a sin against the Holy Church, while she has her spell on him,’ she continued. ‘It’s the one thing that I pray for, that he does not sin. I know he will come back to me.’

‘Your Majesty,’ I said quietly. ‘What if he does not come? What if they annul your marriage and he marries her? Do you have somewhere to go? Have you secured your own safety if it all goes wrong?’

Queen Katherine turned her tired blue eyes on me as if she saw me for the first time. She held out her arms so that I could unlace the top part of her gown and then turned round so that I could slip it off her shoulders. Her skin was scraped raw by the irritation of her hair shirt. I made no remark, she did not like us ladies even to see it.

‘I do not prepare for defeat,’ she said simply. ‘It would be to betray myself. I know that God will turn Henry’s mind back to me and we will be happy together again. I know that my daughter will be Queen of England and she will be one of

the finest queens that ever reigned. Her grandmother was Isabella of Castile – no-one can doubt that a woman can rule a kingdom. She will be a princess that everyone will remember, and the king will be Sir Loyal Heart at my death as he was once in my girlhood.’

She went to her privy chamber and the maid, who was dozing before the fire, jumped up and took her gown and hood from my arms.

‘God bless you,’ the queen said. ‘You can tell the others to go to bed now. I shall expect them all to come with me to Mass in the morning. And you too, Mary. I like my ladies to come to Mass.’

Summer 1530

I rode down the road to Hever surrounded by a jogging army of serving men, the Howard standard before and behind me, and any other travellers on the road crowded into the ditch as we went by. The hedges and grass at the roadside were dusty already, it had been a dry spring, all the signs that it would be a bad year for the plague. But at a distance from the road the hay was sweet, already cut and stacked in some fields, and the wheat and barley were knee-high and starting to fatten. The hop fields were green and the grass in the apple orchards was drifted with petals like snow.

I sang as we rode along, there was such joy for me in riding through the English countryside, with my back to the court, on the way to my children. The men were commanded by a gentleman in my uncle's train, William Stafford, and he rode beside me for some of the way.

'This dust is dreadful,' he remarked. 'As soon as we are clear of the town I'll order the men to ride behind you.'

I stole a little sideways glance at him. He was a handsome man, broad-set with an honest open face. I imagined that he was a Stafford ruined on the execution of the disgraced Duke of Buckingham. He certainly looked like a man who had been born and bred to something more.

'I thank you for escorting me. It is important to me to see my children.'

'I should think there was nothing more important. I have neither wife nor child, but if I did have I would not leave them.'

'Why have you never married?'

He gave me a smile. 'I never met a woman I liked enough.'

There was nothing in it; there was something in it. I found I wanted to ask him what a woman would have to do to please him. He was foolish to be so choosy in women. Most men would marry a woman who could bring them either wealth or good connections. And yet William Stafford did not look like a fool.

When we stopped for our dinner he was by my horse to lift me down and he held me for a moment, to keep me steady, when I was on my feet.

'All right?' he asked gently. 'You've been a long time in the saddle.'

‘I’m all right. Tell the men we won’t stay too long to dine, I want to get on to Hever before nightfall.’

He led me into the inn. ‘I hope they can find something good for your dinner. They promised a chicken but I’m afraid it might be a scrawny old goose.’

I laughed. ‘Anything! I could eat anything, I am so hungry. Will you dine with me?’

For a moment I thought he would say yes, but then he made a little bow and said: ‘I’ll eat with the men.’

I felt a little piqued that he refused my invitation. ‘As you wish,’ I said coolly and went into the low-ceilinged room of the inn. I warmed my hands at the fire, and glanced out of the little leaded pane window. In the stable yard he was watching the men take the tack off the horses and rub them down before they got their dinners. He was a good-looking man, I thought. A pity that he had such bad manners.



This summer I had decided that Henry’s golden curls should be cut and Catherine should come out of short clothes and go into proper gowns. Henry too should wear a doublet and hose. If it had been left to me I might have given them another year in their baby clothes but Grandmother Boleyn was insistent that the two of them should leave their infancy behind, and she was quite capable of writing to Anne and saying that I was not bringing up her ward properly.

Henry’s hair was softer than hat feathers. He had long golden curls which fell to his shoulders in ringlets and framed his bright little face. No mother in the world could have seen them cut without tears, he was my baby, and the last thing I wanted was for him to leave behind his curls and his baby plumpness, the last thing I wanted was to see any change in the way he held out his arms to be picked up, the unsteady rushing of his fat little legs.

He, of course, was all for it, and he wanted a sword, and his own pony. He wanted to go to the court of France like George, and learn to fight. He wanted to go on crusade and learn to joust, he wanted to grow up as fast as he could, while I wanted to hold him in my arms, my baby forever.

William Stafford came upon us at our favourite place, on the stone bench facing towards the moat and the castle. Henry had run around all morning and was now frankly sleepy, cuddled into my arms, his thumb creeping into his mouth. Catherine was paddling her bare feet in the moat.

He saw at once that there were tears in my eyes but he merely hesitated and said quietly, in order not to wake my boy: 'I am sorry to disturb you, I was coming to tell you that we're returning to London now, and to ask if you had any messages that you wanted to send.'

'I have some fruit and some vegetables for my mother in the kitchen.'

He nodded and then hesitated, irresolute. 'Forgive me,' he said awkwardly. 'I can see that something has made you cry. Is there anything I can do? Your uncle put you in my care. It is my duty to know if someone has offended you.'

That made me chuckle. 'No. It is just that Henry has to be breeched and I have so loved having him as a little baby. I don't want either him or my little Catherine to grow up. If I had a husband he would have taken Henry and cut his curls without my permission. As it is, I have to see it done myself.'

'D'you miss your husband?' he asked curiously.

'A little.' I wondered how much Stafford knew of my marriage that had hardly been a marriage at all. 'We were not much together.' That was about as honest and as tactful as I could manage, and his small judicial nod did not tell me whether he had understood me or not.

'I meant now,' he said, showing me that he was cleverer than I had allowed. 'Now that you no longer have the favour of the king. Now would be the time that you would expect to have another child with your husband, isn't it? And start again?'

I hesitated. 'I suppose so.' I was reluctant to discuss my future with someone who was only a gentleman in my uncle's train, ten a penny if truth were told, little more than a common adventurer if one was to be unkind.

'But it's not a very comfortable situation for a woman like you, a young woman of twenty-two with two young children. You've your whole life ahead of you and yet your future is tied to your sister's. You are in her shadow. You, who were once the favourite of everyone.'

It was such a bleak and accurate summary of my life that I rather choked at the vista he opened up for me. 'That's how it is for women,' I said, stung into honesty. 'It's not what one would choose – I grant you that. But women are the very toys of fortune. If my husband had lived then he would have been granted great honours. My brother is Lord George, my father an earl, and I would have shared in his prosperity. But as it is I am still a Boleyn girl and a Howard, I'm not penniless. I have prospects.'

'You're an adventurer,' he said. 'Like me. Or, at any rate, you could be. While your family is so fixed on Anne, and her future is so unreliable, you could

make your own future. You could make your own choice. They have forgotten to manage you for a moment. In this moment you might be free.'

I turned my attention to him. 'Is that why you are unmarried? So that you can be free?'

He smiled at me, a gleam of white teeth in his brown face. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'I owe no man a living, I owe no woman a duty. I am your uncle's man, I wear his livery, but I don't see myself as his serf. I'm a freeborn Englishman, I go my own way.'

'You're a man,' I said. 'It's different for a woman.'

'Yes,' he acknowledged. 'Unless she was to marry me. Then we could make our own way together.'

I laughed quietly, and gathered little Henry closer to me. 'You would make your own way on precious little money if you married to disoblige your lord, and without the blessing of her parents.'

Stafford was not at all put out. 'There are worse beginnings than that. I think I'd rather have a woman who loved me stake her life on my ability to care for her, than have her father bind me up with a dowry and a contract.'

'And what would she get?'

He looked me straight in the face. 'My love.'

'And this is worth a breach with her family? With your lord? With her family's kin?'

He glanced away to where the swallows were building their little mud-cups of nests under the turrets of the castle. 'I should like a woman who was free as a bird. I should like a woman who came to me for love, and who wanted me for love, and cared for nothing more than me.'

'You would have a fool as a wife,' I said sharply.

He turned back to me and smiled. 'Just as well that I have never yet met a woman I wanted,' he said. 'So there are no fools rather than two.'

I nodded. It seemed to me that I had triumphed in the exchange but that it was somehow unresolved. 'I hope to remain unmarried for a while,' I said. Even to my own ears I sounded uncertain.

'I hope you do too,' he said oddly. 'I bid you farewell, Lady Carey.' He bowed and was about to go. 'And I think that you will find that your boy is still your little boy whether he is in breeches or short clothes,' he said gently. 'I loved my mother till the day she died, God bless her, and I was always her little boy – however big and disagreeable I became.'



I should not have worried about the loss of Henry's curls. When they were shorn, I could see once more the exquisite rounded shape of his head, the tender vulnerable neck. He no longer looked like a baby, he looked like the smallest most engaging little boy. I liked to cup his head in the palm of my hand and feel the warmth of him. In his adult clothes he looked every inch a prince and, despite myself, I started to think that he might one day sit on the throne of England. He was the king's son, he was adopted by the woman who might well one day take the title of Queen of England – but more than any of this, he was the most golden princely boy I had ever seen. He stood like his father, hands on hips, as if he owned the world. He was the sweetest-tempered boy that any mother has ever called to her and seen come running through a meadow, following her voice as trustingly as a hawk to the whistle. He was a golden child this summer and when I saw the boy he was, and the young man that he might become, I did not grieve any more for the baby he had been.

But I did learn that I wanted another child. The beauty of him as a boy meant that I had lost my baby and I thought of how it would be to have a baby that was not another pawn in the great game of the throne, but wanted for itself alone. How it would be to have a baby with a man who loved me and who looked forward to the child we might have together. That thought took me back to court in a very quiet and sombre mood.



William Stafford came to escort me to Richmond Palace and insisted that we leave early in the morning so that the horses could rest at midday. I kissed my children goodbye and came out into the stable yard where Stafford lifted me up into the saddle. I was crying at leaving them and, to my embarrassment, one of my tears fell on his upturned face. He brushed it with a fingertip but instead of wiping his hand on his breeches he put his finger to his lips and licked it.

‘What are you doing?’

At once he looked guilty. ‘You shouldn't have dropped a tear on me.’

‘You shouldn't have licked it,’ I burst out in reply.

He didn't answer, nor did he move away immediately. Then he said: ‘To horse,’ and turned from me and swung into his own saddle. The little cavalcade

moved out of the courtyard of the castle and I waved at my boy and my girl, kneeling up at their bedroom window to see me go.

We rode over the drawbridge with our horses' hooves sounding like thunder on the hollow wooden boards, and down the long sweeping road to the end of the park. William Stafford edged his horse forward beside mine.

'Don't cry,' he said abruptly.

I glanced sideways at him and wished he would go and ride with his men. 'I'm not.'

'You are,' he contradicted me. 'And I cannot escort a weeping woman all the way to London.'

'I'm not a weeping woman,' I said with some irritation. 'But I hate to leave my children and know that I will not see them again for another year. A whole year! I should think I might be allowed to feel a little sad at leaving them.'

'No,' he said staunchly. 'And I'll tell you why. You told me very clearly that a woman has to do as her family bids her. Your family has bidden you to live apart from your children, even to give your son into your sister's keeping. To fight them and to take your children back makes better sense than to weep. If you choose to be a Boleyn and a Howard then you might as well be happy in your obedience.'

'I'd like to ride alone,' I said coldly.

At once he spurred his horse forward and ordered the men at the front of the escort to fall back. They all went back six paces behind me and I rode in silence and in loneliness all the way up the long road to London, just as I had ordered.

Autumn 1530

The court was at Richmond and Anne was all smiles after a happy summer in the country with Henry. They had hunted every day and he had given her gift after gift, a new saddle for her hunter and a new set of bow and arrows. He had ordered his saddler to make a beautiful pillion saddle so that she could sit behind him, her arms around his waist, her head against his shoulder so that they could whisper together as they rode. Everywhere they went they were told that the country was admiring them, favouring their plans. Everywhere they were greeted with loyal addresses, poems, masques and tableaux. Every house welcomed them with a shower of petals and freshly strewn herbs beneath their feet. Anne and Henry were assured over and over again that they were a golden couple with a certain future. Nothing could possibly go wrong for them.

My father, home from France, decided to say nothing to disturb this picture. 'If they're happy together then thank God for it,' he remarked to my uncle. We were watching Anne at the archery butts on the terrace above the river. She was a skilful archer, she looked as if she might take the prize. Only one other lady, Lady Elizabeth Ferrers, looked as if she might outshoot my sister.

'It's a pleasant change,' my uncle said sourly. 'She has the temper of a stable cat, your daughter.'

My father chuckled comfortably. 'She takes after her mother,' he said. 'All the Howard girls jump one way or another as soon as you look at them. You must have had some fights with your sister when you were children.'

Uncle Howard looked cool and did not encourage the intimate note. 'A woman should know her place,' he said icily.

Father exchanged a quick look with me. The regular episodes of uproar in the Howard household were well-known. It was hardly surprising. Uncle Howard had openly kept a mistress from the moment that his wife had given him his sons. My aunt swore that she had been nothing more than the laundry woman to the nursery and that to this day the two of them could only couple if they were lying on dirty sheets. The hatred between her and her husband was a constant feature of court, and it was as good as a play to see him lead her in on state

occasions when they had to keep up the semblance of unity and appear in public together. He held the very tips of her fingertips, and she turned her head away from him as if he smelled of unwashed hose and dirty ruffs.

‘We’re not all blessed with your happy touch with women,’ my father said.

My uncle shot one surprised look at him. He had been head of the family for so long that he was used to deference. But my father was an earl in his own right now, and his daughter, who at that very moment loosed an arrow and saw it fly straight to the heart of the target, could be queen.

Anne turned, smiling from her shot, and Henry, unable to keep from her, leaped to his feet out of the chair and hurried down to the butts and kissed her on the mouth, before all the court. Everyone smiled and applauded, Lady Elizabeth concealed as well as she could any sense of pique that she had lost to the favourite, and received a small jewel from the king while Anne took a little headdress shaped like a golden crown.

‘A crown,’ my father said, watching the king hold it out to her.

In an intimate, confident gesture Anne pulled off her hood and stood before us all with her dark hair tumbling back from her forehead in thick glossy ringlets. Henry stepped forward and put the crown on her head. There was a pause of absolute silence.

The tension was broken by the king’s Fool. He danced behind the king and peeped around him at Anne. ‘Oh Mistress Anne!’ he called. ‘You aimed for the eye of the bull, but you hit very true at another part. The bull’s b ...’

Henry rounded on him with a roar of laughter and aimed a cuff which the Fool dodged. The court exploded in laughter and Anne, beautifully blushing, the little archery crown glinting on her black hair, shook her head at the Fool, wagged her finger at him, and then turned her face in confusion to Henry’s shoulder.



I was sharing a bedroom with Anne in the second best rooms that Richmond Palace could offer. They were not the queen’s apartments, but they were the next best. There seemed to be an unwritten rule that Anne might commandeer a set of rooms and furnish them as richly as the queen, almost as richly as the king, but she was not yet allowed to live in the queen’s own rooms, even though the queen was never there. New protocols had to be invented all the time in this court which was not like any other before.

Anne was sprawled on the ornate bed, careless of creasing her gown.

‘Good summer?’ she asked me idly. ‘Children well?’

‘Yes,’ I said shortly. I would never again speak willingly of my son to her. She had forfeited her right to be his aunt when she had laid claim to be his mother.

‘You were watching the archery with Uncle,’ she said. ‘What was he talking about?’

I thought back. ‘Nothing. Saying you and the king were happy.’

‘I have told him that I want Wolsey destroyed. He’s turned against me. He’s supporting the queen.’

‘Anne, he lost the Lord Chancellorship, surely that’s enough.’

‘He’s been corresponding with the queen. I want him dead.’

‘But he was your friend.’

She shook her head. ‘We both played a part to please the king. Wolsey sent me fish from his trout pond, I sent him little gifts. But I never forgot how he spoke to me about Henry Percy, and he never forgot that I was a Boleyn, an upstart like him. He was jealous of me, and I was jealous of him. We have been enemies from the moment I came home from France. He didn’t even see me. He didn’t even understand what power I have. He still does not understand me. But at his death, he will. I have his house, I will have his life.’

‘He’s an old man. He’s lost all his wealth and his titles that were his great pride and joy. He’s retiring to his see at York. If you want your revenge, you can leave him to rot. That’s revenge enough.’

Anne shook her head. ‘Not yet. Not while the king still loves him.’

‘Is the king to love nobody but you? Not even the man who has guarded him and guided him like a father for years?’

‘Yes. He is to love nobody but me.’

I was surprised. ‘Have you come to desire him?’

She laughed in my face. ‘No. But I would have him see no-one and speak to no-one but me, and those I could trust. And who can I trust?’

I shook my head.

‘You – perhaps. George – always. Father – usually. Mother – sometimes, Uncle Howard – if it suits him. Not my aunt, who has gone over to Katherine. Perhaps the Duke of Suffolk but not his wife Mary Tudor who can’t bear to see me rise so high. Anyone else? No. That’s it. Perhaps some men are tender-hearted to me. My cousin Sir Francis Bryan, perhaps Francis Weston from his friendship with George. Sir Thomas Wyatt cares for me still.’ She raised one

other finger in silence and we both knew that we were thinking of Henry Percy, so far away in Northumberland, determinedly never coming to court, ill with unhappiness, living in the middle of nowhere with the wife he had married under protest. 'Ten,' she said quietly. 'Ten people who wish me well against a whole world that would be glad to see me fall.'

'But the cardinal can do nothing against you now. He has lost all his power.'

'Then this is the very time when he is ripe to be destroyed. Now that he has lost all his power and he is a defeated old man.'



It was some plot hatched between the Duke of Suffolk and Uncle Howard but it bore Anne's hallmark. My uncle had evidence of a letter from Wolsey to the Pope and Henry, who had been disposed to recall his old friend to high office, turned once more against him and ordered his arrest.

The lord that they sent to arrest him was Anne's choice. It was Anne's final gesture to the man who had called her a foolish girl and an upstart. Henry Percy of Northumberland went to Wolsey at York and said that he was charged with treason and must travel the long road back to London and stay not in his wonderful palace of Hampton Court which now belonged to the king, not in his beautiful London home of York Place which was now renamed Whitehall and belonged to Anne; instead he was to go, like a traitor, to the Tower and await his trial, as others had gone before him and taken the short walk to the scaffold.

Henry Percy must have felt a harsh joy to send to Anne the man who had separated them, now sick with exhaustion and despair. It was no fault of Henry Percy's that Wolsey escaped them all by dying on the road and the only satisfaction that Anne could take was that it was the boy she had loved who told the man that had parted them that her vengeance had come at last.

Christmas 1530

The queen met the court at Greenwich for Christmas and Anne held her rival Christmas feast in the dead cardinal's old palace. It was an open secret that after the king had dined in state with the queen he would quietly slip out, summon the royal barge and be rowed to the stairs at Whitehall where he would eat another supper with Anne. Sometimes he took some chosen courtiers with him, me among them, and then we had a merry night on the river, wrapped up warm against the biting cold wind, with the stars bright above us as we rowed home and sometimes a huge white moon lighting our way.

I was one of the queen's ladies again and I was shocked to see the change in her. When she raised her head and smiled for Henry she could no longer summon any joy into her eyes. He had knocked it out of her, perhaps forever. She still had the same quiet dignity, she still had the same confidence in herself as a Princess of Spain and Queen of England, but she would never again have the glow of a woman who knows that her husband adores her.

One day we were sitting together at the fireside of her apartment, the altar cloth spread from one side of the hearth to the other. I was working on the blue sky which was still unfinished, and she, unusually for her, had left the blue and moved on to another colour. I thought that she must be weary indeed if she left a task unfinished. Usually she was a woman who would persist, whatever it cost her.

'Did you see your children this summer?' she asked.

'Yes, Your Majesty,' I said. 'Catherine is in long dresses now and is learning French and Latin, and Henry's curls are cut.'

'Will you send them to the French court?'

I could not conceal the pang of anxiety. 'Not yet at any rate. They're still so very young.'

She smiled at me. 'Lady Carey, you know that it is not how young they are, nor how dear. They have to learn their duty. As you did, as I did.'

I bowed my head. 'I know that you're right,' I said quietly.

'A woman needs to know her duty so that she may perform it and live in the

estate to which God has been pleased to call her,' the queen pronounced. I knew that she was thinking of my sister, who was not in the estate to which God had been pleased to call her, but was instead in some glorious new condition, earned by her beauty and her wit, and maintained now by an inveterate campaign.

There was a knock at the door and one of my uncle's men stood in the doorway.

'A gift of oranges from the Duchess of Norfolk,' he said. 'And a note.'

I rose to receive the pretty basket with the oranges arranged in their dark green leaves. There was a letter marked with my uncle's seal laid on the top.

'Read the note,' the queen said. I put the fruit down on the table and opened the letter. I read aloud: "'Your Majesty, having received a fresh barrel of oranges from the country of your birth I take the liberty of sending the pick of them to you with my compliments.'"

'How very kind,' the queen said calmly. 'Would you put them in my bedchamber, Mary? And write a reply to your aunt in my name to thank her for her gift.'

I rose and carried the basket into her room. There was a rug in the doorway and I caught my heel in it. As I staggered to regain my footing the oranges tumbled everywhere, rolling over the floor like a schoolboy's marbles. I swore as quietly as I could, and hurriedly started to pile them back into the basket before the queen came in and saw what a mess I had made of a simple task.

Then I saw something that made me freeze. In the bottom of the basket was a tiny twist of paper. I smoothed it out. It was covered in small numbers, there were no words at all. It was in code.

I stayed there, on my knees with the oranges all around me, for a long time. Then I slowly packed them back in their arrangement and put the basket on a low chest. I even stepped back to admire them and alter their position. Then I put the note in my pocket and went back into the room to sit with the woman that I loved more than any other in the world. I sat beside her, and stitched her tapestry, and wondered what smouldering disaster I had in the pocket of my gown and what I should do with it.



I had no choice. From start to finish I had no choice. I was a Boleyn. I was a Howard. If I did not cleave to my family then I was a nobody with no means to support my children, no future, and no protection. I took the note to my uncle's

rooms and I laid it before him on the table.



He had the code broken in half a day. It was not a very complicated conspiracy. It was only a message of hope from the Spanish ambassador, whispered to my aunt, and passed on by her to the queen. Not a very effectual conspiracy. It was a plot in a desert. It meant nothing but some comfort to the queen, and now I had been the instrument in taking that comfort from her.

When the news of it all came out with a great quarrel in my uncle's apartments as he shouted at his wife that she was a traitor against the king and against him, and then there was a royal remonstrance from the king himself to my aunt, I went to the queen. She was in her room, looking out of the window at the frozen garden below her. Some people wrapped warm in furs were walking down to the river where the barges were waiting for them, going to visit my sister in her rival court. The queen, standing in silence, alone in her room, watched them go, the Fool capering round them, one of the musicians strumming a lute and singing them on their way.

I dropped to my knees before her.

'I gave the duchess's note to my uncle,' I confessed baldly. 'I found it in the oranges. If it had not come to my hand I would never have searched for it. I always seem to betray you, but it is never my intention.'

She glanced at my bowed head as if it did not much matter. 'I don't know anyone who would have done any different,' she observed. 'You should be on your knees to your God, not to me, Lady Carey.'

I did not rise. 'I want to beg your pardon,' I said. 'It is my destiny to belong to a family whose interests run counter to yours. If I had been your lady in waiting at another time you would never have had to doubt me.'

'If you had not been tempted you would not have fallen. If it was not in your interests to betray me then you would have been loyal. Go away, Lady Carey, you are no better than your sister who pursues her own ends like a weasel and never glances to one side or the other. Nothing will stop the Boleyns gaining what they want, I know that. Sometimes I think she will stop at nothing, even my death, to do it. And I know that you will help her, however much you love me, however much I loved you when you were my little maid – you will be behind her every step of her way.'

'She's my sister,' I said passionately.

‘And I am your queen,’ she said, like ice.

My knees ached on the floorboards but I did not want to move.

‘She has my son in her keeping,’ I said. ‘And my king at her beck and call.’

‘Go away,’ the queen repeated. ‘Soon the Christmas feast will be over and we will not meet again till Easter. Soon the Pope will come to his decision and when he tells the king that he has to honour his marriage to me then your sister will make her next move. What have I to expect, d’you think? A charge of treason? Or poison in my dinner?’

‘She wouldn’t,’ I whispered.

‘She would,’ the queen said flatly. ‘And you would help her. Go away, Lady Carey, I don’t want to see you again till Easter.’

I rose to my feet and backed away, at the doorway I swept her a deep curtsy, as low as one would offer to an emperor. I did not show her my face, which was wet with tears. I bowed in shame. I went from her room and shut her door and left her alone, looking out over the frozen garden at the laughing court setting off down river to honour her enemy.



The gardens were quiet with most of the court absent. I thrust my cold hands deep into the fur of my sleeves and walked down to the river, my head lowered, my cheeks icy with my tears. Suddenly, a pair of down-at-heel boots stopped before me.

I looked up slowly. A good pair of legs if a woman cared to observe, warm doublet, brown fustian cape, smiling face: William Stafford.

‘Not gone with the court to visit your sister?’ he asked without a word of greeting.

‘No,’ I said shortly.

He took a closer look at my downturned face.

‘Are your children all right?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘What is it then?’

‘I’ve done a bad thing,’ I said, narrowing my eyes against the glare of the winter sunshine on the water, looking upriver to where the merry court was rowing away.

He waited.

‘I discovered something about the queen and I told my uncle.’

‘Did he think it was a bad thing?’

I laughed shortly. ‘Oh no. So far as he is concerned I am a credit to him.’

‘The duchess’s secret note,’ he guessed at once. ‘It’s all over the palace. She’s been banished from court. But nobody knows how she was detected.’

‘I ...’ I started awkwardly.

‘No-one will learn it from me.’ Familiarly he took my cold hand and tucked it in the crook of his elbow and led me to walk beside the river. The sun was bright on our faces, my hand, trapped between his arm and his body, grew warmer.

‘What would you have done?’ I asked. ‘Since you keep your own counsel and pride yourself so much on being your own man.’

Stafford gave me the most delighted sideways gleam. ‘I did not dare to hope that you remembered our talks.’

‘It’s nothing,’ I said, slightly flustered. ‘It means nothing.’

‘Of course not.’

He thought for a moment. ‘I think I would have done as you did. If it had been her nephew planning an invasion then it would have been essential to read it.’

We paused at the boundary of the palace gardens. ‘Won’t we open the gate and go on?’ he asked temptingly. ‘We could go to the village and have a mug of ale and a pocketful of roasted chestnuts.’

‘No. I have to go to dinner tonight, even though the queen has dismissed me till Easter.’

He turned and walked beside me, saying nothing, but with my hand pressed warmly to his side. At the garden door he stopped. ‘I’ll leave you here,’ he said. ‘I was on my way to the stable yard when I saw you. My horse has gone lame and I want to see that they are fomenting her hoof properly.’

‘Indeed, I don’t know why you delayed for me at all,’ I said, a hint of provocation in my voice.

He looked at me directly and I felt my breath come a little short. ‘Oh I think you do,’ he said slowly. ‘I think you know very well why I stopped to see you.’

‘Mr Stafford ...’ I said.

‘I so hate the smell of the liniment they put on the hoof,’ he said quickly. He bowed to me and was gone before I could laugh or protest or even acknowledge that he had trapped me into flirting with him when it had been my hope to entrap him.

Spring 1531

With the death of the cardinal the church quickly learned that it had lost not only one of its greatest profiteers, but also its great protector. Henry fined the church with an enormous tax that emptied the treasuries and made the clergy realise that the Pope might still be their spiritual leader, but their leader on earth was a good deal closer to home and a good deal more powerful.

Not even the king could have done it on his own. Supporting Henry's attack on the church were the brightest thinkers of the age, the men in whose books Anne believed, who demanded that the church return to early purity. The very people of England, ignorant of theology, were not prepared to support their priests or their monasteries against Henry when he spoke of the right of English people to a church of England. The church at Rome seemed very much the church of Rome: a foreign institution, dominated at the moment by a foreign emperor. Better by far that the church should answer firstly to God, and be ruled, as everything else in the country was ruled, by the King of England. How else could he be king?

No-one outside the church would argue with this logic. Inside the church only Bishop Fisher, the queen's old stubborn faithful confessor made any protest when Henry named himself the supreme head of the church of England.

'You should refuse to allow him to court,' Anne said to Henry. They were seated in a window embrasure in the audience chamber of the palace of Greenwich. She lowered her voice only a little out of deference to the petitioners waiting to see him and the court all around them. 'He's always creeping into the queen's rooms to whisper for hours. Who's to say she's confessing and he's praying? Who knows what advice he is giving her? Who knows what secrets they are plotting?'

'I cannot deny her the rites of the church,' the king said reasonably. 'She would hardly plot in the confessional.'

'He's her spy,' Anne said flatly.

The king patted her hand. 'Peace, sweetheart,' he said. 'I am head of the church of England, I can rule on my own marriage. It is all but done.'

‘Fisher will speak against us,’ she fretted. ‘And everyone will listen to him.’

‘Fisher is not supreme head of the church,’ Henry repeated, savouring the words. ‘I am.’ He looked over to one of the petitioners. ‘What d’you want? You can approach me.’

The man came forward holding out a piece of paper, some quarrel about a will that the court of wards had been unable to resolve. Father, who had brought the man to court, stood back and let him make his petition. Anne slipped from Henry’s side to Father, touched his sleeve and whispered. They broke apart and she came back to the king, smiling.

I was laying out the cards for us to play a game. I looked around for a gentleman to take the fourth hand. Sir Francis Weston stepped forward and bowed to me. ‘Can I stake my heart?’ he asked.

George was watching the two of us, smiling at Sir Francis’s flirtatiousness, his eyes very warm.

‘You have nothing to stake,’ I reminded him. ‘You swore to me you lost it when you saw me in my blue gown.’

‘I got it back when you danced with the king,’ he said. ‘Broken but returned.’

‘It’s not a heart but a battered old arrow,’ Henry remarked. ‘You’re always loosing it off and then going to get it back again.’

‘It never finds its target,’ Sir Francis said. ‘I am a poor marksman beside Your Majesty.’

‘You’re a poor card player as well,’ Henry said hopefully. ‘Let’s play for a shilling a point.’



A few nights later, Bishop Fisher was sick, and nearly died of his sickness. Three men at his dinner table died of poison, others in his household were sick too. Someone had bribed his cook to put poison in his soup. It was only his good luck that Bishop Fisher had not wanted the soup that evening.



I did not ask Anne what she had said to Father in the doorway, nor what he had replied. I did not ask her if she had any hand in the bishop’s sickness and the

deaths of three innocent men at his table. It was not a little thing, to think that one's sister and one's father were murderers. But I remembered the darkness of her face as she swore that she hated Fisher as much as she had hated the cardinal. And now the cardinal was dead of shame, and Fisher's dinner had been salted with poison. I felt as if this whole matter, which had started as a summer flirtation, had grown too dark and too great for me to want to know any secrets. Anne's dark-tempered motto, 'Thus it will be: grudge who grudge', seemed like a curse that Anne was laying on the Boleyns, on the Howards, and on the country itself.



The queen was in the centre of the court for the Easter feast, as she had predicted. The king dined with her every night, all smiles so that the people who had come out from the City to see the king and queen dine would go to their homes and say it was a shame that a man in the very prime of his life should be entrapped by a woman so much older and so grave-looking. Sometimes she would withdraw early from dinner and her ladies had to choose whether to go with her or to stay in the hall. I always left with her when she withdrew. I was weary of the endless gossip and scandal of the court, of the spite of the women and of the brittle charm of my sister. And I feared what I might see if I stayed. It was a more unreliable place than the court I had joined with such high hopes when I had been the only Boleyn girl in England, and a newly wed wife with great hopes of my husband and my life with him.

The queen accepted my service without comment; she never mentioned my earlier betrayal. Only once she asked me if I would not rather be in the hall, watching the entertainment or dancing.

'No,' I said. I had picked up a book and was about to offer to read to her as she sat and sewed the altar cloth. Almost all the blue sky was completed, it was remarkable how fast and accurately she had worked. The cloth was spread like a gown over her lap, tumbling down in a swirl of rich blue to the floor, she had only the last corner of sky to stitch.

'You have no interest in dancing?' she asked me. 'You, a young widow? Have you no suitors?'

I shook my head. 'No, Your Majesty.'

'Your father will be looking for another match for you,' she said, stating the obvious. 'Has he spoken to you?'

‘No. And matters are ...’ There was no way that I could complete the sentence as a proper courtier. ‘Matters are very unsettled for us.’

Queen Katherine gave a little snort of genuine laughter. ‘I had not thought of that,’ she admitted. ‘What a great gamble for a young man! Who knows how far he might rise with you? Who knows how far he might fall?’

I smiled rather wanly and showed her the spine of the book. ‘Did you want me to read, Your Majesty?’

‘D’you think I am safe?’ she asked me abruptly. ‘You would warn me if my life was in danger, would you not?’

‘Safe from what?’

‘From poison.’

I shivered as if the spring evening had suddenly turned damp and chilly. ‘These are dark times,’ I said. ‘Very dark times.’

‘I know it,’ she said. ‘And they started so very well.’

She spoke of her fear of poison to no-one but me, but her ladies observed that she fed a little of her breakfast to her greyhound Flo, before eating it herself. One of them, a Seymour girl – Jane – remarked that it would get fat and that it was bad training for a dog to be fed at the table. Someone else laughed that the love of little Flo was all that the queen had left. I said nothing. I would willingly have had the queen test her food on any of them. We could have lost Jane Seymour and she would not have been much missed.

So when they brought news that Princess Mary was sick, my first thought, like the queen’s, was that her pretty, clever daughter had been poisoned. Probably by my sister.

‘He says she is very ill,’ the queen said, reading the physician’s letter. ‘My God, he says that she has been sick for eight days, she can keep nothing down.’

I forgot royal protocol and took her hand which was shaking so hard that the paper crackled in her hand. ‘It can’t be poison,’ I whispered urgently. ‘It would benefit no-one to poison her.’

‘She’s my heir,’ the queen said, her face as white as the letter. ‘Would Anne have her poisoned to frighten me into a nunnery?’

I shook my head. I could not say for sure what Anne might do now.

‘Either way I must go to her.’ She strode to the door and flung it open. ‘Where will the king be?’

‘I’ll find out,’ I said. ‘Let me go. You can’t go running round the palace.’

‘No,’ she said with a moan of pain. ‘I cannot even go to him and ask him to let me see our daughter. What shall I do if that woman says no?’

For a moment I had no reply. The thought of the Queen of England desperately asking if my upstart sister would let her see her own child, and that child a Princess Royal, was too much, even for this topsy-turvy world. 'It is not her word, Majesty. The king loves the Princess Mary, he would not want her to be sick without her mother to care for her.'



Anne already knew that the princess was ill. Anne knew everything now. My uncle's spy system, always a superb network, had recruited a servant in every household in England, and its findings were dedicated to the service of my sister. Anne knew that the Princess Mary was sick with distress. The little girl lived alone with no company but servants and her confessor, she spent hours on her knees praying God to turn her father's love back to her mother, his wife. She was sick with grief.

That night, when the king came to the queen's apartments he was primed with his answer. 'You can go and see the princess if you like, and stop there,' he said. 'With my blessing. With my thanks. And so farewell.'

The queen's high colour drained from her cheeks, leaving her looking sick and haggard. 'I would never leave you, my husband,' she whispered. 'I was thinking of our child. I was thinking that you would want to know that she was well cared for.'

'She's only a girl,' he said, a world of spite in his voice. 'You were not so quick to care for our son. You were not so effective a nurse for our son, as I remember?'

She gave a little gasp of pain but he went on. 'So. Are you coming to dinner, madam? Or are you going to your daughter?'

She recovered herself with an effort. She drew herself up to her little height, took the arm that he offered and he led her into dinner as a queen. But she could not play-act as he did. She looked down the body of the hall and saw my sister at her table, her little court about her. Anne felt the queen's dark gaze upon her and looked up. She gave her a radiant confident smile, and the queen, seeing Anne's unconcealed pleasure, knew who she should thank for the king's cruelty. She dropped her head and crumbled a slice of bread without eating any.

That night there were many people who said that a young handsome king should not be matched with a woman who looked old enough to be his mother and was miserable as sin into the bargain.



Queen Katherine did not leave the tiltyard that was now the court until she was thoroughly beaten. It would have made any woman but my sister feel ashamed to watch the queen find the courage to confront her husband. Only days after she first heard the news that the Princess Mary was sick, she was dining with the king in private, with the ladies of her chamber and the gentlemen of his, a couple of ambassadors and Thomas Cromwell, who was everywhere at the moment. Thomas More was there too, looking very much as if he wished he was not.

They had taken away the meats, and set the voiding course of fruit and dessert wine. The queen turned to the king and asked him – as if it were a simple request – to send Anne away from court. She called her ‘a shameless creature.’

I saw the face of Thomas More and knew I had the same stunned expression. I could not believe that the queen should challenge His Majesty in public. That she, whose case even now was before the Pope in Rome, should have the courage to face her husband in his own chamber and politely ask that he set aside his mistress. I could not think why she was doing it, and then I knew. It was for Princess Mary. It was to shame him into letting her go to the princess. She was risking everything to see her daughter.

Henry’s face flushed scarlet with anger. I dropped my gaze to the table and I prayed to God that the rage did not turn on me. With my head low I stole a sideways glance and I saw Ambassador Chapuys in the same pose. Only the queen, her hands clasped on the arms of her chair so that they should not tremble, kept her head up, kept her eyes on his suffused face, kept her face schooled to a look of polite inquiry.

‘Before God!’ Henry raged at her. ‘I will never send Lady Anne away from court. She has done nothing to offend any right-thinking man.’

‘She is your mistress,’ the queen observed quietly. ‘And that is a scandal to a God-fearing household.’

‘Never!’ Henry’s shout became a roar. I flinched, he was as terrifying as a baited bear. ‘Never! She is a woman of absolute virtue!’

‘No,’ the queen said calmly. ‘In thought and in word, if not in deed, she is shameless and brazen, and no company for a good woman or a Christian prince.’

He leaped to his feet, and still she did not shrink back.

‘What the devil do you want of me?’ he yelled into her face. His spittle showered her cheeks. She did not blink or turn away. She sat in her chair as if she were made of rock while he was a terrifying spring tide, raging into shore.

‘I want to see the Princess Mary,’ she said quietly. ‘That is all.’

‘Go!’ he bellowed. ‘Go! For God’s sake! Go! And leave us all in peace. Go and stay there!’

Slowly, Queen Katherine shook her head. ‘I would not leave you, not even for my daughter, though you will break my heart,’ she said quietly.

There was a long painful silence. I looked up. There were tears on her face but her expression was completely calm. She knew that she had just surrendered the chance to see her child, even if her child was dying.

Henry glared at her with absolute hatred for a moment and the queen turned her head and nodded to a server behind her. ‘More wine for His Majesty,’ she said coolly.

Angrily, the king leaped to his feet and pushed back his chair. It scraped like a scream on the wooden floor. The ambassador and the lord chancellor and the rest of us rose uncertainly with him. Henry dropped back into his chair as if he were exhausted. We dipped up and down, lost. Queen Katherine looked at him, she seemed as drained as he did by their quarrel, but she was not beaten.

‘Please,’ she said very quietly.

‘No,’ he replied.



A week later and she asked him again. I was not with her when that scene was played out but Jane Seymour told me, very wide-eyed with horror, that the queen had stood her ground when the king had raged. ‘How could she dare?’ she asked.

‘For her child,’ I said bitterly. I looked at Jane’s young face and thought that before I had my son I had been as great a fool as this ninny. ‘She wants to be with her daughter,’ I said. ‘You wouldn’t understand.’

Not until the princess was said by her doctors to be near to death, and asking every day when her mother was coming, did Henry release the queen. He ordered that Princess Mary should be taken by litter to Richmond Palace and the queen could meet her there. I went down to the stable yard to see her off.

‘God bless Your Majesty and the princess.’

‘At least I can be with her,’ was all she said.

I nodded and stepped back and the cavalcade went past me, the queen’s standard in front, half a dozen horsemen following the flag, and next came the queen and a couple of her ladies, then the outriders, and then she was gone.

William Stafford was on the other side of the stable yard, watching me

waving farewell.

‘So, at last, she can see her daughter.’ He strolled across to where I stood, holding my dress away from the mud. ‘They say that your sister swears that the queen will never return to court. She says that the queen so foolishly loves her daughter that she has gone to her and lost the crown of kingdom in one ride.’

‘I don’t know that, or anything else,’ I said stubbornly.

He laughed, his brown eyes gleaming at me. ‘You seem very ignorant today. Do you not rejoice in your sister’s rise to greatness?’

‘Not at this price,’ I said shortly, and I turned and walked away from him.

I had barely gone half a dozen steps before he was beside me. ‘And what of you, Lady Carey? I have not seen you for days. D’you ever look for me?’

I hesitated. ‘Of course I don’t look for you.’

He fell into step beside me. ‘I don’t expect it,’ he said with sudden earnestness. ‘I might joke with you, madam. But I know very well that you’re far above me.’

‘I am,’ I said ungraciously.

‘Oh I know it,’ he assured me again. ‘But I thought that we quite liked each other.’

‘I cannot play these games with you,’ I said gently. ‘Of course I don’t look for you. You are in service to my uncle and I am the daughter of the Earl of Wiltshire –’

‘A rather recent honour,’ he supplemented quietly.

I frowned, a little distracted by the interruption. ‘Whether it is today’s honour or goes back a hundred years makes no difference,’ I said. ‘I am the daughter of an earl and you are a nobody.’

‘But what of you, Mary? Leaving aside the titles? Do you, Mary, pretty Mary Boleyn, never look for me? Never think of me?’

‘Never,’ I said flatly, and left him standing in the archway to the stable yard.

Summer 1531

The court moved to Windsor and the queen brought the Princess Mary, still very pale and thin, back with her to the castle. The King could not help but be tender to his only legitimate child. His attitude to his wife mellowed, and then hardened again, depending on whether he was with my sister or at the bedside of their daughter. The queen, sleepless with praying and nursing the princess, was never too weary to greet him with a smile and a curtsy, was always a steady star in the firmament of the court. She and the princess was to rest at Windsor for the summer.

She smiled at me when I came in with a posy of early roses. 'I thought the Princess Mary might like these by her bedside,' I said. 'They smell very sweet.'

Queen Katherine took them from me and sniffed at them. 'You are a countrywoman,' she said. 'None of my other ladies would think of picking flowers and bringing them indoors.'

'My children love to bring flowers into their rooms,' I said. 'They make crowns and necklaces from daisies. When I kiss Catherine goodnight I often find buttercups on her pillow where they have fallen from her hair.'

'The king has said that you can go to Hever while the court is travelling?'

'Yes.' I smiled at her accurate reading of my contentment. 'Yes, and stay there all the summer.'

'So we shall be with our children then, you and I. You will come back to court in the autumn?'

'I will,' I promised. 'And I will come back to your service if you want me, Your Majesty.'

'And then we start again,' she said. 'Christmas when I am unchallenged queen and summer when I am deserted.'

I nodded.

'She holds him, doesn't she?' She looked out of the windows which faced towards the garden and the river. In the distance we could see the king with Anne, walking on the riverside path before they rode out on their summer progress.

‘Yes,’ I said shortly.

‘What’s her secret, d’you think?’

‘I think they’re very alike.’ My distaste for the two of them crept into my tone. ‘They both know exactly what they want and they both stop at nothing to get it. They both have the ability to be absolutely single-minded. It’s why the king was such a great sportsman. When he chased a stag he saw nothing in his whole heart but the stag. And Anne is the same. She schooled herself to follow only her interest. And now their desires are the same. It makes them ...’ I paused, thinking of the right word. ‘Formidable,’ I said.

‘I can be formidable,’ the queen said.

I gave her a sideways glance. If she had not been queen I would have put my arm around her shoulders and hugged her.

‘Who knows it better than I? I have seen you stand up to the king in one of his rages, I have seen you take on two cardinals and the Privy Council. But you serve God, and you love the king, and you love your child. You don’t think absolutely singly, “what is it that *I* want?”’

She shook her head. ‘That would be the sin of selfishness.’

I looked towards the two figures by the river’s edge, the most selfish two people that I knew. ‘Yes.’



I went down to the stable yard to make sure that they had the trunks loaded and my horse ready for us to start next morning and found William Stafford checking the wheels of the wagon.

‘Thank you,’ I said, a little surprised to find him there.

He straightened up and turned his bright smile on me. ‘I am to escort you. Did your uncle not say?’

‘I am sure he said someone else.’

His smile broadened to a grin. ‘It was. But he is not fit to ride tomorrow.’

‘Why not?’

‘He’s ill with drink.’

‘Drunk now, and not fit to ride tomorrow?’

‘I should have said he will be ill with drink.’

I waited.

‘He will be ill with drink tomorrow, because he is going to be dead drunk tonight.’

‘And you can foresee the future?’

‘I can foresee that I will be pouring the wine,’ he chuckled. ‘May I not escort you, Lady Carey? You know that I will make sure that you arrive safely.’

‘Of course you may,’ I said, a little flustered. ‘It’s just that ...’

Stafford was very quiet, I had the impression that he was listening to me not just with his ears but with all his senses.

‘Just what?’ he prompted.

‘I would not want you hurt,’ I said. ‘You cannot be anything more to me than a man in my uncle’s service.’

‘But what should prevent us liking each other?’

‘The gravest of trouble with my family.’

‘Would that matter so very much? Would it not be better to have a friend, a true friend, however lowly, than be a grand lonely woman at her sister’s beck and call?’

I turned away from him. The thought of being in Anne’s service grated on me, as it always did.

‘So, shall I escort you to Hever tomorrow?’ he asked, deliberately breaking the spell.

‘If you like,’ I said ungraciously. ‘One man is much the same as another.’

He choked on a laugh at that, but he did not argue with me. He let me go and I went from the stable yard rather wanting him to run after me and tell me that he was not the same as any other man, and that I might be very sure of that.



I went up to my room and found Anne adjusting her riding hat before the mirror, glittery with excitement.

‘We’re going,’ she said. ‘Come out and bid us farewell.’

I followed her down the stairs, taking care not to step on the long hem of her rich red velvet gown.

We came out of the two huge double doors and there was Henry, already mounted on his horse with Anne’s dark hunter waiting restlessly beside him. I noted with horror that my sister had kept the king waiting while she adjusted her hat.

He smiled. She might do anything. Two young men sprang forward to help her up into the saddle and she coquetted for a moment, choosing which one might have the privilege of putting his cupped hands under her boot.

The king gave the signal to start and they all moved off. Anne looked over her shoulder and waved at me. 'Tell the queen we've gone,' she called.

'What?' I asked. 'You surely bid her goodbye?'

She laughed. 'No. We've just gone. Tell her we're gone and she's left all alone.'

I could have run after her and pulled her off her horse and slapped her for that piece of spite. But I stayed where I was on the doorstep, smiling at the king and waving at my sister, and then, as the horsemen and wagons and outriders and soldiers and the whole household clattered past me, I turned and went slowly into the castle.

I let the door bang shut behind me. It was very very quiet. The hangings had gone from the walls, some of the tables had been taken from the great hall and the place was filled with the echoes of silence. The fire had died down in the grate, there were no men at arms to throw on extra logs and call for more ale. The sunlight filtered in through the windows and threw slabs of yellow light on the floor and the dust motes danced in the light. I had never been in a royal palace and heard nothing before. Always the place was alive with noise and work and business and play. Always there were servants scolding, and orders being shouted down the stairs, and people begging for admission or for some favour, musicians playing, dogs barking, and courtiers flirting.

I went up the stairs to the queen's apartments, my heels tapping on the flagstones. I knocked on the door and even my fingertips on the wood seemed unnaturally loud. I pushed it open and thought for a moment that the room was vacant. Then I saw her. She was at the window, watching the road winding away from the palace. She could see the court which had been her court, led by the husband who had been her husband, and all her friends and servants, goods, furniture and even the household linen, winding away down the road from the castle, following Anne Boleyn on her big black hunter, leaving her alone.

'He's gone,' she said wonderingly. 'Without even saying goodbye to me.'

I nodded.

'He's never done such a thing before. However bad it has been he always comes to me for my blessing before he goes away. I thought sometimes that he was like a boy, like my boy, that however much he might go away he would always want to know that he could come back to me. He would always want my blessing on any journey he made.'

A troop of horsemen clattered alongside the baggage train, urging the drivers to close up and keep better order. We could hear the noise of the wheels from the

queen's window. She was spared nothing.

There was a clatter of boots on the stair and a sharp tap on the half-open door. I went to answer it. It was one of the king's men with a letter with the royal seal.

She turned at once, her face lit up with joy, and ran across the room to take it from his hand. 'There! He didn't leave without a word. He has written to me,' she said, and took it over to the light and broke the seal.

I watched her grow old as she read it. The colour drained from her cheeks and the light went from her eyes and the smile left her lips. She sank down into the windowseat and I pushed the man from the room and shut the door on his staring face. I ran over to her and knelt at her side.

The queen looked down at me but she did not see me, her eyes were filled with tears. 'I am to leave the castle,' she whispered. 'He is sending me away. Cardinal or no cardinal, Pope or no Pope, he is sending me into banishment. I am to be gone within a month and our own daughter is to go too.'

The messenger tapped on the doorway and cautiously put his head inside the door. I leaped to my feet and would have slammed the door in his face for impertinence, but the queen put her hand on my sleeve.

'Any reply?' he asked. He did not even call her 'Your Majesty'.

'Go where I may, I remain his wife, and I will pray for him,' she said steadily. She rose to her feet. 'Tell the king that I wish him well on his journey, that I am sorry not to have said goodbye to him, if he had told me he was leaving so soon I should have made sure that he did not leave without his wife's blessing. And ask him to send a message to tell me that he is in good health.'

The messenger nodded, shot a quick apologetic look at me, and got himself out of the room. We waited.

The queen and I went to the window. We could see the man on his horse ride the length of the baggage train which was still winding down the river road. He vanished from sight. Anne and Henry, perhaps handclasped, perhaps singing together, would be far ahead on the road to Woodstock.

'I never thought it would end like this,' she said in a small voice. 'I never thought he would be able to leave me without saying goodbye.'



It was a fine summer for the children and for me. Henry was five and his sister seven years old and I decided that they should each have a pony of their own;

but nowhere in the county could I find a pair of good ponies small enough and docile enough for us. I had mentioned this plan to William Stafford as we rode to Hever and so I was not wholly surprised when I saw him returning, uninvited, a week later, riding up the lane with a small fat pony on either side of his rangy hunter.

The children and I had been walking in the meadows before the moat. I waved to him and he turned off the lane and rode along the side of the moat towards us. As soon as Henry and Catherine saw the ponies they were leaping with excitement.

‘Wait,’ I cautioned them. ‘Wait and see. We don’t know that they’ll be any good. We don’t know that we want to buy them.’

‘You’re right to be cautious. I’m such a huckster,’ William Stafford said, sliding from his saddle and dropping to the ground. He took my hand in his and brought it to his lips.

‘Wherever did you find them?’

Catherine had the rope of the little grey pony and was petting its nose. Henry was behind my skirt, eyeing the chestnut with a mixture of intense excitement and fear.

‘Oh you know, on the doorstep,’ he said idly. ‘I can send them back if you don’t like them.’

At once there was a wail of protest from Henry, still behind my skirts. ‘Don’t send them back!’

William Stafford dropped to one knee to be on a level with Henry’s bright face. ‘Come out, lad,’ he said kindly. ‘You’ll never make a horseman hiding behind your mother.’

‘Does he bite?’

‘You have to feed him with your hand flat,’ William explained. ‘Then he can’t bite.’ He flattened Henry’s hand and showed him how a horse crops.

‘Does he gallop?’ Catherine asked. ‘Gallop like mother’s horse?’

‘He can’t go as fast, but he does gallop,’ William answered. ‘And he can jump.’

‘Can I jump with him?’ Henry’s eyes were like trenchers.

William straightened up and smiled at me. ‘You have to learn to sit on him first, walk, trot and canter. Then you can go on to jousting and jumping.’

‘Will you teach me?’ Catherine demanded. ‘You will, won’t you? Stay here with us all the summer and teach us how to ride?’

William’s smile was shamelessly triumphant. ‘Well I should like to, of

course. If your mother says that I may.'

At once the two children turned to me. 'Say yes!' Catherine begged.

'Please!' Henry urged me.

'But I can teach you to ride,' I protested.

'Not to joust!' Henry exclaimed. 'And you ride sideways. I need to ride straight. Don't I, sir? I need to ride straight because I'm a boy and I'm going to be a man.'

William looked at me over the top of my son's bobbing head. 'What d'you say, Lady Carey? Can I stay for the summer and teach your son to ride straight?'

I did not let him see my amusement. 'Oh very well. You can tell them in the house to prepare a room if you like.'



Every morning William Stafford and I would walk for hours with the children seated on their little ponies walking beside us. After dinner we would put the ponies on long lunge reins and let them walk, trot and then canter in a circle while the two children clung on like a pair of little burrs.

William was unendingly patient with them. He made sure that every day they learned a little more, and I suspected that he also made sure that they did not learn too fast. He wanted them to ride on their own by the end of the summer, but not before.

'D'you have no home of your own to go to?' I asked unkindly as we walked back to the castle one evening, each of us leading a pony. The sun was sinking behind the turrets and it looked like a little fairytale palace with the windows winking with rosy light and the sky all pale and cloud-striped behind it.

'My father lives in Northampton.'

'Are you his only son?' I asked.

He smiled at that key question. 'No, I am a second son: good for nothing, milady. But I am going to buy a little farm if I can, in Essex. I have a mind to be a landowner of a small farm.'

'Where will you find the money?' I asked curiously. 'You can't do very well from my uncle's service.'

'I served on a ship and took a little prize money a few years ago. I have enough to start. And then I shall find a woman who would like to live in a pretty house amid her own fields and know that nothing – not the power of princes nor the malice of queens – can touch her.'

‘Queens and princes can always touch you,’ I said. ‘Else they would not be queens and princes.’

‘Yes, but you can be so small as to be of no interest to them,’ he said. ‘Our danger would be your son. While they see him as the heir to the throne then we would never be out of their sights.’

‘If Anne has a boy of her own she’ll give mine up,’ I said. Without realising it I had followed the train of his thoughts just as I had fallen into step beside him.

Cunningly he said nothing to alert me. ‘Better than that, she’ll want him away from the court. He could be with us and we could bring him up as a little country squire. It’s not a bad life for a man. Perhaps the best life there is. I don’t like the court. And these last few years you never know where you are.’

We reached the drawbridge and in accord helped the children from their saddles. Catherine and Henry ran ahead into the house as William and I led their ponies round to the stable yard. A couple of lads came out to take them from us.

‘Coming to dinner?’ I asked casually.

‘Of course,’ he said and threw me a little bow and was gone.

It was only in my room, as I kneeled and prayed that night and found my mind wandering, as it always does, that I realised that I had let him talk to me as if I would be the woman who would want a pretty house amid my own fields, and William Stafford in my married bed.

Dear Mary,

We are to come to Richmond for autumn and then Greenwich for winter. The queen will not be under the same roof as the king, ever again. She is to go to Wolsey’s old house, The More in Hertfordshire, and the king is to give her a court of her own there, so she need not complain of being ill-treated.

You are no longer to be in her service, you will serve me alone.

The king and I are confident that the Pope is in terror of what the king might do to the church in England. We are certain that he will rule in our favour as soon as the courts reconvene in the autumn. I am preparing myself for an autumn wedding and a coronation soon after. It is all but complete – grudge who will grudge it!

Uncle has been very cold towards me and the Duke of Suffolk has quite turned against me. Henry sent him away from us this summer and I was glad to have him taught a lesson. There are too

many people envying me and watching me. I want you at Richmond when I arrive, Mary. You may not go to the que – to Katherine of Aragon at The More. And you may not stay at Hever. I am doing this for your son as much as for myself and you will help me.

Anne.

Autumn 1531

That autumn when I returned to court I realised that the queen was finally thrown down. Anne had convinced Henry that there was no longer any point in keeping up the appearance of being a good husband. They might as well show their brazen faces to the world and defy anyone to come against them.

Henry was generous. Katherine of Aragon lived in great state at The More and she entertained visiting ambassadors as if she were still a beloved and honoured queen. She had a household of more than two hundred people, fifty of them maids in waiting. They were not the best of the young women: those all flocked to the king's court and found themselves attached to Anne's household. Anne and I had a merry day in allocating young women that we disliked to the queen's court, we got rid of half a dozen Seymours that way, and laughed at the thought of Sir John Seymour's face when he found out.

'I wish we could send George's wife to wait on the queen,' I said. 'He would be happier if he came home and found her gone.'

'I'd rather have her here where I can see her than send her to somewhere that she might cause more trouble. I want no-one around the queen but nonentities.'

'You can't still fear her. You have all but destroyed her.'

Anne shook her head. 'I'll not be safe until she is dead,' she said. 'Just as she will not be safe until I am dead. It is not just a matter now of a man or a throne, it is as if I am her shadow and she is mine. We are locked together till death. One of us has to win outright and neither of us can be sure that we have won or lost until the other is dead and in the ground.'

'How could she win?' I demanded. 'He won't even see her.'

'You don't know how much people hate me,' Anne whispered, I had to lean close to hear. 'When we are on our progress we go from house to house now, and never stop in the villages. People have heard the rumours from London and they no longer see me as a pretty girl who rides beside the king, they see me as the woman who destroyed the happiness of the queen. If we linger in a village then people shout against me.'

'No!'

She nodded. 'And when the queen came into the City and gave a banquet there was a mob outside Ely Palace and they were all calling out blessings on her and promising her that they would never bow the knee to me.'

'A handful of sulky servants.'

'What if it's more than that?' Anne asked bleakly. 'What if the whole country hates me? What d'you think the king feels when he hears them booing and cursing me? D'you think a man like Henry can bear to be cursed when he rides out? A man like Henry, who has been used to praise ever since he was a child?'

'They'll get accustomed,' I said. 'The priests will preach in the churches that you are his wife, when you give them a son they'll turn round in a moment, you'll be the saviour of the country.'

'Yes,' she said. 'It all hangs on that, doesn't it? A son.'



Anne was right to fear the mob. Just before Christmas we went up the river from Greenwich to dinner with the Trevelyan. It was not an outing of the court. Nobody knew that we were going. The king was dining in private with a couple of ambassadors from France and Anne took a fancy to go into the City. I went with her, with a couple of the king's gentlemen and a couple of the other ladies. It was cold on the river and we were wrapped up warmly in furs. No-one on the banks could even have seen our faces as the boat stopped at the Trevelyan's stairs and we disembarked.

But somebody saw us, and somebody recognised Anne, and before we had even started eating there was a servant running into the hall and whispering to Lord Trevelyan that there was a mob coming towards the house. His quick glance at Anne told us all who they were coming for. She rose at once from the table, her face as white as her pearls.

'You'd better go,' his lordship said ungallantly. 'I cannot promise your safety here.'

'Why not?' she asked. 'You can close your gates.'

'For Christ's sake, there are thousands of them!' His voice was sharp with fear. Now we were all on our feet. 'This isn't a gang of apprentice lads, it's a mob coming, they are swearing to hang you from the rafters. You had better get to your boat and go back to Greenwich, Lady Anne.'

She hesitated for a moment, hearing his determination to get her away from

his home.

‘Is the boat ready?’

Someone ran from the hall shouting for the boatmen.

‘Surely we can beat them off!’ Francis Weston said. ‘How many men have you got here, Trevelyan? We can take them on, teach them a lesson, and then have our dinner.’

‘I have three hundred men,’ his lordship started.

‘Well then – let’s arm them and ...’

‘The mob is eight thousand, and growing as they pass through every street.’

There was a stunned silence. ‘Eight thousand?’ Anne whispered. ‘Eight thousand people marching against me in the streets of London?’

‘Quickly,’ Lady Trevelyan said. ‘For God’s sake, get to your boat.’

Anne snatched her cape from the woman and I grabbed another, it wasn’t even mine. The ladies who had come with us were crying with fear. One of them ran away upstairs, she was afraid to be on the river in case they came after us on the dark waters. Anne raced out of the house and through the black garden. She flung herself into the boat and I was right behind her. Francis and William were with us, the rest threw the mooring ropes into the boat and pushed it off. They wouldn’t even come with us.

‘Get your heads down and keep covered,’ one of them shouted.

‘And take the royal standard down.’

It was a shameful moment. One of the boatmen snatched out his knife and cut the ropes holding the royal standard for fear that the people of England should see their own king’s flag. He fumbled with it and then it slipped from his hand and fell overboard. I watched it turn in the water and sink down.

‘Never mind that! Row!’ Anne shouted, her face veiled in her furs.

I ducked down beside her and we clung together. I could feel her trembling.

We saw the mob as we pulled out into the swirling current. They had lit torches and we could see the bobbing flares reflected in the dark river. The string of lights seemed to go on for ever. Over the water we could hear them shouting curses on my sister. At each violent shout there was a roar of approval, a roar of naked hatred. Anne shrank lower in the boat, held onto me yet more tightly and shook with fear.

The boatmen rowed like men possessed, they knew that none of us would survive an attack on the boat in this weather. If the mob even knew that we were out on the dark water they would heave up cobblestones and throw them, they would chase down the banks to get to us, they would find boats to commandeer

and they would be after us.

‘Row faster!’ Anne hissed.

We made ragged progress, too afraid to beat a drum or shout the rhythm. We wanted to slip past the mob, shielded by the darkness. I peered over the edge of the boat and saw the lights pause, hesitate, as if they were looking out into the darkness, as if they could sense with the preternatural awareness of a savage beast that the woman they wanted was muffling her sobs of terror into her furs only yards away from them.

Then the procession went on, to the Trevelyan’s house. It wound along the curve of the river, the torches stretching for what seemed like miles. Anne sat up and pushed back her hood. Her face was aghast.

‘D’you think he’ll protect me against that?’ she demanded fiercely. ‘Against the Pope – yes – especially when it means that he gets the tithes of the church into his own keeping. Against the queen – yes – especially when it means that he gets a son and heir. But against his own people, if they come for me with torches and ropes in the night? D’you think he’ll stand by me then?’



It was a quiet Christmas at Greenwich that year. The queen sent the king a beautiful cup of gold and he sent it back to her with a cold-hearted message. We felt her absence all the time. It was like a home when a beloved mother is missing. It was not that she had been sparkling or brilliant or provocative as Anne always, wearisomely, was – it was just that she had always been there. Her reign had gone on for so long that there were very few people who could remember the English court without her.

Anne was determinedly bright and enchanting and active. She danced and she sang, she gave the king a set of darts in Biscayan fashion and he gave her a room full of the most expensive fabrics for her gowns. He gave her the key to the room and watched her as she went in and exclaimed in delight at the rich swathes of colour swagged from one golden pole to another. He showered gifts on her, on all of us Howards. He gave me a beautiful shirt with a collar of blackwork. But still, it was more like a wake than Christmas. Everyone missed the steadying presence of the queen and wondered what she was doing at the lovely house which had belonged to the cardinal, who had been her enemy till the very last when he had finally found the courage to acknowledge that she was in the right.

Nothing could lift people's spirits, though Anne wore herself to a shadow trying to be merry. At night she would lie beside me in the bed and even in her sleep I would hear her muttering, like a woman quite insane.

I lit the candle one night and held it up to see her. Her eyes were closed, dark eyelashes sweeping her white cheeks. Her hair was tied back under a nightcap as bleached as her skin. The shadows under her eyes were violet as pansies, she looked frail. And all the time her bloodless lips, parted in a smile, were muttering introductions, jests, quick quips. Every now and again she would turn her head restlessly on the pillow, that enchanting turn of her head that she did so well, and she would laugh, a horrid breathy sound from a woman so driven that even in her deepest dreams she was trying to make a celebration come alive.

She started to drink wine in the morning. It brought colour to her face and a brightness to her eyes, it lifted her from her intense fatigue and nervousness. Once she thrust a bottle at me when I came into her rooms with Uncle following me. 'Hide it,' she hissed desperately and turned to him with the back of her hand against her mouth so that he would not smell the drink on her breath.

'Anne, you have to stop,' I said when he had gone. 'Everyone watches you all the time. People are bound to see, and they will tell the king.'

'I can't stop,' she said darkly. 'I can't stop anything, not for a moment. I have to go on and on and on, as if I am the happiest woman in the world. I am going to marry the man I love. I am going to be Queen of England. Of course I am happy. Of course I am wonderfully happy. There couldn't be a happier woman in England than me.'



George was due to come home in the New Year and Anne and I decided on a private dinner in her grand rooms to welcome him. We spent the day consulting with the cooks and ordering the very best that they had, and then the afternoon lingering in the windowseats waiting to see George's boat coming up the river with the Howard standard flying. I spotted it first, dark against the dusk, and I did not say a word to Anne but slipped from the room and ran down the stairs so that when George disembarked and came up the landing stage I was alone, into his arms, and it was me that he kissed and whispered: 'Good God, sister, I am glad to be home.'

When Anne saw that she had lost the chance of taking first place she did not run after me but waited to greet him in her rooms, before the great arching

mantelpiece when he bowed and next kissed her hand and only then folded her into his arms. Then the women were dismissed and we were the three Boleyns together again, as we had always been.

George had told us all his news over dinner and he wanted to know everything that had happened since he had been away from court. I noticed that Anne was careful what she told him. She did not tell him that she could not go into the City without an armed guard. She did not tell him that in the country she had to ride swiftly through peaceful little villages. She did not tell him that the night after Cardinal Wolsey had died she had designed and danced in a masque entitled 'Sending the Cardinal to Hell' which had shocked everyone who saw it by its tasteless triumphing over the king's dead friend and its outright bawdiness. She did not tell him that Bishop Fisher was still against her and that Bishop Fisher had nearly died of poison. When she did not tell him these things I knew, as I had in truth known before, that she was ashamed of the woman that she was becoming. She did not want George to know how deep this canker of ambition had spread inside her. She did not want him to know that she was not his beloved little sister any more but a woman who had learned to throw everything, even her mortal soul, into the battle to become queen.

'And what about you?' George asked me. 'What's his name?'

Anne was blank. 'What are you talking about?'

'Anyone can see – surely I've not got it wrong? – Marianne is glowing like a milkmaid in springtime. I would have put a fortune on her being in love.'

I blushed a deep scarlet.

'I thought so,' my brother said with deep satisfaction. 'Who is it?'

'Mary has no lover,' Anne said.

'I suppose she might have her eye on somebody without your permission,' George suggested. 'I suppose somebody might have picked her out without applying to you, Mistress Queen.'

'He'd better not,' she said, without a trace of a smile. 'I have plans for Mary.'

George let out a soundless whistle. 'Good God, Annamaria, anyone would think you were anointed already.'

She rounded on him. 'When I am, I will know who my friends are. Mary is my lady in waiting and I keep good order in my household.'

'Surely she can make her own choice now.'

Anne shook her head. 'Not if she wants my favour.'

'For God's sake, Anne! We're family. You're where you are because Mary

stepped back for you. You can't turn around now and act like a Princess of the Blood. We put you where you are. You can't treat us like subjects.'

'You are subjects,' she said simply. 'You, Mary, even Uncle Howard. I had my own aunt sent from court, I had the king's brother-in-law sent from court. I had the queen herself sent from court. Is there anyone who has any doubt that I can send them into exile if I wish? No. You may have helped me to be where I am —'

'Helped you! We bloody well pushed you!'

'But now I am here I will be queen. And you will be my subjects and in my service. I will be the queen and mother to the next King of England. So you had better remember that, George, for I won't tell you again.'

Anne rose up from the floor and swept towards the door. She stood before it, waiting for someone to open it for her, and when neither of us sprang up she flung it open herself. She turned on the threshold. 'And don't call me Annamaria any more,' she said. 'And don't call her Marianne. She is Mary, the other Boleyn girl. And I am Anne, Queen Anne to be. There is a world of difference between us two. We don't share a name. She is next to nobody and I will be queen.'

She stalked out, not troubling to close the door behind her. We could hear her footsteps going to her bedroom. We sat in silence while we heard her chamber door slam.

'Good God,' George said, heartfelt. 'What a witch.' He got up and closed the door against the cold draught. 'How long has she been like this?'

'Her power has grown steadily. She thinks she is untouchable.'

'And is she?'

'He's deeply in love. I should think she is safe, yes.'

'And he still hasn't had her?'

'No.'

'Good God, what do they do?'

'Everything, but the deed. She daren't allow it.'

'Must be driving him crazy,' George said with grim satisfaction.

'Her too,' I said. 'Almost every night he is kissing her and touching her and she is all over him with her hair and her mouth.'

'Does she speak to everyone like this? Like she spoke to me?'

'Far worse. And it is costing her friends. Charles Brandon is against her now, Uncle Howard is sick of her; they have quarrelled outright, at least a couple of times since Christmas. She thinks she is so safe in the king's love that she needs no other protection.'

‘I won’t tolerate it,’ George said. ‘I’ll tell her.’

I maintained my look of sisterly concern, but my heart leaped at the thought of a gulf opening up between Anne and George. If I could get George on my side, I would have a real advantage in any fight to regain the ownership of my son.

‘And truly, is there no-one that has caught your eye?’ he asked.

‘A nobody,’ I said. ‘I would tell no-one but you, George – so keep it as a secret.’

‘I swear,’ he said, taking both my hands and drawing me closer. ‘A secret, on my honour. Are you in love?’

‘Oh no,’ I said, drawing back at the very thought of it. ‘Of course not. But he pays me a little attention and it’s nice to have a man make a fuss of you.’

‘I’d have thought the court was full of men making a fuss of you.’

‘Oh they write poetry and they swear they will die of love. But he ... he is a little more ... real.’

‘Who is he?’

‘A nobody,’ I said again. ‘So I don’t think about him.’

‘Pity you can’t just have him,’ George said with brotherly candour.

I did not reply. I was thinking of William Stafford’s engaging intimate smile. ‘Yes,’ I said very quietly. ‘A pity, but I can’t.’

Spring 1532

George, ignorant of the change of the temper of the people, invited Anne and me to ride out with him, down the river, to dine at the little ale house and come home again. I waited for Anne to refuse, to tell him that it was no longer safe for her to ride out alone; but she said nothing. She dressed in an unusually dark gown, she wore her riding hat pulled down over her face, and she laid aside her distinctive necklace with the golden 'B'.

Pleased to be back in England riding out with his sisters, George did not notice Anne's discreet behaviour and dress. But when we stopped at the ale house the slatternly old woman who should have been serving us took a sideways glance at Anne and then went away. Moments later the master of the house came out, wiping his hands on an apron of hessian, and announced that the bread and cheese he had been going to set before us had spoiled, there was nothing in his house we could eat.

George would have flared up, but Anne put a hand on his sleeve and said that it was no matter, we should go to the monastery nearby and eat there. He let himself be guided by her, and we ate well enough. The king was an object of terror now in every abbey and monastery in the land. Only the servants, less politically astute than the monks, glanced askance at Anne and at me, and speculated in whispers as to which was the old whore and which was the new.

Riding home, the cold sun on our backs, George spurred his horse forward and rode beside me. 'Everyone knows then,' he said flatly.

'From London to far out into the country,' I said. 'I don't know how far the news has gone.'

'And I don't see anyone throwing his hat in the air and shouting huzzah?'

'No, you won't see that.'

'I'd have thought a pretty English girl would have pleased people? She's pretty enough, isn't she? Waves her hand as she goes by, gives out alms, all the rest of it?'

'She does all that,' I said. 'But the women have a stubborn liking for the old queen. They say that if the King of England puts a loyal honest wife aside

because he fancies a change, then no woman is safe.'

George was silent for a moment. 'Do they do more than mutter?'

'We were caught in a riot in London. And the king says it's not safe for her to go into the City at all. She is hated, George, and they say all sorts of things about her.'

'Things?'

'That she is a witch and has enchanted the king by sorcery. That she is a murderess and would poison the queen if she could. That she has made him impotent with all other women so he has to marry her. That she blasted the children in the queen's womb and put barrenness on the throne of England.'

George went a little pale and his hand on the rein clenched into the old sign against witchcraft – thumb between the two first fingers to make the sign of the cross. 'They say this publicly? Might the king hear of it?'

'The worst of it is kept from him, but someone is bound to tell him sooner or later.'

'He wouldn't believe a word of it, would he?'

'He says some of it himself. He says he is a man possessed. He says that she has enchanted him and that he can't think about another woman. It's love talk when he says it, but when it gets out – it's dangerous.'

George nodded. 'She should do more good works and not be so damned ...' He broke off, searching for the word. 'Sensual.'

I looked ahead. Even on horseback, even when she was riding with no-one but her family, Anne swayed in the saddle in a way that made you want to take her by the waist.

'She's a Boleyn and a Howard,' I said frankly. 'Underneath the great name, we're all bitches on heat.'



William Stafford, waiting at the gateway to Greenwich Palace when we rode in, tipped his hat to me and caught my secret smile. When we had dismounted and Anne had led the way in, he was at the doorway and he drew me to one side.

'I was waiting for you,' he said, without further greeting.

'I saw.'

'I don't like you riding without me, the country's not safe for the Boleyn girls.'

'My brother took care of us. It was good to be out without a great retinue.'

‘Oh, I can offer you that. Simplicity I can offer in abundance.’

I laughed. ‘I thank you.’

He kept his hand on my sleeve to keep me by him. ‘When the king and your sister marry then you will be married to a man of their choosing.’

I looked into his square, tanned face. ‘And so?’

‘And so, if you wanted to marry a man with a pretty little manor and a few fields around it you should make haste to do so before your sister’s wedding. The later that you leave it the harder it will be.’

I hesitated. I moved away from the touch of his hand and I turned away. I smiled at him, sideways under my eyelashes. ‘But no-one has asked me,’ I sweetly explained. ‘I shall have to reconcile myself to being a widow all my days. No-one has asked me to marry him at all.’

For once he was lost for words. ‘But I thought ...’ he began. A delighted laugh escaped me. I swept him a deep curtsy, and turned for the palace. As I climbed the stairs I glanced back to see him fling his hat to the ground and kick it, and I knew the joy that every woman knows, when she has got a handsome man on the run.



I did not see him again for a week though I dawdled in the stable yard, and in the garden, and at the river where he might have found me. When my uncle’s train went by one day I watched them but I could not pick him out from the two hundred men in matching Howard livery. I knew I was behaving like a fool; but I thought that there was no harm in looking for a handsome man and teasing him.

I did not see him for a week, and then not for another week. My uncle and I were watching the king and Anne playing at bowls one warm April morning and I said casually: ‘Do you still have that man – William Stafford – in your service?’

‘Oh yes,’ my uncle said. ‘But I have given him leave for a month.’

‘Gone from court?’

‘He has a fancy to marry, he tells me. He has gone to speak to his father and to buy a place for his new wife.’

I felt the ground shift. ‘I thought he was married already,’ I said, choosing the safest thing to say.

‘Oh no, a terrible philanderer,’ my uncle said, his mind half on the king and

Anne. 'One of the ladies of the court was quite besotted with him, thought she would marry him and give up the life of court to live with him and a flock of hens. Can you imagine it!'

'Foolish.' My mouth was dry. I swallowed a little.

'And all the time he's betrothed to some country girl, I don't doubt,' my uncle said. 'Waiting for her to come of age, I expect. He's off to marry this month and then he'll come back to me. He's a good man, very reliable. He took you to Hever, didn't he?'

'Twice,' I said. 'And he found me the children's ponies.'

'He's good at things like that,' my uncle said. 'He should go far. I might raise him up to run my stables, be my master of horse.' He paused, and suddenly turned his dark gaze on me like a bright lantern. 'Didn't flirt with you, did he?'

The look I returned to him was one of absolute indifference. 'A man in your service? Of course not.'

'Good,' my uncle said, unimpressed. 'He's a rogue given half a chance.'

'He won't have a chance with me,' I said.



Anne and I were ready for bed, dressed in our night shifts, the maids dismissed, when there was the familiar tap at the door. 'Could only be George,' Anne said. 'Come in.'

Our handsome brother lounged at the door with a pitcher of wine in one hand and three glasses in the other. 'I come to worship at the shrine of beauty.' He was quite drunk.

'You can come in,' I said. 'We are wonderfully beautiful.'

He kicked the door shut behind him. 'Much better by candlelight,' he said, surveying the two of us. 'Good God, Henry must go mad to think that he had the one of you and wants the other and can have neither.'

Anne was never pleased to be reminded that the king had been my lover. 'He is always attentive to me.'

George rolled his eyes at me. 'Drink?'

We all took a glass and George threw another log on the fire. There was a whisper of sound from the other side of the door. George, suddenly lithe and quick, was up at the door and tore it open. Jane Parker stood there, just straightening up from where she had been bending to put her eye to the keyhole.

'My dear wife!' George said with a voice like honey. 'If you want me in

your bed you don't have to crawl around my sister's rooms, you can just ask.'

She flushed to the roots of her hair and peered past him to Anne, in bed, her gown slipping from her naked shoulder, and me in my nightdress at the fireside. There was something about the way she looked at the three of us that made me flinch. She always made me feel ashamed, as if I had been doing something wrong. But it was as if she would collude with us. She looked as if she wanted to know dirty secrets, and share them.

'I was passing the door and I heard voices,' she said awkwardly. 'I was afraid that someone was disturbing Lady Anne. I was just about to knock to make sure that her ladyship was all right.'

'You were going to knock with your ear?' George asked, puzzled. 'With your nose?'

'Oh leave it, George,' I said suddenly. 'There is nothing wrong, Jane. George came to have a drink with us and say goodnight. He'll come to your room in a moment.'

She looked very far from grateful for my intervention. 'He can come or not as he likes,' she said. 'He can stay here all night if that is his pleasure.'

'Leave me,' Anne said simply. She spoke as if she would not descend to brawl with Jane.

George bowed in obedience and smartly shut the door in Jane's face. He turned and put his back to it and, without caring that she would certainly hear, laughed aloud. 'What a little snake!' he cried. 'Oh Mary, you shouldn't rise to her. Follow Anne's lead: "Leave me." Good God! It was tremendous: "Leave me."'

He came back to the fireside and poured us all wine. He handed the first glass to me and the second to Anne and then he held up his own to toast us both.

Anne did not raise her glass and she did not smile at him. 'Next time,' she observed, 'you will serve me first.'

'What?' he asked, confused.

'When you pour a glass of wine, it comes first to me. When you open my bedroom door you ask me if I want to admit the visitor. I am going to be queen, George, and you must learn to serve me as a queen.'

He did not flare up at her as he had done when he was freshly home from Europe. Even in that short time he had seen that Anne had great power. She did not care if she quarrelled with her uncle, or with any of the men at court that could have been her allies. She did not care who hated her, as long as the king was at her beck and call. And she could ruin any man she chose.

George put his glass down on the hearth and crawled up on the bed so that he was on his hands and knees, with his face just inches from hers. 'My little queen in waiting,' he purred.

Anne's face softened at his intimacy.

'My little princess,' he whispered. Gently he kissed her on the nose and then the lips. 'Don't be a shrew with me,' he begged her. 'We all know that you are the first lady of the kingdom, but be sweet to me, Anne. We'll all be so much happier if you are sweet to me.'

Unwillingly, she smiled. 'You must show me every respect,' she warned him.

'I will lie beneath your horse's hooves,' he promised her.

'And never take liberties.'

'I would rather die.'

'Then you can come here and I will be sweet to you,' she said.

He leaned forward and kissed her again. Her eyes closed and her lips smiled and then parted. I watched as he pressed closer, and his finger went to her bare shoulder and stroked her neck. I watched, quite fascinated and quite horrified, as his fingers went into her smooth dark hair and pulled her head back for his kiss. Then she opened her eyes with a little sigh. 'Enough.' And she pushed him gently off the bed. George returned to his place at the fireside and we all pretended that it was nothing more than a brotherly kiss.



The next day Jane Parker was as confident as ever. She smiled at me, she curtsied at Anne and handed her cape as Anne was about to go out walking by the river with the king.

'I would have thought you would have been displeased this day, my lady.'

Anne took the cape. 'Why?'

'The news,' Jane said.

'What news?' I asked, so that Anne did not appear curious.

Jane answered me, but she watched Anne. 'The Countess of Northumberland is divorcing Henry Percy.'

Anne staggered for a moment and went white.

'Oh!' I cried, to draw the attention to me and from Anne. 'What a scandal! Why should she divorce him? What an idea! How very wrong of her.'

Anne had recovered, but Jane had watched her. 'Why,' Jane said, in a voice

like silk. ‘She says that their marriage was never valid at all. She says that there was a pre-contract. She says that all along he has been married to you, Lady Anne.’

Anne’s head went up and she smiled at Jane. ‘Lady Rochford, you do bring me the most extraordinary tidings. And you do choose the strangest of times to bring them to me. Last night you were creeping and listening at my door, and now you are as filled with bad news as a dead dog with maggots. If the Countess of Northumberland is unhappy in her marriage then I am sure that we all grieve for her.’ There was a little murmur from the ladies, more like avid curiosity than sympathy. ‘But if she wants to claim that Henry Percy was betrothed to me then it is simply not true. In either case, the king is waiting for me and you are delaying me.’

Anne tied her own cape and swept from the room. Two or three of her ladies followed her, as they should all have done. The rest held back, circling Jane Parker for more scandal.

‘Jane, I am sure the king will want to see you attending Lady Anne,’ I said spitefully.

At once she had to go, she followed Anne from the room and the others trailed behind her.

I picked up my skirts and ran like a schoolgirl to my uncle’s apartments.



He was at his desk, though it was early in the afternoon. A clerk stood at his elbow, writing memoranda as my uncle dictated. My uncle frowned when I put my head around the door and then motioned me in and gestured that I should wait.

‘What is it?’ he asked. ‘I am busy. I’ve just heard that Thomas More is unhappy with the king’s matter against the queen. I didn’t expect him to like it but I was hoping his conscience could swallow it. I’d give a thousand crowns not to have Thomas More openly against us.’

‘It’s something else,’ I said tersely. ‘But important.’

My uncle waved the clerk from the room.

‘Anne?’ he asked.

I nodded. We were a family business now and Anne was our goods for sale. My uncle knew, without me telling him, that if I ran to his rooms first thing in the afternoon, then it was a crisis in our trading.

‘Jane just said that the Countess of Northumberland is to petition for divorce against Henry Percy,’ I said in a rush. ‘Jane said that she is arguing he was pre-contracted to Anne.’

‘Damnation,’ my uncle swore.

‘Did you know?’

‘Of course I knew she had it in mind. I thought she was going to plead desertion or cruelty or buggery or something. I thought we had moved her away from the pre-contract business.’

‘We?’

He scowled at me. ‘We. Doesn’t matter who, does it?’

‘No.’

‘And how does Jane know?’ he demanded irritably.

‘Oh Jane knows everything. She was listening at Anne’s door last night.’

‘What could she have heard?’ he asked, the spymaster in him always alert.

‘Nothing,’ I said staunchly. ‘George was there and we were doing nothing but talking and drinking a glass of wine.’

‘No-one but George?’ he asked sharply.

‘Who else could it be?’

‘That’s what I’m asking you.’

‘You cannot doubt Anne’s chastity.’

‘She spends her life spinning her toils around men.’

Even I could not let this injustice go. ‘She spins her toils around the king, as you ordered.’

‘So where is she now?’

‘In the garden with the king.’

‘Go to her straightaway and tell her to deny everything with Henry Percy. No betrothal of any sort, no pre-contract. Just a boy and a girl in springtime and a green affection. A pageboy making eyes at a lady in waiting. Nothing more than that, and never returned by her. Just him. Have you got that?’

‘There are those who know different,’ I warned him.

‘They’re all bought,’ he said. ‘Except Wolsey, and he’s dead.’

‘He might have told the king, back then, before anyone knew that the king would fall in love with Anne.’

‘He’s dead,’ my uncle said with relish ‘He can’t repeat it. And everyone else will fall over themselves to assure the king that Anne is as chaste as the Virgin Mary. Henry Percy quicker than anyone. It’s only that damned wife of his who is so desperate to get out of that marriage that she’d risk everything.’

‘Why does she hate him so?’ I wondered.

He gave a sharp bark of laughter. ‘Good God, Mary, you are the most delightful fool. Because he *was* married to Anne, and she knows it. Because he was in love with Anne, and she knows it. And because losing Anne turned his head to melancholy and he has been a man destroyed ever since. No wonder she doesn’t want to be his wife. Now go and find your sister and lie your head off. Open those beautiful eyes of yours and tell lies for us.’



I found the king and Anne at the riverside walk. She was talking earnestly to him and his head was inclined towards her as if he could not risk missing a single word. She glanced up when she saw me coming. ‘Mary will tell you,’ she said. ‘She was my bedfellow then when I was nothing more than a girl new to court.’

Henry looked up at me and I could see the hurt in his face.

‘It’s the Countess of Northumberland,’ Anne explained ‘Spreading slander about me to save herself from a marriage that she has grown tired of.’

‘What can she be saying?’

‘The old scandal. That Henry Percy was in love with me.’

I smiled at the king with all the warmth and confidence I could muster. ‘Of course he was, Your Majesty. Don’t you remember what it was like when Anne first came to court? Everyone was in love with her. Henry Percy among them.’

‘There was talk of a betrothal,’ Henry said.

‘With the Earl of Ormonde?’ I asked quickly.

‘They couldn’t agree the dowry and the title,’ Anne said.

‘I meant between you and Henry Percy,’ he persisted.

‘There was nothing,’ she said. ‘A boy and a girl at court, a poem, a few words, nothing at all.’

‘He wrote three poems to me,’ I said. ‘He was the most idle page that the cardinal ever had. He was always writing poems to everyone. What a shame that he has married a woman with no sense of humour. But thank God she had no love of poetry or she would have run away even sooner!’

Anne laughed but we could not turn Henry off his course.

‘She says there was a pre-contract,’ he persisted. ‘That you and he were betrothed.’

‘I have told you we were not.’ Anne contradicted him with a little edge to her voice.

‘But why should she say it if it is not so?’ Henry demanded.

‘To rid herself of her husband!’ Anne snapped.

‘But why choose that lie, rather than another? Why not say he was married to Mary here? If she had his poems too?’

‘I expect she will,’ I said wildly, hoping to delay the explosion from Anne. But her temper was rising up in her and she could not stop it. She pulled her hand from the crook of his arm.

‘What are you suggesting?’ she demanded. ‘What are you saying of me? Are you calling me unchaste? When I stand here and swear to you that I have never, ever looked at another man? And now you – of all people in the world – accuse me of being pre-contracted! You! Who sought me out and courted me with another wife still living? Which of us is the more likely to be a bigamist, think you? A man with a wife tucked away in a beautiful house in Hertfordshire, fawned on by her own court, visited by everyone, a queen in exile, or the girl who once had a poem written to her?’

‘My marriage is invalid!’ Henry shouted back at her. ‘As every cardinal in Rome knows!’

‘But it took place! As every man, woman and child in London knows. You spent enough money on it, God knows. You were merry enough about it then! But nothing took place for me, no promises were made, no rings were given, nothing nothing nothing! And you torment me with this nothing.’

‘Before God!’ he swore. ‘Will you listen to me?’

‘No!’ she screamed, quite beyond control. ‘For you are a fool and I am in love with a fool and the more fool me. I will not listen to you but you will listen to every spiteful worm that would spit poison in your ear!’

‘Anne!’

‘No!’ she cried and flung herself away from him.

In two swift strides he was after her and had caught her to him. She lashed out at him and hit him on the padded shoulders of his jacket. Half the court flinched to see the monarch of England assaulted, no-one knew what to do. Henry grabbed her hands and slammed them behind her back, holding her so that her face was as close to him as if they were making love, her body pressed to his, his mouth close enough to bite or to kiss. I saw the look of avid lust that spread over him the moment he had her close.

‘Anne,’ he said again in a quite different voice.

‘No,’ she repeated, but she was smiling.

‘Anne.’

She closed her eyes and tipped back her head and let him kiss her eyes and her lips. 'Yes,' she whispered.

'Good God,' George said in my ear. 'Is this how she plays him?'

I nodded as she turned in his arms and they walked together, hip to hip, his arm around her shoulders, her arm around his waist. They looked as if they wished they were walking to the bedroom instead of walking by the river. Their faces were alight with desire and satisfaction, as if the quarrel had been a storm like the storm of lovemaking.

'Always the rage and then the making up?'

'Yes,' I said. 'It is instead of the rage of making love, don't you think? They both get to shout and cry and then end up quietly in each other's arms.'

'He must adore her,' George said. 'She flies at him and then she nestles. My God, I've never seen it so clearly. She is a passionate whore, isn't she? I'm her brother and I'd have her now. She could drive a man crazed.'

I nodded. 'She always gives in; but always at least two minutes too late. She always pushes it to the very limit and beyond.'

'It's a damned dangerous game to play with a king who has absolute power.'

'What else can she do?' I asked him. 'She has to hold him somehow. She has to be a castle that he besieges over and over again. She has to keep the excitement up somehow.'

George slipped my hand into his arm and we followed the royal couple along the path. 'And what of the Countess of Northumberland?' he asked. 'She'll never get her annulment on the grounds that Henry Percy was pre-contracted to Anne?'

'She might as well wait to be widowed,' I said crudely. 'We can't let any slur be attached to Anne. The Countess will be married forever to a man who has always been in love with someone else. She'd have done better to never be a countess at all but to marry a man who loved her.'

'Are you all for love these days?' George asked. 'Is this the advice of the nobody?'

I laughed as if I did not care. 'The nobody has gone,' I said. 'And good riddance. The nobody meant nothing, as I should have foreseen.'

Summer 1532

The nobody, William Stafford, came back to my uncle's service in June. He came to find me to tell me that he was back at court and that he would escort me to Hever when I was ready to leave.

'I have already asked Sir Richard Brent to ride with me,' I said coldly.

I had the pleasure of seeing him look taken aback. 'I thought you might allow me to stay and take the children out riding.'

'How kind of you,' I said icily. 'Perhaps next summer.' I turned and walked away from him before he could think of anything to say to keep me. I felt his gaze on my back and felt that I had repaid him in some measure for flirting with me and treating me like a fool while all along he was planning to marry someone else.



Sir Richard stayed only a few days, which was a relief to both of us. He did not like me in the country where I was distracted by my children and interested in my tenants. He preferred me at court where I had nothing to do but flirt. To his half-hidden relief he was summoned back by the king to help to plan for a royal trip to France.

'I am desolated to have to leave you,' he said, waiting for them to lead his horse round from the stables while we stood in the sunshine by the moat. The children dropped twigs into the water on one side of the drawbridge and were waiting for them to float through. I laughed while I watched them.

'That will take forever,' I said. 'It's not a fast-flowing stream.'

'William made us boats with a sail,' Catherine said to me, not taking her eye off her twig. 'They went whichever way the wind was blowing.'

I turned my attention back to my desolate lover. 'We will miss you, Sir Richard. Please give my regards to my sister.'

'I shall tell her that the country suits you as green velvet wrapped around a diamond,' he said.

‘Thank you,’ I replied. ‘Do you know if the whole court is to go to France?’

‘The noblemen and the king and the Lady Anne and her ladies in waiting,’ he said. ‘And I have to arrange all the staging posts in England to be ready for such a progress.’

‘I’m sure they could trust the work to no more competent gentleman,’ I said. ‘For you brought me here with great comfort.’

‘I could take you back again,’ he offered.

I put my hand down to feel Henry’s warm cropped head. ‘I’ll stay here for a little longer,’ I said. ‘I like to be in the country for the summer.’



I had not thought how I should get back to court, I was so happy with the children, so warmed by the sun of Hever, so much at peace in my little castle, under the skies of my home. But at the end of August I received a terse note from my father to tell me that George would come for me the next day.

We had a miserable supper. My children were pale and huge-eyed at the prospect of parting. I kissed them goodnight and then I sat by Catherine’s bed waiting for her to sleep. It took a long time. Catherine forced her eyes open, knowing that once she slept the night would come, and next day I would be gone; but after an hour, not even she could stay awake any longer.

I ordered my maids to pack my gowns and my things and see that they were loaded onto the big wagon. I ordered the steward to pack cider and beer that my father would welcome, and apples and other fruit that would be an elegant gift for the king. Anne had wanted some books and I went to pick them out of the library. One was in Latin and I took a long time puzzling out the title to make sure that I had the right one. The other was a theology book in French. I put them carefully with my little jewel box. Then I went to bed and cried into my pillow because my summer with my children was cut short.



I was mounted and waiting for George with the wagon loaded and ready when I saw the column of men riding down the lane towards the drawbridge. Even at that distance I knew it was not George but him.

‘William Stafford,’ I said, unsmiling. ‘I was expecting my brother.’

‘I won you,’ he said. He swept his hat from his head and beamed at me. ‘I played him at cards and won the right to come and fetch you back to Windsor Castle.’

‘Then my brother is forsworn,’ I said disapprovingly. ‘And I am not a chattel to be put on a gambling table of a common inn.’

‘It was a most uncommon inn,’ he said, needlessly provocative. ‘And after he lost you he lost a very handsome diamond and a dance with a pretty girl.’

‘I want to leave now,’ I said rudely.

He bowed, crammed his hat on his head and signalled to the men to turn. ‘We slept at Edenbridge last night so we are fresh for the journey,’ he said.

My horse fell into pace beside his. ‘Why didn’t you come here?’

‘Too cold,’ he said shortly.

‘Why, you have had one of the best rooms every time you have stayed here!’

‘Not the castle. There’s nothing wrong with the castle.’

I hesitated. ‘You mean me.’

‘Icy,’ he confirmed. ‘And I have no idea what I have done to offend you. One moment we were talking of the joys of country living and the next you are a flake of snow.’

‘I don’t have the least idea what you mean,’ I said.

‘Brrr,’ he said and sent the column forward into a trot.

He kept up a punishing pace until it was midday and then he called a halt. He lifted me down from my horse and opened the gate into a field by a river. ‘I brought food for us to eat,’ he said. ‘Come and walk with me while they are getting it ready.’

‘I’m too tired to walk,’ I said unhelpfully.

‘Come and sit then.’ He spread his cape on the ground in the shade of a tree.

I could not argue any more. I sat on his cape and I leaned back against the friendly roughness of the bark and looked at the sparkling river. A few ducks dabbled in the water near us, in the reeds at the far side was the furtive dodging of a pair of moorhen. He left me for a few moments and when he came back he was carrying two pewter mugs of small ale. He gave one to me and drew a gulp from his own.

‘Now,’ he said, with every appearance of a man settling down to talk. ‘Now, Lady Carey. Please tell me what I have done to offend you.’

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that he had not offended me at all, that since there was nothing between us from start to finish, nothing could be lost.

‘Don’t,’ he said hastily, as if he could see all of this in my face. ‘I know I tease you, lady, but I never meant to distress you. I thought we were halfway to understanding each other.’

‘You were openly flirting with me,’ I said crossly.

‘Not flirting, I’ve been courting you,’ he corrected me. ‘And if you object to that then I can do my best to stop, but I have to know why.’

‘Why did you leave court?’ I asked abruptly.

‘I went to see my father, I wanted to have the money he had promised me on marriage, and I wanted to buy a farm, in Essex. I told you all about it.’

‘And you are planning marriage?’

For a moment he scowled then all at once his face cleared. ‘Not with anyone else!’ he cried out. ‘What did you think? With you! You cloth-head girl! With you! I’ve been in love with you from the moment I first saw you and I have racked my brains as to how I could find a place fit for you and make a home good enough for you. Then when I saw how you love it at Hever I thought that if I were to offer you a manor house, a pretty farm, you might consider it. You might consider me.’

‘My uncle said you were buying a house to marry a girl,’ I gasped.

‘You!’ he cried out again. ‘You’re the girl. Always you. Never anyone but you.’

He turned to me and for a moment I thought that he would snatch me up to him. I put my hand out to fend him off and at that tiny gesture he at once checked. ‘No?’ he asked.

‘No,’ I said shakily.

‘No kiss?’ he said.

‘Not one,’ I said, trying to smile.

‘And no to the little farmhouse? It faces south and it nestles in the side of a hill. It’s got good land all around it, it’s a pretty building, half-timbered and a thatched roof, and stables in a courtyard round the back. A herb garden and an orchard and a stream at the bottom of the orchard. A paddock for your hunter and a field for your cows.’

‘No,’ I said, sounding more and more uncertain.

‘Why not?’ he asked.

‘Because I am a Howard and a Boleyn and you are a nobody.’

William Stafford did not flinch from my bluntness. ‘You would be a nobody too, if you married me,’ he said. ‘There’s a great comfort in it. Your sister is set to be queen. D’you think she will be happier than you?’

I shook my head. 'I cannot escape who I am.'

'And when are you happiest now?' he asked me, knowing the answer already. 'In winter when you are at court? Or in summer when you are with the children at Hever?'

'We would not have the children at your farm,' I said. 'Anne would take them. She wouldn't let the king's son be brought up by two nobodies in the middle of nowhere.'

'Until she has a son of her own, and at that moment she'll never want to see him again,' he said shrewdly. 'She'll have other ladies in waiting, your family will find other Howard girls. Drop out from their world and you'll be forgotten within three months. You can choose, my love. You don't have to be the other Boleyn girl for all your life. You could be the absolutely one and only Mistress Stafford.'

'I don't know how to do things,' I said feebly.

'Like what?'

'Make cheese. Skin chickens.'

Slowly, as if he did not want to startle me, he knelt beside me. He took my unresisting hand and lifted it to his lips. He turned it over and opened up the fingers so that he could kiss the palm, the wrist, each fingertip. 'I will teach you how to skin chickens,' he said gently. 'And we will be happy.'

'I don't say yes,' I whispered, closing my eyes at the sensation of his kisses on my skin and the warmth of his breath.

'And you don't say no,' he agreed.



At Windsor Castle Anne was in her presence chamber surrounded by tailors and haberdashers and seamstresses. Great bolts of rich fabrics were thrown over chairs and spread out in the windowseat. The place looked more like the Clothmakers' Hall on a feast day than the queen's rooms, and for a moment I thought of the careful housekeeping of Queen Katherine, who would have been shocked to her soul by the wanton richness of the silk and velvets and cloth of gold. 'We leave for Calais in October,' Anne said, two seamstresses pinning folds of material around her. 'You'd better order some new gowns.'

I hesitated.

'What?' she snapped.

I did not want to speak out in front of the tradesmen and the ladies in

waiting. But it seemed that I had no choice. 'I cannot afford new gowns,' I said quietly. 'You know how my husband left me, Anne. I have only a small pension, and what Father gives me.'

'He'll pay,' she said confidently. 'Go to my cupboard and pull out my old red velvet and that one with the silver petticoat. You can have them made over for you.'

Slowly I went to her privy chamber and lifted the heavy lid to one of her many chests of clothes.

She waved me towards one of the seamstresses. 'Mrs Clovelly can rip it back and make it new for you,' she said. 'But make sure that it's fashionable. I want the French court to see us all looking very stylish. I don't want anything dowdy and Spanish about my ladies.'

I stood before the woman as she measured me.

Anne glanced around. 'You can all go,' she said abruptly. 'All except Mrs Clovelly, and Mrs Simpter.'

She waited until they had cleared the room. 'It's getting worse,' she said, her voice very low. 'That's why we're home early. We couldn't travel around at all. Everywhere we went there was trouble.'

'Trouble?'

'People shouting names. In one village, half a dozen lads throwing stones at me. And the king at my side!'

'They were stoning the king?'

She nodded. 'Another little town we couldn't even go in. They had a bonfire in the town square and they were burning me in effigy.'

'What did the king say?'

'At first he was furious, he was going to send in the soldiers, teach them a lesson; but it was the same at every village. There were too many. And what if the people started fighting against the king's soldiers? What would happen then?'

The seamstress turned me round with a gentle touch on my hips. I moved as she bid me but I hardly knew what I was doing. I had been brought up in the steady peace of Henry's reign; I could hardly take in the thought of English men rising up against this king.

'What does Uncle say?'

'He says to thank God that we have only the Duke of Suffolk to fear as an enemy, because when the king is stoned and insulted in his own kingdom then a civil war will follow swift behind.'

‘Suffolk is our enemy?’

‘Absolutely declared,’ she said shortly. ‘He says that I have cost the king the church, will he lose the country as well?’

I turned once more and the seamstress knelt back and nodded. ‘Shall I take these gowns and re-model them?’ she asked in a whisper.

‘Take them,’ I said.

She picked up her materials and her sewing bag and went from the room. The seamstress hemming Anne’s gown put in the final stitch and snipped off the thread.

‘My God, Anne,’ I said. ‘Was it really everywhere?’

‘Everywhere,’ she said grimly. ‘They turned their backs on me in one village, they hissed at me in another. When we rode down the country lanes the boys scaring crows cried out against me. The goose girls spat on the road before me. When we went through any market town the women at the stalls threw stinking fish and rotten vegetables in our way. When we went to stay at a house or a castle we had a mob of people following behind us, abusing us, and we had to shut the gates against them.’ She shook her head. ‘It was worse than a nightmare. When our hosts came out to greet us their faces would fall to see half their tenants in the road shouting out against the lawful king. We came to every door with a train of unhappiness. We can’t go into the City of London, and now we can’t go into the country either. We are hiding in our own palaces, where the people can’t get to us. And they are calling her Katherine the Well-Beloved.’

‘What does the king say?’

‘He says we won’t wait for the ruling from Rome. As soon as Archbishop Warham dies, then he will appoint a new archbishop who will marry us and we’ll just do it, whether Rome rules in our favour or not.’

‘What if Warham lingers?’ I asked nervously.

Anne laughed harshly. ‘Oh don’t look like that! I won’t send him soup! He’s an old man, he’s been in his bed most of this summer. He’ll die soon and then Henry will appoint Cranmer and he will marry us.’

I shook my head disbelievingly. ‘As easily as that? After all this time?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘And if the king was more of a man and less of a schoolboy he could have married me five years ago and we could have had five sons by now. But he had to make the queen see that he was right, he had to make the country see that he was right. He has to be seen to be doing the right thing, whatever the truth of the matter. He’s a fool.’

‘You’d better not say that to anyone but me,’ I cautioned her.

‘Everyone knows,’ she said stubbornly.

‘Anne,’ I said. ‘You had better watch your tongue and your temper. You could still fall, even now.’

She shook her head. ‘He’s going to give me a title in my own right, and a fortune that no-one can take from me.’

‘What title?’

‘Marquess of Pembroke.’

‘Marchioness?’ I thought I had not heard her properly.

‘No.’ Her face glowed with pride. ‘Not a title that you give to a woman who is married to a marquess. The title that a person can hold in their own right. Marquess. I am to be Marquess, and no-one can take that away from me. Not even the king himself.’

I closed my eyes on a surge of pure jealousy. ‘And the fortune?’

‘I am to have the manors of Coldkeynton and Hanworth in Middlesex, and lands in Wales. They’ll bring me about a thousand pounds a year.’

‘A thousand pounds?’ I repeated, thinking of my annual pension of one hundred pounds.

Anne gleamed. ‘I shall be the richest woman in England and the most noble,’ she said. ‘Rich in my own right, noble in my own right. And then I will be queen.’

She laughed as she realised how bitter her triumph was for me. ‘You must be happy for me.’

‘Oh, I am.’



Next morning the stable yard was in a great fuss and bother, the king was hunting and everyone had to go with him. The hunters were being brought out of their stables and the hounds were waiting in a corner of the great yard, whipped in by the huntsmen but forever dashing off to one corner or another, sniffing and yowling with excitement. Grooms were running round with straps and buckles and helping their masters into the saddles. Stable lads were out with cloths to give shining haunches and glossy necks one last polish. Henry’s black hunter, arching its neck and pawing the ground, was by the mounting block, waiting for the king.

I looked everywhere for William Stafford, then I felt the lightest of touches at my waist and a warm voice in my ear said: ‘I was sent on an errand, I ran back

all the way.'

I turned around to see him. I was almost in his arms. We were so close that if he moved forward half an inch we would have touched all down the length of our bodies. I closed my eyes for a moment in desire at the scent of him, and when I opened them I saw his eyes dark with lust for me.

'For God's sake, step back,' I said shakily.

Unwillingly he released one hand and stepped half a pace back from me. 'Before God, I have to marry you,' he said. 'Mary, I am beyond myself. I have never been like this in my life before. I cannot go another moment without holding you.'

'Sssh,' I whispered. 'Put me up in the saddle.'

I had thought that if I was up there and out of his way then the weakness in my knees and the dizziness in my head would matter less. Somehow I got into the saddle, crooked my leg around the pommel and arranged my riding habit so that it fell as it should. He pulled the hem straight, and cupped my foot in his hand. He looked up at me, his face filled with determination.

'You have to marry me,' he said simply.

I glanced around, at the wealth of the court, the bobbing feathers in the hats, the velvets and silks – all dressed like princes, even for a day in the saddle. 'This is my life,' I said, trying to explain. 'This has been my home since I was a little girl. First the French court and now here. I have never lived in an ordinary house, I have never stayed in the same room for a whole year. I am a courtier from a family of courtiers. I can't become a country wife at the snap of your fingers.'

There was a blast of horns and the king, very broad but smiling, came out of the castle door with Anne at his side. Her quick glance raked the courtyard and I snatched my foot back from William's grasp and met her gaze with a blandly innocent smile. The king was helped onto his horse, he sat heavily in the saddle for a moment, and then gathered the reins and was ready, and everyone who was still on foot scrambled into the saddle and jockeyed for the best position in the cavalcade, the gentlemen trying to be close to Anne, the ladies riding, as if by accident, alongside the king.

'Are you not coming?' I asked urgently.

'Do you want me to?'

Slowly the horsemen were leaving the courtyard, jostling and waiting at the arched gateway.

'You'd better not. My uncle is out today, and he sees everything.'

William stepped back and I saw the light die from his eyes. 'As you wish.'

For all the world I would have jumped off my horse and kissed the smile back into his face. But he bowed, and stepped back to lean against the wall and watched the hunt and me ride out and away from him. He did not even call to me when he would see me again. He let me go.

Autumn 1532

Anne was enthroned as Marquess of Pembroke with all the ceremony of a coronation, in the king's presence chamber at Windsor Castle. He sat in his throne flanked by my uncle and Charles Brandon, the Duke of Suffolk, newly forgiven and returned to court in time to witness Anne's triumph. Suffolk looked as if he was chewing on lemons, his smile was so bitter, my uncle was torn between joy at the wealth and the prestige for his niece and his increasing hatred of her arrogance.

Anne wore a gown of red velvet trimmed with the white fluffy fur of ermine. Her hair, dark and glossy as a racehorse's mane, was spread over her shoulders like a girl on her wedding day. Lady Mary, the duke's daughter, held the robe of state, and the rest of Anne's ladies, Jane Parker, me, the other dozen or so, all dressed in our best, followed in her train and stood behind in sycophantic silence while the king tied the robe of state about her shoulders, and put a gold coronet on her head.

At the banquet George and I sat side by side and looked up to our sister, seated beside the king.

He did not ask if I was envious. It was an answer too obvious to be worth inquiry. 'I don't know another woman who could have done it,' he said. 'She has a unique determination to be on the throne.'

'I never had that,' I said. 'The only thing I've ever wanted from childhood was not to be overlooked.'

'Well you can forget that,' George said with brotherly frankness. 'You'll be overlooked now for the rest of your life. We'll both be as nothing. Anything I achieve will be seen as her gift. And you'll never match her. She's the only Boleyn anyone will ever know of or remember. You'll be a nobody forever.'

It was the word 'nobody'. At the very word the bitterness drained out of me, and I smiled. 'You know, there might be some joy in being a nobody.'



We danced till late and then Anne sent all the ladies to their beds but me.

‘I’m going to him,’ she said.

She did not need to explain what she meant. ‘Are you sure?’ I asked. ‘You’re still not married.’

‘Cranmer will be installed any day,’ she said. ‘I’m going to France as his consort and Henry has insisted that they treat me as queen. He’s given me the title of Marquess and the lands, and I cannot keep saying no.’

‘Good God, you want to!’ I suddenly understood her impatience. ‘Do you love him at last?’

‘Oh no!’ she exclaimed impatiently, as if it were irrelevant. ‘But I have kept him at arm’s length so long that he has been driven nearly mad, and me too. Sometimes I have been so aroused by his desire and his pulling and teasing of me that I could have done it with a stable lad. And I have his promise, I can see my way to the throne. I want to do it now. I want to do it tonight.’

I poured water for her into the ewer and warmed a drying sheet for her while she washed. ‘What will you wear?’

‘The gown I was wearing to dance,’ she said. ‘And the coronet. I’ll go to him like a queen.’

‘George had better take you.’

‘He’s coming, I already told him.’

She finished washing and took the sheet from me to pat herself dry. Her body in firelight and candlelight was as beautiful as a wild animal. There was a tap on the door. ‘Let him in,’ she said.

I hesitated. She was tying her skirt around her waist but apart from that she was naked. ‘Go on,’ she said wilfully.

I shrugged and opened the door. George recoiled at the sight of his sister, her dark hair tumbled over her naked breasts.

‘You can come in,’ she said carelessly. ‘I’m nearly ready.’

He threw one shocked interrogative look at me and came into the room and dropped into the chair at the fireside.

Anne, holding the stomacher across her naked breasts and belly, turned her bare back to George to lace her up. He rose to his feet and threaded the laces through the holes in the criss-cross pattern. At every insertion of the thread his hand brushed her skin and I saw her close her eyes in pleasure at the continual caress. George’s face was dark, he was scowling as he did her bidding. ‘Anything else?’ he asked. ‘Tie your shoes for you? Polish your boots?’

‘Don’t you want to touch me?’ she taunted him. ‘I’m good enough for the

king.'

'You're good enough for the bagnio,' he said brutally. 'Get your cape, if you're coming.'

'But I *am* desirable,' she said, confronting him.

George hesitated. 'Why on earth ask me? Half the court was weak at the knees this evening. What more do you want?'

'I want everyone,' she said, unsmiling. 'I want you to say that I am the best, George. I want *you* to say it here, in front of Mary.'

He gave his low chuckle. 'Oh the old rivalry,' he said slowly. 'Anne, Marquess of Pembroke, you are the most desired and the richest girl in the family. You have eclipsed us both in success. You will shortly eclipse your revered father and uncle in terms of pride and position. What more do you want?'

She had been glowing with his praise but at that question she looked suddenly afraid, as if she remembered the curses of the fishwives and the shouts of 'Whore!' from the market traders. 'I want everyone to know it,' she said.

'Shall I take you to the king?' George asked pragmatically.

Anne put her hand on his arm and I saw him tense at the turn of her head and her sidelong smile. 'Wouldn't you rather take me to your chamber?'

'If I wanted to be beheaded for incest – yes.'

She gave her sexy little laugh. 'Very well then. To the king. But remember, George, you are my courtier, like all the others.'

He bowed and led her from the room. I listened to them cross the presence chamber and then go down the stairs, and I waited till I heard the door at the bottom of the stairs bang shut. I thought that Anne's desire to be first with everyone must be powerful indeed if she would pause to torment her own brother on the very night of her bedding the king.



She came back at daybreak, huddled into her clothes, just as I used to do. George brought her back and together we stripped her and pushed her into bed. She was too weary to speak.

'So it's done,' I said as her eyes closed.

'Several times, I should think,' he said. 'I waited outside the chamber and slept in the chair and a couple of times in the night they woke me with their crying out and panting. Please God we get an heir from it.'

‘And no doubt that he’ll marry her? He won’t tire of her now he has her?’

‘Not inside six months. And now she’s getting some pleasure for herself and not having to fight him off all the time she might be sweeter to him, and – please God – sweeter to us.’

‘If she’s much sweeter to you she’ll be in your bed as well as the king’s.’

George stretched and yawned and smiled lazily down at me from his extended height. ‘She was hot,’ he said. ‘And she could take it out on no-one else. She was hot and once that wears off then please God she has a baby in her belly and a ring on her finger and a crown on her head. *Vivat Anna!* And grudge who grudges it – it’s done.’



I left Anne sleeping and thought that I might see William Stafford if I went to my uncle’s rooms at this hour in the morning. The castle was stirring, the lanes approaching the kitchen were crowded with the wagons bringing cords of firewood and charcoal from the woods, fruit and vegetables from the market, and meat, milk and cheese from the farms. In my uncle’s rooms there was the bustle of a great household setting about the day. The maids had finished sweeping and cleaning in the presence chamber and the scullions were loading the fireplaces with logs and blowing on the embers to make them flame up.

My uncle’s gentlemen were housed in half a dozen small rooms off the great hall, his men at arms slept in the guard room. William could be anywhere. I walked through the presence chamber and nodded at a couple of the gentlemen I knew and tried to look as if I were waiting to see my uncle or my mother.

The door to my uncle’s privy chamber opened and George came out in a rush.

‘Oh good,’ he said on seeing me. ‘Is Anne still asleep?’

‘She was when I left her.’

‘Go to her and wake her up. Tell her that the clergy has submitted to the king, or at least enough of them to mean that we have won, but Thomas More has announced that he has resigned his post. The king will learn it during Mass today when he receives More’s letter, but she should be forewarned. The king is bound to take it hard.’

‘Thomas More?’ I repeated. ‘But I thought he was on our side?’

My brother tutted at my ignorance. ‘He promised the king never to comment publicly on the dissolution of the marriage. But it’s obvious what he thinks, isn’t

it? He's a lawyer, a logical man, he's hardly likely to be convinced by the twisting of the truth that's been going on in a thousand universities in Europe.'

'But I thought he wanted the church reformed?' I asked. Not for the first time I was adrift in the sea of politics which was my family's natural element.

'Reformed; not taken to pieces and headed by the king,' my brother said quickly. 'Who knows better than Thomas More that the king is not fit to play Pope? He's known him from childhood. He'd never accept Henry as the heir to St Peter.' My brother laughed shortly. 'It's a ridiculous notion.'

'Ridiculous? I thought we supported it.'

'Of course we do,' he said. 'It means that Henry can rule on his own marriage, he can marry Anne. But no-one but a fool would think that there was the least justification for it in law, in morality, or in common sense. Look, Mary, don't worry. Anne understands all this. Just go and wake her and tell her that More is resigning and the king will learn of it this morning and she is to be calm. That's what my uncle said. Anne must be calm.'

I turned to do as he bid me, and just at that very moment, William Stafford came into the hall, shrugging on his doublet. He paused when he saw me and made me a low bow. 'Lady Carey,' he said. He bowed to my brother. 'Lord Rochford.'

'Go,' my brother said to me and gave me a little push. He ignored William. 'Go and tell her.'

There was nothing I could do but hurry from the room without even being able to touch William's hand and say 'good morning' to him.



Anne and the king were closeted alone for most of the morning, considering what the resignation of Thomas More might mean to them. My father and uncle were with them, and Cranmer and Secretary Cromwell, all the men attached to Anne's cause, all determined that the king should take the power and the profit of the church in England. Anne and the king came out to dinner in very good harmony and she sat at his right hand as if she were already queen.

After dinner the two of them went to his privy chamber and everyone was sent away. George raised an eyebrow at me with a little smile and whispered: 'As long as a little prince comes out of it, eh, Mary?' and then went strolling off to play at cards with Francis Weston and a couple of the others. I went out into the garden to sit in the sunshine and look at the river, and all the time I knew that

I was longing for William Stafford.

As if I had summoned him, he was suddenly there before me.

‘Were you looking for me this morning?’ he asked.

‘No,’ I said, lying as quick as a courtier. ‘I was looking for my brother.’

‘Whatever the case, I have come looking for you,’ he offered. ‘And glad I am to find you. Very glad, my lady.’

I moved a little on the seat and gestured that he might sit beside me. The moment he was within touching distance I felt my heart hammer. There was a scent about him, a warm sweet male scent that lingered about his hair and his soft brown beard. I found that I was leaning towards him and I made myself sit back.

‘I am to come with your uncle to Calais,’ he said. ‘Perhaps I can be of service to you on the journey.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

There was a brief silence.

‘I am sorry about the stable yard,’ I said. ‘I was afraid of Anne seeing us together. While she has the guardianship of my son I dare not offend her.’

‘I understand,’ William said quickly. ‘It was just the moment – I had hold of your little riding boot. I didn’t want to let go.’

‘I can’t be your lover,’ I said in a very low voice. ‘Clearly not.’

He nodded. ‘But were you looking for me this morning?’

‘Yes,’ I whispered, honest at last. ‘I couldn’t go for another minute without seeing you.’

‘I have been hovering in this garden and outside the marquess’s chambers all of the day, hoping to see you,’ he said. ‘I’ve been out here so long that I thought of getting a spade and doing something useful in the time while I was waiting.’

‘Gardening?’ I said with a gurgle of laughter, thinking of Anne’s face if I were to announce that I was in love with the man who dug the garden. ‘That hardly helps.’

‘No,’ he said, sharing my amusement. ‘But I was hanging round the ladies’ chambers like a pimp so it’s the better of the two. Mary, what shall we do? What is your desire?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, speaking nothing but the truth. ‘I feel as if this is a sort of madness which I am going through and if I had a true friend they would tie me down until it had passed.’

‘You think it will pass?’ he asked, as if it were an interesting viewpoint that he had not considered.

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘It is a fancy, isn’t it? It is just that it happened to both of us at once. I have taken a fancy to you and if you had not liked me, I would have mooned around a little and made sheep’s eyes at you for a while, and then got over it.’

He smiled at that. ‘I should have liked that. Couldn’t you do that anyway?’

‘We will laugh at this later.’

I expected him to argue. In truth I was counting on him to argue that this was a real love, an undying love, and persuade me that I had to follow my heart whatever the cost.

But he nodded. ‘A fancy, then? And nothing more?’

‘Oh,’ I said, surprised.

William rose to his feet. ‘How soon do you expect to recover?’ he asked conversationally.

I stood close to him. I was drawn to him as if every bone in my body needed his touch whatever my mouth might say.

‘Just think a little,’ he said to me gently. His mouth was so close to my ear that his breath stirred the tendril of hair which had escaped from my hood. ‘You could be my love, you could be my wife. We would have Catherine, would we not? They would not take her away from you? And as soon as Anne has her own son she will give you Henry back, our boy.’

‘He’s not our boy,’ I said, clinging to common sense with difficulty under this low-voiced torrent of persuasion.

‘Who bought him his first pony? Who made him his first sailing boat? Who taught him to tell the time by the sun?’

‘You,’ I admitted. ‘But no-one but you and me would consider that.’

‘He might.’

‘He’s only a little boy, he has no say in anything. And Catherine will never have a say in anything. She’ll be just another Boleyn girl who will be sent where they want her.’

‘Then break the pattern for yourself, and we’ll rescue the children too. Don’t you be just another Boleyn girl for a day longer. Come and be Mrs Stafford, the one and only most beloved Mrs Stafford, who owns her fields outright and her little farmhouse, and is learning to make cheese and skin a chicken.’

I laughed and at once he caught at my hand and pressed his thumb against my palm. Despite myself my fingers closed on his hand and we stood for a moment, handclasped in the warm sunshine, and I thought, like a lovesick girl: ‘This is heaven.’

There was a footstep behind us and I dropped his hand as if it had burnt me and whipped around. Thank God it was George and not that spying wife of his. He looked from my blushing face to William's impassive expression and raised an eyebrow.

'Sister?'

'William here is just telling me that my hunter has strained her fetlock,' I said at random.

'I've poulticed it,' William said quickly. 'And Lady Carey can borrow one of the king's horses while Jesmond is recovering. Shouldn't be more than a day or two.'

'Very good,' George said. William bowed and left us.

I let him go. I did not have the courage, even before George whom I would have trusted with any other secret, to call him back. William walked away, his shoulders a little stiff with resentment.

George followed my gaze after him. 'A little lust stirring in the lovely Lady Carey?' he asked idly.

'A little,' I conceded.

'Is this the nobody that meant nothing?'

I smiled ruefully. 'Yes.'

'Don't,' he said simply. 'Anne has to be immaculate between now and her wedding day, especially now that she is bedding the king. We are all of us on show. If you have a little lust for the man, then sit on it, my sister, for until Anne is married we have to be as chaste as angels, and she has to be head seraphim.'

'I'm hardly likely to roll in the hay with him,' I protested. 'My reputation is as good as anyone's. Certainly better than yours.'

'Then tell him to stop looking at you as if he wanted to eat you alive,' George said. 'The man looks completely besotted.'

'Does he?' I said eagerly. 'Oh George, does he?'

'God help us,' George said. 'Coal on the fire. Yes, I'm afraid he does. Tell him to keep it to himself until Anne is married and Queen of England and then you can choose for yourself.'



There was an explosive row going on in Anne's privy chamber. George and I, coming in from a ride, froze in the presence chamber and looked around at Henry's gentlemen and Anne's ladies, who were all maintaining a wonderful

pretence of not listening while straining to hear every word through the thick door. I heard Anne's scream of rage over Henry's rumble of discontent.

'What use has she of them? What use? Or is she to come back to court at Christmas again? Is she to sit in my place and am I to be thrown down now that you have had me?'

'Anne, for God's sake!'

'No! If you loved me at all I would not have had to ask! How can I go to France in anything but the queen's jewels? What does it say if you take me to France as a marquess with nothing but a handful of diamonds?'

'They're hardly a handful ...'

'They're not the crown jewels!'

'Anne, some of those were bought for her by my father for her first marriage, they are nothing to do with me ...'

'They are everything to do with you! They are England's jewels, given to the queen. If I am to be queen then I must have them. If she is queen then she can keep them. Choose!'

We all heard Henry's goaded roar. 'For God's sake, woman, what do I have to do to please you? You have had every honour that a woman could dream of! What d'you want now? The gown off her back? The hood off her head?'

'All that and more!' Anne yelled back at him.

Henry flung open the door, we all began talking with tremendous animation, started upon seeing him, and dropped into our bows.

'I shall see you at dinner,' he said icily over his shoulder to Anne.

'You will not,' she said very loudly. 'For I shall be long gone. I shall take my dinner on the road and my breakfast at Hever. You do not treat me with disdain.'

At once he turned back to her and the door swung behind him. We all strained forward to hear what we could not see. 'You would not leave me.'

'I will not be half a queen,' she said passionately. 'Either you have me or not at all. Either you love me or not at all. Either I am all yours or I am nobody's. I will have no half-measures with you, Henry.'

We heard the rustle of her gown as he crushed her to him and her little sigh of delight.

'You shall have every diamond in the Tower, you shall have her diamonds and her barge as well,' he promised huskily. 'You shall have your heart's desire, since you have given me mine.'

George stepped forward and closed the door. 'Anyone for a game of cards?'

he asked cheerfully. 'I think we may have to wait for some time.'

There was a ripple of half-suppressed laughter and someone produced a pack of cards and someone else a pair of dice. I sent the page running for the musicians to make some noise to drown whatever indiscreet sighs came from Anne's privy chamber. I was as busy and as bustling as I could be to make sure that the court was at play while my sister and the king made love. I did everything I could do, so that I did not have to think of the queen, moved to her new and less comfortable house, being told by a messenger from the king that she had to hand over her royal jewels, her very own rings, bracelets and necklaces, and every little token of love that he had ever given her, because my sister wanted to wear them to France.



It was an enormous expedition, the greatest ever undertaken by Henry's court since the journey to the Field of the Cloth of Gold; and it was in every way as extravagant and ostentatious as that fabled event had been. It had to be – Anne was determined that anything that Katherine had seen and done must be bettered by her; so we rode through England from Hanbury to Dover like emperors. A troop of horse went ahead of us to clear any malcontents out of the road, but the sheer weight of the expedition and the number of horses, carriages, wagons, soldiers, men at arms, serving men, camp followers and the beauty of the ladies on horseback and their gentlemen companions stunned most of the country into amazed silence.



We had a clear sailing across the Channel. The ladies went below, Anne retired to her cabin and slept for much of the voyage. The gentlemen were up on deck, wrapped in their riding coats, watching the horizon for other ships and sharing jugs of hot wine. I came up on deck and leaned over the ship's rail, and watched the movement of the waves rolling beneath the prow of the boat and listened to the creaking of the timbers.

A warm hand covered my cold one. 'Are you feeling well?' William Stafford whispered in my ear. 'Not sick?'

I turned towards him and smiled. 'Not at all, praise God. But all the sailors

say that this is a very calm crossing.'

'Please God it stays that way,' he said fervently.

'Oh! My knight errant! Don't tell me that you are ill?'

'Not very,' he said defensively.

I wanted to take him in my arms. I thought for a moment what a test of love it is, when the beloved is less than perfect. I would never have thought that I could be drawn to a man suffering from seasickness and yet here I was, longing to fetch spiced wine for him and wrap him up warm.

'Come and sit down.' I glanced around. We were as unobserved as one might ever be in this court which was a very mine of gossip and scandal. I led him to a rolled pile of sails and settled him against the mast so that he might lean back. I tucked his cloak around him as carefully as if he had been my boy Henry.

'Don't leave me,' he said in a tone so plaintive that for a moment I thought that he was teasing me, but I met a look of such limpid innocence that I touched his cheek with my cold fingers.

'I'm just going to get us some hot spiced wine.' I went to the galley where the cooks were heating wine and ale and serving chunks of bread, and when I came back William moved up on the roll of sail so that I could sit beside him. I held the cup while he ate the bread and then we shared the wine, sip for sip.

'Are you better?'

'Of course, is there anything I can do for you?'

'No, no,' I said hastily. 'I was just pleased that you look better. Can I get you some more mulled wine?'

'No,' he said. 'Thank you. I think I should like to sleep.'

'Could you sleep if you leaned back against the mast?'

'No, I don't think I could.'

'Or if you lay down on the sail?'

'I think I'd roll off.'

I glanced around. Most people had gone over to the leeward side of the boat and were dozing or gambling. We were all but alone. 'Shall I hold you?'

'I should like that,' he said softly, as if he were almost too ill to speak.

We exchanged seats, I went with my back to the mast and then he put his dear curly-haired head into my lap and put his arms around my waist and closed his eyes.

I sat stroking his hair and admiring the softness of his brown beard and the flutter of his eyelashes on his cheek. His head was warm and heavy on my lap, his arms tight around my waist. I felt the total contentment that I always knew

when we were close together. It was as if my body had yearned for him all of my life, whatever my mind might have been thinking; and that at last, I had him.

I tipped my head back and felt the cold sea air on my cheeks. The rocking of the boat was soporific, the muted creak and hush of the wind in the sheets and the sails. The noise grew fainter and fainter as I fell asleep.

I woke to the warmth of his touch, his head nuzzling my crotch, rubbing against my thighs, his hands exploring inside my cape, stroking my arms, my waist, my neck, my breasts. As I sleepily opened my eyes to this flood of sensation, he lifted his head and kissed my bare neck, my cheek, my eyelids, and then finally, passionately, my mouth. His mouth was warm and sweet and lingering, his tongue slid between my lips and stirred me. I wanted to eat him, I wanted to drink him, I wanted him to kiss me and then bear me down onto the holystoned boards of the deck and to have me, then and there, and never let me go.

When he loosened his grip on me and would have released me it was me who put my hands behind his head and pulled his mouth towards me again, it was my desire which drove us onwards, not his.

‘Is there a cabin? A bunk? Anywhere we can go?’ he asked me breathlessly.

‘The ladies have all the accommodation, and I gave my bunk away.’

He gave a little groan of frustrated desire and then ran his hands through his hair and laughed at himself. ‘Good God, I am like a cunt-struck page!’ he said. ‘I am shaking with desire.’

‘Me too,’ I said. ‘Oh God, me too.’

William got to his feet. ‘Wait here,’ he ordered me, and disappeared down into the body of the ship. He came back with a cup of small ale which he offered to me first, and then took a long draught himself.

‘Mary, we must marry,’ he said. ‘Or you must take full responsibility for me going insane.’

I laughed weakly. ‘Oh my love.’

‘Yes I am,’ he said fervently.

‘You are what?’

‘I am your love. Say it again.’

For a moment I thought I might refuse and then I knew I was weary of denying the truth. ‘My love.’

He smiled at that, as if for the moment it was enough for him. ‘Come here,’ he said, opening his cape like a wing and summoning me to the rail of the ship. Obediently, I went and stood beside him and he put his arm and his warm riding

cape around my shoulders and held me close to him. Under the shelter of the cape I slid my hand around his waist, and unseen by any but seagulls, I rested my head on his shoulder and we stood there, swaying hip to hip with the motion of the ship for a long peaceful time.

‘And there’s France,’ he said finally.

I looked ahead and could see the dark shape of the land and then gradually the quayside and the masts of the boats and the walls and the castle of the English fortress of Calais.

Reluctantly, he released me. ‘I shall come and find you as soon as we are settled.’

‘I shall look for you.’

We stood apart, there were people coming up on deck, marvelling at the smoothness of the crossing and looking over the narrowing strait of water to Calais.

‘Do you feel all right now?’ I asked, out of arm’s reach, feeling the habitual coldness of my life take the place of that passionate intimacy.

For one moment William had the grace to look confused. ‘Oh, my seasickness, I had forgotten it.’

I suddenly realised I had been tricked. ‘Were you ever ill at all? No! You never were! It was all a scheme to get me to sit beside you and to wrap you up and to hold you while you slept.’

He was delightfully shamefaced, he dropped his head like a scolded boy and then I saw the gleam of his smile. ‘But you tell me, my Lady Carey,’ he challenged me. ‘Did you have the happiest six hours of your life, just now? Or did you not?’

I bit my tongue. I paused and thought. There must have been in my life a dozen happy moments. I had been the beloved of a king, I had been reclaimed by a loving husband, and I had been the more successful sister for many years. But the happiest six hours?

‘Yes,’ I said simply, conceding him everything. ‘Those were the happiest six hours of my life.’



We docked the ship in a bustle of noise and activity and the harbourmaster and the sailors and dockers all came down to the quayside to watch the king and Anne disembark and cheer them as they touched English soil in France. Then we

all went up to hear Mass in the chapel of St Nicholas with the governor of Calais, who made a great fuss, treating Anne with the same courtesy as if she were a crowned queen. But whatever the governor might say and do to appease her in her anxious hunt for reassurance, the King of France was not so amenable and Henry had to leave Anne behind in Calais while he rode out to meet Francis.

‘He’s such a fool,’ Anne muttered to herself, looking out of the window of Calais Castle as Henry rode out at the head of his men at arms, his hat off his head to bow in acknowledgement to the crowd, and then turning in the saddle to wave up to the castle in the hope that she would be watching him.

‘Why?’

‘He must have known that the Queen of France wouldn’t meet with me, she’s a Spanish princess like Katherine. And then he let the Queen of Navarre refuse to meet me as well. She should never have been asked but it gave her the chance to say that she would not.’

‘Did she say why not? She was always so kind to us when we were little.’

‘She said my behaviour was a scandal,’ Anne said shortly. ‘Good God, how these women do put on airs when they are married and safe. You would think none of them ever struggled to catch a husband.’

‘So will we not see King Francis at all?’

‘We cannot meet him officially,’ Anne said. ‘There’s no lady to meet me.’ She drummed her fingers on the windowsill. ‘Katherine was greeted by the Queen of France herself and everyone says now how friendly they were.’

‘Well, you’re not queen yet, you know,’ I said injudiciously.

The look she turned on me was like ice. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I know that. I have observed that over the last six years. I have had a little while to become aware of that, thank you. But I will be. And when I next come to France as queen I shall make her sorry for this insult to me, and when Margaret of Navarre seeks to marry her children to my sons I will not forget that she called me a scandal.’ She looked hard at me. ‘And I shall not forget that you are always very quick to point out that I am not yet queen.’

‘Anne, I was only saying ...’

‘Then you should be silent and try thinking before you speak for once,’ she snapped.



Henry invited King Francis of France back to the English fort of Calais and for

two days we ladies in waiting, with Anne at our head, had to content ourselves with peeping from the castle window at the French king, and seeing nothing more of his fabled good looks than the top of his head. I expected Anne to be in a state of absolute fury at being excluded but she was smiling and secretive, and when Henry came to her room every night after dinner he was welcomed with such pleasant humour that I was certain that she had something planned.

She set us to rehearsing a special dance which was to be led in by her and then to include the seated diners, who would be summoned to dance with us. It was obvious that she was planning to enter the king's banquet with the King of France and dance with him.

Some of the younger ladies wondered how she dared run against the conventions, but I knew that she would have had her plan approved by Henry. His surprise when she entered would be as counterfeit as all the amazement that Queen Katherine had learned to show when her husband had entered her rooms so many times in his disguises. It made me feel old and world-weary to think that we had pretended for years not to recognise the king, and now Anne would play the same games, and the court would still have to admire them.

Despite the demands of riding with Anne in the morning and dancing with her and the ladies in the afternoon I found time every noon to stroll in the streets of Calais where, at a little alehouse, I would always find William Stafford waiting for me. He would draw me inside, away from the prying eyes of the street, and set a mug of small ale before me.

‘All well, my love?’ he would ask me.

I would smile at him. ‘Yes. And with you?’

He nodded. ‘I am to ride out with your uncle tomorrow, I have news of some horses he might like. But the prices are absurd. Every French farmer is determined to fleece an English lord this season, for fear we never come again.’

‘He said that he might make you master of his horse. That would be a good thing for us, wouldn't it?’ I said wistfully. ‘We could see each other more easily if you had charge of my horse, and we could ride together.’

‘And marry of course,’ he said, teasing me. ‘Your uncle would be delighted if the master of his horse married his niece. No, my love, I don't think it would be a good thing for us at all. I don't think there's any way for us at court.’ He touched my cheek. ‘I don't want to see you every day by luck. I want to see you every night and day because we are married and living in the same house.’

I was silent.

‘I will wait for you,’ William said softly. ‘I know that you are not ready

now.'

I looked up at him. 'It's not that I don't love you. It's the children, and my family, and Anne. More than anything else – it's Anne. I don't know how I can leave her.'

'Because she needs you?' he asked, surprised.

I gave a little gurgle of laughter. 'Good God! No! Because she won't let me go. She needs me in her sight, so that she knows that she is safe.' I broke off, unable to explain to him the long determined rivalry between the two of us. 'Any triumph she has is halved if I am not there to see it. And anything that goes wrong for me, any slight or humiliation, she is quick to perceive and she would even be quick to revenge – oh! – but inside her heart is singing to know that I have taken a blow.'

'She sounds like a devil,' he said, loyal to me.

I giggled again. 'I wish I could say yes,' I confessed. 'But to tell you the truth, it is the same for me. I am as envious of her as she is of me. But I have seen her rise and rise. I will never do better than her now. I have come to accept it. I know that she caught and held the king when I could not. But I also know that I didn't really want to. After I had my son, I wanted nothing but to be with my children and far from the court, and the king is so –'

'So?' he prompted.

'He's so desirous. Not just of love; but of everything. He's like a child himself and when I had a child of my own, a real child, I found I had no patience with a man who wanted to be diverted like a child. When once I saw King Henry was as selfish as his own little son, I couldn't really love him any more. I couldn't look at him but with impatience.'

'But you didn't leave him.'

'You don't leave the king,' I said simply. 'He leaves you.'

William nodded, acknowledging the truth of it.

'But when he left me for Anne I saw him go without regret. And when I dance with him now, or dine with him, or walk and talk with him, I do my job as a courtier. I let him think that he is the most delightful man in the world and I look up at him and I smile and I give him every reason to think that I am still in love with him.'

William's arm came around my waist and held me rather tightly. 'But you're not,' he specified.

'Let me go,' I whispered. 'You're squeezing me too tight.'

His grip tightened a little more.

‘Oh very well,’ I said. ‘No, of course not. I am doing my job as a Boleyn girl, as a Howard courtier. Of course I don’t love him.’

‘And do you love anyone at all?’ he asked conversationally. His grip around my waist was as fierce as ever.

‘Nobody,’ I said provocatively.

One finger under my chin forced my face up and his bright brown gaze scanned me as if he would look into my soul.

‘A nobody,’ I specified.

His kiss, when it came, was as light on my mouth as the brush of a warm feather.



That night, Henry and Francis dined privately at Staple Hall. The ladies in waiting, with Anne leading the way, slipped out from the castle with cloaks around our fine gowns and hoods up over our headdresses. We gathered in the hall outside the chamber and put off our cloaks and helped each other put on our golden dominoes, our golden masks, and our golden hoods. There were no mirrors in the hall so I could not see what I looked like but the others around me were a blaze of gold and I knew I was glittering among them. Anne in particular, her dark eyes glinting through the slits of the golden mask shaped like the face of a hawk, looked rich and wild, her dark hair falling to her shoulders under the golden veil of the hood.

We waited for our cue and then ran in to do our dance. Henry and King Francis could not take their eyes from her. I danced with Sir Francis Weston who whispered appalling suggestions in my ear in French, under the transparent pretext that he thought I was a French lady who would welcome such invitations, and I saw George leading out another lady in his haste to avoid dancing with his wife.

The dance ended and Henry turned to one dancer and unveiled her, then, ceremonially, went around the room taking the visors off all the masked ladies and coming lastly to Anne.

‘Ah, the Marquess of Pembroke,’ King Francis said with every appearance of surprise. ‘When I knew you before you were Mistress Anne Boleyn and the prettiest girl at my court then, just as you are the most beautiful woman at my friend Henry’s court now.’

Anne smiled and turned her head towards Henry to smile at him.

‘There was only one girl who could ever match you and that was the other Boleyn girl,’ King Francis said, looking around for me. Anne’s moment of triumph abruptly dissolved and she gestured me to come forward as if she wished she were showing me to a scaffold. ‘My sister, Your Majesty,’ she said shortly. ‘Lady Carey.’

Francis kissed my hand. ‘*Enchanté*,’ he whispered seductively.

‘Let’s dance again!’ Anne said suddenly, irritated as I knew she would be by any attention paid to me. At once the musicians struck a chord, and for the rest of the night the court made merry and everyone took a great deal of trouble to ensure that Anne was happy.



That evening concluded the formal visit to France and the following day we spent in packing up the goods for the journey home. The wind was against us and we had to linger in Calais, sending every morning to the master of the ship to ask if he could get out of harbour on this day, or the next. Anne and Henry hunted and entertained themselves as well as if they had been in England. Better, actually, since in France there was no-one to cat-call when Anne rode down the street or to shout ‘whore’ at her horse’s hooves. And in the delay William and I were free to meet.

We rode out every afternoon on a firm sand beach to the west of the town, which stretched almost as far as the eye could see. Sometimes the horses would strain to gallop on the hard sand at the water’s edge and we let them have their heads and fly away. Then we would ride up into the dunes, and William would lift me down from the saddle, spread his cape on the ground and the two of us would lie together, arms around each other, kissing and whispering until I was near to weeping with desire.

There were many afternoons when I was tempted to untie the laces of his breeches and let him have me, without ceremony, like a country girl under the seductive sun with only the cry of seagulls to distract us. He kissed me till my mouth was sore with kissing, my lips swollen and chapped, and all the long evening when I had to dine with the ladies without him, I could still feel the bruises from his passionate biting when I put my lips to a cool glass to drink. He touched me all over my body, without shame. His hands unlaced my stomacher at the back so that he could slide it down to my hips, and caress my naked breasts. He bent his brown curly head and suckled at me till I cried out with

pleasure and thought that I would rise up in more and more pleasure until I could hardly bear another moment of it, and then he would plunge his head into my belly and bite me hard on the navel so I flinched with pain and pushed him away and found that I was screaming and fighting him off instead of sighing.

He would wrap me warmly and lie beside me unmoving for long moments until my hunger for him subsided a little. Then he would turn me over and lie his long lean body against my back, take off my cap and lift a handful of hair, so that he could nibble at the nape of my neck and press himself against me so that I felt his hardness even through my gown and underskirt, and I knew myself to be pressing back like a whore, as if to beg him to do the deed, and do it without permission, for I could not say 'Yes'. And God knew that I would not say 'No'.

He would thrust against me, pause, and thrust again, and I would press back, knowing and longing for what would happen next, he would go faster and I would find myself rising towards pleasure, and getting to a point where I could not stop whether I would or no – and then, before I had reached my pleasure, before he had so much as touched me skin to skin, he would pause and give a little sigh and lie down beside me again and gather me to him and kiss my eyelids, and hold me till I stopped trembling.

Every day while the wind blew onshore and kept the ships in the harbour we rode out into the sand dunes and made love which was not making love but which was the most passionate of courtships. And every day I hoped, against myself, that today would be the day when I would whisper 'Yes' or that he would force me to it. But every day he stopped just a second, just a moment, before my consent, and enfolded me in his arms and soothed me as if I were racked with pain instead of desire – and there were many days when I could not have told the one from the other.

We were walking the horses out of the dunes and back to the beach on the twelfth day when William suddenly paused and looked up. 'The wind's changed.'

'What?' I asked stupidly. I was still dazed with pleasure. I did not know that there was a wind. I was hardly aware of the sand beneath my riding boots, the breakers on the beach, the warmth of the evening sun on my left cheek.

'It's offshore,' he said. 'They'll be able to sail.'

I rested my arm on my horse's neck. 'Sail?' I repeated.

He turned and saw my dazed expression and laughed at me. 'Oh sweetheart, you are far away, aren't you? Remember we cannot sail for England because we are waiting for a favourable wind? This is it. The wind's changed. We'll sail

tomorrow.'

The words finally sunk into my understanding. 'So what do we do?'

He looped his horse's reins over his arm and came around to my horse to lift me up into the saddle.

'Set sail, I suppose.' He cupped his hands underneath my boot and tossed me up into the saddle. I recognised the ache in my body as unfulfilled desire, more desire, another day of desire, the twelfth day of unfulfilled desire.

'And then what?' I persisted. 'We can't meet like this at Greenwich.'

'No,' he agreed pleasantly.

'So how shall we meet?'

'You can find me in the stable yard, or I can find you in the garden. We've always managed, have we not?' He mounted his own horse, lightly; he was not trembling like me.

I could not find the words. 'I don't want to meet you like that.'

William adjusted his stirrup leather, frowning slightly, then he straightened up and gave me a polite, rather distant smile.

'I could escort you to Hever in the summer,' he offered.

'That's seven months away!' I exclaimed.

'Yes.'

I rode a little closer to him, I could not believe he was indifferent. 'Don't you want to meet me every afternoon like this?'

'You know I do.'

'Then how is it to be done?'

He gave me a little half-teasing smile. 'I don't think it can be done,' he said gently. 'There are too many enemies of the Howards who would be quick to report you for light behaviour. There are too many spies in your uncle's train for me to be undetected for long. We've been lucky, we've had our twelve days, and they've been very sweet. But I don't think we can have them again in England.'

'Oh.'

I turned my horse's head and felt the sun warm on my back. The waves washed in gently and my horse, fretting a little, shied as they splashed her fetlocks and knees. I could not hold her steady, I could not command her. I could not command myself.

'I think I shan't stay in your uncle's service.' William drew his horse up alongside mine.

'What?'

'I think I'll go to my farm and try my hand as a farmer. It's all there waiting

for me. I'm tired of court. I'm not suited to the life. I'm too independent a man to serve a master, even a great family like yours.'

I straightened up a little. The Howard pride helped. I put back my shoulders and I lifted my chin. 'As you wish,' I said, as cold as he.

He nodded and let his horse drop a little back. We rode towards the walls of the town like a lady and her escort. The entranced lovers of the sand dune were far behind us, we were the Boleyn girl and the Howards' man returning to court.

The sallyport was still open, it was not yet dusk, and we rode side by side through the cobbled streets up to the castle. The gates were open, the drawbridge down, we rode straight into the stable yard. There were men watering the horses and rubbing them down with wisps of straw. The king and Anne had returned half an hour before and their horses were being walked till they were cool before being fed and watered. There was no chance at all of a private conversation.

William lifted me down from the saddle and at the touch of his hands on my waist, his body against mine, I was filled with a sudden fierce yearning for him, so acute that I gave a little cry of pain.

'Are you all right?' he asked, setting me on my feet.

'No!' I said fiercely. 'I am not all right. You know that I am not.'

For a moment he too was shaken out of calmness. He caught my hand and roughly pulled me back to him. 'How you are feeling now is how I have been feeling for months,' he swore in a passionate undertone. 'How you are feeling now is how I have been feeling night and day since I first saw you, and I expect to go on feeling like this for the rest of my life. Think about it, Mary. And you send for me. Send for me when you know that you cannot live without me.'

I twisted my hand out of his grip and I pulled myself away. I half-expected him to come after me but he did not. I walked so slowly that if he had as much as whispered my name I would have heard him, and turned. I walked away from him though my feet dragged at every step. I went through the archway to the castle door though every inch of my body was crying out to stay with him.



I wanted to go to my room and weep but as I went through the great hall George rose up out of a chair and said: 'I've been waiting for you, where've you been?'

'Riding,' I said shortly.

'With William Stafford,' he accused me.

I let him see my red eyes and the quiver of my mouth. 'Yes. So?'

‘Oh God,’ George said, brother-like. ‘Dear God no, you silly whore. Go and wash and get that look off your face, anyone can guess what you’ve been doing.’

‘I’ve done nothing!’ I exclaimed in sudden passion. ‘Nothing! And much good it has done me!’

He hesitated. ‘Just as well. Hurry up.’

I went to my room and splashed water on my eyes and rubbed my face on a drying sheet. When I came into Anne’s presence chamber there were half a dozen ladies playing cards, and George waiting, very sombre, in the window embrasure.

He gave a quick cautious look around the room and then tucked my hand under his arm and led me away to the picture gallery which ran the length of the great hall but was empty at this time of the day.

‘You’ve been seen,’ he said. ‘You can’t have thought you’d get away with it.’

‘With what?’

He stopped short, and looked at me with a seriousness I had never seen before. ‘Don’t be pert,’ he urged me. ‘You were seen coming out of the sand dunes with your head on his shoulder and his arm around your waist and your hair all blowing loose in the wind. Don’t you know that Uncle Howard has spies everywhere? Didn’t you think that you would be bound to be caught?’

‘What’s going to happen?’ I asked fearfully.

‘Nothing, if it stops here. That’s why it’s me telling you, and not Uncle or Father. They don’t want to know. As far as you’re concerned, they don’t know. It’s just between you and me and it need go no further.’

‘I love him, George,’ I said very quietly.

He put his head down and ploughed on down the gallery, dragging me with him by my hand in his arm. ‘Doesn’t make any difference to people like us. You know that.’

‘I can’t sleep, I can’t eat, I can’t do anything but think about him. At night I dream of him, all day I wait to see him, and when I do see him my heart turns over and I think I will faint with desire.’

‘And he?’ George asked, drawn into this despite himself.

I turned my head away so he should not see the sudden pain in my face. ‘I thought he felt the same. But today, when the wind changed, he said we would sail for England and we would not be able to see each other as we had done in France.’

‘Well, he’s right,’ George said brutally. ‘And if Anne had been doing her

business then neither you nor half a dozen other of the ladies would have been dawdling around France flirting with men in your train.'

'It's not like that,' I flared up. 'He's not a man in my train. He's the man I love.'

'D'you remember Henry Percy?' George suddenly demanded.

'Of course.'

'He was in love. More than that, he was betrothed, more than that: he was married. Did it save him? No. He's stuck in Northumberland, married to a woman who loathes him, still in love, still heartbroken, still hopeless. You can choose. You can be in love and heartbroken, or you can make the best you can of it.'

'Like you?' I said.

'Like me,' he said grimly. Despite himself he looked down the gallery to where Sir Francis Weston was leaning over Anne's shoulder, following a music score. Sir Francis felt our gaze on him and looked up. For once he forgot to smile at me, he looked past me at my brother and there was a deep intimacy in the gaze.

'I never follow my desire, I never consult it,' George said grimly. 'I have put my family first and it costs me a heartbeat, every day of my life. I do nothing which might cause Anne embarrassment. Love does not come into it for us Howards. We are courtiers first and foremost. Our life is at court. And true love has no place at court.'

Sir Francis gave a distant little smile when George did not acknowledge him, and turned his attention back to the music.

George pinched my cold fingers as they rested on his arm. 'You have to stop seeing him,' he said. 'You have to promise on your honour.'

'I can't promise on my honour, for I have no honour,' I said bleakly. 'I was married to one man and I cuckolded him with the king. I went back to him and he died, before I had a chance to tell him that I might love him. And now when I find a man that I could love heart and soul, you ask me to promise on my honour not to see him – and I do so promise. On my honour. There is no honour left in us three Boleyns at all.'

'Bravo,' George said. He took me in his arms and kissed me on the mouth. 'And heartbreak becomes you. You look delicious.'



We sailed the next day. I looked for William on the deck and when I saw him, carefully not looking at me, I went below with the other ladies and curled up in a nest of cushions and went to sleep. More than anything else I wanted to sleep the next half year away until I could go to Hever and see my children again.

Winter 1532

The court held Christmas at Westminster and Anne was the hub of every activity. The master of the revels staged masque after masque when she was hailed as Queen of Peace, Queen of Winter, Queen of Christmas. She was called everything but Queen of England, and everyone knew that title would follow very soon. Henry took her to the Tower of London and she had her pick of the treasury of England, as if she were a princess born.

She and Henry now had adjoining apartments. Brazenly, they retired to his room or hers together at night and they emerged together in the morning. He bought her a fur-lined black satin robe to greet the visitors who came into his bedchamber. I was released from my post as chaperone and bedfellow and found myself alone at night for the first time since girlhood. It was a pleasure of sorts to be able to sit by my little fire and know that Anne would not be storming into the room in a temper. But I found I was lonely. I spent long nights daydreaming in front of the fire, and many cold afternoons, looking out of the window at the grey winter rain. The sunshine and the sand dunes of Calais seemed like a million years away. I felt that I was turning to ice, just like the sleet on the tiled roofs.

I looked for William Stafford among my uncle's men and someone told me that he had gone to his farm to see to the lifting of the turnips and the killing of the old beasts. I thought of him, going about his little farmstead, setting things to rights, dealing with real things while I lingered at court, enmeshed in gossip and scandal and thinking of nothing but the pleasure of two idle selfish people and how to entertain them.

In the middle of the twelve-day Christmas feast Anne came to me and asked what signs would tell a woman that she had conceived. We counted the days of her courses and she was due within the week; she was already determined to be sick in the mornings and unable to eat the fat off the meat, but I told her it was too early to know.

She counted the days. Sometimes I could see her holding herself very still and I knew that she was willing herself to be with child.

The day came when she might have bled, and that night she put her head around the door of my room and said triumphantly: 'I am clean. Does that mean I have a baby?'

'One day proves nothing,' I said ungraciously. 'You have to wait a month at least.'

The next day passed, and the next. She did not tell Henry of her hopes but I imagined that he could count like any other man. They both started to have the look of a couple balancing on air like rope dancers at a fair. He did not dare to ask her, but he came to me and asked me if Anne had missed her course.

'Only by a week or two, Your Majesty,' I said respectfully.

'Shall I send for a midwife?' he asked.

'Not yet,' I advised. 'Better to wait for the second month.'

He looked anxious. 'I should not lie with her.'

'Perhaps just be very gentle,' I advised.

He frowned in his anxiety, and I thought that their desire for this baby would rob all the joy from their mating before they were even wed.

In January it was clear that Anne had missed a month for certain, and she told the king that she thought that she might be with his child.

It was touching to see him. He had been so long married to a barren woman, the thought of a fertile wife was damp ploughland in a dry August to him. They were very quiet together, very strange to each other. They had been passionate quarrellers, passionate lovers, and now they wanted to be friends. Anne wanted to rest quietly, she had a terror of doing anything that might disturb the process which was going on in secret in her body. Henry wanted to sit beside her, as if his presence might continue what he had started. He wanted to hold her and walk beside her, and save her from any exertion at all.

He had seen too many pregnancies end in a mess of crying women and disappointment. He had celebrated some live births and had the joy stolen from him by inexplicable deaths. Now he thought that Anne's ready fertility vindicated him completely. God had cursed him for marrying his brother's wife and now God was lifting the curse by making his wife-to-be (his first wife, in Henry's adaptable conscience) so fertile that she conceived within months of lying with him. He treated her with immense tenderness and respect, and he rushed through a new law, so that they might be legally married, under the new English law, in the new English church.

It took place in almost complete secrecy in Whitehall, Anne's London house, the home of her dead adversary, the cardinal. The king's two witnesses were his

friends, Henry Norris and Thomas Heneage, and William Brereton attended him. George and I were commanded to make it seem as though Anne and the king were dining in his privy chamber. We thought the most agreeable way to do this was to order the very best dinner for four and have it served to us sitting in the king's own chamber. The court, watching great dishes going in and out, came to the conclusion that it was a private dinner for the Boleyns and the king. It was a petty revenge for me, to sit in Anne's chair and eat off her plate while she was marrying the King of England, but it amused me. To tell the truth, I tried on her black satin bedgown too, while she was safely out of the way, and George swore that it suited me very well.

Spring 1533

A few months later and the business was done. Anne, forever holding her swelling belly, was publicly announced as the official wife of the king by no less an authority than Archbishop Cranmer, who held the briefest of inquiries into the marriage of Queen Katherine and Henry and discovered that it had always been null and void. The queen did not even attend the court which traduced her name and dishonoured her. She was clinging to her appeal to Rome, and ignoring the English decision. For a moment, foolishly enough, I had looked for her when the announcement was made, thinking that she might be there, defiant in her red gown as she had been defiant before. But she was far away writing to the Pope, to her nephew, to her allies, begging them to insist that her case be tried fairly, before honourable judges in Rome.

But Henry had passed a law, another new law, which said that English disputes could only be judged in English courts. Suddenly, there could be no legal appeal to Rome. I remembered telling Henry that Englishmen would like to see justice done in an English court, never dreaming that English justice would come to mean Henry's whim, just as the church had come to mean Henry's treasury, just as the Privy Council had come to mean Henry and Anne's favourites.

Nobody at the Easter feast mentioned Queen Katherine. It was as if she had never been. Nobody remarked upon it when the stonemasons set to work chipping away the pomegranates of Spain, which had been in place for so long that the stone had weathered like a mountain that has always been there. Nobody asked what Katherine's new title would be, now that there was a new queen in England. Nobody spoke of her at all, it was as if she had died a death so shameful that we were all trying to forget her.

Anne nearly staggered under the weight of the robes of state and the diamonds and jewels in her hair, on her train, on the hem of her gown and laden around her throat and arms. The court was absolutely at her service, and clearly unenthusiastic. George told me that the king planned to have her crowned at Whitsun which this year would fall in June.

‘In the City?’ I asked.

‘It’ll be a performance to put Katherine’s coronation in the shade,’ he said. ‘It has to be.’

William Stafford did not return to court. I minded the tone of my voice very carefully and asked my uncle, while we were watching the king play at bowls, whether he had made William Stafford his master of horse because I would dearly love to have a new hunter for the season.

‘Oh no,’ he said, hearing the lie the moment that it was out of my mouth. ‘He has gone. I had a little word with him after Calais. You won’t see him again.’

I kept my face very still and I did not gasp or flinch. I was a courtier as well as he, and I could take a hit and still ride on. ‘Has he gone to his farm?’ I asked, as if I did not much care one way or another.

‘That, or ridden off to the crusades,’ my uncle said. ‘Good riddance.’

I turned my attention to the game and when Henry made a good throw I clapped very loudly and said: ‘Hurrah!’ Someone offered me a bet but I refused to bet against the king and caught a quick smile from him for that little piece of flattery. I waited till the game was over and when it was clear that Henry was not going to summon me to walk with him, I slipped away from the crowd around him and went to my room.

The fire was out in the little fireplace. The room faced west and was gloomy in the morning. I sat up on my bed and huddled the clothes over my feet and put a blanket around my shoulders like a poor woman in a field. I was miserably cold. I tightened the blanket around me but it did not warm me. I remembered the days on the beach at Calais, the smell of the sea and the gritty sand under my back and in my linen while William touched me and kissed me. In those nights in France I dreamed of him, and woke every morning quite weak with longing, with sand on my pillow from my hair. Even now, my mouth still yearned for his kisses.

I had meant my promise to George. I had said that I was, before anything else, a Boleyn and a Howard through and through; but now, sitting in the shadowy room, looking out over the grey slates of the city, and up at the dark clouds leaning on the roof of Westminster Palace, I suddenly realised that George was wrong, and my family was wrong, and that I had been wrong – for all my life. I was not a Howard before anything else. Before anything else I was a woman who was capable of passion and who had a great need and a great desire for love. I didn’t want the rewards for which Anne had surrendered her youth. I didn’t want the arid glamour of George’s life. I wanted the heat and the

sweat and the passion of a man that I could love and trust. And I wanted to give myself to him: not for advantage, but for desire.

Hardly knowing what I was doing, I rose up from the bed and kicked the clothes aside. 'William,' I said to the empty room. 'William.'



I went down to the stable yard and I ordered my horse to be brought from her stall and said that I was going to Hever to see my children. It was a certainty that my uncle would have a pair of eyes and ears listening and watching in the stable yard but I hoped to be gone before a message could be got to him. The court had gone from the bowling green to dinner, and I thought that if I was lucky, I might be away before any spy found my uncle at liberty to deliver the report which told him that his niece had left for her home without an escort.

It was dark within a couple of hours, that cold spring dark that comes on first very grey and then quickly as black as winter. I was hardly clear of the city, coming into a little village that called itself Canning where I could see the high walls and porter's door of a monastery. I hammered on the door and when they saw the quality of my horse, they took me in and showed me to a small white-washed cell and gave me a slice of meat, a slice of bread, a piece of cheese and a cup of small ale for my dinner.

In the morning they offered me exactly the same fare to break my fast and I took Mass on a rumbling belly, thinking that Henry's fulminations against the corruption and wealth of the church should make allowances for little communities like this.

I had to ask for directions to Rochford. The house and the estate had been in the Howard family for years but we seldom visited it. I had been there only once, and that by river. I had no idea of the road. But there was a lad in the stable who said that he knew his way to Tilbury, and the monk who served as master of the horse for the couple of riding mules and the draft horses for ploughing said that the boy could ride with me on an old cob to show me the way.

He was a nice lad, called Jimmy, and he rode bareback, kicking his bare heels against the dusty sides of his old horse, singing at the top of his voice. We made an odd couple: the urchin and the lady, as we rode along the track beside the river. It was hard riding, the track was dust and pebbles in some places, mud in others. Where it crossed the streams which flowed to the Thames there were fords and sometimes deceptive quagmires where my horse shied and fretted at

the shifting sand and sucking mud beneath her feet and only the steadiness of Jimmy's old hack kept her going on. We ate our dinner at a farm in a village called Rainham. The goodwife offered me a boiled egg and some black bread as being all that the house could afford. Jimmy ate bread with nothing else, and seemed well pleased. There were a couple of dried apples for our dessert and I nearly laughed as I thought of the dinner I was missing at the palace at Westminster, with the half-dozen side dishes and the dozens of meat dishes served on gold platters.

I was not nervous. For the first time ever I felt as if I had taken my life into my own hands and I could command my own destiny. For once I was obedient neither to uncle nor father nor king, but following my own desires. And I knew that my desire led me, inexorably, to the man I loved.

I did not doubt him. I did not think for one moment that he might have forgotten me, or taken up with some drab from the village, or married an heiress picked out for him. No, I sat on the tailboard of a wheel-less wagon and watched Jimmy spitting apple pips up into the air, and for once I had the sense to trust.

We rode for a couple more hours after dinner and came into the little market town of Grays as it started to get dark. Tilbury was further down the road, Jimmy assured me, but if I wanted Rochford, beyond Southend, he had a notion that I could cut away from the river and ride due east.

Grays boasted a little ale house, no farmhouse of any size, but a good manor house, drawn back from the road. I toyed with the idea of riding up to the manor house and claiming my right, as a benighted traveller, to their hospitality. But I was afraid of my uncle's influence, which stretched all over the kingdom. And I was starting to become uneasy about the dust in my hair and the dirt on my face and clothes. Jimmy was as filthy as a street urchin, no house of any quality would have put him anywhere but in the stable.

'We'll go to the ale house,' I decided.

It was a better place than it at first appeared. It profited from the traffic to and from Tilbury where travellers from the capital frequently chose to embark, rather than wait for the tide or the barges to take their ships up to the pool of London. They could offer me a bed with curtains in a shared room, and Jimmy a straw mattress in the kitchen. They killed and cooked a chicken for my dinner and served it with wheaten bread and a glass of wine. I even managed to wash in a basin of cold water so my face was clean, even if my hair was filthy. I slept in my clothes, and kept my riding boots under my pillow for fear of thieves. In the morning I had the uneasy sense that I smelled, and a string of fleabites across my

belly under my stomacher which itched more and more infuriatingly as the day went on.

I had to let Jimmy go in the morning. He had promised only to show me the way to Tilbury, and it was a long ride back for a little lad on his own. He was not in the least daunted by it. He hopped from the mounting block onto the bowed back of his hack and accepted a coin from me, and a hunk of bread and cheese for his dinner on the road. We rode out together till our paths diverged and he pointed me on the track towards Southend, and then went westwards himself, back towards London.

It was empty countryside that I rode through alone. Empty and flat and desolate. I thought that farming this land would be very different from being enfolded in the fertile weald of Kent. I rode briskly, and kept a good look about me, apprehensive that the desolate road through the marshes could be haunted by thieves. In fact, the sheer emptiness of the countryside was my friend. There were no highwaymen since there were no travellers to steal from. In the hours from dawn till noon I saw only a little lad scaring crows from a newly sown vegetable patch, and in the distance a ploughman churning the mud on the edge of the marsh, a plume of seagulls rising up like smoke behind him.

The going was slow as the track went through the marshes and became waterlogged and muddy. The wind blew in from the river bringing the smell of brine. I passed a couple of villages which were little more than mud, shaped into houses, with mud walls and mud roofs. A couple of children stared and then ran after me, crying with excitement as I went past, and they were the colour of mud, too. It was getting to be dusk as I rode into Southend and I looked around for somewhere that I could spend the night.

There were a few houses, and a small church, and the priest's house beside it. I tapped on the door and the housekeeper answered me with a discouraging scowl. I told her that I was travelling and asked her for hospitality and she showed me, with the most unwilling air, into a small room which adjoined the kitchen. I thought that if I had been a Boleyn and a Howard I would have cursed her for her rudeness, but instead I was a poor woman, with nothing in the world but a handful of coins and an absolute determination.

'Thank you,' I said, as if it were an adequate lodging. 'And can I have some water to wash in? And something to eat?'

The chink of the coins in my purse changed her refusal to an assent and she went to fetch me water and then a bowl of meat pottage, which looked and tasted very much as if it had been in the pot for a couple of days. I was too hungry to

care, and too tired to argue. I ate it up and wiped the wooden trencher clean with a piece of bread, and then I fell into the little pallet bed and slept till dawn.

She was up in the morning in the kitchen, sweeping the floor and riddling the fire to cook her master's breakfast. I borrowed a drying sheet from her and went out into the yard to wash my face and hands. I washed my feet too, under the pump, scolded all the time by a flock of chickens. I very much wanted to strip off my clothes and wash all over, and then wear clean clothes, but I might as well have wished for a litter and bearers to take me the last few miles. If he loved me, he would not mind a little dirt. If he did not love me, then the dirt would be nothing to me – compared with that catastrophe.

The housekeeper was curious at breakfast as to what I was doing travelling alone. She had seen the horse and my gown and knew what both would be worth. I said nothing, slipped a slice of bread into the pocket of my gown, and went out to saddle my horse. When I was mounted and ready to go I called her out to the yard. 'Can you tell me the way to Rochford?'

'Out of the gate and turn left down the track,' she said. 'Just keep heading eastwards. You should be there in about an hour. Who was it you wanted to see? The Boleyn family are always at court.'

I mumbled a reply. I did not want her to know that I, a Boleyn, had ridden out such a long way for a man who had not even invited me. As I grew nearer to his home I was more and more fearful and I did not need any witnesses to my boldness. I clicked to my horse, and rode out of the yard, turned left, as she had told me, and then straight into the rising sun.



Rochford was a little hamlet of half a dozen houses gathered around an ale house at a crossroads. My family's great house was set back behind high brick walls with a good-sized park around it. I could not even see it from the road. I had no fear that any of the house servants would see me, and no-one would recognise me if they did.

An idle youth of about twenty lounged against a cottage wall and watched the empty lane. It was very flat and windy. It was very cold. If this had been a test of knight errantry it could not have been more discouraging. I put up my chin and called to the man: 'William Stafford's farm?'

He took the straw from his mouth and strolled over towards my horse. I turned the horse a little, so that he could not put his hand on the reins. He

stepped back when the powerful hindquarters moved around, and pulled his forelock.

‘William Stafford?’ he repeated in complete bewilderment.

I brought out a penny from my pocket and held it between my gloved finger and thumb. ‘Yes,’ I said.

‘The new gentleman?’ he asked. ‘From London? Appletree Farm,’ he said, pointing up the road. ‘Turn right, towards the river. Thatched house with a stable yard. Apple tree by the road.’

I flipped the coin towards him and he caught it with one hand. ‘You from London too?’ he asked curiously.

‘No,’ I said. ‘From Kent.’

Then I turned and rode up the road looking out for the river, an apple tree, and a thatched house with a stable yard.



The ground fell away from the road towards the river. At the river’s edge there were reed beds and a flight of ducks suddenly quacked in alarm and up sprang a heron, all long legs and bow-shaped breast, flapping his huge wings and then settling a little further downstream. The fields were hedged with low quickset and hawthorn, at the water’s edge the ragged meadows showed yellow, probably spoiled with salt, I thought. Nearer the road they were dull and green with the fatigue of winter, but in spring I thought William might get a good grass crop off them.

On the far side of the road the land was higher and ploughed. Water was glinting in every furrow, this would always be wet land. Further north I could see some fields planted with apple trees. There was a big old solitary apple tree leaning over the road and the branches brushed low. The bark was silvery grey, the twigs chunky with age. A bush of green mistletoe was thick in one fork in a branch and, on an impulse, I rode my horse up to it and picked a sprig, so I was holding that most pagan plant in my hand as I turned off the road and went down the little track to his farmhouse.

It was a little farmhouse, like a child might draw. A long low house, four windows long along the upper storey, two and a central doorway on the lower. The doorway was like a stable door, top and bottom. I imagined that in the not very distant past the farmer’s family and the animals would all have slept inside together. At the side of the house was a good stable yard, cobbled and clean, and

a field with half a dozen cows beside it. A horse nodded over the gate and I recognised William Stafford's hunter that had galloped beside me on the sandy beaches at Calais. The horse whinnied when he saw us, and mine cried back as if she too remembered those sunny days at the end of autumn.

At the noise the front door opened and a figure came out of the dark interior and stood, hands on hips, watching me ride down the road. He did not move or speak as I rode up to the garden gate. I slipped down from the saddle unaided, and opened his gate without a word of welcome from him. I hitched the reins to the side of the gate and, with the mistletoe still in my hand, I walked up to him.

After all this long journey, I found I had nothing to say. My whole sense of purpose and determination scattered the moment I saw him.

'William,' was all that I managed, and I held out the little twig of mistletoe with the white buds as if it was a tribute.

'What?' he asked unhelpfully. He still made no move towards me.

I pulled off my hood and shook out my hair. I was suddenly, overwhelmingly conscious that he had never seen me anything but washed and perfumed. And here I was, in the same gown I had worn for three days, flea-bitten, lousy, dusty and smelling of horse and sweat, and hopelessly, helplessly inarticulate.

'What?' he repeated.

'I've come to marry you, if you still want me.' There seemed to be no way to mitigate the baldness of the words.

His expression gave nothing away. He looked at the road behind me. 'Who brought you?'

I shook my head. 'I came alone.'

'What's gone wrong at court?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'It's never been better. They're married and she's with child. The Howards never had fairer prospects. I will be aunt to the King of England.'

William gave a short barking laugh at that, and I looked down at my filthy boots and the dust on my riding habit and laughed too. When I looked back up his eyes were very warm.

'I have nothing,' he warned me. 'I am a nobody, as you rightly said.'

'I have nothing but a hundred pounds a year,' I said. 'I'll lose that when they know where I have gone. And I am nobody without you.'

He made a quick gesture with his hand as if he would draw me to him, but still he held back. 'I won't be the cause of your ruin,' he said. 'I won't have you

become the poorer for loving me.'

I felt myself tremble at his nearness, at my desire for him to hold me. 'It doesn't matter,' I said urgently. 'I swear to you that it doesn't matter to me any more.'

He opened his arms to me at that, and I stepped and half-fell forward. He snatched me up and crushed me against him, his mouth on mine, his demanding kisses all over my dirty face, on my eyelids and cheeks and lips and then finally plunging into my open longing mouth. Then he lifted me up into his arms and carried me across the threshold of his house, and up the stairs into the bedroom, into the clean linen sheets of his duckdown bed, and into joy.



Much later he laughed at the fleabites, and he brought me a great wooden bath which he filled with water and set before the big fire in the kitchen, and combed my hair for lice while I lolled my head back and soaked in the hot sweet-smelling water. He put my stomacher and skirt and linen to one side for washing and insisted that I dress in his shirt and a pair of his trousers which I kilted in around my waist and rolled up the legs like a sailor on deck. He turned out my horse into the meadow where she rolled with pleasure at being rid of the saddle, and cantered around with William's hunter, bucking and kicking like a filly. Then he cooked me a big bowl of porridge with yellow honey, and cut me a slice of wheaten bread with creamy butter, and a slab of thick soft Essex cheese. He laughed at my travels with Jimmy and scolded me for setting off without an escort, and then he took me back to bed and we made love all the afternoon till the sky darkened and we were hungry again.

We ate dinner by candlelight in the kitchen. In my honour, William killed an old chicken and spit-roasted it. I was armed with a pair of his gauntlets and delegated to turn the spit while he sliced bread and drew the small ale, and went to the cool pantry for butter and cheese.

When we had eaten we drew up our stools to the fire and drank to each other, and then sat in a rather surprised silence.

'I can't believe this,' I said after a little while. 'I thought no further than getting to you. I didn't think about your home. I didn't think what we would do next.'

'And what d'you think now?'

'I still don't know what to think,' I confessed. 'I suppose I will become

accustomed. I shall be a farmer's wife.'

He leaned forward and tossed a slab of peat on the fire. It settled with the others and started to glow red. 'And your family?' he asked.

I shrugged.

'Did you leave a note?'

I shook my head. 'Nothing.'

He cracked a laugh. 'Oh my love, what were you thinking of?'

'I was thinking of you,' I said simply. 'I just suddenly realised how much I loved you. All I could think of was that I should come to you.'

William reached across and stroked my hair. 'You're a good girl,' he said approvingly.

I gave a little gurgle of laughter. 'A good girl?'

'Yes,' he said, unabashed. 'Very.'

I leaned back against his caress and his hand strayed from my head to the nape of my neck. He took it in a firm grasp and shook me gently, like a mother cat might hold a kitten. I closed my eyes and melted into his touch.

'You can't stay here,' he said softly.

I opened my eyes in surprise. 'No?'

'No.' He lifted his hand to forestall me. 'Not because I don't love you, because I do. And we must be married. But we have to get the most we can from this.'

'D'you mean money?' I asked, a little dismayed.

He shook his head. 'I mean your children. If you come to me without a word of warning, without the support of anyone, you'll never get your children. You'll never even see them again.'

I pressed my lips together against the pain. 'Anne can take them from me at any moment, anyway.'

'Or return them,' he reminded me. 'You said she was breeding?'

'Yes. But –'

'If she has a son she'll have no need of yours. We need to be ready to pick him up when she drops him.'

'D'you think I might get him back?'

'I don't know. But you have to be at court to play for him.' His hand was warm on my shoulders through the linen of the shirt. 'I'll come back with you,' he said. 'I can leave a man to run the farm for a season or two. The king will give me a place. And we can be together until we see which way the wind is blowing. We'll get the children if we can, and then we'll get clear and come

back here.' He hesitated for a moment and I saw a shadow cross his face. He looked uncomfortable. 'Is it good enough for them here?' he asked shyly. 'They're used to Hever, and there's your family's own great house just up the lane. They're gentry born and bred. This is only a little place.'

'They'll be with us,' I said simply. 'And we'll love them. They'll have a new family, a sort of family that no nobleman has ever had before. A father and a mother who married for love, who chose each other despite wealth and position. It should be better for them, not worse.'

'And you?' he asked. 'It's not Kent.'

'It's not Westminster Palace either,' I said. 'I took my decision when I realised that nothing would compensate me for not being with you. I realised then that I need you. Whatever else it costs, I want to be with you.'

The grip on my shoulders tightened and he drew me off my stool and onto his lap. 'Say it again,' he whispered. 'I think that I am dreaming this.'

'I need you,' I whispered, my eyes searching his intent face. 'Whatever else it costs, I want to be with you.'

'Will you marry me?' he asked.

I closed my eyes and leaned my forehead against the warm column of his neck. 'Oh yes,' I said. 'Oh yes.'



We were married as soon as my gown and my linen were washed and dried since I refused absolutely to go to the church in his breeches. The priest knew William, and opened the church for us the very next day and performed the service with absent-minded speed. I didn't mind. I had been married first at the royal chapel in Greenwich Palace with the king in attendance and the marriage had been a cover for a love affair within a few years, and had ended in death. This wedding, so simple and easy, would take me to a quite different future: a house of my own with a man that I loved.

We walked back to the farmhouse hand in hand and we had a wedding feast of freshly baked bread and a ham which William had smoked in his chimney.

'I shall have to learn how to do all of this,' I said uneasily, looking up to the rafters where the three remaining legs of William's last pig were hanging.

He laughed. 'It's easy enough,' he said. 'And we'll get a girl in to help you. We'll need a couple of women working here when the babies come.'

'The babies?' I asked, thinking of Catherine and Henry.

He smiled. 'Our babies,' he said. 'I want a house filled with little Staffords. Don't you?'



We set off back to Westminster the next day. I had already sent a note upriver to George, imploring him to tell Anne and my uncle that I had been taken ill. I said that I had been so afraid that it was the sweat that I left court without seeing them, and had gone to Hever until I recovered. It was a lie too late, and too unlikely to convince anyone who thought about it, but I was gambling on the fact that with Anne married to the king and pregnant with his child, no-one would be thinking or caring very much what I did at all.

We went back to London by barge, with the two horses loaded with us. I was reluctant to go. I had meant to leave court and live with William in the country, not to disrupt his plans and take him away from his farm. But William was determined. 'You'll never settle without your children,' he predicted. 'And I don't want your unhappiness on my conscience.'

'So it's not an act of generosity at all,' I said with spirit.

'Last thing I want is a miserable wife,' he said cheerfully. 'I've tried to ride with you from Hever to London, remember. I know what a sad little drab you can be.'



We caught an incoming tide and an onshore wind and we made good time upriver. We landed at Westminster stairs and I walked up while William went round to the jetty to unload the horses. I promised to meet him on the stairs to the great hall within the hour; by that time I should have discovered how the land lay.

I went straight to George's rooms. Oddly, his door was locked and so I tapped on it, the Boleyn knock, and waited for his response. I heard a scuffling and then the door swung open. 'Oh it's you,' George said.

Sir Francis Weston was with him, straightening his doublet as I came into the room.

'Oh,' I said, stepping back.

'Francis took a fall from his horse,' George said. 'Can you walk all right

now, Francis?’

‘Yes, but I’ll go and rest,’ he said. He bowed low over my hand and did not comment on the state of my gown and cape which bore all the signs of hard wear and home washing.

As soon as the door was shut behind him I turned to George. ‘George, I’m so sorry, but I had to go. Did you manage to lie for me?’

‘William Stafford?’ he asked.

I nodded.

‘I thought as much,’ he said. ‘God, what fools we both are.’

‘Both of us?’ I asked, warily.

‘In our different ways,’ he said. ‘Went to him and had him, did you?’

‘Yes,’ I said shortly. I did not dare trust even George with the explosive news that we were married. ‘And he’s come back to court with me. Will you get him a place with the king? He can’t serve Uncle again.’

‘I can get him something,’ George said doubtfully. ‘Howard stock is very high at the moment. But what d’you want with him at court? You’re bound to be found out.’

‘George, please,’ I said. ‘I’ve asked for nothing. Everyone has had places or land or money from Anne’s rise, but I have asked for nothing except my children, and she has taken my son. This is the first thing I’ve ever asked for.’

‘You’ll get caught,’ George warned. ‘And then disgraced.’

‘We all have secrets,’ I said. ‘Even Anne herself. I’ve protected Anne’s secrets, I’d protect you, I want you to do the same for me.’

‘Oh very well,’ he said unwillingly. ‘But you must be discreet. No more riding out together alone. For God’s sake don’t get yourself in pup. And if Uncle finds a husband for you, you’ll have to marry. Love or no.’

‘I’ll deal with that when it happens,’ I said. ‘And you’ll get him a place?’

‘He can be a gentleman usher to the king. But make very sure that he knows it is my favour that has bought it for him, and that he keeps his ears and eyes open in my interest. He’s my man now.’

‘No he’s not,’ I said with a sly smile. ‘He’s very much mine.’

‘Good God, what a whore,’ my brother laughed, and pulled me into his arms.

‘And am I safe? Did they all believe I went to Hever?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Nobody noticed you gone at all for a day. They asked me if I had taken you to Hever without permission and it seemed the safest thing to say yes, until I knew what the devil you were doing. I said you feared that the children were ill. When I got your note the lie was already told, and so I’ve stuck

to it. Everyone thinks that you dashed off to Hever and I took you. It's not a bad lie and it should hold.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'I'd better go and change my gown before anyone sees me like this.'

'You'd better throw it away. You're a mad romp, you know, Marianne. I never thought you had it in you. It was always Anne who insisted on going her own way. I thought you would do as you are told.'

'Not this time,' I said, blew him a kiss, and left him.



I met William as I had promised; but it was odd and uncomfortable to have to stand at arm's distance and speak like strangers when I wanted his arms around me and his kisses in my hair.

'George lied for me already, so I am safe. And he says he can get you the post of gentleman usher to the king.'

'How I rise in the world!' William said sardonically. 'I knew that marriage to you would benefit me. Farmer to gentleman usher in one day.'

'The block the next day if you don't mind your tongue,' I warned him.

He laughed and took my hand and kissed it. 'I'll go and find some lodgings just outside the walls and we can spend every night together even if we have to spend our days apart like this.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I want that.'

He smiled at me. 'You're my wife,' he said gently. 'I'm not going to let you go now.'



I found Anne in the queen's chambers, starting work with her ladies on an enormous altar cloth. The sight was so reminiscent of Queen Katherine that for a moment I blinked, and then I saw the crucial differences. Anne's ladies were all Howard family members or our chosen favourites. Prettiest of the girls was undoubtedly our cousin Madge Shelton, the new Howard girl at court, wealthiest and most influential was Jane Parker, George's wife. The very air of the room was different: Queen Katherine often had one of us reading to her, from the Bible or from some book of sermons. Anne had music, there were four

musicians playing as I came in, and one of the ladies lifted her head and sang as she worked.

And there were gentlemen in the room. Queen Katherine, brought up in the strict seclusion of the Spanish royal court, was always formal – even after years in England. The gentlemen visited with the king, they were always made welcome and always royally entertained – but in general the courtiers did not linger in the queen’s rooms. What flirtations there were took place in the unsupervised freedom of the gardens or out hunting.

The state kept by Anne was far more merry. There were half a dozen men in the room; Sir William Brereton was there, helping Madge to sort the embroidery silks into colours, Sir Thomas Wyatt was in the windowseat listening to the music, Sir Francis Weston was looking over Anne’s shoulder and praising her sewing, and in a corner of the room Jane Parker was in whispered talk with James Wyville.

Anne barely glanced up when I came in, in a clean green gown. ‘Oh you’re back,’ she said indifferently. ‘Are the children well again?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It was only a rheum.’

‘It must be lovely at Hever,’ Sir Thomas Wyatt remarked from the windowseat. ‘Are the daffodils out by the river?’

‘Yes,’ I lied quickly. ‘In bud,’ I corrected myself.

‘But the fairest flower of Hever is here,’ Sir Thomas said, looking over at Anne.

She glanced up from her sewing. ‘And also in bud,’ she said provocatively, and the ladies laughed with her.

I looked from Sir Thomas to Anne. I had not thought that she would have even hinted at her pregnancy, especially before gentlemen.

‘Would that I were the little bee that played in the petals,’ Sir Thomas said, continuing the bawdy jest.

‘You would find the flower closed quite tight against you,’ Anne said.

Jane Parker’s bright eyes turned from one player to the other as if she were watching tennis. The whole game suddenly seemed to me a waste of the time that I could have been spending with William, yet another masque in the unending make-believe of the court. I was hungry for real love now.

‘When do we move?’ I asked, breaking into the flirtation. ‘When do we go on progress?’

‘Next week,’ Anne said indifferently, snipping a thread. ‘We go to Greenwich, I believe. Why?’

‘I’m tired of the City.’

‘How restless you are,’ Anne complained. ‘Only just back from Hever and you want to be off again. You need a man to tie you down, sister. You’ve been a widow for too long.’

At once I subsided into the windowseat beside Sir Thomas. ‘No indeed,’ I said. ‘See, I am as quiet as any sleeping cat.’

Anne laughed shortly. ‘Anyone would think that you had an aversion to men.’

The ladies laughed at the note of malice.

‘Just a disinclination.’

‘You never had a reputation for being disinclined,’ Anne said cattily.

I smiled back at her. ‘You never had a reputation for being willing. But now, see, we are both happy.’

She bit her lip at that retort, and I saw her think of snubs which she could make in reply, and reject half of them for being too bawdy, or too near to the truth of her own status as a royal mistress no better than I had been.

‘Praise God for it,’ she said piously and bent her head to her work.

‘Amen,’ I returned, as sweet as she.



They were long days for me at Westminster in Anne’s court. I could see William only by chance during the day. As a gentleman usher he was required to be in close attendance to the king. Henry took a liking to him, consulted him about horses and often rode with him at his side. I thought it ironic that my William, a man completely unsuited to the life of court, should find himself so favoured. But Henry liked straightforward speech as long as it agreed with him.

Only at night could William and I be alone together. He had hired some rooms just across the road from the great palace of Westminster, an attic in the very rafters of an old building. When we lay awake after making love I could hear the sleepy birds settling in their nests in the thatch. We had a little pallet bed, a table and two stools, a fireplace where we warmed up our dinner from the palace, and nothing more. We wanted nothing more.

I woke at dawn every morning to his touch, the delight of his warmth and the heady smell of his skin. I had never before lain with a man who had loved me completely, for myself, and it was a dizzy experience. I had never lain with a man whose touch I adored without any need to hide my adoration, or exaggerate

it, or adjust it at all. I simply loved him as if he were my one and only lover, and he loved me too with the same simplicity of appetite and desire which made me wonder what I thought I had been doing all those years when I had been dealing in the false coin of vanity and lust. I had not known then that all along there had been this other currency of pure gold.



Anne's coronation was overshadowed by a violent quarrel with our uncle. I was in her room when he raged at her, swearing that she had become so great in her own mind that she forgot who put her there. Anne, infuriatingly smug, put her hand on her swelling belly and told him that she was great in her body, and that she was very well aware who had put it there.

'By God, Anne, you will remember your family,' he swore.

'How should I forget them? They are around me like wasps around a honeypot. Every time I step, I trip over one of you, asking for another favour.'

'I don't ask,' he snapped. 'I have rights.'

She turned her head at that. 'Not over me! You are speaking to your queen.'

'I am speaking to my niece who would have been banished from the court in disgrace for bedding Henry Percy if it were not for me,' he spat at her.

She leaped to her feet as if she would fly at him.

'Anne!' I cried out. 'Sit! Be still!' I looked at my uncle. 'She *must* not be upset! The baby!'

He looked murderously at her, then he got his temper under control. 'Of course,' he said with stilted politeness. 'Sit, Anne. Be calm.'

She sank down into her seat again. 'Never speak of that,' she hissed at him. 'I swear it, uncle or no uncle, if you raise that old slander against me I will have you out of court.'

'I am Earl Marshal,' he said through his teeth. 'I was one of the greatest men in England when you were still in the nursery.'

'And before Bosworth your father was a traitor in the Tower,' she said triumphantly. 'Remember, as I do, that we are Howards together. If you are not on my side, I am not on yours. You could see the inside of the Tower again at one word from me.'

'Say it,' he spat at her and stalked from the room without a bow. She stared after him. 'I hate him,' she said very quietly. 'I will see him broken to a nobody.'

'Don't think that,' I said hastily. 'You need him.'

‘I need no-one,’ she said flatly. ‘The king is wholly mine. I have his heart, I have his desire, and I am carrying his son. I need no-one.’



The quarrel with Uncle Howard was still not mended when he arrived to escort Anne to her coronation in the City. It was to be, as George had predicted, the finest coronation that anyone had ever seen. Anne had ordered them to burn away the pomegranate crest on Queen Katherine’s barge as if Katherine had been a usurper, instead of rightful queen. In their place was Anne’s own coat of arms and her initials entwined with Henry’s. People mocked even that – saying that they read HA HA! and the last laugh was on poor England. Anne’s new motto was everywhere: ‘the most happy’. Even George had snorted when he first heard it. ‘Anne, happy?’ he said. ‘When she is Queen of Heaven and has pulled down the Virgin Mary herself.’

We went by barges to the Tower of London, flying flags of gold and white and silver, and the king was waiting for us at the great watergate. They held our barge steady as Anne disembarked, and I watched her, almost as if she was a stranger to me. She rose off her throne and glided down the gangplank as if she had been a queen born and bred. She was wonderfully gowned in silver and gold with a fur cape around her shoulders. She did not look like my sister, she did not look like any mortal woman at all. She carried herself as if she were the greatest queen that had ever been born.

We spent two nights in the Tower and on the first there was a great dinner and entertainment at which Henry gave out honours to celebrate the day. He made eighteen Knights of the Bath and gave out a dozen knighthoods, three of them to his favourite gentlemen ushers, including my husband. William came to find me, after the king had tapped him on the shoulder with his sword and given him the kiss of fealty. He led me out for a dance where we could mingle with the court and hope that no-one would notice the queen’s sister dancing with a gentleman usher.

‘Well then, my Lady Stafford,’ he said softly. ‘How is this for ambition?’

‘Vaulting,’ I said. ‘You will be as high as a Howard, I know it.’

‘Actually I am glad of it,’ he said, reverting to a low confidential whisper as we watched the pair of dancers in the middle of the circle. ‘I did not want you to be lowered by marrying me.’

‘I would have married you if you had been a peasant,’ I said firmly.

He chuckled at that. 'My love, I saw how upset you were about the fleabites. I don't think you would have married me if I had been a peasant at all.'

I turned to laugh at him and then I caught a furious glance from George who was paired to dance with Madge Shelton. At once I steadied myself. 'George is watching us.'

William nodded. 'He'd do better to take care of himself.'

'Oh why?'

It was our turn to dance. William took me to the centre of the circle and we danced together, three steps one way, three steps the other. It was a courtship dance, it was hard to perform without drawing close and locking our gaze. I kept reminding myself not to let my face show my delight in him. William was less discreet than me. Every time I stole a glance at him his eyes were on me as if he would eat me up. I was relieved when we danced around the line of the circle and out under an arch of arms, and the dance became general again.

'What about George?'

'Bad company,' William said shortly.

I laughed out loud. 'He's a Howard, and a friend of the king,' I said. 'He's supposed to be in bad company.'

I saw him change tack. 'Oh, it's nothing, I suppose.'

The musicians reached the end and played a final chord. I drew William to the side of the hall.

'Now tell me truly what you mean.'

'Sir Francis Weston is forever with him,' William said, driven to speak. 'And he has a bad reputation.'

At once I was on my guard. 'You'll have heard of nothing but a young man's wildness.'

'More,' William said shortly.

'What more?'

William looked about him as if he wanted to escape this inquisition. 'I've heard they're lovers.'

I took a little breath.

'You knew?'

I nodded, saying nothing.

'My God, Mary.' William took a step away from me, and then came back to my side. 'You did not tell me? Your own brother deep in sin and you didn't tell me?'

'Of course not,' I exclaimed. 'I don't hold him up to shame. He is my

brother. And he might change.'

'You give him loyalty before me?'

'As well as you,' I said swiftly. 'William, this is my brother. We are the three Boleyns, we all three need each other. We all three know a dozen things, a score of things which are the greatest of secrets. I am not yet wholly Lady Stafford.'

'Your brother is a sodomite!' he hissed at me.

'And still my brother!' I grabbed his arm, careless of who might see us, and dragged him to an alcove. 'He is a sodomite, and my sister is a whore, and perhaps a poisoner, and I am a whore. My uncle has been the falsest of friends, my father a time-server, my mother – God knows – some even say she had the king before the two of us! All of this you knew or you could have deduced. Now tell me, am I good enough for you? For I knew that you were a nobody and I came to find you all the same. If you want to rise to be a somebody in this court you will get blood or shit on your hands. I have had to learn this through a hard apprenticeship since I was a little girl. You can learn it now if you have the stomach.'

William gasped at my vehemence and stepped back to take me in. 'I didn't mean to distress you.'

'He is my brother. She is my sister. Come what will, they are my kin.'

'They could be our enemies both,' he warned.

'They could be my enemies till death and they would still be my brother and sister,' I said.

We paused.

'Kin and enemies all at once?'

'Perhaps,' I said. 'It depends on how this great gamble goes.'

William nodded.

'So what do they say about him?' I asked more steadily. 'What did you hear?'

'It's not widely known, thank God, but they say there is a secret court within a court, they circle your sister, they are her closest friends, but at the same time they are lovers among themselves. Sir Francis is one, Sir William Brereton another. Hard gamblers, great horse-riders, men who will do anything for a dare, anything that brings them pleasure or excitement – and George is among them. They're always around the queen, it's her rooms where they meet and flirt and play. So Anne is compromised too.'

I looked across the hall at my brother. He was leaning over the back of

Anne's throne and whispering in her ear. I saw her tilt her head to his intimate whisper and giggle.

'This life would corrupt a saint, never mind a young man.'

'He wanted to be a soldier,' I said sadly. 'A great crusader, a knight with a white shield riding out against the infidel.'

William shook his head. 'We'll save the boy Henry from this if we can,' he said.

'My son?'

He nodded. 'Our son. We'll try to give him a life of some purpose, not idleness and pleasure-seeking. And you had better warn your brother and your sister that their circle of friends are the subject of whispers, and he the worst.'



Anne entered the City the following day, I helped her to dress in her white gown with a white surcoat and a mantle of white ermine. She wore her dark hair loose about her shoulders with a golden veil and circlet of gold. She rode into London on a litter pulled by two white ponies with the Barons of the Cinque Ports holding a canopy of cloth of gold over her head, and the whole court, dressed in their finest, following on foot behind her. There were triumphal arches, there were fountains pouring wine, there were loyal poems at every stopping point, but the whole procession wound through a city of terrible silence.

Madge Shelton was beside me as we walked behind Anne's litter in the silence which grew increasingly ominous as we went down the narrow streets to the cathedral. 'Good God, this is dreadful,' she muttered.

London was sulking, the people were out in their thousands but they did not wave flags or call blessings or shout Anne's name. They stared at her with a dreadful hungry curiosity as if they would see the woman who had wrought such a change in England, such a change in the king, and who had finally cut the very mantle of queenship into her own gown.

If her entrance to the City was bleak, her coronation on the second day of silent celebrations was no better. This time she wore crimson velvet trimmed with the softest whitest fur of ermine with a mantle of purple, and a face like thunder.

'Aren't you happy now, Anne?' I asked as I twitched her train straight.

She showed a smile which was more a grimace. 'The most happy,' she said bitterly, quoting her own motto. 'The most happy. I should be, shouldn't I? I

have everything I ever wanted, and it was only me, first and last, who believed that I could get it. I am queen, I am the wife of the King of England. I have thrown down Katherine and taken her place. I should be the happiest woman in the world.'

'And he loves you,' I said, thinking of how my life was transformed by being loved by a good man.

Anne shrugged her shoulders. 'Oh yes,' she said indifferently. She touched her belly. 'If only I could know it was a boy. If only I could have been crowned with a prince already in the nursery.'

Gently I patted her shoulder, awkward at the intimacy. Since we had stopped sharing a bed we seldom touched. Since she had a household of maids I no longer brushed her hair or laced her gown. She was intimate still with George but she had grown apart from me; and the theft of my son had left an unspoken resentment between us. I felt odd that she should confide a weakness to me. The polished veneer of queenship had spread over Anne like a glaze over a figurine.

'Not long to wait,' I said gently.

'Three months.'

There was a knock at the door and Jane Parker came in, her face bright with excitement. 'They're waiting for you!' she said breathlessly. 'It's time. Are you ready?'

'I beg your pardon?' Anne said glacially. At once my sister disappeared behind the mask of queenship. Jane dropped into a curtsey. 'Your Majesty! I beg your pardon! I should have said that they are waiting for Your Majesty.'

'I'm ready,' Anne said and rose to her feet. The rest of her court came into the room and the ladies in waiting arranged the long train of her cape, I straightened her headdress, and spread her long dark hair over her shoulders.

Then my sister, the Boleyn girl, went out to be crowned Queen of England.



I spent the night of Anne's coronation with William in my bedroom in the Tower. I should have had Madge Shelton to share my bed but she whispered to me that she would be gone all night so while the feasting of the court went on, William and I crept away to my room, locked the door, threw another log on the fire, and slowly, sensually, undressed and made love.

We woke through the night made love and dozed again in a sleepy cycle of arousal and satisfaction, and by five o'clock in the morning, when it was starting

to get light, we were both deliciously exhausted and ravenous with hunger.

‘Come on,’ he said to me. ‘Let’s go out and find something to eat.’

We pulled on our clothes and I put on a cape with a hood to hide my face and we crept from the sleeping Tower into the streets of the City. Half the men of London seemed to be drunk in the gutters from the free wine that had poured from the fountains to celebrate the triumph of Anne. We stepped over limp bodies all the way up the hill to the Minories.

We walked hand in hand, careless of being seen in this city which was sick with drink. William led the way to a baker’s shop and stepped back to see if smoke was coming from the crooked chimney.

‘I can smell bread,’ I said, snuffing at the air and laughing at my own hunger.

‘I’ll knock him up,’ William said and hammered on the side door.

A muffled shout from inside answered him and the door was thrown open by a man with a red face smeared with white flour.

‘Can I buy a loaf of bread?’ William asked. ‘And some breakfast?’

The man blinked at the brightness of the light in the street. ‘If you have the money,’ he said sulkily. ‘For God knows I have squandered all of mine.’

William drew me into the bakehouse. It was warm inside and smelled sweet. Everywhere was covered with a fine dust of white flour, even the table and the stools. William swept a seat with his cape and set me down on it.

‘Some bread,’ he said. ‘A couple of mugs of small ale. Some fruit if you have it, for the lady. A couple of eggs, boiled, a little ham perhaps? A cheese? Anything nice.’

‘This is my first batch of the day,’ the man grumbled. ‘I have hardly broken my own fast. Never mind running around slicing ham for the gentry.’

A little chink and the gleam of a silver coin changed everything.

‘I have some excellent ham in my larder and a cheese just up from the country that my own cousin made,’ the baker said persuasively. ‘And my wife shall rise and pour you the small ale herself. She’s a good brewer, there’s not a better taste in all of London.’

‘Thank you,’ William said gracefully as he sat down beside me and winked, and rested his arm comfortably around my waist.

‘Newly wed?’ the man asked, shovelling loaves out of the oven and seeing William’s gaze on my face.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Long may it last,’ he said doubtfully, and turned the loaves onto the wooden counter.

‘Amen to that,’ William said quietly, and drew me to him and kissed me on the lips and whispered privately in my ear: ‘I am going to love you like this forever.’



William saw me into the little wicket gate to the Tower before going down to the river, hiring a river boatman and entering through the watergate. Madge Shelton was in our room when I got in, but too absorbed in brushing her hair and changing her gown to wonder where I had been so early in the morning. Half the court seemed to be waking up in the wrong beds. The triumph of Anne, the mistress who had become a wife, was an inspiration to every loose girl in the country.

I washed my face and hands and dressed ready to go with Anne and the other ladies to matins. Anne, in her first day of queenship, was dressed very richly in a dark gown with a jewelled hood and a long string of pearls twisted twice around her neck. She still wore her golden ‘B’ for Boleyn, and carried a prayerbook encased in gold leaf. She nodded when she saw me and I dropped into a deep curtsy and followed the hem of her gown as if I was honoured to do so.

After Mass and after breakfast with the king, Anne started to reorganise her household. Many of Queen Katherine’s servants had transferred their loyalty without much inconvenience, like the rest of us they would rather be attached to a rising star than to the lost queen. My eye was caught by the name Seymour.

‘Are you having a Seymour girl as your lady in waiting?’ I asked curiously.

‘Which one?’ George asked idly, pulling the list towards him. ‘That Agnes is said to be a terrible whore.’

‘Jane,’ Anne said. ‘But I shall have Aunt Elizabeth, and Cousin Mary. I should think we have enough Howards to outweigh the influence of one Seymour.’

‘Who asked for her place?’ George inquired.

‘They’re all asking for places,’ Anne said wearily. ‘All of them, all of the time. I thought one or two women from other families would be a sop. The Howards can’t have everything.’

George laughed. ‘Oh, why not?’

Anne pushed her chair back from the table and rested her hand on her belly and sighed. George was alert.

‘Tired?’ he asked.

‘A little gripe.’ She looked at me. ‘It doesn’t matter, does it? Little nips of pain? They don’t mean anything?’

‘I had quite bad pains with Catherine, and she went full term, and then an easy birth.’

‘They don’t mean that it’ll be a girl though, do they?’ George said anxiously.

I looked at the two of them, the matching long Boleyn noses and long faces and those eager eyes. They were the same features that had looked back at me from my own mirror for all of my life, except that now I had lost that hungry expression.

‘Be at peace,’ I said gently to George. ‘There’s no reason in the world why she should not have the most beautiful son. And worrying is the worst thing she can do.’

‘As well tell me not to breathe,’ Anne snapped. ‘It’s like carrying the whole future of England in my belly. And the queen miscarried over and over again.’

‘Because she was not his proper wife,’ George said soothingly. ‘Because their marriage was never valid. Of course God will give you a son.’

Silently, she stretched her hand across the table. George gripped it tight. I looked at both of them, at the absolute desperation of their ambition, still riding them as hard as when they were the children of a small lord on the rise. I looked at them and knew the relief of my escape.

I waited for a moment and then I said, ‘George, I have heard some gossip about you which is not to your credit.’

He looked up with his merry, wicked smile. ‘Surely not!’

‘It is serious,’ I said.

‘Who have you been listening to?’ he returned.

‘Court whispers,’ I said. ‘They say that Sir Francis Weston is part of a wild circle, you among them.’

He glanced quickly at Anne, as if to see what she knew.

She looked inquiringly at me. She was clearly ignorant of what was being said. ‘Sir Francis is a loyal friend.’

‘The queen has spoken.’ George tried to make a joke.

‘Because she doesn’t know the half of it, and you do,’ I snapped back.

Anne was alerted by that. ‘I have to be all but perfect,’ she said. ‘I can’t let them have anything that they could whisper to the king against me.’

George patted her hand. ‘It’s nothing,’ he soothed her again. ‘Don’t fret. A couple of wild nights and a little too much to drink. A couple of bad women and some high gambling. I’d never be a discredit to you, Anne, I promise.’

‘It’s more than that,’ I said flatly. ‘They say that Sir Francis is George’s lover.’

Anne’s eyes widened, she reached for George at once. ‘George, no?’

‘Absolutely not.’ He took her hand in a comforting clasp.

She turned a cold face to me. ‘Don’t come to me with your nasty stories, Mary,’ she said. ‘You’re as bad as Jane Parker.’

‘You had better take care,’ I warned George. ‘Any mud thrown at you sticks to us all.’

‘There’s no mud,’ he replied, but his eyes were on Anne’s face. ‘Nothing at all.’

‘You had better be sure,’ she said.

‘Nothing at all,’ he repeated.

We left her to rest and went out to find the rest of the court who were playing quoits with the king.

‘Who spoke of me?’ George demanded.

‘William,’ I said honestly. ‘He was not spreading scandal. He knew I would be afraid for you.’

He laughed carelessly, but I heard the strain in his voice. ‘I love Francis,’ he confessed. ‘I can’t see a finer man in the world, a braver sweeter better man never lived – and I cannot help but desire him.’

‘You love him like a woman?’ I asked awkwardly.

‘Like a man,’ he corrected me swiftly. ‘A more passionate thing by far.’

‘George, this is a dreadful sin, and he will break your heart. This is a disastrous course. If our uncle knew ...’

‘If anyone knew, I’d be ruined outright.’

‘Can you not stop seeing him?’

He turned to me with a crooked smile. ‘Can you stop seeing William Stafford?’

‘It’s not the same!’ I protested. ‘What you’re describing is not the same! Nothing like it. William loves me honourably and truly. And I love him. But this –’

‘You’re not without sin, you’re just lucky,’ George said brutally. ‘It is luck to love someone who is free to love you in return. But I don’t. I just desire him, desire him and desire him; and I wait for it to burn out.’

‘Will it burn out?’ I asked.

‘Bound to,’ he said bitterly. ‘Everything I have ever gained has always turned to ashes after a little while. Why should this be any different?’

‘George,’ I said, and put my hand out to him. ‘Oh my brother ...’

He looked at me with those hard hungry Boleyn eyes. ‘What?’

‘This will be your undoing,’ I whispered.

‘Oh probably,’ he said carelessly. ‘But Anne will save me. Anne and my nephew the king.’

Summer 1533

Anne would not release me to go to Hever in the summer when she was expecting her baby in August. The court would not progress around the manor houses of England, nothing would happen as it should. I was in such a bitter rage of disappointment that I could hardly bear to be in the same room as her; but I had to be in the same room as her every day, and listen to her endless, endless speculation of what sort of a king her baby might be. Everyone had to wait on Anne. Everyone had to bow to her. Nothing mattered more than Anne and her belly. She was the focus of everything and she would plan nothing. In such confusion, the court could decide nothing, could go nowhere. Henry could hardly bear to be parted from her, even to go hunting.

At the start of July George and my uncle were sent to France as emissaries to the French king to tell him that the heir to the English throne was about to be born, and to take him some pledges and promises in case the Spanish emperor moved against England at this fresh insult to his aunt. They would go on to a meeting with the Pope in which the deadlock that held England frozen might be broken. I went to Anne to ask her again if she might spare me too, as soon as she went into her confinement.

‘I want to go to Hever,’ I said quietly. ‘I need to see my children.’

She shook her head. She was lying in the bay of the window of her room on a day bed they had pushed into the embrasure for her. All the windows stood open to catch the breeze as it came up the river, but she was still sweating. Her gown was laced firmly, her breasts, pressed by the stomacher, were swollen and uncomfortable. Her back ached, even supported by cushions embroidered with seed pearls.

‘No,’ she said shortly.

She saw that I was about to argue with her. ‘Oh stop it,’ she said irritably. ‘I can order you as a queen to do what I shouldn’t have to even ask as a sister. You ought to want to be with me. I visited you when you were confined.’

‘You stole my lover while I was giving birth to his son!’ I said flatly.

‘I was told to. And you would have done the same if our roles had been

turned. I need you, Mary. Don't go wandering off when you're needed.'

'What d'you need me for?' I demanded.

She lost her flushed colour and went waxy white. 'What if it kills me?' she whispered. 'What if it gets stuck and I die of it?'

'Oh Anne ...'

'Don't pet me,' she said irritably. 'I don't want your sympathy. I just want you here to protect me.'

I hesitated. 'What d'you mean?'

'If they can get the baby out by killing me, I wouldn't give you a groat for my life,' she said brutally. 'They'd rather have a live Prince of Wales than a live queen. They can get another queen. But princes are rare in this market.'

'I won't be able to stop them,' I said feebly.

She gleamed at me under her eyelids. 'I know you're a broken reed. But at least you could tell George and he would work on the king to make them save me.'

Her bleak view of the world made me pause. But then I thought of my own children. 'After your baby is born, and you are well – then I go to Hever,' I stipulated.

'After the baby is born you can go to hell if you like,' she said levelly.



Then there was nothing to do but wait. But in the hot days when it seemed as if nothing was happening, the most appalling news arrived from Rome. The Pope had finally ruled against Henry. Astoundingly: the king was to be excommunicated.

'What?' Anne demanded.

Lady Rochford, George's newly ennobled wife Jane Parker, had brought the news. Like a buzzard to carrion, she was always first. 'Excommunicated.' Even she looked stunned. 'Every Englishman loyal to the Pope should disobey the king,' she said. 'Spain can invade. It would be a holy war.'

Anne was whiter than the pearls at her neck.

'Go out,' I said suddenly. 'How dare you come in here and upset the queen?'

'Some will say that she is not the queen.' Jane went for the door. 'Won't the king put her aside now?'

'Go!' I said fiercely, and ran to Anne. She had her hand on her belly as if she would shield the baby from the disastrous news. I pinched her cheeks, and

watched her eyelids flutter.

‘He’ll stand by me,’ she whispered. ‘Cranmer himself married us. Crowned me. They can’t say it is all to be put aside.’

‘No,’ I said as staunchly as I could, thinking that yes, perhaps they could put it all aside, for who could deny the Pope when he held the keys of heaven in his hand? The king must surrender. And the first thing he would have to surrender would be Anne.

‘Oh God, I wish George was here,’ Anne said with a little wail of despair. ‘I wish he was home.’

Two days later, George came home from France with a brief panicstricken letter from our uncle, demanding to know what should be done next in the negotiations to resolve a crisis which had suddenly become a disaster. The king sent George straight back to France again with orders for my uncle to break off the talks and come home. We would all wait and see what would happen.

The days grew hotter, they drew up plans for the defence of England against a Spanish invasion, the priests preached calm from the pulpits but wondered which side they should be on. Many churches simply bolted their doors in the crisis and no-one could confess or pray, bury their dead or christen their babies. Uncle Howard begged the king to let him go back to France and implore Francis to persuade the Pope to lift the excommunication. I never before saw him look so terrified. But George, the steadiest of us all, turned all his attention to Anne.

It was as if he thought that the king’s immortal soul and the future of England were too great for him. The one place where he could be effective was to keep the baby growing in Anne’s belly. ‘This is our guarantee,’ he said quietly to me. ‘Nothing secures our safety more than a boy baby.’

He spent every morning with Anne, sitting with her on the day bed in the window embrasure. When Henry came into the room George would wander away, but when Henry was gone again, Anne would lean back on the pillows and look for our brother. She never showed Henry the strain she suffered. She remained for him the fascinating woman she had always been. She would show him her temper if he crossed her, quick enough. But she never showed him her fear. She never showed her fear to anyone but to George and me. Henry had her sweetness and her charm and her flirtatiousness. Even eight months with child Anne could flick her eyes sideways in a way which would make a man catch his breath. I used to watch her talking with Henry, and see that every gesture, every inch of her was devoted to delighting him.

No wonder that when he left the room to go hunting she leaned back on the

pillows and summoned me to take off her hood and stroke her forehead. 'I'm so hot.'

Henry did not go hunting alone, of course. Anne might be fascinating but not even she could hold him when she was eight months pregnant and forbidden to go to his bed. Henry was flirting openly with Lady Margaret Steyne and it was not long before Anne knew of it.

When he visited her one afternoon he got a sharp welcome.

'I wonder you dare show your face to me,' she greeted him in a hiss as he sat down beside her. Henry glanced around the room and the gentlemen of the court at once moved a little further away and pretended to be deaf while the ladies turned their heads to give the royal couple the illusion of privacy.

'Madam?'

'I hear you've bedded some slut,' Anne said.

Henry looked around and saw Lady Margaret. A glance at William Brereton prompted that most experienced of courtiers to offer Lady Margaret his arm. He swept her out of the room for a walk by the river. Anne watched them go with a glare which would have frightened a lesser man.

'Madam?' Henry inquired.

'I won't have it,' she warned him. 'I won't tolerate it. She must leave court.'

Henry shook his head and rose to his feet. 'You forget to whom you speak,' he pronounced. 'And ill temper is not suitable to your condition. I shall bid you good day, madam.'

'You forget to whom you speak!' Anne retorted. 'I am your wife and the queen and I will not be overlooked and insulted in my own court. That woman is to leave.'

'No-one orders me!'

'No-one insults me!'

'How have you been insulted? The lady has never paid you anything but the greatest of attention and politeness, and I remain your most obedient husband. What is the matter with you?'

'I won't have her at court! I shall not be so treated.'

'Madam,' Henry said, at his most chilling. 'A better lady than you was treated far worse and never complained to me. As you well know.'

For a moment, absorbed in her own temper, she did not catch the reference. And when she did she flung herself out of her chair to her feet. 'You cite her to me!' she screamed at him. 'You dare compare me to that woman who was never your wife?'

‘She was a Princess of the Blood,’ he shouted back. ‘And she would never, never have reproached me. She knew that a wife’s whole duty is to mind her husband’s comfort.’

Anne slapped her hand on the curve of her belly. ‘Did she give you a son?’ she demanded.

There was a silence. ‘No,’ Henry said heavily.

‘Then princess or not, she was no use. And she was not your wife.’

He nodded. Henry, and indeed all of us, sometimes had trouble remembering that most debatable fact.

‘You are not to distress yourself,’ he said.

‘Then do not you distress me,’ she answered smartly.

Reluctantly, I drew closer. ‘Anne, you should sit down,’ I said as quietly as I could. Henry turned to me with relief. ‘Yes, Lady Carey, keep her quiet. I am just going.’ He gave a little bow to Anne and left the room abruptly. Half the gentlemen swirled out with him, half of them were caught unawares and stayed. Anne looked at me.

‘What did you interrupt for?’

‘You can’t risk the baby.’

‘Oh! The baby! All anyone thinks about is the baby!’

George drew close to me and took Anne’s hand. ‘Of course. All our futures depend on it. Yours as well, Anne. Be still now, Mary’s right.’

‘We should have fought it out to the end,’ she said resentfully. ‘I should not have let him go until he promised to send her from court. You should not have interrupted us.’

‘You can’t fight it through to the end,’ George pointed out to her. ‘You can’t end up in bed till you’ve been birthed and churched. You have to wait, Anne. And you know that he’ll have someone else while he’s waiting.’

‘But what if she keeps him?’ Anne wailed, her glance sliding past me, knowing full well that she had taken him from me when I was in childbirth.

‘She can’t,’ George said simply. ‘You’re his wife. He can’t divorce you, can he? He’s only just got rid of t’other one. And if you have his son he’d have no reason to. Your winning card is in your belly, Anne. Hold it close and play it right.’

She leaned back against the chair. ‘Send for some musicians,’ she said. ‘They can dance.’

George snapped his fingers and a pageboy jumped forward.

Anne turned to me. ‘And you tell Lady Margaret Steyne that I don’t want her

in my sight,' she said.



The court took to the river that summer. We had never been near to the Thames in the summer months before, and the master of the revels devised water battles and water masques and water entertainments for Henry and his new queen. One night they had a battle of fire at twilight on the water and Anne watched it from a little tented palace on the bank. The queen's men won and then there was dancing on a little stage built out over the river. I danced with half a dozen men and then I looked around for my husband.

He was watching me, he was always watching me for the moment when we could slip away together. One discreet tilt of his head, one secret smile and we were gone into the shadows for a kiss and a hidden touch and sometimes, when it was dark and when we could not resist each other, we would take our pleasure, hidden in the darkness by the river with the sound of faraway music to disguise my moan of pleasure.

I was a clandestine lover and it was that which made me alert for George. He too would take part in the first half-dozen dances and establish his presence at the centre of things. Then he too would step back, back, back from the circle of light into the obscurity of the garden. Then I would see that Sir Francis was missing too and know that he had taken my brother off somewhere, perhaps to his room, perhaps to the stews of the City for some wild doings, perhaps gambling, or riding in the moonlight, or for some rough embracing. George might reappear in five minutes, or he might be gone all night. Anne, who thought he was roistering as he always had done, accused him of flirting with the maids around the court and George laughed and disclaimed as he always had done. Only I knew that a more powerful and more dangerous desire had my brother in its grasp.

In August Anne announced that she would retire for her confinement and when Henry came to visit her in the morning, after hearing Mass, he found that the rooms were in chaos with furniture being moved in and out, and all the ladies in a great toil of activity.

Anne sat on a chair among all the confusion and ordered what she wanted. When she saw Henry come in she inclined her head but did not rise to curtsy to him. He did not care, he was besotted with his pregnant queen, he dropped like a boy to kneel beside her, to put his hands on her great round belly and look up

into her face.

‘We need a christening gown for our son,’ she said without preamble. ‘Does she have it?’

‘She’ meant only one thing in the royal vocabulary. ‘She’ was always the queen that had disappeared, the queen that no-one ever mentioned, the queen that everyone tried not to remember, sitting in that chair, preparing for her own confinement in that room, and forever turning to Henry with her sweet deferential smile.

‘It’s her own,’ he said. ‘Brought from Spain.’

‘Was Mary christened in it?’ Anne demanded, already knowing the answer.

Henry frowned at the effort of recovering a memory. ‘Oh yes, a great long white gown, richly embroidered. But it was Katherine’s own.’

‘Does she have it still?’

‘We can order a new gown,’ Henry said pacifically. ‘You could draw it yourself, and the nuns could sew it for you.’

A toss of Anne’s head indicated that this would not do. ‘My baby is to have the royal gown,’ she said. ‘I want him christened in the gown that all the princes have worn.’

‘We don’t have a royal gown ...’ he said hesitantly.

‘I’ll warrant!’ she snapped. ‘Because she has it.’

Henry knew when he was beaten. He bent his head and kissed her hand, clenched on the arm of the chair. ‘Don’t distress yourself,’ he urged her. ‘Not so near your time. I’ll send to her for it. I swear I will. Our little Edward Henry shall have everything you might want.’

She nodded, she found her sweet smile, she touched the nape of his neck with her fingertips as he bowed to her.

The midwife came to them and swept a curtsy. ‘Your room is ready now,’ she said.

Anne turned to Henry. ‘You’ll visit me every day,’ she said. It sounded more like an order than a request.

‘Twice a day,’ he promised. ‘The time will pass, sweetheart, and you must rest for the coming of our son.’

He kissed her hand again and left her, and I drew close as the two of us went to the threshold of her bedchamber. Her great bed had been moved in, and the walls hung with thick tapestries to exclude any noise or sunshine or fresh air. They had put rushes down on the floor with rosemary for scent, and lavender for relief. They had moved all the other furniture out of the room except for one

chair and table for the midwife. Anne was expected to stay in bed for one whole month. They had lit a fire although it was midsummer and the room was stifling. They had lit candles so that she could read or sew, and they had put the cradle ready at the foot of the bed.

Anne recoiled on the threshold of the darkened stuffy room. 'I can't go in there, it's like a prison.'

'It's only for a month,' I said. 'Perhaps less.'

'I'll suffocate.'

'You'll be fine. I had to do it.'

'But I'm the queen.'

'All the more reason.'

The midwife came up behind me and said: 'Is it all to your liking, Your Majesty?'

Anne's face was white. 'It's like a prison.'

The midwife laughed and ushered her into the room. 'They all say that. But you'll be glad of the rest.'

'Tell George I'll want to see him later,' Anne said over her shoulder to me. 'And tell him to bring someone entertaining. I'm not going to be all alone in here. I might as well be imprisoned in the Tower.'

'We'll dine with you,' I promised. 'If you rest now.'



With Anne withdrawn from court the king returned to his normal pattern of hunting every morning from six till ten and then coming in for his dinner. In the afternoon he would visit Anne and then there would be entertainments laid on for him in the evening.

'Who does he dance with?' Anne demanded, as sharp as ever though she lay hot and tired and heavy in the darkened room.

'No-one in particular,' I said. Madge Shelton had taken his eye and the Seymour girl, Jane. Lady Margaret Steyne was peacocking about in half a dozen new gowns. But none of this would matter if Anne had a boy.

'And who hunts with him?'

'Just his gentlemen,' I lied. Sir John Seymour had bought his daughter a most handsome grey hunter. She had a dark blue gown to ride in and she looked well in the saddle.

Anne looked suspiciously at me. 'You're not chasing after him yourself, are

you?’ she asked nastily.

I shook my head. ‘I’ve no desire to alter my station in life,’ I said honestly enough. Carefully, I kept my thoughts from William. If I let myself think of the set of his shoulders or the way he stretched when he was naked in the morning light, then I knew that my desire would show in my face. Anyone could read it. I was too much his woman.

‘And you watch the king for me?’ Anne insisted. ‘You do watch him, Mary?’

‘He’s waiting for the birth of his son, like the rest of the court,’ I said. ‘If you have a boy then nothing can touch you. You know that.’

She nodded and closed her eyes and leaned back on the pillows. ‘God, I wish it was over,’ she said pettishly.

‘Amen,’ I said.



Without my sister’s keen eyes on me I was free to spend time with William. Madge Shelton was frequently missing from my bedroom and she and I had developed an informal arrangement of always knocking at the door, and turning away from it immediately if it was locked from the inside. Madge was only a young girl but she had grown up quickly at court. She knew that her chances of a good marriage depended on the careful balance of catching a man’s desire without letting a shadow fall on her own reputation. And it was a wilder harder-living court than the one I had come to as a girl.

George’s deceits worked as well. He and Sir Francis with William Brereton and Henry Norris were at a loose end without the queen in her court. They went hunting with Henry in the morning and sometimes they would be summoned to his council in the afternoon but mostly they were idle. They flirted with the queen’s ladies, they slipped up the river to the City, and they disappeared for unexplained nights. I caught him once in the early morning. I had been watching the sunshine on the river when a rowboat tied up to the palace landing stage and George paid off the boatman and came quietly up the garden path.

‘George,’ I said, stepping out from my seat in the roses.

He gave a start. ‘Mary!’ At once his thoughts went to Anne. ‘Is she all right?’

‘She’s well. Where have you been?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘We went for a little entertainment,’ he said.

‘Some friends of Henry Norris. We went dancing and dining, a little gambling.’

‘Was Sir Francis there?’

He nodded.

‘George –’

‘Don’t reproach me!’ he said quickly. ‘No-one else knows. We keep it quiet enough.’

‘If the king found out you would be banished,’ I said flatly.

‘He won’t find out,’ he said. ‘I know you heard of it but that was a groom who was gossiping. He’s silenced. Dismissed. That’s the end of it.’

I took his hand and looked in his dark Boleyn eyes. ‘George, I fear for you.’

He laughed, his courtier’s brittle laugh. ‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘I have nothing to fear. Nothing to fear, nothing to look for, and nowhere to go.’



Anne did not get her royal christening gown. They wrote to the queen with proposals for her separation from the king. They addressed her as Dowager Princess and she tore the parchment of the declaration with an angry pen-stroke when she crossed through the title. They threatened her that she would never see the Princess Mary her daughter again. They moved her to the most desolate of palaces: Buckden in Lincolnshire. Still she would not recant. Still she would not admit the possibility that she had not been the king’s lawful wife. In such an impasse, the christening gown seemed to matter very little and after she refused to part with it, saying that it was her own property brought from Spain, Henry did not insist.

I thought of her, in a cold house on the edge of the Fens. I thought of her, separated from her daughter as I was parted from my son by the ambition of the same woman. I thought of her unswerving determination to do right in the sight of God. And I missed her. She had been like a mother to me when I had first come to court and I had betrayed her as a daughter will betray her mother, and yet never stop loving her.

Autumn 1533

Anne's pains started at dawn and the midwife called me straightaway into the birthing chamber. I had to half-fight my way through courtiers and lawyers and clerks and officers of the court in the presence chamber outside the room. Nearest the door were the ladies in waiting assembled to assist the queen in her confinement, in fact doing nothing but frightening each other with nightmare stories of difficult births. Princess Mary was among them, her pale face screwed up into her habitual scowl of determination. I thought Anne cruel to make Katherine's daughter a witness of the birth of the child that would disinherit her. I gave her a little smile as I went past her and she gave me that curious, half-hearted curtsy which was now her trademark. She could trust nobody, she would trust nobody ever again.

Inside the room it was like a scene from hell. They had rigged up ropes on the bedposts and Anne was clinging onto them like a drowning woman. The sheets were already stained with her blood, and the midwives were brewing a caudle on the fire which was stoked high with logs. Anne was naked from the waist down. She was sweating and crying out with fear. Two other ladies in waiting were reciting their prayers in an irritating anxious drone and every now and again Anne would let out a shriek of renewed pain.

'She must rest,' one of the midwives said to me. 'She's fighting it.'

I stepped up to the bed and waited. 'Anne, rest,' I said. 'This is going to go on for hours.'

'It's you, is it?' she said, throwing back her hair. 'Thought you'd get up, did you?'

'I came as soon as I was called. Do you want me to do anything for you?'

'I want you to do this for me,' she said, her wit as sharp as ever.

I laughed. 'Not I!'

She stretched a hand to me and when I held it, she clung on. 'God help me, I am in terror,' she whispered.

'God will help you,' I said. 'You're having a Christian prince, aren't you? You're giving birth to a boy that is going to be the head of the church in

England, aren't you?'

'Don't leave me,' she said. 'I am ready to vomit with fear.'

'Oh you'll vomit,' I said cheerfully. 'It gets an awful lot worse than this before it is better.'



Anne was in labour for all of the day and then her pains grew faster and it was clear to us all that the baby was coming. She stopped fighting and went vague and dreamy, her body doing the work for her. I held her up and the midwife spread the cloth for the baby and then gave a shout of joy as the head broke out of Anne's straining body, and then with a slither and a rush the whole baby was born. 'God be praised,' the woman said.

She bent her head and sucked at the baby's mouth and we heard a choking little cry. Both Anne and I strained to see.

'Is it the prince?' Anne gasped, her voice croaky with screaming. 'He is to be Prince Edward Henry.'

'A girl,' the midwife said, determinedly cheerful.

I felt Anne's full weight as she slumped with disappointment and I heard myself whisper: 'Oh God, no.'

'A girl,' the midwife said again. 'A strong healthy girl,' she repeated as if to reconcile us to our disappointment.

For a moment I thought Anne had fainted. She was as white as death itself. I lowered her back against the pillows and stroked the hair back from her sweating face. 'A girl.'

'A live baby is the main thing,' I said, trying to fight my own sense of despair.

The midwife wrapped the baby in the cloth and patted her. Both Anne and I turned our heads at the wailing penetrating cry.

'A girl,' Anne said in horror. 'A girl. What good is a girl to us?'



George said the same when I told him. Uncle Howard swore out loud and called me a useless jade and my sister a stupid whore when I took the news to him. The whole fortunes of the family had depended on this small accident of birth. If

Anne had given birth to a boy we would have been the most powerful family in England with a stake in the throne forever. But she had a girl.

Henry, always the king, always unpredictable, did not complain. He took the baby on his lap and praised her blue eyes and her strong sturdy little body. He admired the little details of her hands, the dimples of her knuckles, the tiny perfection of her fingernails. He told Anne that next time they should have a boy, that he was happy to have another princess, and such a perfect little princess, in his household. He ordered that the letters which were to have gone out announcing the birth of a prince should have a double 's' added to them, to tell the King of France and the Emperor of Spain that the King of England had a new daughter. He gritted his teeth and tried not to think what they would say in the courts of Europe. They would laugh at all of England, for going through such an upheaval in order for the king to get a girl on a commoner. But I admired him, that evening, when he took my sister in his arms and kissed her hair and called her sweetheart. I understood him: he was too proud to let anyone know that he had been disappointed. I thought that he was a man of intense vanity, of dangerous whims, and despite all of that – or perhaps *because* all of that – a great king.

I got to my bedroom after thirty-six hours without sleep, and with the anger and despair of my father, my uncle, and my brother ringing in my ears, and found William there with a little meat pie on the fireside table and a pitcher of small ale.

'I thought you'd be tired and hungry,' he said by way of greeting.

I fell into his arms and buried my face into the comforting smell of his linen. 'Oh William!'

'Trouble?'

'They are all so angry, and Anne is in despair, and no-one has looked at the baby but the king and he held her for a few moments only. And it all seems so dreadful. Oh God, if she had only been a boy!'

He patted my back. 'Hush, my love. They'll all come round. And they'll make another child. A son next time, perhaps.'

'Another year,' I said. 'Another year before Anne is free of fear and before I can be free of her.'

He drew me to the table, sat me before it and pressed the spoon into my hand. 'Eat,' he said. 'Everything will seem much better when you have eaten and slept.'

'Where's Madge?' I asked fearfully, looking at the door.

‘Roistering in the hall like a drunkard,’ he said. ‘The court prepared a feast to welcome the prince and was going to eat it whatever happened. Madge won’t be back for hours, if she comes at all.’

I nodded and ate my dinner as he bid me. When I had finished he drew me onto the bed and kissed my ear and my neck and my eyelids very gently and very tenderly until I forgot all about Anne and the unwanted baby girl and turned in his arms and let him hold me. I fell asleep like that, fully dressed, lying on the covers of the bed, torn between sleep and desire. I fell asleep and I dreamed of him making love to me, even as he held me and stroked my face, all the night long.



As soon as Anne recovered from the birth she was engrossed in arranging for the care of the little Princess Elizabeth at Hatfield Palace, where a royal nursery was to be established under the charge of our aunt, Lady Anne Shelton, Madge’s discreet mother. The Princess Mary, who had been seen to smile behind her hand at Anne’s discomfiture in having a girl was to go too, far away from her father and her proper place at court.

‘She can wait on Elizabeth,’ Anne said carelessly. ‘She can be her maid in waiting.’

‘Anne,’ I said. ‘She’s a princess in her own right. She can’t serve your daughter, it’s not right.’

Anne gleamed at me. ‘Fool,’ she said simply. ‘It is all part of the same thing. She must be seen to go where I bid her, she must serve my daughter, that way I know that I am queen indeed and Katherine is forgotten.’

‘Can’t you rest?’ I asked. ‘Surely you don’t have to be always plotting?’

She gave me a bitter thin smile. ‘You don’t think that Cromwell rests, do you? You don’t think that the Seymours rest, do you? You don’t think that the Spanish ambassador and his network of spies and that accursed woman are all resting, saying to themselves: “Well, she has married him and given birth to a useless girl so although we have everything to play for we’ll rest.” Do you?’

‘No,’ I said unwillingly.

She looked at me for a moment. ‘One might better ask how you manage to look so plump and pleased with yourself when according to reason you should be struggling on a small pension and wasting away.’

I could not hold back a choke of laughter at her gloomy vision of me. ‘I

manage,' I said shortly. 'But I should like to see my children at Hever now, if you would let me go for a visit.'

'Oh go,' she said, weary of the request. 'But be back at Greenwich in time for Christmas.'

I went to the door quickly, before she could change her mind. 'And tell Henry that he is to go to a tutor, he must be educated properly,' she said. 'He can go later this year.'

I stopped, my hand on the door frame. 'My boy?' I whispered.

'My boy,' she corrected me. 'He can't play for all his childhood, you know.'

'I thought ...'

'I have arranged for him to study with Sir Francis Weston's son and William Brereton's. They're learning well, I'm told. It's time he was with boys of his own age.'

'I don't want him with them,' I said instantly. 'Not the sons of those two.'

She raised one dark eyebrow. 'They are gentlemen of my court,' she reminded me. 'Their sons will be courtiers too, they might be his courtiers one day. He should be with them. It is my decision.'

I wanted to scream at her but I pinched my fingertips and I kept my voice soft and sweet. 'Anne. He's only a little boy still. He is happy with his sister at Hever. If you want him educated I will stay there, I will educate him ...'

'You!' she laughed. 'As well ask the ducks on the moat to teach him to quack. No, Mary. I have decided. And the king agrees with me.'

'Anne ...'

She leaned back and looked at me through slitted eyes. 'I take it that you do want to see him at all this year? You don't want me to send him to his tutor at once?'

'No!'

'Then go, sister. For I have taken my decision and you weary me.'



William watched me as I stormed up and down the confines of our narrow lodging-house room. 'I'll kill her,' I swore.

He had his back to the door, he checked that the casement window was shut against eavesdroppers.

'I'll kill her! To put my boy, my precious boy, with the sons of those sodomites! To prepare him for a life at court! To order the Princess Mary to wait

on Elizabeth and send my boy into exile in the same breath! She is mad to do this! She is insane with ambition. And my boy ... my boy ...’

My throat was too tight for words. My knees gave way beneath me, I laid my face on the covers of our bed and sobbed into them.

William did not move from his post at the door, he let me weep. He waited until I raised my head and wiped my wet cheeks with my fingers. Only then did he step forward and kneel on the floor near me so that I crawled, hands and knees, beaten down by my distress, into his arms. Then he held me gently and rocked me as if I were a baby myself.

‘We’ll get him back,’ he whispered into my hair. ‘We’ll have a wonderful time with him, we’ll send him off to his tutors, and then we’ll get him back. I promise it. We’ll fetch him back, sweetheart.’

Winter 1533

For her New Year's present to the king Anne commissioned a most extravagant gift. The goldsmiths brought it to the great hall and spent the morning setting it up. When they came to the queen's apartments to tell her that she might come and see it Anne beckoned to George and to me and said we might come too.

We ran down the stairs to the great hall, Anne ahead of us, so that she could fling open the doors and see our faces. It was a most astounding sight: a fountain made of gold inlaid with diamonds and rubies. At the foot of the fountain were three naked women, also wrought of gold, and from their teats spouted springs of more water.

'My God,' said George, truly awed. 'How much did it cost you?'

'Don't ask,' Anne said. 'It is very grand, isn't it?'

'Grand.' I didn't add: 'But vilely ugly,' though I could tell from George's stunned expression that he thought the same.

'I thought the ripple of the water would be soothing. Henry can have it in his presence chamber,' Anne said. She went closer to the edifice and touched it. 'They have wrought it very fine.'

'Fertile women gushing water,' I said, looking at the three gleaming statues.

Anne smiled at me. 'An omen,' she said. 'A reminder. A wish.'

'Pray God a prediction,' George said grimly. 'Any signs yet?'

'Not yet,' she said. 'But it's bound to happen soon.'

'Amen,' George and I said together, devout as Lutherans. 'Amen.'



Our prayers were answered. Anne missed her time in January and then in February again. When the asparagus shoots showed in spring the queen ate them at every meal for they were known to make a boy. People started to wonder. No-one knew for sure. Anne went around with a half-smile on her face and revelled in being the very centre of attention once again.

Spring 1534

The court's plans for a summer progress were delayed again while Anne, at the very centre of the whirlpool of gossip, was well-pleased to sit serenely with her hand on her belly and let them all wonder. The place was alive with gossip. George, my mother, and I were pestered for news from the courtiers who wanted to know if she were indeed with child, and when she might be brought to bed. No-one liked to be close to the plague-ridden streets of London in the hot weather; but the thought of the queen's confinement and the opportunities for advancement that a solitary king might provide were a powerful draw.

We were to be at Hampton Court for the summer, as far as anyone knew, and a proposed trip to France to cement the treaty with Francis was postponed.

Our uncle called a family meeting in May but he did not summon Anne, she was far beyond his ordering now. However, driven by curiosity, she timed her arrival at his rooms to the very second, so that we were all seated and waiting when she entered the room. She hesitated in the doorway, perfectly poised, Uncle rose from his seat at the head of the table to fetch a chair for her, but the moment his place was vacant she walked grandly and slowly to the head of the table and seated herself without a word of thanks. I giggled, a tiny suppressed sound, and Anne flashed me a smile. There was nothing she loved more than the exercise of her power that had been bought at so high a price.

'I asked the family to meet together to discover what are your plans, Your Majesty,' my uncle said smoothly. 'It would help me to know if you are indeed with child, and when you expect to be confined.'

Anne raised a dark eyebrow as if his question was an impertinence. 'You ask that of *me*?'

'I was going to ask your sister or your mother, but since you are here I might as well ask you directly,' he said. He was not in the least overawed by Anne. He had served more frightening monarchs: Henry's father and Henry himself. He had faced cavalry charges. Not even Anne at her most regal would frighten him.

'In September,' she said shortly.

'If it is another girl he will show his disappointment this time,' my uncle

observed. 'He has had trouble enough making Elizabeth his heir over Mary. The Tower is filled with men who refuse to deny Mary. And Thomas More and Fisher are certain to join them. If you had a boy then nobody would deny his rights.'

'It will be a boy,' Anne said positively.

Uncle smiled at her. 'So we all hope. The king will take a woman when you are in your final months.' Although Anne raised her head to speak he would not be interrupted. 'He always does, Anne. You must be calmer about these things, not rail at him.'

'I shall not tolerate it,' she said flatly.

'You will have to,' he said, as uncompromising as she was.

'He never looked away from me in all the years of our courtship,' she said. 'Not once.'

George raised an eyebrow to me. I said nothing. Apparently, I did not count.

My uncle gave a short laugh and I saw my father smile.

'Courtship is different. Anyway, I've chosen the girl to divert him,' my uncle said. 'A Howard girl.'

I felt the sweat break out on me. I knew that I had gone white when George suddenly hissed: 'Sit up!' out of the corner of his mouth.

'Who?' Anne said sharply.

'Madge Shelton,' Uncle said.

'Oh, Madge,' I said, my heart pounding with relief and my cheeks blazing as the colour came rushing back. 'That Howard girl.'

'She'll keep him busy and she knows her place,' my father said judicially, not at all as if he were handing another niece over to adultery and sin.

'And your influence is undiminished,' Anne spat.

My uncle smiled. 'That is true of course, but who would you rather? A Seymour girl? Given that it is a certainty, isn't it best for us that it should be a girl who'll do our bidding?'

'It depends on what you bid her,' Anne said shortly.

'To divert him while you are confined,' my uncle said smoothly. 'Nothing else.'

'I won't have her setting herself up as his mistress, I won't have her in the best rooms, wearing jewels, in new gowns, flaunting herself around me,' Anne warned.

'Yes, you of all women would know how painful that can be for a good wife,' my uncle concurred.

Anne's dark eyes flashed at him. He smiled. 'She shall divert the king during your confinement, and when you are back at court she will disappear,' he promised. 'I shall see that she makes a good marriage and Henry will forget her as easily as he takes her up.'

Anne drummed her fingers on the table. We could all see that she was fighting with herself. 'I wish I could trust you, Uncle.'

'I wish you would.' He smiled at her unwillingness. He turned to me and I felt the familiar tremor of fear at his attention. 'Madge Shelton beds with you, doesn't she?'

'Yes, Uncle,' I said.

'Tell her how to go along, tell her how to manage herself.' He turned to George. 'And you keep the king's attention on Anne and on Madge.'

'Yes, sir,' George said easily, as if he had never wished for any career other than that of a pander in the royal harem.

'Good,' Uncle said, rising to his feet to signal that the meeting was at an end. 'Oh, and one other thing ...' We all obediently waited on his word, except Anne, who was looking out of the window at the gardens in the sunshine and the court playing bowls, with the king at the centre of all the attention, as always.

'Mary,' Uncle remarked.

I flinched at the mention of my name.

'I think we should have her married, don't you?'

'I'd be pleased to see her betrothed before her sister is brought to bed,' my father remarked. 'That way there's no uncertainty if Anne fails'.

They did not look at Anne, who might be pregnant with a girl and thus diminish our bartering strength in the marriage market. They did not look at me, who was to be traded like a farmer's cow. They looked at each other, merchants with a deal to make.

'Very well,' our uncle said. 'I'll speak to Secretary Cromwell, it's time she was wed.'



I got away from Anne and George, and found my way to the king's rooms. William was not in the presence chamber and I dared not go looking for him in the privy chamber. A young man strolled by with a lute, Sir Francis Weston's musician, Mark Smeaton. 'Have you seen Sir William Stafford?' I asked him.

He made a pretty bow to me. 'Yes, Lady Carey,' he said. 'He's still playing

at bowls.'

I nodded and went towards the great hall. As soon as I was out of his sight I took one of the little doors that led out to the broad terrace before the palace and then down the stone steps to the garden. William was picking up the balls, the game had ended. He turned and smiled at me. The other players hailed me and challenged me to a game.

'Oh, very well,' I said. 'What are the stakes?'

'A shilling a game,' William said. 'You have fallen among desperate gamblers, Lady Carey.'

I felt in my purse and put down my shilling and then took a ball and rolled it carefully along the grass. It was nowhere near. I stepped back to make a place for another player and found William at my elbow.

'All well?' he asked quietly.

'Well enough,' I said. 'But I have to be alone with you as soon as we can.'

'Oh, I feel it myself,' he said with a laugh at the back of his voice. 'But I didn't know you were so shameless.'

'Not for that!' I said indignantly and then had to stop and look away before anyone could see me laugh and blush. I longed to touch him, I could hardly stand beside him and not reach out for him. I took a careful step away from him as if to see the game more clearly.

I was knocked out early on, and William took care to lose soon after. We left our shillings on the green for the eventual winner and strolled, as if to take the air, down the long gravel path towards the river. The windows of the palace overlooked the garden, I did not dare touch him or let him take my arm. We walked side by side, like courteous strangers. Only when I stepped up to the landing stage could he touch my elbow, as if to hold me steady, and then he kept hold of me. That simple contact of his hand on my arm warmed me all through.

'What is it?' he asked.

'It's my uncle. He's planning my marriage.'

At once his face was dark. 'Soon? Does he have a husband in mind?'

'No. They're considering.'

'Then we must be ready for when they find someone. And when they do we must just confess, and hope to brazen it out.'

'Yes.' I paused for a moment, glanced at his profile and back to the river. 'He frightens me,' I said. 'When he said he wanted to see me married, in that moment I thought that I would have to obey him. I always have obeyed him, you see. Everybody always obeys him. Even Anne.'

‘Don’t look like that my love, or I will take you in my arms in full view of the whole palace. I swear to you that you are mine and I will let no-one take you from me. You are mine. I am yours. No-one can deny that.’

‘They took Henry Percy from Anne,’ I said. ‘And she was as much married as us.’

‘He was a young lad,’ William said. ‘No man comes between me and mine.’ He paused for a moment. ‘But we may have to pay for it. Would Anne stand your friend? If we have her support then we are safe.’

‘She won’t be pleased,’ I said, knowing full well the intense concentrated selfishness of my sister. ‘But it doesn’t hurt her.’

‘Then we wait until we are cornered, and then we confess,’ he said. ‘And in the meantime we will be as charming as we can be.’

I laughed, ‘To the king?’ thinking he meant to deploy courtier’s skills.

‘To each other,’ he said. ‘Who matters the most to me in the whole world?’

‘Me,’ I said with quiet joy. ‘And you for me.’



We spent the night in each other’s arms in the room of a little inn. When I woke and turned to him he was already moving towards me. We fell asleep wrapped in each other as if we could not bear to part, even in sleep we could not bear to let each other go. When I woke in the morning he was still on top of me, still inside me, and when I moved underneath him I felt him stir with desire for me again. I closed my eyes and let myself drift away while he loved me until the early morning sun came brightly through the shutters and the noise from the courtyard downstairs warned us that we should get back to the palace.

He came up the river with me in a little wherry, and left me at the landing stage so that he could disembark further downriver and stroll home half an hour behind me. I thought I would get in by the garden door and creep up to my room in time to appear for morning Mass but when I got to my door George appeared from nowhere and said: ‘Thank God you’re back, another hour or two and everyone would have known.’

‘What is it?’ I asked quickly.

His face was grim. ‘Anne’s taken to her bed.’

‘I’ll go to her,’ I said and ran quickly down the corridor. I knocked at the door to Anne’s bedroom and put my head inside. She was quite alone in the imposing chamber, white and wan on the bed.

‘Oh you,’ she said unpleasantly. ‘You might as well come in.’

I stepped into the room and George shut the door firmly behind us. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked.

‘I’m bleeding,’ she said shortly. ‘And I’ve got gripping pains, like the pains of childbirth. I think I’m losing it.’

The blank horror of her words was too much for me to take in. I was powerfully aware of my dishevelled hair and the scent of William on every inch of my skin. The contrast between last night’s loving and this dawning disaster was too much for me. I turned to George.

‘We should get a midwife,’ I said.

‘No!’ Anne hissed like a snake. ‘Don’t you see? If we call in that crowd, we tell the world. At the moment no-one knows for sure whether I am with child or not; it’s all rumour. I can’t risk them knowing I lost it.’

‘This is wrong,’ I said flatly to George. ‘This is a baby we are talking about here. We can’t let a baby die for fear of scandal. Let’s move her to a back room, a little room, nothing fine. And cover her face, and draw the curtains. I’ll get a midwife and tell her it’s a maid at court. Nobody important.’

George hesitated. ‘If it’s a girl it’s not worth the risk,’ he said. ‘If it’s another girl, it’d be better dead.’

‘For God’s sake, George! This is a baby. This is a soul. This is our kith and kin. Of course we should save her if we can.’

His face was hard, for a moment he did not look like my beloved brother at all, he looked like one of the iron-featured men at court who would sign the death warrant for anyone, provided that they were themselves secure.

‘George!’ I cried. ‘If this is another Boleyn girl she has a right to live as much as Anne or me.’

‘All right,’ he said reluctantly. ‘I’ll move Anne. You get a midwife and make sure you’re discreet. Who will you send?’

‘William,’ I said.

‘Oh God: William!’ he said irritably. ‘Does he have to know everything about us? Does he know a midwife? How will he find one?’

‘He’ll go to the bath house,’ I said bluntly. ‘They must need midwives there in a hurry. And he’ll keep his mouth shut for love of me.’

George nodded and went to the bed. I heard him start to whisper an explanation to Anne in a tender low voice, and her murmured reply, and I ran from the room to the back door of the palace where I expected William to stroll in at any moment.



I caught him on the threshold and sent him out to find a midwife. He was back within the hour with a surprisingly clean young woman, with a small sack of bottles and herbs.

I took her to the little room where George's pageboys slept and she looked around the darkened room and recoiled. In some grotesque moment of fancy George and Anne had raided the palace costume box to find a mask to hide her well-known face. Instead of a simple disguise they had found a golden bird face mask, which she had worn in France to dance with the king. Anne, panting with pain, half-lit by guttering candles, lay back on a narrow bed, her huge belly straining under the sheet and above it a glittering gold mask with a face like a hawk, a great gilt beak and flaring eyebrows. It was like a scene from some dreadful morality painting with Anne's face like a depiction of greed and vanity, with her dark eyes glittering through the holes in the proud gold face at the head of the bed, while below her vulnerable white thighs were parted over a mess of blood on the sheets.

The midwife peered at her, taking care to touch her very little. She straightened up and asked a string of questions about the pains, how fast they were coming, how strong they were, how long they were lasting. Then she said she could make a posset which would put Anne to sleep and that might save the child. Her body would rest and perhaps the child would rest too. She did not sound hopeful. The expressionless beak of the golden mask turned from the woman to George's drawn face; but Anne herself said nothing.

The midwife brewed up the posset over the fire and Anne drank from a mug of pewter. George held her until she leaned back against his shoulders, the dreadful gleaming mask looking wildly triumphant, even as the midwife gently covered her up. The woman went to the door and George laid Anne gently down and followed us out. 'We can't lose her, we can't bear to lose her,' George said, and for a moment I heard the passion in his voice.

'Pray for her then,' the woman said shortly. 'She's in the hands of God.'

George said something indistinguishable and turned back to the bedroom. I let the woman out of the door and William escorted her down the long dark corridor to the palace gates. I returned to the room and George and I sat either side of the bed while Anne slept and moaned in her sleep.



We had to get her back into her own room, and then we had to give it out that she was unwell. George played cards in her presence chamber as if he had not a care in the world and the ladies flirted and gamed and diced as if everything was the same as usual. I sat with Anne in her bedchamber, and sent a message to the king in her name that she was tired and would see him before dinner. My mother, alerted by George's loud insouciance and my disappearance, came to find Anne. One sight of her in a drugged sleep with blood on the sheets and she went white around the mouth.

'We did the best that we could,' I said desperately.

'Does anyone else know?' she demanded.

'No-one. Not even the king.'

She nodded. 'Keep it that way.'

The day wore on. Anne started to sweat and I began to doubt the wise woman's posset. I put my hand on her forehead and felt the heat burn against my palm. I looked at my mother. 'She's too hot,' I said. My mother shrugged.

I turned back to Anne. She was rolling her head on the pillow, and then without warning, she lifted up, curved herself inwards and gave a great groan. My mother ripped back the covers and we saw the sudden flood of blood and a mass of something. Anne dropped back on the pillows and cried out, a heartbroken pitiful cry, and then her eyelids fluttered and she was still.

I touched her forehead again, and put my ear to her breast. Her heart was beating steadily and strongly, but her eyes were shut. My mother, her face like stone, was bundling up the stained sheets, wrapping them around the mess. She turned to where the fire was burning, a little summertime fire.

'Stoke it up,' she said shortly.

I hesitated, glancing to Anne. 'She's so hot.'

'This is more important,' she said. 'This has to be gone before anyone has even the slightest idea of it.'

I put the poker into the fire and turned over the hot embers. My mother knelt at the fireside and ripped the sheet into a strip and laid it on the flames, it curled and burned with a hiss. Patiently, she ripped another and another, until she came to the very centre of the bundle, the awful dark mess which had been Anne's baby. 'Put on kindling,' she said shortly.

I looked at her in horror. 'Shouldn't we bury ...?'

'Put on kindling,' she spat at me. 'How long d'you think any of us will last if

everyone knows that she cannot carry a baby?’

I looked into her face and measured the power of her will. Then I piled the fire with the little scented fir cones, and when they burned up brightly we packed the guilty bundle onto the flames and sat back on our heels like a pair of old witches and watched all that was left of Anne’s baby go up the chimney like some dreadful curse.

When the sheet was burned, and the sizzling mess gone too, my mother threw on some more fir cones and some herbs from the floor to purify the smell of the room, and only then did she turn back to her daughter.

Anne was awake, leaning up on one elbow to watch us, her eyes glassy.

‘Anne?’ my mother said.

With an effort my sister turned her gaze up to her.

‘Your baby is dead,’ my mother said flatly. ‘Dead and gone. You have to sleep and get well. I expect you to be up within the day. Do you hear me? If anybody asks you about the baby you will say that you made a mistake, that there was no baby. There never has been a baby and you never announced one. But for a certainty, one will come soon.’

Anne turned a blank look to her mother. For a moment I was seized with a dreadful fear that the posset and the pain and the heat had driven her mad, and that she would forever look without seeing, hear without understanding.

‘The king too,’ my mother said, her voice cold. ‘Just tell him you made a mistake, that you were not with child. A mistake is innocent enough but a miscarriage is proof of sin.’

Anne’s face never changed. She did not even protest her innocence. I thought she was deaf. ‘Anne?’ I said gently.

She turned to me, and when she saw my shocked eyes, and the smuts on my face, I saw her expression alter. She understood that something very terrible had taken place.

‘Why are you in such a mess?’ she asked coldly. ‘It’s not as if anything has happened to you, has it?’

‘I’ll tell your uncle,’ my mother said. She paused at the threshold and looked at me. ‘What has she done that this should happen?’ she asked as coldly as if she were inquiring after a broken piece of china. ‘She must have done something to lose her child like this. D’you know what it was?’

I thought of the days and nights of seducing the king and breaking the heart of his wife, of the poisoning of three men and the destruction of Cardinal Wolsey. ‘Nothing out of the ordinary.’

My mother nodded and went from the room without touching her daughter, without another word to either of us. Anne's empty gaze came back to me, her face as blank as the gold hawk mask. I kneeled at the head of her bed and held out my arms. Her expression never altered but she leaned slowly towards me and rested her heavy head on my shoulder.



It took us all that night and the next day to get Anne back on her feet again. The king kept away, once we gave out that she had a cold. Not so my uncle, he came to the doorway of her bedchamber as if she were still nothing more than a Boleyn girl. I saw her eyes darken with rage at his disrespect.

‘Your mother has told me,’ he said shortly ‘How could such a thing happen?’

Anne turned her head. ‘How should I know?’

‘You consulted no wise women to conceive? You tried no potions or herbs or anything? You invoked no spirits and did no spells?’

Anne shook her head. ‘I would not touch such things,’ she said. ‘You can ask anyone. Ask my confessor, ask Thomas Cranmer. I have a care to my soul as much as you.’

‘I have more of a care for my neck,’ he said grimly. ‘Do you swear it? For I may have to swear for you one day.’

‘I swear it,’ Anne said sulkily.

‘Get up as soon as you can and conceive another, and it had better be a boy.’

The look she turned on him was so filled with hatred that even he recoiled. ‘Thank you for that advice,’ she snarled. ‘It is something that had occurred to me before. I have to conceive as swiftly as possible and it has to go full term and it has to be a boy. Thank you, Uncle. Yes. I know that.’

She turned her face away from him to the rich hangings on her bed. He waited for a moment and then he smiled his grim hard-faced smile at me, and went away. I closed the door and Anne and I were alone.

Her eyes, when she looked at me, were filled with fear. ‘But what if the king cannot get a legitimate son?’ she whispered. ‘He never did it with her. I will get all the blame and what will happen to me then?’

Summer 1534

In the first days of July I was sick in the mornings and my breasts were tender to the touch. William, kissing my belly in a dark-shaded room one afternoon, patted me with his hand and said quietly: 'What d'you think, my love?'

'About what?'

'About this round little belly.'

I turned my head away so he could not see me smile. 'I hadn't noticed.'

'Well I have,' he said bluntly. 'Now tell me. How long have you known?'

'Two months,' I confessed. 'And I have been torn between joy and fear, for this will be our undoing.'

He gathered me into the fold of his arm. 'Never,' he said. 'This is our firstborn Stafford and a cause for the greatest of joy. I couldn't be more pleased. A son to bring the cows in or a daughter to do the milking, what a clever girl you are.'

'D'you want a boy?' I asked curiously, thinking of the constant theme of the Boleyns.

'If you have one,' he said easily. 'Whatever you have in there, my love.'



I was released from court to meet my children at Hever in July and August while Anne and the king went off. William and I had the best summer we had ever spent together with the children, but when the time came to go back to court I was carrying the baby so high and so proudly that I knew I would have to tell Anne the news and hope that she would shield me from my uncle's rage in my pregnancy, as I had shielded her miscarriage from the king.

I was lucky when I arrived at Greenwich. The king was out hunting and most of the court with him. Anne was sitting in the garden, on a turf bench, an awning over her head and a group of musicians playing to her. Someone was reading love poetry. I paused for a moment and took a second look at them. They were all older than I had remembered. This was no longer the court of a young man.

They were all seasoned in a way that they had not been when Queen Katherine had been on the throne. There was a hint of extravagance and glamour about them all, there were a great deal of pretty words being spoken and a certain heat in the group which was not all late-summer sunshine and wine. It had become a sophisticated court, an older court; I could almost have said corrupt. It felt as if anything could happen.

‘Why, here is my sister,’ Anne remarked, shading her eyes with her hand. ‘Welcome back, Mary. Have you had enough of the country?’

I kept my riding cloak loosely about me. ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I have come seeking the sunshine of your court.’

Anne giggled. ‘Very nicely put,’ she said. ‘I shall have you trained as a true courtier yet. How is my son Henry?’

I gritted my teeth on that, as she knew I would. ‘He sends his love and duty to you. I have a copy of a letter he has written to you in Latin. He is a bright boy, his schoolmaster is pleased with him, and he has learned to ride very well this summer.’

‘Good,’ Anne said. Clearly, I was not worth tormenting for she turned from me to William Brereton. ‘If you cannot do better with “love” than “dove” I shall have to award the prize to Sir Thomas.’

‘Shove?’ he suggested.

Anne laughed. ‘What? My sweetest queen, my only love, I long to give you a hearty shove?’

‘Love is impossible,’ Sir Thomas remarked. ‘In poetry as in life, nothing goes with it.’

‘Marriage,’ Anne suggested.

‘Clearly love does not go with marriage, marriage is quite another thing. For a start it is three beats as opposed to one. And for another it has no music to it.’

‘My marriage has music,’ Anne said.

Sir Thomas bowed his head. ‘Everything that you do has music,’ he pointed out. ‘But still the word does not rhyme with anything helpful.’

‘The prize goes to you, Sir Thomas,’ Anne said. ‘You need not flatter me as well as make poetry.’

‘It is no flattery to tell the truth,’ he said, kneeling before her. Anne gave him a little gold chain from her belt and he kissed it and tucked it away in the pocket of his doublet.

‘Now,’ Anne said. ‘I shall go and change my gown before the king comes home from his hunting wanting his dinner.’ She rose to her feet and looked

around at her ladies. 'Where is Madge Shelton?'

The silence which greeted her told her everything. 'Where is she?'

'Hunting with the king, Your Majesty,' one of the ladies volunteered.

Anne raised an eyebrow and glanced at me, the only member of her court who knew that Madge had been appointed as the king's mistress by our uncle but only for the duration of Anne's confinement. Now it seemed that Madge was making progress on her own account.

'Where's George?' I asked her.

She nodded, it was a key question. 'With the king,' she said. We knew that George could be trusted to protect Anne's interests.

Anne nodded and turned to the palace. The lightness of the afternoon had faded at the first mention of the king with another woman. Anne's shoulders were set, her face grim. I walked at her side as we went up to her rooms. As I had hoped, she gestured that the ladies in waiting should wait in the presence chamber and she and I went into her privy chamber alone. As soon as the door was closed I said: 'Anne, I have something to tell you. I need your help.'

'What now?' she said. She seated herself before a golden mirror and pulled her hood from her head. Her dark hair, as lovely and lustrous as ever, tumbled down over her shoulders. 'Brush my hair,' she said.

I took a brush and swept it through the dark locks, hoping to soothe her. 'I have married a man,' I said simply. 'And I am carrying his child.'

She was so still that for a moment I thought she had not heard me, and in that moment I hoped to God that she had not. Then she turned around on the stool and her face was like thunder. 'You have done what?' She spat out the question.

'Married,' I said.

'Without my permission?'

'Yes, Anne. I'm very sorry.'

Her head came up, her eyes met mine in the mirror. 'Who?'

'Sir William Stafford.'

'William Stafford? The king's usher?'

'Yes,' I said. 'He has a small farm near Rochford.'

'He is nothing,' she said. I could hear her temper rising in her voice.

'The king knighted him,' I said. 'He is Sir William.'

'Sir William Nothing!' she said again. 'And you are with child?'

I knew it was that she would hate the most. 'Yes,' I said humbly.

She leaped to her feet and dragged the cloak away so that she could see the broad spread of my stomacher. 'You whore!' she swore at me. Her hand came

back, I froze, ready to take the blow, but when it came I felt my neck snap back with the force of it. It threw me backwards against the bed, and she stood over me like a fighter. 'How long has this been going on? When will this next bastard of yours be born?'

'In March,' I said. 'And he is no bastard.'

'D'you think to mock me, coming into my court with a belly on you like a fat brood mare? What d'you mean to do? You mean to tell the world that *you* are the fertile Boleyn girl and I am all but barren?'

'Anne ...'

Nothing would stop her.

'Showing the world that you are in pup again! You insult me by even being here. You insult our family.'

'I married him,' I said, I could hear my voice shake a little at her anger. 'I married him for love, Anne. Please, please don't be like this. I love him. I can go from court, but please let me see ...'

She did not even let me finish. 'Aye, you'll go from court!' she cried. 'To hell for all I care. You'll go from court and never come back to it.'

'My children,' I finished breathlessly.

'You can say goodbye to them. I'll not have my nephew brought up by a woman who has no pride in her family and no knowledge of the world. A fool who is dragged through life by her lust. Why marry William Stafford? Why not a lad from the stable? Why not the miller at Hever mill? If all you want is a good thumping why stop at one of the king's men? A soldier in the ranks would do as well.'

'Anne, I warn you.' The anger was creeping into my own voice even as my cheek still throbbed with the heat from her blow. 'I will not take this. I married a good man for love, I did no more than the Princess Mary Tudor did when she married the Duke of Suffolk. I married once to oblige my family, I did as they bid me when the king looked my way, and now I want to please myself. Anne – only you can defend me against our uncle and father.'

'Does George know?' she demanded.

'No. I told you he does not. I only came to you. Only you can help me.'

'Never,' she swore. 'You have married a poor man for love, you can eat love, you can drink it. You can live off it. Go to his little farm in Rochford and rot there, and when Father or George or I come down to Rochford Hall make very sure that you are nowhere in our sight. You are banished from court, Mary. You have ruined yourself and I will set a seal on it. You are gone. I have no

sister.'

'Anne!' I cried, utterly aghast.

She turned a furious face to me. 'Shall I call the guards and have you thrown out of the gates?' she demanded. 'For I swear I will do so.'

I fell to my knees. 'My son,' was all I could say.

'My son,' she said vindictively. 'I will tell him that his mother is dead and that he is to call me mother. You have lost everything for love, Mary. I hope it brings you joy.'

There was nothing I could say. I rose awkwardly to my feet, my heavy belly making it hard for me to rise. She watched me struggle as if she would sooner push me down than help me. I turned to the door and hesitated with my hand on the handle in case she should change her mind. 'My son ...'

'Go,' she said. 'You are dead to me. And don't approach the king or I shall tell him what a whore you have been.'

I slipped out of the door and went to my bedroom.



Madge Shelton was changing her dress before the looking glass. She turned when she heard me come in, a bright smile on her young face. She took one look at my grim expression and I saw her eyes widen. That one look said everything that was different between our ages, between our positions, between our places in the Howard family. She was a young girl with everything to sell and I was a woman twice married who would have three children at twenty-seven, cast out by my family and nothing to turn to but one man on a little farm. I was a woman who had her chance and botched it.

'Are you sick?' she asked.

'Ruined,' I said shortly.

'Oh,' she said with all the doltishness of vain youth. 'Sorry.'

I found a grim little laugh. 'That's all right,' I said dourly. 'It's a bed of my own making.'

I threw my riding cloak on the bed and she saw the broad lacing of my stomacher. She gave a little gasp of horror.

'Aye,' I said. 'I'm carrying a baby, and I am married, if you want to know.'

'The queen?' she asked in a half-whisper, knowing, as we all knew, that the one thing this queen hated was fertile women.

'Not best pleased,' I said.

‘Your husband?’

‘William Stafford.’

A gleam in her dark eyes told me that she had noticed more than she had said. ‘I’m so pleased for you,’ she said. ‘He’s a handsome man and a good man. I thought you liked him. So all these nights ...?’

‘Yes,’ I said shortly.

‘What happens now?’

‘We’ll have to make our own way in the world,’ I said. ‘We’ll go to Rochford. He has a little farm there. We might do nicely.’

‘On a little farm?’ Madge asked incredulously.

‘Yes,’ I said with sudden energy. ‘Why not? There are other places to live than in palaces and castles. There are other tunes to dance to other than the court’s music. We don’t always have to wait on a king and queen. I have spent all my life at court, wasted my girlhood and womanhood here. I am sorry that I shall be poor but I am damned if I will miss the life here.’

‘And your children?’ she asked.

The question knocked the wind out of me like a blow to the belly. My knees buckled and I sank to the floor, holding myself tight, as if my heart would break out of me. ‘Oh, my children,’ I said in a whisper.

‘Does the queen keep them?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes. She keeps my son.’ I could have said more, and that very bitter. I could have said that she kept my son because she could have none of her own. That she had taken from me everything that she ever could take, she would always take everything from me. That she and I were sisters and deadly rivals and nothing would ever stop us from endlessly eyeing the other’s plate and fearing that the other had the biggest portion. Anne wanted to punish me for refusing to dance in her shadow. And she knew that she had chosen the one forfeit in the world that I could not bear to pay.

‘At least I will escape her,’ I said. ‘And escape this family’s ambition.’

Madge looked at me wide-eyed, as worldly as a fawn. ‘But escaped to what?’



Anne was quick to announce my departure. My father and mother would not even see me before I left court. Only George came down to the stable yard to watch my trunks being loaded onto a cart, and William help me up into the

saddle and then mount his own hunter.

‘Write to me,’ George said. He was scowling with worry. ‘Are you well enough to travel all that way?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘I’ll take care of her,’ William assured him.

‘You’ve not done a wonderful job so far,’ George said unpleasantly. ‘She’s ruined, she’s stripped of her pension, and she’s banned from court.’

I saw William’s hand tighten on the reins and his horse sidled. ‘Not my doing,’ William said levelly. ‘That’s the spite and ambition of the queen and the Boleyn family. In any other family in the land Mary would be allowed to marry a gentleman of her choice.’

‘Stop it,’ I said quickly, before George could reply.

George took a breath and bowed his head. ‘She’s not been best treated,’ he conceded. He looked up at William, seated high on the horse above him, and smiled his rueful, charming Boleyn smile. ‘We had our minds on targets other than her happiness.’

‘I know,’ said William. ‘But I do not.’

George looked wistful. ‘I wish you would tell me the secret of true love,’ he said. ‘Here’s the two of you riding off the very edge of the world and yet you look as if someone has just given you an earldom.’

I put my hand out to William and he gripped it hard. ‘I just found the man I love,’ I said simply. ‘I could never have had a man who loved me more, nor a more honest man.’

‘Go then!’ George said. He pulled off his cap as the wagon lurched forward. ‘Go and be happy together. I’ll do the best I can to get you your place and your pension.’

‘Just my children,’ I said. ‘That’s all I want.’

‘I’ll speak to the king when I can, and you can write. Write to Cromwell perhaps, and I’ll talk to Anne. It’s not forever. You’ll come back, won’t you? You’ll come back?’

There was an odd tone to his voice; not at all as if he were promising me my safe return to the centre of the kingdom, more as if he feared being without me. He did not sound like one of the greatest men at a great court, he sounded more like a boy abandoned in a dangerous place.

‘Keep yourself safe!’ I said, suddenly shivering. ‘Keep out of bad company, and watch over Anne!’

I had not been mistaken. The expression on his face was one of fear. ‘I’ll

try.' His voice rang with hollow confidence. 'I will try!'

The wagon went out under the archway and William and I rode side by side after it. I looked back at George and he seemed very young and far away. He waved at me and called something, but over the grinding of the wheels on the cobbles and the ringing of the horses' hooves I could not hear.

We came out onto the road and William let his horse lengthen his stride so that we overtook the slow-moving wagon and were clear of the dust from its wheels. My hunter would have trotted to keep up, but I steadied her into a walk. I rubbed my face with the back of my glove and William looked sideways at me. 'No regrets?' he asked gently.

'I just fear for him,' I said.

He nodded. He knew too much about George's life at court to offer me a glib reassurance. George's love affair with Sir Francis, their indiscreet circle of friends, their drinking, their gambling, their whoring, was slowly coming to be an open secret. More and more men at court were taking their pleasures more and more wildly, George among them.

'And for her,' I said, thinking of my sister who had banished me like a beggar and so left herself with only one friend in the world.

William leaned over and put his hand over mine. 'Come on,' he said, and we turned our horses' heads to the river and rode down to meet the waiting boat.



We disembarked at Leigh early in the morning. The horses were cold and fretting after the long river journey and we walked them up the lane, north to Rochford. William took us down the little track which led cross-country to his farm. The early morning mist swirled damp and cold over the fields, it was the very worst time of year to come to the country. It would be a long waterlogged icy winter in the little farmhouse, a long way from anywhere. The dampness on my skirts now would hardly dry out for six months.

William glanced back at me. He smiled. 'Sit up, sweetheart, and look about you. The sun's coming out, and we'll be all right.'

I managed a smile and I straightened my back and pressed my horse onwards. Ahead of me I could see the thatched roof of his farmhouse, and then, as we came over the rise of a hill, the whole pretty little fifty acres, laid out below us with the river lapping up to the bottom fields and the stable yard and barn as neat and as trim as I remembered it.

We rode down the lane and William dismounted to open the gate. A small boy emerged from nowhere and looked doubtfully at the two of us. 'You can't come in,' he said firmly. 'This belongs to Sir William Stafford. A great man at court.'

'Thank you,' William said. 'I am Sir William Stafford and you can tell your mother that you are a fine gatekeeper. Tell her that I am come home, and brought my wife, and that we need bread and milk and some bacon and cheese.'

'You are Sir William Stafford, for sure?' the boy confirmed.

'Yes.'

'Then she'll probably kill a chicken as well,' he said, and legged it across the fields to the little cottage set half a mile away on the lane.

I rode Jesmond through the gate and pulled up in the stable yard. William helped me from the saddle and threw the reins over a hitching post while he took me into the house. The door to the kitchen was open, and we stepped over the threshold together.

'Sit down,' William said, pressing me into a chair by the fireside. 'I'll soon get this lit.'

'Not at all,' I said. 'I'm going to be a farmer's wife, remember. I'll light the fire and you can see to the horses.'

He hesitated. 'D'you know how to light a fire, my little love?'

'Go away!' I said in mock indignation. 'Out of my kitchen. I need to set things to rights here.'



It was like playing at house, like my children might do in a den made of bracken, and at the same time it was a real house, and a real challenge. There was kindling laid in the grate and a tinder box so it did not take me more than about fifteen minutes of patient, painstaking work to get the fire lit and the little flames licking around the wood. The chimney was cold but the wind was in the right quarter so it soon started to draw. William came in from the horses just as the lad returned from the cottage bringing a parcel of food wrapped up in a muslin cloth. We spread the whole thing out on the wooden table and made a little feast of it. William opened a bottle of wine from his cellar under the stairs, and we drank to each other's healths and to the future.



The family who had been farming the fields for William while he had been at court had served him well. The hedges were in good trim, the ditches clear, the meadow fields had been cut for hay and the hay was safely in the barn. The older animals of the herd of cows and sheep would be slaughtered through the autumn, and their meat would be salted or smoked. We had chickens in the yard, we had doves in the cote, and a limitless supply of fish from the stream. For a few pence we could go down to the river and buy sea fish from the fishermen. It was a prosperous farm and an easy place to live.

The urchin's mother, Megan, came over to the farmhouse every day to help me with the work and to teach me the skills I needed to know. She taught me how to churn butter and how to make cheese. She taught me how to bake bread and to pluck a chicken, a dove, or a game bird. It should have been easy and delightful to learn such important skills. I was absolutely exhausted by it.

I felt the skin on my hands grow dry and hard and saw, in the small sliver of looking glass, my face slowly colour with the sun and the wind. I fell into my bed at the end of every day and I slept without dreaming: the sleep of a woman on the edge of exhaustion. But though I was tired at the end of each day I felt I had achieved something, however small. I liked the work since it put food on our table or pence in our savings jar. I liked the feeling that we were building a place together, claiming the land as our own. I liked learning the skills that a poor woman was taught from childhood and when Megan asked me did I not miss my fine clothes and fancy gowns at court, I remembered the endless drudgery of dancing with men I did not like, and flirting with men I did not desire, playing cards and losing a small fortune, and forever trying to please everyone around me. Here there was just William and I, and we lived as easily and as joyfully as two birds in a hedge – just as he had promised.

My only sorrow was the loss of my children. I wrote to them every week and once a month I wrote to George or to Anne, wishing them well. I wrote to Secretary Thomas Cromwell asking him to intervene with my sister and ask her if we might come back to court. But I would not in any way apologise for the choice I had made. I would not sweeten my request with an apology. The words froze on my pen, I could not say that I regretted loving William, for every day I loved him more. In a world where women were bought and sold as horses I had found a man I loved; and married for love. I would never suggest that this was a mistake.

Winter 1534

At Christmas I had a letter from my brother, George.

Dear Sister,

I send you greetings of the season and hope that it finds you as well in your farmhouse as I am at court. Perhaps better.

Matters here are gone a little sour for our sister. The king has been riding and dancing with a Seymour girl – you remember Jane? The one who always looks down: so sweetly; and upwards: so surprised? The king has been seeking her right under the nose of our sister and she is not best pleased. She has rung a few storms over his head but she does not move him to tears as she once did. He can tolerate her displeasure, he just goes away from her. You can imagine what this does to her temper.

Our uncle, taking warning from the king's straying, has been putting Madge Shelton in his way, and His Majesty is torn between the two of them. Since they are both ladies in waiting the queen's rooms are in continual uproar and the king finds it safer to go hunting a good deal and leave the ladies to cry and scream and scratch each other's faces undisturbed.

Anne is sick with fear and I cannot tell what will be the outcome. She never thought when she overthrew a queen that thereafter all queens would be unsteady. She has no friend at court but me. Father, Mother and Uncle are all in favour of putting Madge forward, to keep the king's eye from the Seymour girl. This leaves a very sour taste with Anne, who accuses the family of seeking to supplant her with a new Howard girl. She misses you, but she will not say it.

I speak of you but there is nothing I can tell her which would reconcile her to your marriage. If you had married a prince and been unhappy she would have stood your dearest friend. What

breaks her heart is thinking of you finding love, while she is in the greatest court of Europe, frightened and unhappy.

I get richer every day and my wife is a curse to me and my friend is my delight and my torment. This court would corrupt a saint and neither Anne nor I were saints to begin with. She is desperately lonely and frightened and I long for what I cannot have and am forced to keep my desires hidden. I am weary and angry and this Christmas season seems to offer little to us Boleyns unless Anne can get herself with child again. Write to me to tell me of your news. I hope you are as happy as I imagine you to be.

*Your brother
George.*

William and I celebrated the Christmas feast with a great haunch of venison. I took care not to ask where the beast had been killed. My family's parkland at Rochford Hall was well-stocked and ill-guarded, and there was little doubt in my mind that I had just bought my own deer. But since neither Father nor Mother sent me greetings I thought that I might award myself a gift from their wealth, and I bought the deer at a knock-down price, and a brace of pheasants too. The work of the farm did not stop for the twelve days but we found time to go to Christmas Mass, to see the mummers at Rochford, to drink a wassail cup with our neighbours, and to walk alone beside the river while the seagulls cried over our heads and a cold wind blew up the estuary.

In the iron days of February I prepared for my lying in. This time I would not be a grand lady at court, I would not have to take to my room for a month. I might do as I pleased. William was more apprehensive than I, he insisted that we send for a midwife to stay at the house with us from the last days of the month, to make sure that there was no danger of the baby coming while we were cut off by snow. I laughed at his anxiety but I did as he wished and an old woman, more like a witch than a midwife, came and stayed with us from the first days of March, and watched over me.

I was glad that William had been so careful when I woke one morning and found the room filled with a brilliant white light. It had snowed in the night and it was still snowing, thick white flakes which blew soundlessly out of a grey sky, and swirled around the yard. The world was transformed into a place of utter silence and magic. The hens hid inside their coop, only their three-toed tracks in

the yard showed that they had ventured out looking for food. The sheep huddled at the gate, brown and dirty against the whiter field. The cows crowded into the barn and their field was bleached lawn. I sat at the window, feeling my belly churn as the baby moved inside me, and watched the drifts swell and curve along the hedge. It looked as if not a flake was landing, as if they were just swirling and blowing around the house, but every hour the peaks and troughs of the snowdrifts grew higher and more exotically sculpted. When I looked down from the window, the flakes were white as duck feathers, but when I craned my neck and looked up, they were like scraps of grey lace, dirty against a dull sky.

‘Setting in,’ William said. He had wrapped sacking around his legs and boots and he stood in the little porch outside the door untying it and kicking off the snow. I came slowly down the stairs and smiled at him. He was arrested by the sight of me. ‘Are you well?’

‘Dreamy,’ I said. ‘I have been watching the snow all the morning.’

He exchanged one swift meaningful glance with the midwife who was making porridge at the fire, and then he hopped across the kitchen floor in his bare feet and drew me into a chair at the fireside. ‘Are your pains coming?’ he asked.

I smiled. ‘Not yet. But I think it will be today.’

The midwife slopped porridge into a big bowl and passed it to me with a spoon. ‘Sup up then,’ she said encouragingly. ‘We’ll all need our strength.’



In the end it was an easy birth. My baby girl came in only four hours of labour and the midwife wrapped her in a warm white sheet and put her to my breast. William, who was at my side for every moment of the four hours, put his hand on her little bloodstained head and blessed her, his mouth trembling with emotion. Then he lay down on the bed beside me. The old woman threw a cover over the three of us and left us warm, wrapped in each other’s arms, fast asleep.

We did not wake until the baby stirred and cried two hours later and then I put her to my breast and felt the familiar, wonderful sensation of a beloved child feeding. William tucked a shawl around my shoulders and went downstairs to fetch me a cup of mulled ale. It was still snowing, I could see the white flakes against the darker sky from the bed. I snuggled down into the warmth and leaned back against the goosefeather pillows and knew that I was a woman blessed indeed.

Spring 1535

Dear Sister,

The queen our sister commands me to tell you that she is with child once more and that you are to come to court to help her but that your husband must stay at Rochford and the baby with him. She will not see either. Your pension will be restored to you and you may be allowed to see your children at Hever this summer.

That is the message I have been ordered to give you, and I tell you as well that we need you at Hampton Court. Anne expects her confinement in the autumn of this year. We will go on progress this summer but not very far. She is anxious to have you with her, because she is desperate to keep this child, as you can imagine, and she wants a friend at court as well as me. In truth, at the moment, she is the loneliest woman in the world. The king is quite taken up with Madge who goes everywhere in a new gown for every day of the week. There was a family conference held the other day by our uncle to which neither I nor Father nor Mother was bid. The Sheltons went. I leave you to imagine what Anne and I made of that. Anne is still queen, but she is no longer favourite either with the king or with her own family.

I warn you of one other thing before you arrive. The city is in an uneasy mood. The oath of succession has driven five good men to the Tower of London and to their deaths and it may drive more. Henry has discovered that his power is without limits and now there is neither Wolsey nor Queen Katherine nor Thomas More to keep him steady. The court itself is a wilder place than when you knew it before. I have been in the forefront of it, and it sickens me. It is like a runaway cart and I cannot see how to leap clear. It is not a happy place that I am bidding you visit. No – that I am begging you to visit.

As inducement, I can promise you a summer with your

children, if Anne is well enough to let you leave her.
George.

I took the letter with the heavy Boleyn seal to my husband where he was in the yard, milking a cow with his head pressed against her warm flank and the milk hissing into the bucket.

‘Good news?’ he asked, reading my bright face.

‘I am allowed back to court. Anne is with child again and she wants me there.’

‘And your children?’

‘I can see them this summer if she will release me.’

‘Thank God,’ he said simply, and he turned his head to the cow’s belly and closed his eyes for a moment and I realised, as I had not fully known before, that he had been suffering for me in the loss of my children.

‘Any forgiveness for me?’ he asked after a little while.

I shook my head. ‘You’re forbidden. But I suppose you could just come with me.’

‘I’d be sorry to leave the farm again for long.’

I chuckled. ‘Have you become a rustic, my love?’

‘Arr,’ he said. He rose from the milking stool and patted the cow on the rump. I held open the gate for her and she went out into the field where the spring grass was coming through rich and green. ‘I’ll come to court with you, whether they say so or not; and when the summer comes, we’ll come back here.’

‘After Hever,’ I stipulated.

He smiled at me and his warm hand closed on mine as it rested on the top of the gate. ‘After Hever, of course,’ he said. ‘When is the queen’s baby due?’

‘In the autumn. But no-one knows.’

‘Pray God this time she can carry it.’ He hesitated for a moment and then dipped a ladle into the warm milk. ‘Taste,’ he commanded.

I did as I was bid and drank a draught of the warm foamy milk.

‘Good?’

‘Yes.’

‘D’you want it in the dairy for churning?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I thought I’d do it myself.’

‘I don’t want you getting too tired.’

I smiled at his concern. ‘I can do it.’

‘I’ll carry it in for you,’ he said tenderly. And he led the way into the dairy

where our baby, named Anne to please her aunt, wrapped tight in her swaddling, was asleep on the bench.



The royal barge was sent to bring me back to Hampton Court. William, the wet nurse, and myself embarked at Leigh very grand in our court clothes. Our horses were to follow later. The imposing nature of our send-off was rather spoiled by my husband who kept shouting last-minute instructions to Megan's husband who would care for the farm while we were away.

'I am sure he would have remembered the shear the sheep,' I remarked mildly when William finally settled down into his seat and stopped hanging over the rail and bawling like a seaman. 'When their coats grew very long, he would probably have noticed.'

He grinned. 'I am sorry. Did I disgrace you?'

'Well, since you are a member of the royal family, I do think you might find a way to behave which is not quite like a drunk farmer on market day.'

He was quite unrepentant. 'Beg your pardon, Lady Stafford,' he said. 'I swear, when we get to Hampton Court I shall be discretion itself. Where shall I sleep, for instance? Would a hayloft in your stable be sufficiently humble?'

'I thought we might take a little house in the town. And I'll come every day for most of the day.'

'And you had better come home to sleep at night,' he said emphatically. 'Or I shall come up to the palace and fetch you. You're my wife now, my acknowledged wife. I expect you to act like one.'

I smiled and turned my head away so that he should not see the amusement in my face. Pointless to remind my straightforward determined husband, that my previous marriage had been a court marriage and I had all but never slept in my husband's bed, and no-one had been in the least surprised.

'Makes no difference,' he said, with his intuitive knowledge of my thoughts. 'No difference at all how your first marriage was. This is my marriage, and I want my wife in my bed.'

I laughed aloud and snuggled back into his arms. 'It's where I want to be,' I confessed. 'Why would I ever want to be anywhere else?'



The royal barge went smoothly upriver, the rowers keeping to the rhythmic beat of the drum, the tide, rushing inwards, carrying us as fast as a cantering horse. The familiar landmarks came into sight, the great square white tower and the yawning mouth of the watergate at the Tower of London. The bridge was a dark shadow across the river like a doorway opening up to the beauty of the waterside palaces and their gardens and all the bustle and excitement of the central waterway of a great city. The little wherries and ferries and fishing boats crisscrossed the river before us, at Lambeth the great ponderous horse ferry hesitated while we went swiftly by. William pointed to a great grey heron nesting awkwardly in some trees at the water's edge and a cormorant as it upended and dived, a dark acquisitive shadow under water.

Many faces turned in the direction of the royal barge but there were few smiles. I remembered riding in the barge with Queen Katherine and how everyone had pulled off their hats as we went by and the women curtsied, and the children kissed their hands and waved. There had been a trust that the king was wise and strong and that the queen was beautiful and good and that nothing could go wrong. But Anne and the Boleyn ambition had opened a great crack in that unity and now everyone could see into the void. They could see now that the king was no better than some paltry little mayor of a fat little town, who wanted nothing more than to feather his own nest, and that he was married to a woman who knew desire, ambition and greed and longed for satisfaction.

If Anne and Henry had expected the people to forgive them then they must be disappointed. The people would never forgive. Queen Katherine might be all but a prisoner in the cold marshes of Huntingdonshire, but she was not forgotten. Indeed, every day that there was no new christening of a new heir for England, her banishment seemed more and more pointless.

I lay back against William's comforting shoulder and dozed. I heard our baby cry after a little while and I woke to see the wet nurse clasping her close and feeding her. My own breasts, firmly bound, ached in longing, and William tightened his grip around my waist and kissed the top of my head. 'She's well cared for,' he said gently. 'And no-one will ever take her away from you.'

I nodded. I could order her to be brought to me at any time of the day or night. She was my child in a way that my other two had never been. There was no point in telling him that when I saw her blue intent eyes that I grieved even more for the two I had lost. She could not take their place, she only reminded me that I was a mother of three and that though I might have a warm little bundle in my arms, there were two children of mine somewhere else in the world, and I

did not even know where my son lay his head at night.

It was twilight before we saw the great pier of Hampton Court and the great iron gates behind them. The drummer gave an extra roll of drums and we saw the watermen tumbling along the pier making ready for us to land. There was a brief cursory fanfare to honour the king's standard, and then the barge was docked and we were landed and William and I were back at court.

Discreetly, William, our baby and the wet nurse took the tow path down to the village and left me to enter the palace on my own. He squeezed my hand briefly before he turned away. 'Be brave,' he said with a smile. 'Remember, she needs you now. Don't sell your services too cheap.'

I nodded, gathered my cloak around me and turned to face the great palace.

I was shown in as if I were a stranger, up the great stairs to the queen's apartments. When the guards opened the door and I walked in there was a moment of dead silence and then a storm of female enthusiasm burst about my head. Every woman in the room touched my shoulders, my neck, the sleeves of my gown, the hood over my hair, and remarked how well I was looking, how motherhood became me, how the country air suited me and how delightful it was to see me back at court. Every single woman was my dearest friend, my sweetest cousin, I should have my pick of bedchambers, everyone wanted to share with me. It was so delightful for them to see me back at court that I could only be amazed that they had managed so long without me, not one of them ever writing, not one of them ever asking my sister for clemency.

And was I indeed married to William Stafford? And did he indeed have a manor farm? Just the one? Just one? But a large place? No? How odd! And did we have a baby? A boy or a girl? And who were the godparents and the sponsors? And what was her name? And where were William and the baby now? At court? No? Well, how curious.

I fended off the questions with all the skill that I could manage and looked around for George. He was not there. The king had ridden out late with just a handful of hard-drinking hard-riding favourites and they were not yet back. The ladies had changed for dinner and were awaiting the return of the men. Anne was in her privy chamber, alone.

I took my courage in my hands and went to her door. I tapped on it and turned the handle, and went in.

The room was in shadow, the only illumination coming from the windows which were still unshuttered, the grey light of the May twilight, and a little flickering glow from the small fire. She was kneeling at her prie dieu and I had

to choke back an exclamation of superstitious fear. I saw Queen Katherine on her knees at her prie dieu, praying with all her heart that she might conceive a son for her husband and that he might turn back to her, away from the Boleyn girls. But then the ghost queen turned her head and it was Anne, my sister, pale and strained, with her flirtatious eyes shadowed with fatigue. At once my heart went out to her and I crossed the room and wrapped my arms around her where she knelt and said, 'Oh Anne.'

She rose to her feet and put her arms around me and her heavy head came down on my shoulder. She did not say that she had missed me, that she was miserably lonely in a court which was turning its attention away from her; but she did not need to. The droop of her shoulders was enough to tell me that queenship was not a great joy to Anne Boleyn in these days.

Gently, I put her in a chair and I took a seat, without permission, opposite her.

'Are you well?' I asked, going to the main point, the only point.

'Yes,' she said. Her lower lip trembled slightly. Her face was very pale with new lines either side of her mouth. For the first time in my life I looked into her face and saw that she resembled our mother, I could see how she would look in old age.

'No pains?'

'None.'

'You look very pale.'

'I'm weary,' she confessed. 'It is draining the strength out of me.'

'How many months?'

'Four,' she said, with the instant recollection of a woman who has been thinking about nothing else.

'You'll feel better soon then,' I said. 'The first three are always the worst.' I nearly said, 'and then the last three', but it was no joke to Anne who had only once carried a child through to the last three months.

'Is the king home?' she asked.

'They told me he was still out hunting, George with him.'

She nodded. 'Is Madge out there with the ladies?'

'Yes,' I said.

'And that Seymour white-faced thing?'

'Yes,' I said, having no difficulty in recognising Jane Seymour from that description.

Anne nodded. 'Well enough then,' she said. 'As long as neither of them are

with him then I am content.'

'You should try to be content anyway,' I said gently. 'You don't want a belly full of bile with a baby in there.'

She gave me a swift glance and a hard laugh. 'Oh aye, very content. Did your husband come with you?'

'Not to court,' I said. 'Since you said he could not.'

'Are you still besotted? Or are you weary now of him and his handful of fields?'

'I love him still.' I was not in the mood to rise to Anne's baiting. The thought of William filled me with such peace that I did not want to quarrel with anyone, least of all a woman as pale and weary as this queen.

She gave me a bitter little smile. 'George says that you are the only Boleyn with sense,' she said. 'He says that of the three of us you made the wisest choice. You'll never be wealthy, but you have a husband who loves you, and a healthy baby in the cradle. George's wife looks at him as if she would kill him and eat him, her desire is so mixed with hatred; and Henry flits in and out of my room like a butterfly in the springtime. And those two girls flit after him with nets at the ready.'

I laughed aloud at the thought of the increasingly fat Henry as a butterfly in the springtime. 'Big net,' was all I said.

Anne gleamed for a moment, and then laughed too: her merry familiar laugh. 'Dear God, I'd give anything to be rid of them.'

'I'm here now,' I said. 'I can keep them off you.'

'Yes,' she said. 'And if it goes wrong for me you can help me, can't you?'

'Of course,' I said. 'Whatever else happens, you always have George and you always have me.'

There was a flurry of noise from the outer room: an unmistakable bellow of laughter, the great Tudor roar. Anne heard her husband's joy and she did not smile. 'Now I suppose he'll want his dinner.'

I stopped her as she went to the door. 'Does he know that you're with child?' I asked quickly.

She shook her head. 'No-one knows but you and George,' she said. 'I dare not tell.'

She opened the door and we saw, just as she opened it, Henry tying a locket around the blushing neck of Madge Shelton. At the sight of his wife he flinched but finished his task. 'A little keepsake,' he remarked to Anne. 'A small wager won by this clever girl here. Good evening, my wife.'

‘Husband,’ Anne said through her teeth. ‘Good evening to you.’

He looked past her and saw me. ‘Why, Mary!’ he exclaimed, beaming with delight. ‘The beautiful Lady Carey, back with us again.’

I dropped my curtsey and looked up into his face. ‘Lady Stafford, if you please, Your Majesty. I have remarried.’

His quick nod showed that he remembered – and remembered the peal his wife had rung over his head as she banished me from court. As I saw his smile stay constant, and his eyes stay warm on my upturned face, I thought what a poisonous witch my sister was. She had sought and obtained my banishment quite alone, it had not been the will of the king at all. He would have forgiven me at once. If Anne had not needed me to help her hide her pregnancy then she would have left me at the little farmhouse forever.

‘And you have a child?’ he asked. He could not help a swift glance over my head to Anne, looking from the fertile Boleyn girl to the barren one.

‘A girl, Your Majesty,’ I said, thanking God that it had not been a son.

‘William is a lucky man.’

I smiled up at him intimately. ‘I certainly tell him so.’

Henry laughed and reached out a hand to draw me closer. ‘Is he not here?’ he said, looking around his gentlemen.

‘He was not asked ...’ I started.

At once he grasped my meaning. He turned back to his wife. ‘Why is Sir William not bidden back to court with his wife?’ he asked.

Anne never even wavered. ‘Of course he was summoned. I invited them both to come back to us as soon as my dear sister was churched.’

I could do nothing but admire her as she delivered this barefaced lie. Nothing for me to do but accept the lie and then play it for all I was worth. ‘He will join me tomorrow if it please Your Majesty. And if I may, I will have my daughter with me too.’

‘The court is no place for a baby,’ Anne said flatly.

At once Henry rounded on her. ‘More the pity. And more the pity I should hear that from my wife. This court is the very place for a baby, as I would have thought you, of all people, would know.’

‘I was thinking of the baby’s health, my lord,’ Anne said coldly. ‘I was thinking that she should be brought up in the country.’

‘Her mother can be the judge of that,’ Henry said grandly.

I smiled, honey sweet, and then I snatched at my chance. ‘Indeed, with your permission, I should like to take my baby into the country, to Hever this

summer. She can meet my other children.'

'My son Henry,' Anne reminded me.

I turned a beguiling gaze upwards to the king.

'Why not?' he said. 'Whatever you wish, Lady Stafford.'

He offered me his arm and I swept him a curtsy and slipped my hand in the crook of his elbow. I gazed up at him as if he were still the most handsome prince in Europe, and not the balding fat man he had become. The clear line of his jaw had thickened. The hair on the top of his head was thin and sparse. The rosebud mouth which had been so kissable in a young face was now a self-indulgent little pout, and his dancing eyes were occluded by the fat of his eyelids and the puff of his cheeks. He looked like a man both indulged and yet unhappy. A man like a sulky child.

I smiled radiantly up at him, I tilted my head towards him, laughed at his remarks, and made him laugh with tales of my buttermaking and my cheesemaking, until we were at the high table and he went to his throne as King of England, and I went to my seat at the table for the ladies in waiting.



We sat long over dinner, this court had become gluttons. There were twenty different meat dishes: game and killed meat, birds and fish. There were fifteen different puddings. I watched Henry taste a little of everything, and continually send for more. Anne sat beside him with a face like ice, picking at her plate, her eyes forever flicking to one side and then the other as if she would see where danger waited.

When the plates were finally taken away there was a masque and then the court set to dancing in earnest. I kept a close watch on the side door to the left of the fireplace, even when I was taking my place in a circle of dancers, even when I was flirting with my old friends of the court. After midnight, my watch was rewarded: the door opened and my husband William slipped in, and looked around for me.

The candles were guttering down and there were so many people dancing and moving around that he was not seen. I excused myself from the dance and went over to him and he drew me at once into an alcove, behind a curtain.

'My love,' he said and took me in his arms. 'It feels like a lifetime.'

'For me too. Is the baby all right? Settled in?'

'I left her and the nurse sound asleep. And I have good lodgings for them and

for us too as soon as you can get away from court.'

'I've done better than that,' I said delightedly. 'The king was pleased to see me and he asked for you. You are to come to court tomorrow. We can be here together. He said that we could take Baby Anne to Hever for the summer.'

'Did Anne ask it for you?'

I shook my head. 'It's Anne I have to thank for my exile,' I said. 'She wouldn't even have let me see my children if I had not asked it of the king.'

He gave a low whistle. 'You must have thanked her kindly for that.'

I shook my head. 'No point complaining of her very nature.'

'And how is she?'

'Sour,' I whispered very low. 'Sick. And sad.'

Summer 1535

That night George and I sat in Anne's room as she prepared for bed. The king had said he would lie with her that night and she had bathed and asked me to brush her hair.

'You do make sure he is careful, don't you?' I asked her anxiously. 'It's a sin that he should lie with you at all.'

George gave a short laugh from where he was stretched out on her bed, his boots on her fine covers.

She turned her head under the hairbrush. 'I'm in little danger of rough wooing.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Some nights he cannot do it. Some nights he cannot get hard at all. It's disgusting. I have to lie underneath him while he heaves around and sweats and grunts. And then he gets angry, and he is angry with me! As if I had anything to do with it.'

'Is it drink?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'You know the king. He's always half-drunk by night.'

'If you tell him you're with child ...' I said.

'I'll have to tell him in June, won't I?' she remarked. 'As soon as it quickens, I'll tell him then. He'll cancel the court's progress and we can all stay at Hampton Court. George will have to ride out and hunt with him and keep that moon-faced Jane off his neck.'

'Archangel Gabriel couldn't keep the women off him,' George said negligently. 'You've set a pattern, Anne, you'll live to regret it. They all of them hold him at arm's length and promise him the earth. It was easier when they were all like pretty Mary here – took a little romp and were paid a couple of manors for it.'

'I think you got the manors,' I said sharply. 'And Father. And William Carey. As I recall, I got a pair of embroidered gloves and a pearl necklace.'

'And a ship named for you, and a horse,' Anne said with her accurate envious memory. 'And gowns without number, and a new bed.'

George laughed. 'You have an inventory as if you were a groom of the household, Anne.' He stretched out a hand for her and pulled her to the bed to lie back on the pillow beside him. I looked at the two of them, as intimate as twins, side by side in the big bed of England.

'I'll leave you,' I said shortly.

'Run off to Sir Nobody,' Anne threw over her shoulder, and twitched the richly embroidered curtains of the bed so they were both shielded from my sight.



William was waiting for me, in the garden, looking out over the river, his face dark.

'What's the matter?'

'He's arrested Fisher,' he said. 'I never thought he'd dare.'

'Bishop Fisher?'

'I thought he had a charmed life. Henry always loved him, and he seemed to be allowed to defend Queen Katherine and emerge unscathed. He's been her man without swerving. She'll grieve for him.'

'But he'll just be in the Tower for a week or so, won't he? And then apologise, or whatever?'

'It depends what they demand of him. He won't take the oath of succession, I'm sure of that. He can't say that Elizabeth is to succeed in the place of Mary, he's written a dozen books and preached a million sermons in defence of the marriage, he can't disinherit her daughter.'

'Then he'll just stay there,' I said.

'I suppose so,' William repeated.

I drew a little closer and put my hand on his arm. 'Why are you so worried?' I asked. 'He'll have his books and his things, his friends will visit him. He'll be released at the end of the summer.'

William turned from the river and took my hands in his. 'I was there when Henry ordered him sent to the Tower,' he said. 'He was at Mass while he was doing his business. Think of that, Mary. He was at Mass when he ordered a bishop to the Tower.'

'He's always done his business while hearing Mass,' I said. I was unwilling to recognise my husband's earnestness. 'It doesn't mean anything.'

'These are Henry's laws,' my husband said, holding my hands and not releasing me. 'The Oath of Succession and then the Supremacy Act, and then the

Treason Act. These aren't the laws of the land. These are Henry's laws that set a trap to catch his enemies, and Fisher and More have fallen into it.'

'He's hardly going to behead them ...' I said reasonably. 'Oh William, really! One is the most revered churchman in the land, and the other was Lord Chancellor. He'd hardly dare behead them.'

'If he dares to try them for treason then none of us is safe.'

I found I had lowered my voice to match him. 'Because?'

'Because he will have found that the Pope does not protect his servants. That English men and women do not rise up against tyranny. That no-one is so well thought of, or so well connected, that they cannot be arrested under a new law of his devising. How long d'you think Queen Katherine will be free once her advisor is imprisoned?'

I pulled my hands away. 'I won't listen to this,' I said. 'It's to fear shadows. My Grandfather Howard was in the Tower for treason and came out smiling. Henry wouldn't execute Thomas More, he loves him. They may be at loggerheads now but More was his greatest friend and joy.'

'What about your Uncle Buckingham?'

'That was different,' I said. 'He was guilty.'

My husband let me go and turned back to the river. 'We'll see,' was all he said. 'Pray God you're right and I am wrong.'



Our prayers were not answered. Henry did the thing that I thought he would never dream of doing. He sent Bishop Fisher and Sir Thomas More to trial for claiming that Queen Katherine had been truly married to him. He let them lay their lives down to declare that he was not the head of the Church, an English Pope. And those two, men without a stain on their conscience, two of the finest men in England, walked out to the scaffold and laid their heads on the blocks as though they had been the lowest of traitors.

They were very quiet days at court, the days in June when Fisher died, when More died. Everyone felt that the world had grown a little more dangerous. If Bishop Fisher could be beheaded, if Thomas More could walk to the scaffold, then who could call themselves safe?



George and I waited with increasing impatience for Anne's baby to quicken in the womb so that she could tell the king that she was with child; but mid-June came and still nothing had happened.

'Could you have mistaken your time?' I asked her.

'Is that likely?' she retorted. 'Do I think of anything else?'

'Could it move so slightly that you cannot feel it?' I asked.

'You tell me,' she said. 'You're the sow that's always in farrow. Could it?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'Yes, you do know,' she said. Her little pursed mouth was shut in a thin bitter line. 'We both know. We both know what's happened. It's died in there. It's five months now and I'm no bigger than when I was three months gone. It's dead inside me.'

I looked at her in horror. 'You must see a physician.'

She snapped her fingers in my face. 'I'd as soon see the devil himself. If Henry knows that there is a dead baby inside me he'll never come near me again.'

'It will make you sick,' I warned her.

She laughed, a shrill bitter laugh. 'It will be the death of me, one way or another. For if I let out one word that this is the second baby I've failed to carry, then I am thrown aside and ruined. What am I to do?'

'I'll go to a midwife myself and ask her if there is something you could take to get rid of it.'

'You'd better make sure she doesn't know it's for me,' Anne said flatly. 'If one whisper of this gets out, then I am lost, Mary.'

'I know,' I said grimly. 'I'll get George to help me.'



That evening, before dinner, the two of us made our way down the river. A private ferryboatman took us, we didn't want the great family barge. George knew a bath house for whores. There was a woman who lived nearby who was reputed to be able to cast spells, or stop a baby, put a curse on a field of cows, or make river trout come to the line. The bath house overlooked the river, with bay windows leaning out over the water. There was a shielded candle in every window, and women seated half-naked by the light, so that they could be seen from the river. George pulled his hat down over his eyes and I drew the hood of my cape forward. We put the boat in at the landing stage, and I ignored the girls

leaning out of the windows above our heads and cooing at George.

‘Wait here,’ George ordered the boatman, as we went up the slippery wet steps. He took my elbow and guided me across the filth of the cobbled street to the house on the corner. He knocked at the door, and as it silently opened, he stood back and let me go in alone. I hesitated on the doorway, peering into the darkness.

‘Go on,’ George said. An abrupt shove in the small of my back warned me that he was in no mood for delays. ‘Go on. We’ve got to get this for her.’

I nodded and went inside. It was a small room, smoky from the sluggish fire of driftwood burning in the fireplace, furnished with nothing more than a little wooden table and a pair of stools. The woman was seated at the table: an old woman, stoop-backed and grey-haired, a face lined with knowledge, bright blue eyes which saw everything. A little smile revealed a mouthful of blackened teeth.

‘A lady of the court,’ she remarked, taking in my cloak and the hint of my rich gown at the front opening.

I laid a silver coin on the table. ‘That’s for your silence,’ I said flatly.

She laughed. ‘I’ll be not much use to you, if I’m silent.’

‘I need help.’

‘Want someone to love you? Want someone dead?’ Her bright gaze scanned me as if she would take me all in. Her grin beamed out again.

‘Neither,’ I said.

‘Baby trouble then.’

I pulled up a stool and sat down, thinking of the world divided so simply into love, death and childbirth. ‘It’s not for me, it’s for my friend.’

She gave a delighted little giggle. ‘As ever.’

‘She was with child, but she’s now in her fifth month and the baby isn’t growing and isn’t moving.’

At once the old woman was more interested. ‘What does she say?’

‘She thinks it’s dead.’

‘Is she still growing stouter?’

‘No. She’s no bigger than two months ago.’

‘Sick in the mornings, her breasts tender?’

‘Not now.’

She nodded her head. ‘Has she bled?’

‘No.’

‘Sounds like the baby is dead. You’d better take me to her, so that I can be

sure.'

'That's not possible,' I said. 'She's very closely guarded.'

She gave a short laugh. 'You won't believe the houses that I have got in and out.'

'You can't see her.'

'Then we can take a chance. I can give you a drink, it'll make her sick as a dog and the baby will come away.'

I nodded eagerly but she held up a hand. 'But what if she's mistaken? If it's a live baby in there? Just resting awhile? Just gone quiet?'

I looked at her, quite baffled. 'What then?'

'You've killed it,' she said simply. 'And that makes you a murderer, and her, and me too. D'you have the stomach for that?'

I shook my head slowly. 'My God, no,' I said, thinking of what would happen to me and mine if anyone knew that I had given the queen a potion to make her miscarry a prince.

I rose to my feet and turned away from the table to look out of the window at the cold grey river. I summoned my memory of Anne as I had seen her at the start of this pregnancy, her higher colour, her swelling breasts; and as she was now, pale, drained, dry-looking.

'Give me the drink. She can be the one to choose whether to take it or no.'

The woman rose from her stool and waddled towards the back of the room. 'That'll be three shillings.'

I said nothing to the absurdly high fee but put the silver coins down on the greasy table in silence. She snatched them up with one quick movement. 'It's not this you need fear,' she said suddenly.

I was halfway to the door but I turned back. 'What d'you mean?'

'It's not the drink but the blade you should fear.'

I felt a cold shiver, as if the grey mist from the river had just crept all over the skin of my back. 'What d'you mean?'

She shook her head, as if she had been asleep for a moment. 'I? Nothing. If it means something to you, then take it to heart. If it means nothing, it means nothing. Let it go.'

I paused for a moment in case she would say anything more, and when she was silent I opened the door and slipped out.



George was waiting, arms folded. When I came out he tucked his hand under my elbow in silence and we hurried down the slippery green steps to the gently rocking boat. In silence we made the longer journey home, the boatman rowing against the current. When he put us off at the palace landing stage I said urgently to George, 'Two things you should know: one is that if the baby is not dead then this drink will kill it, and we'll have that on our consciences.'

'Is there any way we can tell if it's a boy, before she drinks?'

I could have cursed him for the single track of his mind. 'Nobody ever knows that.'

He nodded. 'The other thing?'

'The other thing the old woman said is that we should not fear the drink but fear the blade.'

'What sort of blade?'

'She didn't say.'

'Sword blade? Razor blade? Executioner's axe?'

I shrugged.

'We're Boleyns,' he said simply. 'When you spend your life in the shadow of the throne you're always afraid of blades. Let's get through tonight. Let's get that drink down her and see what happens.'



Anne went down to dinner like a queen, pale-faced, drawn, but with her head high and a smile on her lips. She sat next to Henry, her throne only a little less grand than his, and she chattered to him, and flattered him and enchanted him as she still could do. Whenever the stream of wit paused for even a moment his eyes strayed across the room and rested on the ladies in waiting at their table, perhaps looking towards Madge Shelton, perhaps to Jane Seymour, once even a thoughtful warm smile at me. Anne affected to see nothing, she plied him with questions about his hunting, she praised his health. She picked the nicest morsels from the dishes on the high table and put them on his already loaded plate. She was very much Anne, Anne in every turn of her head and her flickering flirtatious glance from under her eyelashes, but there was something about her determined charm that reminded me of the woman who had sat in that chair before and tried not to see that her husband's attention was drifting elsewhere.

After dinner the king said that he would do some business, so we all knew that he would be carousing with his closest friends. 'I'd better be with him,'

George said. 'You'll see she takes it, and stay with her?'

'I'll sleep in her room tonight,' I said. 'The woman said that she'd be sick as a dog.'

He nodded, tightening his lips, and then he turned and went after the king.

Anne told her ladies that she had a headache and that she would sleep early. We left them in the presence chamber, sewing shirts for the poor. They were very diligent as we said goodnight but I knew that once the door was shut behind us there would be the usual endless stream of gossip.

Anne got into her nightdress, and handed me her lice comb. 'You might as well do something useful while we're waiting,' she said ungraciously.

I put the bottle on the table.

'Pour it for me.'

There was something about the dark glass with the glass stopper that repelled me. 'No. This has to be your doing, and your doing alone.'

She shrugged like a gambler raising stakes with empty pockets, and poured the drink into a golden cup. She raised it to me as a mock-toast, and threw her head back and drank it. I saw her neck convulse as she forced the three gulps of it down. Then she slammed down the cup and smiled at me, a savage defiant smile. 'Done,' she said. 'Pray God it works easily.'

We waited, I combed her hair, and then a little later she said: 'We might as well go to sleep. Nothing's happening.' And we curled up in bed, as we had slept together in the old days, and we woke just after dawn and she had no pain.

'It hasn't worked,' she said.

I had a small foolish hope that the baby had clung on, that it was a living baby, perhaps a little one, perhaps frail, but clinging on and staying alive, despite the poison.

'I'll go to my bed if you don't want me,' I said.

'Aye,' she said. 'Run off to Sir Nobody and have a sweaty little thump, why don't you?'

I did not reply at once. I knew the tone of envy in my sister's voice and it was the sweetest sound in the world to me. 'But you are queen.'

'Yes. And you are Lady Nobody.'

I smiled. 'That was my choice,' I said, and slipped through the door before she could get the last word.



All day nothing happened. George and I watched Anne as if she were our own child, but although she was pale and complained of the heat of the bright June sun, nothing happened. The king spent the morning at business, seeing petitioners who were in a hurry to catch him, before the court was travelling.

‘Anything?’ I asked Anne as I watched her dress before dinner.

‘No,’ she said. ‘You’ll have to go back to her tomorrow.’

At about midnight, I saw Anne into bed and then went to my own rooms. William was dozing when I got in, but when he saw me he slipped out of bed and untied my laces, as tender and as helpful as a good maid. I laughed at his intent face as he unlaced the waist of my skirt, and then held the skirt wide for me to step out, and then I sighed with pleasure as he rubbed the ridges on my skin where the ribs of the bodice had cut into me.

‘Better?’ he asked.

‘It’s always better when I am with you,’ I said simply.

He took my hand and led me into bed. I stripped off my petticoat and slid into the warm sheets. At once his warm dry familiar body engulfed me, enveloped me, the scent of him dazzled me, the touch of his naked leg between my thighs aroused me, his warm chest on my arched breasts made me smile with pleasure, and his kisses opened my lips.

We were awakened at two in the morning, while it was still dark, by the quietest of scratches on the door. William was up and out of bed at once, his dagger in one hand. ‘Who’s there?’

‘George. I need Mary.’

William swore softly, threw a cloak around himself, tossed my shift to me and opened the door. ‘Is it the queen?’

George shook his head. He could not bear to tell another man our family secrets. He looked past William to me. ‘Come, Mary.’

William stepped back from the door, curbing his resentment that my brother should command me out of my own marriage bed. I pulled the shift down over my head and jumped out of bed. I reached for my stomacher and my skirt. ‘There’s no time,’ George said angrily. ‘Come now.’

‘She’ll not leave this room half-naked,’ William said flatly.

For a moment George paused to take in William’s truculent expression. Then he smiled his charming Boleyn smile. ‘She has to go to work,’ he said gently. ‘This is the family business. Let her go, William. I’ll see she comes to no harm. But she has to come now.’

William swung his cloak from his naked shoulders and draped it around me

and swiftly kissed me on the forehead as I hurried past. George grabbed my hand and pulled me after him, at the run, to Anne's bedchamber.

She was on the floor before the fire, her arms wrapped around her as if she was hugging herself. On the floor beside her was a bloodstained bundle of cloth. When we opened the door she looked up at us through the trailing locks of her dark hair, and then looked away again, as if she had nothing to say.

'Anne?' I whispered.

I went across the room and sat on the floor beside her. Tentatively I put my arm around her stiff shoulders. She neither leaned back for comfort nor shrugged me off. She was as inflexible as a block of wood. I looked down at the tragic little parcel.

'Was that your baby?'

'Almost without any pain,' she said through her teeth. 'And so fast that it was all done in a moment. I felt my belly turn over as if I wanted to void myself and I got out of bed for the pot and then it was all finished. It was dead. There was hardly any blood. I think it has been dead for months. It has all been a waste of time. All of it. A waste of time.'

I turned to George. 'You have to get rid of that.'

He looked appalled. 'How?'

'Bury it,' I said. 'Get rid of it somehow. This cannot have happened. This whole thing must not have happened.'

Anne slid her white ringed fingers through her hair and pulled. 'Yes,' she said tonelessly. 'It never happened. Like the last time. Like the next time. Nothing ever happens.'

George went to pick the thing up and then checked. He could not bear to touch it. 'I'll get a cape.'

I nodded towards one of the clothes chests that lined the walls. He opened it. A sweet smell of lavender and wormwood filled the room. He pulled out a dark cape. 'Not that one,' Anne said sharply. 'It's trimmed with real ermine.'

He checked at the absurdity of this, but pulled out another, and threw it over the little shape on the floor. It was so tiny that there was nothing of it, even when he wrapped it in the cape and tucked it under his arm.

'I don't know where to dig,' he said quietly to me, keeping a watchful eye on Anne. She was still pulling at her hair as if she wanted pain.

'Go and ask William,' I said, thanking God for my man who would manage this horror for us all. 'He'll help.'

Anne gave a little moan of pain. 'No-one is to know!'

I nodded to George. 'Go!'

He went from the room. The little thing under his arm was so small that it could have been a book wrapped in a cape to keep it dry.

As soon as the door was shut I turned to Anne. Her bed linen was stained and I stripped it off and took her nightgown off her as well. I tore it up and started to burn it on the fire. I pulled a fresh night shift over her head and encouraged her to go back into her bed, to creep under the blankets. She was white as death and her teeth chattered as she lay shrunken, tiny under the thick covers, swamped by the richly embroidered tester and curtains of the great four-posted bed.

'I'll get you some mulled wine.'

There was a jug of wine in the presence chamber and I took it into her room and thrust the hot poker into it. I mixed a little brandy in it as well for good measure and poured it all into her golden cup. I held her shoulders and helped her to drink it. She stopped shivering but she stayed deathly pale.

'Sleep,' I said. 'I'll stay with you, tonight.'

I lifted the covers and crept in beside her. I wrapped her in my arms for the warmth. Her light body with the newly flat belly was as small as a child's. I felt the linen of my night shift grow wet at my shoulder and realised that she was silently weeping, tears pouring out from under her closed eyelids.

'Sleep,' I said again, helplessly. 'We can't do anything more tonight. Sleep, Anne.'

She did not open her eyes. 'I shall sleep,' she whispered. 'And I wish to God that I could never wake up.'



Of course she woke in the morning. She woke and she called for her bath and she made them fill it with unbearably hot water, as if she wanted to boil the pain out of her mind and out of her body. She stood in it and scrubbed herself all over and then she subsided into the suds and called for the maids to bring in another ewer of hot water, and another. The king sent word that he was going to matins and Anne replied that she would see him when he broke his fast; she was taking Mass in her bedchamber. She asked me to fetch the soap and a hard square of linen and scrub her back till it was red. She washed her hair and pinned it on top of her head as she soaked in the boiling water. Her skin flushed crab red as she had them add another ewer of hot water, and then bring her warmed linen sheets to wrap up in.

Anne sat before the fire to dry herself and had them lay out all her finest gowns for her to choose what to wear today and what to take with her when the court set out on its summer progress. I stayed at the back of the room watching her, wondering what this fierce baptism in boiling water meant, what this parade of her wealth told her. They dressed her and she laced tightly so that her breasts were pressed into two tantalising curves of creamy flesh at the neck of her gown. Her glossy black hair was exposed by her pushed-back hood, her long fingers were loaded with rings, she wore her favourite pearl choker with the 'B' for Boleyn at her throat, and she paused before she left the room to look at herself in the mirror, and shot her reflection that knowing, seductive little half-smile.

'Are you feeling all right now?' I asked, coming forward at last.

Her swirling turn made the rich silk of her gown fly outwards and the encrusted diamonds sparkled in the bright light. '*Bien sur!* Why ever not?' she asked. 'Why ever not?'

'No reason at all,' I said. I found I was backing from her room, not from the respect that she liked to see, but from a sense that this was all too much for me. I did not want to be with Anne when she was glittery and hard. When she was like this, I longed for the simplicity and gentleness of William and the world where things were as they appeared.



I found him where I expected him to be, with our baby on his hip, walking by the river. 'I sent the wet nurse for her breakfast,' he said, yielding the baby to me. I put my face to the crown of her head and felt the little pulse gently beating against my cheek. I inhaled the sweet baby smell of her, and closed my eyes with pleasure. William's hand came down into the small of my back and then he held me close.

I rested for a moment, loving his touch, loving the warmth of my baby against my body, loving the sound of the seagulls and the warmth of the sunshine on my face, and then we walked slowly, side by side, on the tow path alongside the river.

'How is the queen this morning?'

'As if none of it had ever been,' I said. 'And there it rests.'

He nodded. 'I was thinking just one thing,' he said tentatively. 'I don't mean to give offence but ...'

'What?'

‘What is it that is wrong with her? That she cannot carry a child?’

‘She had Elizabeth.’

‘Since then?’

I narrowed my eyes and looked at him. ‘What are you thinking?’

‘Only what anyone would think, if they knew what I know.’

‘And what would anyone think?’ I demanded, a little edge to my voice.

‘You know what.’

‘You tell me.’

He gave a little rueful chuckle. ‘Not if you are going to glower at me like that, you look like your uncle. I am shaking in my boots.’

That made me laugh and I shook my head. ‘There! I am not glowering. But go on. What would everyone think? What are you thinking, but trying not to say?’

‘They would be saying that she must have some sin on her soul, some dealing with the devil or some witchcraft,’ he said flatly. ‘Don’t rail at me, Mary. It is what you would say yourself. I was just thinking perhaps she could confess, or go on a pilgrimage, or wash her conscience clear. I don’t know, how can I know? I don’t even *want* to know. But she must have done something gravely wrong, mustn’t she?’

I turned on my heel and walked slowly away. William caught me up. ‘You must wonder ...’

I shook my head. ‘Never,’ I said determinedly. ‘I don’t know half of what she did to become queen. I have no idea what she would do to conceive a son. I don’t know, and I don’t want to know.’

We walked in silence for a moment. William glanced at my profile. ‘If she never gets a son of her own then she’ll keep yours,’ he said, knowing where my thoughts would be.

‘I know that!’ I whispered in quiet grief. I tightened my grip on the baby in my arms.



The court was to travel within the week and I would be excused to be with my children as soon as everyone left. In the excitement and chaos of packing and organising the annual progress, I walked like a tumbler dancing on unbroken eggshells, fearful of doing anything that might turn the queen’s temper against me.

My good luck held, Anne's temper held. William and I waved goodbye to the royal party as they rode south to the very best that the towns and the great houses of Sussex, Hampshire, Wiltshire, and Dorset could offer. Anne was brilliantly dressed in gold and white, Henry at her side was still a grand king, especially on a big-boned hunter. Anne rode with her mare as close to him as they had always ridden, in those summers only two, three, years ago, when he had been besotted with her and she could see the prize within her grasp.

She could still make him turn to listen to her, she could still make him laugh. She could still lead the court out as if she were a girl riding for pleasure on a summer day. Nobody knew what it cost Anne to ride out and sparkle for the king and wave to the people at the roadside who stared at her with a bitter curiosity but no love. Nobody would ever know.

William and I stood waving until they were out of sight and then we went to find the wet nurse and our baby. As soon as the last of the hundreds of wagons and carts had trundled out of the stable yard and down the West Road we would set off south, to Kent, to Hever, for the summer with my children.



I had planned for this moment and prayed for it on my knees every night for a year. Thank God that the gossip of the court had not reached so far into Kent that my children ever knew what a risk we had run as a family. They had been allowed my letters which had told them that I was married to William and with a baby on the way. They had been told that I had given birth to a girl and that they had a little sister, and the two of them were as excited as I was, longing to see me as I was longing to see them.

They were dawdling on the drawbridge as we rode across the park, I could see Catherine pull Henry to his feet and then they both started to run towards us, Catherine holding her long skirt away from her pounding feet, Henry overtaking her with his stronger stride. I tumbled down from my horse and held out my arms to them both and they flung themselves at me and caught me by the waist and hugged me tight.

They had both grown. I could have wept at how quickly they had grown in my absence. Henry was up to my shoulder, he would have his father's height and weight. Catherine was all but a young woman, as tall as her brother, and graceful. She had the Boleyn hazel-brown eyes and mischievous smile. I pushed her back from me so that I could see her. Her body was forming the curves of a

woman, her eyes when they met mine were those of a woman on the brink of adult life: optimistic, trusting. 'Oh Catherine, you are going to be another Boleyn beauty,' I said, and she blushed scarlet and nestled into my embrace.

William got down from his horse and hugged Henry and then turned to Catherine. 'I feel I should kiss your hand,' he said.

She laughed and jumped into his embrace. 'I was so glad when I was told that you were married,' she said. 'Am I to call you Father now?'

'Yes,' he said firmly, as if there had never been any doubt about the matter at all. 'Except when you call me sire.'

She giggled. 'And the baby?'

I went to the wet nurse on her mule and took the baby from her arms. 'Here she is,' I said. 'Your new sister.'

Catherine cooed and took her at once. Henry leaned over her shoulder to pull back the fold of the sheet and look into the tiny face. 'So small,' he said.

'She's grown so much,' I said. 'When she was born she was tiny.'

'Does she cry a lot?' Henry asked.

I smiled. 'Not too much. Not like you. You were a real bawler.'

He grinned at once, a boyish smile. 'Was I really?'

'Dreadful.'

'Still does,' Catherine said with the immediate disrespect of an older sister.

'Do not,' he retorted. 'Anyway, Mother, and, er, Father, would you come inside? There's dinner ready for you soon. We didn't know what time you would be here.'

William turned towards the house and dropped his arm over Henry's shoulders. 'And tell me about your studies,' he invited. 'I'm told you're working with the Cistercian scholars. Are they teaching you Greek as well as Latin?'

Catherine hung back. 'Can I carry her in?'

'You can keep her all the day,' I smiled at her. 'Her nurse will be glad of the rest.'

'And will she wake up soon?' she asked, peering again into the little bundle.

'Yes,' I reassured her. 'And then you shall see her eyes. They are the darkest blue. Very beautiful. And perhaps she'll smile for you.'

Autumn 1535

I received only one letter from Anne, in the autumn:

Dear Sister,

We are hunting and hawking and the game is good. The king is riding well and has bought a new hunter at a knockdown price. We had the great pleasure of staying with the Seymours at Wulfhall, and Jane was very much in evidence as the daughter of the house. You could break your teeth on her politeness. She walked with the king in the gardens and pointed out the herbs that she uses for cures for the poor, she showed him her needlework and her pet doves. She has fish in the moat which come up to be fed. She likes to supervise the cooking of her father's dinner herself, believing as she does that it is a woman's task to be a handmaiden to men. Altogether charming beyond belief. The king mooned around her like a schoolboy. As you can imagine, I was less enchanted, but I smiled withall, knowing that I am carrying the Ace of Trumps – not up my sleeve but in my belly.

Please God that this time all is well. Please God. I am writing to you from Winchester and we go on to Windsor where I expect you to meet me. I shall want you by me for all my time. The baby should be born next summer and we will all be safe again. Tell no-one – not even William. It must be a secret until as late as possible in case of any mishap. Only George knows, and now you. I will not tell the king until I am past my third month. I have good reason this time to think that the baby will be strong. Pray for me.

Anne

I put my hand in my pocket and felt for my rosary, and told the beads through my fingers, praying, praying with all the passion I had, that this time Anne's pregnancy would go full term and she would have a boy. I did not think any of us would survive another miscarriage; the secret would creep out, our

luck could not survive another disaster, or Anne herself might simply slip over the small step from utterly determined unswerving ambition, into madness.



I was watching my maid pack my dresses into my travelling chest for our return to the court at Windsor when Catherine tapped on my door and came into my room.

I smiled and she came and sat beside me, looking down at the buckles on her shoes, clearly struggling to say something.

‘What is it?’ I asked her. ‘Tell it, Cat, you look ready to choke on it.’

At once her head came up. ‘I want to ask you something.’

‘Ask it.’

‘I know that Henry is to stay with the Cistercians with the other boys until the queen orders him to court.’

‘Yes.’ I gritted my teeth.

‘I wondered if I might come to court with you? I am nearly twelve.’

‘You’re eleven.’

‘That’s nearly twelve. How old were you when you left here?’

I made a little grimace. ‘I was four. That was something I’d always wanted to spare you. I cried every night until I was five.’

‘But I am nearly twelve now.’

I smiled at her insistence. ‘You’re right. You should come to court. And I’ll be there to watch over you. Anne might find a place for you as one of her maids in waiting, and William can watch for you as well.’

I was thinking of the increasing lechery of the court, of how a new Boleyn girl would be the centre of attention, and how my daughter’s delicate prettiness seemed to me so much safer in the countryside than at Henry’s palaces. ‘I suppose it has to happen,’ I said. ‘But we will need Uncle Howard’s permission. If he says yes, then you can come to court with William and me next week.’

Her face lit up. She clapped her hands. ‘Shall I have new gowns?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘And may I have a new horse? I shall have to go hunting, shan’t I?’

I ticked the things off on my fingers. ‘Four new gowns, a new horse. Anything else?’

‘Hoods and a cape. My old one is too small. I’ve outgrown it.’

‘Hoods. Cape.’

‘That’s all,’ she said breathlessly.

‘I think we can manage that,’ I said. ‘But you remember, Miss Catherine. The court is not always a good place for a young maid, especially a pretty young maid. I shall expect you to do as you are told and if there are any flirtations or letters passed then you are to tell me. I won’t have you going to court and getting your heart broken.’

‘Oh no!’ She was dancing round the room like a court jester. ‘No. I shall do everything you say, you shall just tell me what to do and I’ll do it. Besides, I shouldn’t think anyone would even notice me.’

Her skirt swirled around her slim body as her brown hair swung out. I smiled at her. ‘Oh they’ll notice you,’ I said wryly. ‘They’ll notice you, my daughter.’

Winter 1535

I enjoyed the twelve days of Christmas more than I ever had done before. Anne was with child and glowing with health and confidence, William was at my side, my recognised husband. I had a baby in the cradle and a young beautiful daughter at court. For the Christmas holidays Anne said that I might have her ward Henry at court with us as well. When I sat down to my dinner on twelfth night it was to see my sister on the throne of England and my family around the hall at the best of the tables.

‘You look merry,’ William said as he took his place opposite me for the dance.

‘I am,’ I said. ‘At last it seems that the Boleyns are where they want to be and we can enjoy it.’

He glanced up to where Anne was starting to lead out the ladies in the complicated configuration of the dance. ‘Is she with child?’ he asked very quietly.

‘Yes,’ I whispered back. ‘How could you tell?’

‘By her eyes,’ he said. ‘And it’s the only time that she can bring herself to be civil to Jane Seymour.’

I giggled at that and looked across the ring of dancers to where Jane, palely virginal in a creamy yellow gown, was waiting, eyes downcast, for her turn to dance. When she stepped forward into the centre of the circle the king watched her as if he would devour her on the spot like a marchpane-iced pudding.

‘She is the most angelic woman,’ William commented.

‘She’s a blanched snake,’ I said stoutly. ‘And you can take that look off your face, because I won’t stand for it.’

‘Anne stands for it,’ William said provocatively.

‘He has no permission, believe me.’

‘One day she’ll overreach herself,’ William declared. ‘One day he’ll be tired of tantrums and a woman like Jane Seymour will seem like a pleasant rest.’

I shook my head. ‘She’d bore him to tears in a sennight,’ I said. ‘He’s the king. He likes the hunt and the joust and entertainment. Only a Howard girl can

do all of that. Just look at us.'

William looked from Anne, to Madge Shelton, to me and finally to Catherine Carey, my pretty daughter, who sat watching the dancers with the turn of her head the exact mirror image of Anne's own coquettish gesture.

William smiled. 'What a wise man I was to pick the flower of the crop,' he said. 'The best of the Boleyn girls.'



I was with Catherine and Anne in the queen's apartments the next morning. Anne had her ladies sewing the great altar cloth and it reminded me of the work we had all done with Queen Katherine, and the endless stitching of the blue sky which seemed to stretch on and on forever while her fate was being decided. Catherine as the newest and most lowly maid in waiting was allowed only to hem all round the great rectangle of cloth while the other ladies knelt on the floor or pulled up their stools to work on the central body of the pattern. Their gossip was like the cooing of summertime doves, only Jane Parker's voice rang discordantly among them. Anne was holding a needle in her hand but was leaning back to listen to the musicians play. I was disinclined to work altogether. I sat in the windowseat and looked out at the cold garden.

There was a loud knocking on the door and it was flung open. My uncle walked in and looked around for Anne. She rose to her feet.

'What is it?' she asked unceremoniously.

'The queen is dead,' he said. It was a measure of his shock that he forgot that she must be called Princess Dowager.

'Dead?'

He nodded.

Anne flushed red and a beaming smile slowly spread over her face. 'Thank God,' she said simply. 'It's all over then.'

'God bless her and take her into His Grace,' Jane Seymour whispered.

Anne's dark eyes flashed with temper. 'And God bless you, Mistress Seymour, if you forget that this Princess Dowager is the woman who defied the king her brother-in-law, trapped him into a false marriage and brought him much distress and pain.'

Jane faced her without flinching. 'I served her as we both did,' she said gently. 'And she was a very kind woman and a good mistress. Of course I say: "God bless her." With your leave I will go and say a prayer for her.'

Anne looked as if she would very much like to refuse Jane permission to go, but she saw the avid glance of George's wife and remembered that any cat fight would be reported and enlarged on to the court within hours.

'Of course,' she said sweetly. 'Would anyone else like to go to Mass to pray with Jane while I go to celebrate with the king?'

The choice was not a hard one to make. Jane Seymour went alone, and the rest of us went through the great hall and up to the king's apartment.

He greeted Anne with a roar of joy, swept her up and kissed her. You would think he had never been Sir Loyal Heart to his Queen Katherine. You would think it had been his worst enemy who had died and not a woman who had loved him faithfully for twenty-seven years and died with a blessing for him on her lips. He summoned the master of the revels and ordered a feast to be prepared in a hurry, there would be an entertainment and dancing. The court of England was to make merry because one woman who had done nothing wrong had died alone, far from her daughter, and abandoned by her husband. Anne and Henry would wear yellow: the most joyful and sunny of colours. It was the colour of royal mourning in Spain so it was a great jest on the Spanish ambassador who would have to report the ambiguous insult to his master, the Spanish emperor.

I could not force a smile to my face at the sight of Henry and Anne glowing with triumph. I turned away and made for the door. A finger slid against my elbow stopped me. I turned and my uncle was beside me.

'You stay,' he whispered quietly.

'This is a disgrace.'

'Yes. Perhaps. But you stay.'

I would have pulled away but his grip was firm. 'She was your sister's enemy and thus ours. She nearly brought us all down. She nearly won.'

'Because she was right,' I whispered back. 'And we all knew it.'

His smile was genuine. He was truly amused by my indignation. 'Right or not, she's dead now, and your sister is queen without anyone to gainsay her. Spain won't invade, the Pope will lift the excommunication. Hers might have been a just cause; but it dies with her. All we need is for Anne to have a son and we have it all. So you stay and look happy.'

Obediently, I stood beside him as Henry and Anne drew into the bay of a window and talked together. There was something about their heads, so close together, and the rapid ripple of their talk which signalled to everyone that these were the greatest conspirators in the land. I thought that if Jane Seymour had seen them now she would have known that she could never penetrate that unity.

When Henry wanted a mind as quick and as unscrupulous as his, it would always be Anne. Jane had gone to pray for the dead queen, Anne would dance on her grave.

The court, left to its own amusements, formed into little knots and couples, to chatter about the death of the queen. William, looking across the room and seeing me standing beside my uncle, my face sulky, came towards me to claim me.

‘She’s to stay here,’ my uncle said. ‘No wandering off.’

‘She’s to follow her own desires,’ William said. ‘I won’t have her ordered.’

My uncle lifted his eyebrows. ‘An unusual wife.’

‘One who suits me,’ William said. He turned to me. ‘Did you want to stay or leave?’

‘I’ll stay now,’ I compromised. ‘But I won’t dance. It’s an insult to her memory, and I won’t be part of it.’

Jane Parker appeared at William’s elbow. ‘They’re saying she was poisoned,’ she said. ‘The Dowager Princess. They’re saying she died suddenly in great pain, it was something slipped into her food. Who d’you think would have done such a thing?’

Studiously the three of us did not glance towards the royal couple: the two people in all the world who would have benefited most from the death of Katherine.

‘It’s a scandalous lie. I wouldn’t repeat it, if I were you,’ my uncle counselled her.

‘It’s all around the court already,’ she defended herself. ‘Everyone is asking, if she was poisoned, who did it?’

‘Then answer them all that she was not poisoned but died of an excess of spleen,’ my uncle replied. ‘Just as a woman can die of an excess of slander, I should think. Especially if she slanders a powerful family.’

‘This is my family,’ Jane reminded him.

‘I keep forgetting,’ he returned. ‘You are so seldom at George’s side, you are so seldom working for our benefit that sometimes I forget altogether that you are kin.’

She held his look for a moment only and then her eyes dropped. ‘I would be more with George if he was not always with his sister,’ she said quietly.

‘Mary?’ My uncle deliberately misunderstood her.

Her head came up. ‘The queen. They are inseparable.’

‘Because he knows that the queen must be served and the family must be

served. You too should be at her beck and call. You should be at his beck and call.'

'I don't think he wants any woman at his beck and call,' she said mutinously. 'If it is not the queen it is no woman at all for him. He is either with her or with Sir Francis.'

I froze. I did not dare look at William.

'It is your duty to be at his side whether he commands it or not,' my uncle said flatly.

For a moment I thought she would retort, but then she smiled her sly smile and slid away.



Anne summoned me to her privy room in the hour before the dinner. She noticed at once that I was not dressed in yellow for the feast. 'You'd better hurry,' she said.

'I'm not coming.'

For a moment I thought she might challenge me, but she chose to avoid a quarrel. 'Oh very well,' she said. 'But tell everyone that you are sick. I don't want anyone asking questions.'

She glanced at herself in the mirror. 'Can you tell?' she asked. 'I am fatter with this one than the others. It means the baby is growing better, doesn't it? He's strong?'

'Yes,' I said to reassure her. 'And you're looking well.'

She seated herself before her mirror. 'Brush my hair. Nobody does it like you.'

I took off her yellow hood and pulled the thick glossy hair back off her shoulders. She had two brushes made of silver and I used one and then the other, as if I were grooming a horse. Anne tipped back her head and gave herself up to the idle pleasure. 'He should be strong,' she said. 'No-one knows what went into the making of this baby, Mary. No-one will ever know.'

I felt my hands suddenly heavy and unskilled. I was thinking of the witches she might have consulted, of spells she might have undertaken.

'He should be a great prince for England,' she said quietly. 'For I went on a journey to the very gates of hell to get him. You will never know.'

'Don't tell me then,' I said, coward-like.

She laughed shortly. 'Oh yes. Draw your hem back from my mud, little

sister. But I have dared things for my country that you could only dream of.'

I forced myself to brush her hair again. 'I'm sure,' I said soothingly.

She was quiet for a moment, then suddenly, she opened her eyes. 'I felt it,' she said in a tone of quiet wonderment. 'Mary, I suddenly felt it.'

'Felt what?'

'Just then, I felt it. I felt the baby. It moved.'

'Where?' I demanded. 'Show me.'

She slapped at her hard boned stomach in frustration. 'In here! In here! I felt it –' She broke off. I saw her face glow in a way I had never seen before. 'Again,' she whispered. 'A little flutter. It's my child, it's quickened. Praise God I am with child, a live child.'

She rose from her chair, her dark hair still tumbled around her shoulders. 'Run and tell George.'

Even knowing their intimacy I was surprised. 'George?'

'I meant the king.' She corrected herself swiftly. 'Fetch the king to me.'

I ran from the room to the king's apartments. They were dressing him for dinner but there were half a dozen men in the privy chamber with him. I dipped a curtsy at the door and he turned and beamed with pleasure at seeing me. 'Why, it's the other Boleyn girl!' he said. 'The sweet-tempered one.'

More than one man sniggered at the jest. 'The queen begs to see you at once, sire,' I said. 'She has good news for you that cannot keep.'

He raised one of his sandy brows, he was very regal these days. 'So she sends you running like a page, to fetch me like a puppy?'

I curtsied again. 'Sire, it is news I was happy to run for. And you would come for this whistle, if you knew what it was.'

Someone muttered behind me, and the king threw on his golden coat and smoothed the ermine cuff. 'Come then, Lady Mary. You shall lead this eager puppy to the whistle. You could lead me anywhere.'

I rested my hand lightly on top of his outstretched arm, and did not resist as he drew me a little closer. 'Your married life seems to suit you, Mary,' he said intimately as we went down the stairs, half of the gentlemen of the chamber following us. 'You are as pretty as when you were a girl, when you were my little sweetheart.'

I was always wary when Henry grew intimate. 'That's a long time ago,' I said cautiously. 'But Your Grace is twice the prince you were then.'

As soon as the words were out of my mouth I cursed myself for a fool. I had meant to say that he was more powerful, more handsome now. But, idiot that I

was, it sounded as if I was telling him that he was twice as fat as he had been then – which was also appallingly true.

He stopped dead on the third stair from the bottom. I was tempted to fall to my knees. I did not dare look up at him. I knew that in all the world there had never been a more incompetent courtier than I with my desire to turn a pretty phrase and my absolute inability to get it right.

There was a great bellow of sound. I peeped up at him and saw, to my intense relief, that he was shouting with laughter. ‘Lady Mary, are you run mad?’ he demanded.

I was starting to laugh too, out of sheer relief. ‘I think so, Your Grace,’ I said. ‘All I was trying to say was that then you were a young man and I a girl and now you are a king among princes. But it came out ...’

Again his great shout of laughter drowned me out, and the courtiers on the stairs behind us craned their necks and leaned down, wanting to know what was amusing the king, and why I was torn between blushing for shame, and laughing myself.

Henry grabbed me round the waist and hugged me tight. ‘Mary, I adore you,’ he said. ‘You are the best of the Boleyns, for no-one makes me laugh as you do. Take me to my wife before you say something so dreadful that I shall have to have you beheaded.’

I slipped from his grip and led the way to the queen’s rooms, and showed him in, all his gentlemen following. Anne was not in her presence chamber, she was still in her inner room. I tapped on the door, and announced the king. She was still standing with her hair down, her hood in her hand, and that wonderful glow about her.

Henry went in and I shut the door behind him, and stood before it so that no eavesdropper could get close. It was the greatest moment of Anne’s career, I wanted her to savour it. She could tell the king that she was pregnant with a baby and for the first time since Elizabeth she had felt a child quicken in her womb.

William came in at the back of the room and saw me, before the door. He touched a shoulder and an elbow and found his way through the crowd. ‘Are you on guard?’ he asked. ‘You’ve got your arms akimbo like a fishwife guarding her bucket.’

‘She’s telling him that she’s with child. She has the right to do that without some damned Seymour girl popping in.’

George appeared at William’s side. ‘Telling him?’

‘The baby quickened,’ I said, smiling up into my brother’s face, anticipating

his joy as my own. 'She felt it. She sent me for the king at once.'

I was expecting to see his joy but I saw something else; a shadow crossed his face. It was how George looked when he had done something bad. It was George's guilty look. It flashed through his eyes so fast that I was hardly certain that I had seen it, but for a moment I knew with absolute certainty that his conscience was not clear, and I guessed that Anne had taken him as her companion on her journey to the gates of hell to conceive this child for England.

'Oh God, what is it? What have you two done?'

At once he smiled his shallow courtier's smile. 'Nothing! Nothing. How happy they will be! What a couple of days this has been! Katherine dead and the new prince quickened in the womb. *Vivat Boleyns!*'

William smiled at him. 'Your family always impresses me by its ability to see everything in the light of its own interests,' he said politely.

'You mean rejoicing that the queen is dead?'

'Princess Dowager.' William and I spoke together.

George grinned. 'Aye. Her. Of course we celebrate it. Your trouble, William, is that you have no ambition. You don't see that there is in life only ever one goal.'

'And what is that?' William asked.

'More,' George said simply. 'Just more of anything. More of everything.'



All through the cold dark days of January, Anne and I sat together, read together, played cards together and listened to her musicians. George was forever with Anne, as attentive as a devoted husband, forever fetching her drinks and cushions for her back, and she bloomed under his attention. She took a fancy to Catherine and would have her with us too, and I watched Catherine carefully copying the manners of the ladies of the court until she could deal a card pack, or pick up a lute, with the same grace.

'She'll be a true Boleyn girl,' Anne said approvingly of her. 'Thank God she has my nose and not yours.'

'I do thank God for it every night,' I said, though sarcasm was always lost on Anne.

'We could look for a good match for her,' Anne said. 'As my niece she should do very well. The king himself will take an interest.'

'I don't want her married yet, nor against her choice,' I said.

Anne laughed. 'She's a Boleyn girl, she has to marry to suit the family.'

'She's my girl,' I said. 'And I won't have her sold off to the highest bidder. You can get Elizabeth betrothed in the cradle, that's your right. She'll be a princess some day. But my children can be children before they are wed.'

Anne nodded, letting it go. 'Your son is still mine though,' she said, evening the score.

I gritted my teeth. 'I never forget it,' I said quietly.



The weather held very fair. Every morning there was a white ground frost and the scent of the deer was strong for the hounds as they streamed across the park and out into the countryside. The going was hard for the horses. Henry changed his mount two or three times a day, steaming with the heat of his thick winter cape, waiting impatiently for the groom to come running up with the strong big hunter dancing at the end of the reins. He rode like a young man because he felt like a young man again, one who could sire a son on a pretty wife. Katherine was dead and he could forget that she had ever been. Anne was carrying his child and it restored his faith in himself. God was smiling on Henry, as he trusted that God must do. The country was at peace and there was no threat of a Spanish invasion now that the queen was dead. The proof of the decision was in the outcome. Since the country was at peace and Anne with child then God must have agreed with Henry and cast His lot against the Pope and the Spanish emperor. Secure in the knowledge that he and God were of the same mind in this, as in every matter, Henry was a happy man.

Anne was contented. Never before had she felt the world coming to her fingertips. Katherine had been her rival, the shadow queen who had always darkened her own steps to the throne, and now Katherine was dead. Katherine's daughter had threatened the right of Anne's children to rule and now Katherine's daughter had been forced to concede that she would take second place, and Anne's daughter Elizabeth was promised the loyalty of every man, woman and child in the country – and those that refused to promise were either in the Tower or dead on the block. And best of all, Anne had a baby strong and growing inside her.

Henry announced that there was to be a jousting tournament and every man who called himself a man should take his armour and his horse and enter the lists. Henry himself would be riding, his renewed sense of youth and confidence

prompted him to take a challenge again. William, complaining mightily of the expense, borrowed his armour from another impoverished knight and rode, taking immense care of his horse, on the first day of the tournament. He kept his seat but the other man was easily declared victor.

‘God help me, I have married a coward,’ I said when he came to find me in the ladies’ tent, Anne seated at the front under the awning and the rest of us, well-wrapped in furs, were standing behind her.

‘God bless you, that you have,’ he said. ‘I brought my hunter out of it without a scratch on him, and I’d rather have that than any reputation for heroism.’

‘You are a commoner,’ I said, smiling at him.

He slid his arm around my waist and drew me to him for a quick hidden kiss. ‘I have the most vulgar of tastes,’ he whispered to me. ‘For I love my wife, and I love a bit of peace and quiet, and I love my farm and no dinner is better for me than a slice of bacon and a bite of bread.’

I nestled closer to him. ‘D’you want to go home?’

‘When you can come too,’ he said peaceably. ‘When her baby is born and she lets us go.’

Henry rode on the first day of the tournament and won through to the second day. Anne would have been there to watch him but she was sickly in the morning and said that she would come down at noon. She ordered me to sit with her and many of her ladies. The others rode out to the lists, all dressed in their brightest colours, and the gentlemen, some already in armour, riding with them.

‘George will take care of the Seymour thing,’ Anne said, watching from the window.

‘And the king will be thinking of nothing but the joust,’ I said reassuringly. ‘He loves to win more than anything else.’

We spent the morning at peace in her room. She had her altar cloth spread out for sewing again, and I was tackling one large boring patch of grass while she was doing the cloak of Our Lady at the other end. Between us was a long stretch of revelations: saints going to heaven and devils tumbling down to hell. Then I heard a sudden noise outside the window. A rider, galloping swiftly into court.

‘What is it?’ Anne lifted her head from her sewing.

I kneeled up on the windowseat to look down. ‘Someone riding like a madman into the stable yard. I wonder what ...’

I bit the next words out of my mouth. Racing out of the stable yard was the

royal litter drawn by two stout horses.

‘What is it?’ Anne asked behind me.

‘Nothing,’ I said, thinking of her baby. ‘Nothing.’

She rose from her chair and looked over my shoulder, but already the royal litter was out of sight.

‘Someone riding into the stables,’ I said. ‘Perhaps the king’s horse has cast a shoe. You know how he hates to be unhorsed, even for a moment.’

She nodded but she stayed, leaning on my shoulder, looking out at the road. ‘There’s Uncle Howard.’

His standard before him, a small party of his men with him, our uncle rode up the track to the palace, and into the stable yard.

Anne resumed her seat. In a little while we heard the palace door bang and heard his feet and those of his men loud on the stairs. Anne raised her head, looked inquiringly as he came into her room. He bowed. There was something in that bow, lower than he usually offered to her, which warned me. Anne rose to her feet, her sewing tumbling off her lap to the floor, her hand to her mouth, her other hand on her loosely laced stomach.

‘Uncle?’

‘I regret to inform you that His Majesty has fallen from his horse.’

‘He’s hurt?’

‘Gravely hurt.’

Anne blanched white, and swayed on her feet.

‘We need to prepare,’ my uncle said firmly.

I thrust Anne into a chair and looked up at him. ‘Prepare for what?’

‘If he is dead then we need to secure London and the North. Anne must write. She’ll have to be Regent until we can establish a council. I shall represent her.’

‘Dead?’ Anne repeated.

‘If he is dead then we have to hold the country together,’ my uncle repeated. ‘It’s a long time until that baby in your belly is a man. We have to make plans. We have to be ready to defend the country. If Henry is dead ...’

‘Dead?’ she asked again.

Uncle Howard looked at me. ‘Your sister will tell you. There’s no time to lose. We have to secure the kingdom.’

Anne’s face was blank with shock, as insensate as her husband. She could not imagine a world without him. She was quite incapable of doing my uncle’s bidding, or securing the kingdom without the king to rule it.

‘I’ll do it,’ I said quickly. ‘I’ll draw it up and sign it. You can’t ask her, Uncle Howard. She shouldn’t be worried, she has the baby to keep safe. Our handwriting is alike, we’ve passed for each other before. I can write for her, and sign for her too.’

He brightened at that. One Boleyn girl was always much the same as another to him. He pulled a stool over to the writing desk. ‘Start,’ he said tersely. “‘Be ye well assured ...””

Anne lay back in her chair, her hand on her belly, the other at her mouth, staring out of the window. The longer she had to wait, the worse the king must be. A man jolted by a fall is brought quickly home. A man near death is carried more carefully. As Anne waited, looking down to the entrance to the stable yard, I realised that all our safety, all our security was falling apart. If the king died we were all ruined. The country could be pulled apart by every one of the lords fighting on his own account. It would be as it was before Henry’s father had pulled it all together: York against Lancaster, and every man for his own. It would be a wild country with every county owning its own master, and no-one able to kneel to the true king.

Anne looked back into the room and saw my aghast face, bent over her claim to the regency for the duration of the youth of her child, Elizabeth.

‘Dead?’ she asked me.

I rose from the table and took her cold hands in my own.

‘Please God, no,’ I said.



They brought him in, walking so slowly that the litter might have been a bier. George at his head, William and the rest of the gaily dressed jousting party straggling along behind, in frightened silence.

Anne let out a moan and slid to the floor, her gown billowing around her. One of the maids caught her, and we carried her into her bedroom, laid her on the bed and sent a page running for hippocras wine and a physician. I unlaced her and felt her belly, whispering a silent prayer that the baby was still safe inside.

My mother arrived with the wine and took one look at Anne, white-faced, was struggling to sit up.

‘Lie quietly,’ she said sharply. ‘D’you want to spoil everything?’

‘Henry?’ Anne said.

‘He’s awake,’ my mother lied. ‘He took a bad fall but he’s all right.’

From the corner of my eye I saw my uncle cross himself and whisper a word of prayer. I had never before seen that stern man call on anyone’s help but his own. My daughter Catherine peeped around the door and was waved into the room and given the cup of wine to hold to Anne’s lips.

‘Come and finish the regency letter,’ my uncle said in an undertone. ‘That’s more important than anything else.’

I took a lingering look at Anne and then went back out to the presence chamber and took up the pen again. We wrote three letters, to the City, to the North, and to parliament, and I signed all three as Anne, Queen of England, while the physician arrived and then a couple of apothecaries. Keeping my head down, in a world falling apart, I was tempting fate to sign myself Queen of England.

The door opened and George came in, looking stunned. ‘How is Anne?’ he asked.

‘Faint,’ I said. ‘The king?’

‘Wandering,’ he whispered. ‘He doesn’t know where he is. He’s asking for Katherine.’

‘Katherine?’ my uncle repeated as quickly as a swordsman draws a blade. ‘He’s asking for her?’

‘He doesn’t know where he is. He thinks he’s just been unhorsed at a joust years ago.’

‘You both go to him,’ my uncle said to me. ‘And keep him quiet. He’s not to mention her name. We can’t have him calling for her on his deathbed, he’ll dethrone Elizabeth for Princess Mary if this gets out.’

George nodded and led me to the great hall. They had not carried the king upstairs, they were afraid that they would stumble with him. He was a great weight, and he would not lie still. They had laid the litter on two of the tables pushed together, and he was tossing and turning on it, moving restlessly around. George led me through the circle of frightened men and the king saw me. His blue eyes slowly narrowed as he recognised my face.

‘I took a fall, Mary.’ His voice was pitiful, like a young boy’s.

‘Poor boy.’ I drew close to him and took his hand and held it to my heart. ‘Does it hurt?’

‘All over,’ he said, closing his eyes.

The physician came behind me and whispered. ‘Ask him if he can move his feet and his fingers, if he can feel all his parts.’

‘Can you move your feet, Henry?’

We all saw his boots twitch. ‘Yes.’

‘And all your fingers?’

I felt his hand grip mine more strongly.

‘Aye.’

‘Does it hurt inside you, my love? Does your belly hurt?’

He shook his head. ‘It hurts all over.’

I looked at the physician.

‘He should be leeches.’

‘When you don’t even know where he is hurt?’

‘He could be bleeding inside.’

‘Let me sleep,’ Henry said quietly. ‘Stay with me, Mary.’

I turned away from the doctor to look down into the king’s face. He looked so much younger, lying quietly and drowsily, that I could almost believe that he had been the young prince that I had adored. The fatness of his cheeks fell away as he lay on his back, the beautiful line of his brow was unchanged. This man was the only one who could hold the country together. Without him we would all be ruined: not just the Howard family, not just us Boleyns, but every man and woman and child in every parish in the country. No-one else would stop the lords snapping at the crown. There were four heirs with good claims to the throne: Princess Mary, my niece Elizabeth, my son Henry, and the bastard Henry Fitzroy. The church was in uproar already, the Spanish emperor or the French king would take a mandate from the Pope to come to restore order and then we would never be rid of them.

‘Will you get better if you sleep?’ I asked him.

He opened his blue eyes and smiled at me. ‘Oh yes,’ he said in his little voice.

‘Will you lie still if we carry you upstairs to your bed?’

He nodded. ‘Hold my hand.’

I turned to the physician. ‘Should we do that? Get him to bed and let him rest?’

He looked terrified. The future of England was in his hands ‘I think so,’ he said uncertainly.

‘Well, he can’t sleep here,’ I pointed out.

George stepped forward and picked out half a dozen of the strongest-looking men, and ranged them around the litter. ‘You keep hold of his hand, Mary, and keep him still. The rest of you lift when I say the word and go to the stairs. We’ll

take a rest on the first landing and then go again. One, two, three, now: lift.'

They strained to lift him and to hold the litter level. I went alongside, my hand gripped in the king's. They got into a shuffling stride which kept them all together and we made it up the stairs to the king's apartments. Someone ran on ahead and threw open the double doors into his presence chamber and then beyond, into the privy chamber. They laid the litter on the bed, the king was badly jolted as they put it down, he groaned in bewildered pain. Then we had the task of getting him off the litter and onto his bed. There was nothing for it but for the men to climb on the bed and take him by his shoulders and feet and heave him up, while the others dragged the litter out from underneath him.

I saw the physician's expression at this rough treatment and I realised that if the king was bleeding inside, then we had probably just killed him. He groaned in pain and for a moment I thought it was the death rattle and that we would all be blamed for this. But then he opened his eyes and looked at me.

'Katherine?' he asked.

There was a superstitious hiss from all the men around me. I looked to George. 'Out,' he said shortly. 'Everyone out.'

Sir Francis Weston came towards him and whispered quietly in his ear. George listened attentively and touched Sir Francis's arm in thanks.

'It is the queen's orders that His Majesty be left with the physicians and with his dear sister-in-law, Mary, and with me,' George announced. 'The rest of you can wait outside.'

Reluctantly, they left the room. Outside I heard my uncle stating very loudly that if the king were incapacitated then the queen would be Regent for the Princess Elizabeth, and that no-one should need reminding that they had all, individually, sworn their loyalty to the Princess Elizabeth, his only chosen and legitimate heir.

'Katherine?' Henry asked again, looking up at me.

'No, it's me, Mary,' I said gently. 'Mary Boleyn as was. Mary Stafford now.'

Shakily he took my hand and raised it to his lips. 'My love,' he said softly, and none of us knew which of his many loves he was addressing: the queen who had died still loving him, the queen who was sick with fear in the same palace, or me, the girl he had once loved.

'D'you want to sleep?' I asked anxiously.

His blue gaze was hazy, he looked like a drunkard. 'Sleep. Yes,' he mumbled.

‘I’ll sit beside you.’ George pulled up a chair for me and I sat down without drawing my hand away from the king.

‘Pray to God he wakes up,’ George said, looking down at Henry’s waxy face and his fluttering eyelids.

‘Amen,’ I said. ‘Amen.’



We sat with him till the middle of the afternoon, the physicians at the foot of the bed, George and I at the head, my mother and father forever coming in and out, my uncle away somewhere, plotting.

Henry was sweating and one of the physicians went to ease the covers back from him, but suddenly checked. On his fat calf where he had been injured jousting long ago was a dark ugly stain of blood and pus. His wound, which had never properly healed, had opened up again.

‘He should be leeches,’ the man said. ‘Get the leeches onto that and let them suck out the poison.’

‘I can’t look,’ I confessed shakily to George.

‘Go and sit in the window, and don’t you dare faint,’ he said roughly. ‘I’ll call you when they’ve got them on and you can come back to the bedside.’

I stayed in the windowseat, resolutely not looking back, trying not to hear the clink of the jars as they put the black slugs on the king’s legs and left them to suck away at the torn flesh. Then George called, ‘Come back and sit beside him, you needn’t see anything.’ And I returned to my place at the head of the bed, only going away when the leeches had sucked themselves into little sated balls of black slime and could be taken off the wound.

In the mid-afternoon, I was holding the king’s hand and stroking it, like one might gentle a sick dog, when he suddenly gripped me, his eyes opened and his gaze was clear. ‘God’s blood,’ he said. ‘I ache all over.’

‘You had a fall from your horse,’ I said, trying to judge if he knew where he was.

‘I remember,’ he said. ‘I don’t remember coming back to the palace.’

‘We carried you in.’ George came forward from the windowseat. ‘Brought you upstairs. You wanted Mary at your side.’

Henry gave me a mildly surprised smile. ‘I did?’

‘You weren’t yourself,’ I said. ‘You were wandering. Praise God you’re well again.’

‘I’ll get a message to the queen.’ George ordered one of the guards to tell her that the king was awake and well again.

Henry chuckled. ‘You must all have been sweating.’ He went to move in the bed but he suddenly grimaced with pain. ‘God’s death! My leg.’

‘Your old wound has opened up,’ I said. ‘They put leeches on it.’

‘Leeches. It needs a poultice. Katherine knows how to make it, ask her ...’ He bit his lip. ‘Someone should know how to treat it,’ he said. ‘For God’s sake. Someone should know the recipe.’ He was silent for a moment. ‘Give me wine.’

A page came running with a cup and George held it to the king’s lips. Henry drained it. His colour came back and his attention returned to me. ‘So who moved first?’ he asked curiously. ‘Seymour or Howard or Percy? Who was going to keep my throne warm for my daughter and call himself Regent for the whole of her minority?’

George knew Henry too well to be led into a laughing confession. ‘The whole court has been on its knees,’ he said. ‘No-one thought of anything but your health.’

Henry nodded, believing nothing.

‘I’ll go and tell the court,’ George said. ‘They will hold a thanksgiving Mass. We were most afraid.’

‘Get me some more wine,’ Henry said sulkily. ‘I ache as if every bone in my body was broken.’

‘Shall I leave you?’ I asked.

‘Stay,’ he said carelessly. ‘But lift these pillows behind my back. I can feel my back seizing up as I lie here. What idiot laid me so flat?’

I thought of the moment when we shunted him from the litter to the bed. ‘We were afraid to move you.’

‘Chickens in the farmyard,’ he said with mild satisfaction, ‘when the cock is taken away.’

‘Thank God you were not taken away.’

‘Yes,’ he said with ungenerous relish. ‘It would go hard for the Howards and the Boleyns if I died today. You’ve made many enemies on your upward climb who would be happy to see you tumble down again.’

‘My thoughts were only for Your Highness,’ I said carefully.

‘And would they have followed my wishes and put Elizabeth on my throne?’ he asked with sudden sharpness. ‘I suppose you Howards would have got behind one of your own? But what about the others?’

I met his gaze. ‘I don’t know.’

‘If I were not here with no prince to follow after me those oaths might not stick. D’you think they would have been true to the princess?’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t know. I couldn’t say. I wasn’t even with the court, I spent all the time in here, watching over you.’

‘You would cleave to Elizabeth,’ he said. ‘Regency to Anne with your uncle behind her, I suppose. A Howard ruling England in all but name. And then a woman to follow a woman, again ruled by a Howard.’ He shook his head, his face darkening. ‘She must give me a son.’ A vein throbbed at his temple and he put his hand to his head as if to press away the pain with his fingertips. ‘I’ll lie down again,’ he said. ‘Take these damned pillows away. I can hardly see with the pain behind my eyes. A Howard girl as Regent and a Howard girl to follow her. A promise of nothing but disaster. She must give me a son this time.’

The door opened and Anne came in. She was still very white. She went slowly to Henry’s bed and took his hand. His eyes, screwed up with pain, scrutinised her pale face.

‘I thought you would die,’ she said flatly.

‘And what would you have done?’

‘I should have done my best as Queen of England,’ she returned. She had her hand on her belly as she spoke.

He put his own bigger hand to cover hers. ‘You had better have a son in there, madam,’ he said coldly. ‘I think your best as Queen of England would not be enough. I need a boy to hold this country together, the Princess Elizabeth and your scheming uncle is not what I want to leave behind when I die.’

‘I want you to swear you’ll never ride in the joust again,’ she said passionately.

He turned his head away from her. ‘Let me rest,’ he said. ‘You with your swearing and your promises. God help me, I thought when I put the queen aside that I was getting something better than this.’

It was the bleakest of moments that I had ever seen between them. Anne did not even argue. Her face was as white as his. The two of them looked like ghosts, half-dead of their own fear. What might have been a loving reunion had served only to remind them both how slight was their hold on the country. Anne curtsied to the heavy body on the bed and went out of the room. She walked slowly as if she were carrying a weighty burden and she paused at the door for a moment.

As I watched her, she transformed herself. Her head went back, her lips curved up in a smile. Her shoulders straightened and she rose up, just a little, like

a dancer when the music starts. Then she nodded at the guard on the door and he flung it open, and she went out to the buzz of noise of the court, with a face filled with thanksgiving to tell them that the king was well, that he had jested with her about falling from his horse, that he would ride in the joust again as soon as ever he could, and that they were merry.



Henry was quiet and thoughtful as he recovered from his fall. The aches in his body gave him a premonition of old age. The wound in his leg wept a mixture of blood and yellow pus, he had to have a thick bandage on it all the time, and when he sat, he propped it up on a footstool. He was humiliated by the sight of it, he who had always been so proud of his strong legs and his dogged stance. Now he limped when he walked and the line of his calf was destroyed by the bulky dressings. Worse than that, he smelled like a dirty hen coop. Henry, who had been the golden Prince of England, acknowledged as the most handsome man in Europe, could see old age coming towards him when he would be lame and in constant pain and stinking like a dirty monk.

Anne was quite incapable of understanding. 'For God's sake, husband, be happy!' she snapped at him. 'You were spared, what else is there?'

'We were both spared,' he said. 'For what would become of you if I were not here?'

'I should do well enough.'

'I think you all do well enough. If I were to die, you and yours would be in my seat while it was still warm.'

She could have held her tongue, but she was in the habit of flaring up at him. 'D'you mean to insult me?' she demanded. 'D'you accuse my family of anything other than complete loyalty?'

The court, waiting for dinner in the great hall, talked a little quieter, straining to hear.

'Howards are loyal firstly to themselves, secondly to their king,' Henry retorted.

I saw Sir John Seymour's head come up and his little secret smile.

'My family have laid down their lives in your service,' Anne snapped.

'You and your sister certainly laid down,' Henry's Fool interjected, as quick as a whip, and there was a roar of laughter. I blushed scarlet and I caught William's eye. I saw his hand go to where his sword would be, but it was

pointless to rail against a Fool, especially if the king was laughing.

Henry reached over and jovially patted Anne's belly. 'To good purpose,' he said. Irritably, she pushed his hand away. He froze, his good temper dying away in a moment.

'I'm not a horse,' she said sharply. 'I don't like to be patted like one.'

'No,' he said coldly. 'If I had a horse as bad-tempered as you I would feed it to the dogs.'

'You'd do better to ride such a mare and tame her,' she challenged.

We waited for his usual hot response. There was a silence, it stretched into a minute. Anne's smile grew strained.

'Some mares are hardly worth the breaking,' he said quietly.

Only a few people nearest to the high table could have heard him. Anne blenched white and then in an instant turned her head and laughed, a high rippling laugh, as if the king had said something irresistibly funny. Most people kept their heads down and pretended to be talking to their neighbours. Her eyes flicked past me to George and he looked back at her, holding her gaze for a moment, as palpable as a steadying hand.

'More wine, husband?' Anne asked without a quaver in her voice and the gentleman stepped forward and poured for the king and queen, and the dinner began.

Henry was sulky throughout dinner. Not even the dancing and the music lifted his spirits, though he drank and ate even more than usual. He rose to his feet and limped painfully among the court, saying a word here, listening to a gentleman who bowed to him and asked for a favour. He came to our table, where the queen's ladies sat together, and he paused between me and Jane Seymour. We both rose to our feet, neck and neck, and he looked at Jane's downcast smile as she curtsied to him.

'I am weary, Mistress Seymour,' he said. 'I wish we were at Wulfhall and you could make a posset for me, from your herb garden.'

She rose up from her curtsy with the sweetest of smiles. 'I so wish it too,' she said. 'I would do anything to see Your Majesty rested, and eased of his pain.'

The Henry I knew would have said: 'Anything?' for the pleasure of a bawdy jest. But this new Henry pulled out a stool for himself from the table and gestured that we should sit on either side of him. 'You can cure bruises and bumps but not old age,' he said. 'I am forty-five and I never felt my age before.'

'It's just the fall,' Jane said, her voice as sweet and as reassuring as milk

dripping into the pail. 'Of course you are hurt and tired, and you must be exhausted by your work for the safety of the kingdom. Night and day I know you think of it.'

'A fine legacy, if I had a son to leave it to,' he said mournfully. They both looked towards the queen. Anne, sparkling with irritation, looked back at them.

'Pray God that the queen has a son this time,' Jane said sweetly.

'Do you truly pray for me, Jane?' he asked very quietly.

She smiled. 'It is my duty to pray for my king.'

'Will you pray for me tonight?' he said, quieter yet. 'When I am sleepless and aching in every bone in my body, and fearful, I should like to think that you are praying for me.'

'I shall,' she said simply. 'It will be as if I were in the room with you, resting my hand on your head, helping you to sleep.'

I bit my lip. At the next table I saw my daughter Catherine, round-eyed, trying to understand this novel form of flirtation done in tones of honeyed piety. The king rose to his feet with a little grunt of pain.

'An arm,' he said over his shoulder. Half a dozen men moved forward for the honour of helping His Majesty back to his throne on the dais. He brushed aside my brother George and chose instead Jane's brother. Anne, George and I watched in silence, as a Seymour helped the king back to his throne.



'I'll kill her,' Anne said grimly.

I was stretched out on her bed, idly leaning on one arm. George sprawled at the fireside, Anne was seated before her mirror, the maid combing her hair.

'I'll do it for you,' I said. 'Setting up to be a saint.'

'She's very good,' George remarked judicially, as one commending an expert dancer. 'Very different from you two. She's sorry for him all the time. I think that's tremendously seductive.'

'Pissy little mistress,' Anne said through her teeth. She took the comb from her maid. 'And you can go.'

George poured us all another glass of wine.

'I should go too,' I said. 'William will be waiting.'

'You stay,' Anne said peremptorily.

'Yes, Your Majesty,' I said obediently.

She gave me a hard, warning look.

‘Shall I send the Seymour thing from the court?’ she asked George. ‘I won’t have her simpering around the king all day. It makes me furious.’

‘Leave her alone,’ George recommended. ‘When he is well again he’ll want something a little more fiery. But stop pulling at him. He was angry with you tonight and you ran towards it.’

‘I can’t stand him so pitiful,’ she said. ‘He didn’t die, did he? Why should he be in such misery for nothing?’

‘He’s afraid. And he’s not a young man any more.’

‘If she simpers at him once again I’ll slap her face,’ Anne said. ‘You can warn her from me, Mary. If I catch her looking at him with that Mother of God smile on her face I’ll slap it off her.’

I slithered from the bed. ‘I’ll say something to her. Perhaps not quite that. Can I go now, Anne? I’m weary.’

‘Oh all right,’ she said irritably. ‘You’ll stay with me, won’t you, George?’

‘Your wife will talk,’ I warned him. ‘Already she says that you’re always here.’

I thought that Anne would shrug it off but she and George exchanged a swift look, and George rose to his feet to go.

‘Do I have to be always alone?’ Anne demanded. ‘Walk alone, pray alone, bed alone?’

George hesitated at the bleak appeal.

‘Yes,’ I said stoutly. ‘You chose to be queen. I warned you it wouldn’t bring you joy.’



In the morning Jane Seymour and I found ourselves side by side on the way to Mass. We walked past the king’s open door and saw him seated at his table, his injured leg propped before him on a chair, a clerk beside him reading out letters and putting them before him for signature. As Jane went by his door she slowed down and smiled at him, and he paused and watched her, the pen in his hand, the ink drying on the nib.

Jane and I kneeled side by side in the queen’s chapel and listened to the Mass celebrated before the altar of the church below us.

‘Jane,’ I said quietly.

She opened her eyes, she had been far away in prayer.

‘Yes, Mary? Forgive me, I was praying.’

‘If you go on flirting with the king with those sickly little smiles, one of us Boleyns is going to scratch your eyes out.’



Anne adopted the habit of walking beside the river, up to the bowling green, through the yew tree *allée*, past the tennis courts and back to the palace every day during her pregnancy. I always walked with her and George was always at her side. Most of her ladies came too, and some of the king’s gentlemen, since the king was not hunting in the afternoons. George and Sir Francis Weston would walk either side of Anne and make her laugh and take her arm and help her when we went up the steps to the bowling green, and any of our particular circle, Henry Norris, or Sir Thomas Wyatt, or William would walk with me.

One day Anne was weary and cut the walk short. We re-entered the palace with her on George’s arm and me a few paces behind her walking with Henry Norris. The guards threw open the doors of her apartments as we came towards them and thus framed a tableau of Jane Seymour leaping from the king’s lap and him trying to jump to his feet, brush down his coat, and look nonchalant, but as he was still lame from his fall, he staggered and looked foolish. Anne went in like a whirlwind.

‘Get out, slut,’ she said sharply to Jane Seymour. Jane dropped a curtsey and scuttled from the room. George tried to sweep Anne through to her inner rooms, but she rounded on the king.

‘What were you doing with that thing on your lap? Is she some sort of poultice?’

‘We were talking ...’ he said awkwardly.

‘Does she whisper so low she has to have her tongue in your ear?’

‘I was ... it was ...’

‘I know what it was!’ Anne shouted at him. ‘Your whole court knows what it was. We all had the privilege of seeing what it was. A man who says he is too tired to go out for a walk, sprawled at his ease, with some clever little ninny sneaking into his lap.’

‘Anne –’ he said. Everyone but Anne heard the warning note in his tone.

‘I won’t tolerate it. She’s to leave court!’ she snapped.

‘The Seymours are loyal friends to the crown and our good servants,’ he said pompously. ‘They stay.’

‘She is no better than a whore in a bath house,’ Anne raged at him. ‘And she

is no friend to me. I won't have her among my ladies.'

'She is a gentle pure young woman and –'

'Pure? What was she doing in your lap? Saying her prayers?'

'That's enough!' he said with a rumble of anger. 'She stays among your ladies. Her family stays at court. You overreach yourself, madam.'

'I do not!' Anne swore. 'I have the say of who attends me. I am queen and these are my rooms. I won't have a woman here I don't like.'

'You will have the attendants I choose for you,' he insisted. 'I am the king.'

'You will not order me,' she said breathlessly, her hand to her heart.

'Anne,' I said. 'Be calm.' She did not even hear me.

'I order everyone,' he said. 'You will do as I bid you for I am your husband and your king.'

'I'll be damned if I do!' she screamed, and turned on her heel and fled to her privy chamber. She opened the door and shouted at him from the threshold. 'You don't master me, Henry!'

But he could not run after her. That was her fatal mistake. If he had been able to run after her then he could have caught her and they could have tumbled into bed together as they had done so many times before. But his leg hurt him and she was young and taunting and instead of being aroused he was baited. He resented her youth and her beauty, he no longer revelled in it.

'It is you who are the whore, not her!' he shouted. 'Don't think I have forgotten what you will do to get into a king's lap. Jane Seymour will never know half the tricks you used on me, madam! French tricks! Whore's tricks! They no longer enchant me; but I don't forget them.'

There was a shocked gasp from the court and George and I exchanged one look of total horror. Anne's door slammed shut and the king turned to his court and George and I met his fulminating glare with the blankness of absolute terror.

He pulled himself to his feet. He said: 'Arm.' Sir John Seymour thrust George aside, and the king leaned on him and went slowly to his own rooms, his gentlemen following him. I watched him go and found that I was swallowing painfully with a dry throat.

George's wife Jane Parker was at my side. 'What tricks did she used to do?'

I had a sudden vivid recollection of coaching her to use her hair, her mouth, her hands on him. George and I had taught her everything that we knew, drawn from George's time in the bath houses of Europe with French whores, Spanish madams, and English sluts, and everything that I knew from wedding and bedding one man and seducing another. We had taken Anne and trained her to

do the things that Henry liked, the things all men like, things expressly forbidden by the church. We had taught her to strip naked before him, to raise her shift an inch at a time to show him her privates, we had taught her to lick his cock from the base to the tip with long languorous touches. We had taught her the words he liked and the pictures he wanted in his head. We had given her the skills of a whore and now she was reproached for it. I met George's eyes and I knew he had the same memory.

'Oh Lord save us, Jane,' he said wearily. 'Don't you know that when the king is angry he'll say anything? Nothing, is what she did. Nothing more than a kiss and a caress. The sort of thing that any husband and wife do in their balmy days.' He paused, and corrected himself. 'We didn't, of course; not you and me. But then you're not really a very kissable woman, are you?'

She turned away for a moment as if he had pinched her. 'But of course,' she said, as quiet as a snake going through bracken, '*you* don't really like to kiss women at all unless they are your sisters.'



I left Anne alone for half an hour and then I tapped on her door and slipped into the room. I closed the door on the curious faces of the ladies in waiting and looked around for her. The room was in the darkness of an early winter afternoon, she had not lit the candles and only the firelight flickered on the walls and the ceiling. She was lying face down on her bed and for a moment I thought she was asleep. Then she reared up and I saw her pale face and her dark eyes.

'My God, he was angry.' Her voice was husky from crying.

'You angered him. You ran towards it, Anne.'

'What was I to do? When he insults me before the whole of the court?'

'Be blind,' I counselled her. 'Look the other way. Queen Katherine did.'

'Queen Katherine lost. She looked the other way and I took him. What am I to do to hold him?'

We both said nothing. There was only one answer. There was always only one answer and it was always the same answer.

'I was sick with anger,' she remarked. 'I felt as if I might vomit up my very guts.'

'You must be calm.'

'How can I be calm when Jane Seymour is everywhere I turn?'

I went to the bed and took her hood from her head. 'Let's get you ready for

dinner,' I said. 'Go down to dinner looking beautiful and it will all blow over and be forgotten.'

'Not by me,' she said bitterly. 'I won't forget.'

'Then act as if you do,' I advised her. 'Or everyone will remember that he abused you. You had better act as if it was never said and never heard.'

'He called me a whore,' she said resentfully. 'No-one will forget that.'

'We're all whores compared with Jane,' I said cheerfully. 'So what of it? You're his wife now, aren't you? With a legitimate baby in your belly? He can call you what he likes in temper, you can win him back when he is calm. Win him back tonight, Anne.'

I called for her maid and Anne picked out her gown. She chose a gown of silver and white, as if she would assert her purity even when the court had heard her accused of whoreish tricks. Her stomacher was embroidered with pearls and diamonds, the hem of the silvery cloth of the skirt was stitched with silver thread. When she put her hood on her black hair she looked every inch a queen, a snow queen, a queen of speckless beauty.

'Very good,' I said.

Anne gave me a weary smile. 'I have to do it and go on doing it forever,' she said. 'This dance to keep Henry interested. What will happen when I am old and I can dance no more? The girls in my chambers will still be young and beautiful. What happens then?'

I had no comfort to offer her. 'Let's get through this evening. Never mind about years to come. And when you have a son and then more sons you won't mind about getting old.'

She rested her hand on the encrusted stomacher. 'My son,' she said softly.

'Are you ready?'

She nodded and went to the closed door. In the new gesture her shoulders went back and her chin went up, she smiled, her dazzling assured smile, and nodded to the maid to open the door and she went out to face the gossip mill of her own rooms, shining like an angel.

I saw that the family had turned out in support, and knew that my uncle must have heard enough to be fearful. My mother was there, and my father. My uncle was at the rear of the room in amicable conversation with Jane Seymour which gave me pause for a moment. George was on the threshold, I caught his smile and then he went forward to Anne and took her hand. There was a little murmur of interest at her fine gown, at her defiant smile, and then the room eddied as the groups of talkers moved away and re-formed. Sir William Brereton came up and

kissed her hand and whispered something about an angel fallen to earth, and Anne laughed and said that she had not fallen but merely arrived on a visit, so the suggestive imagery was neatly turned. Then there was a rustle at the door and Henry stamped into the room with the rest of the court, his lame leg giving him an awkward gait, his round face scored with new lines of pain. He gave Anne a sulky nod.

‘Good day, madam,’ he said. ‘Are you ready to go to dinner?’

‘Of course, husband,’ she said, as sweet as honey. ‘I am glad to see Your Majesty looking so well.’

Her ability to flick from one mood to another was always baffling to him. He checked at her good humour and looked around at the avid faces of the court. ‘Have you greeted Sir John Seymour?’ he asked her, picking on the one man she would not want to honour.

Anne’s smile never wavered. ‘Good evening, Sir John,’ she said, as mild as his own daughter. ‘I hope that you will accept a little gift from me.’

He bowed a little awkwardly. ‘I should be honoured, Your Majesty.’

‘I want to give you a little carved stool from my privy chambers. A pretty little piece from France. I hope you will like it.’

He bowed again. ‘I should be grateful.’

Anne slid a sidelong smile at her husband. ‘It is for your daughter,’ she said. ‘For Jane. To sit on. She seems not to have a seat of her own but she must borrow mine.’

There was a moment’s stunned silence and then Henry’s great bellow of a laugh. At once the court learned that they could laugh too and the queen’s rooms rocked at her jest against Jane. Henry, still laughing, offered his arm to Anne, and she peeped up at him roguishly. He started to lead her from the room and the court took their usual places behind them, and then I heard a gasp, and someone say quietly: ‘My God! The queen!’

George cut through the crowd of them like a scythe through grass and grabbed Anne by the hand, pulling her away from Henry. ‘Your pardon, Your Majesty, the queen is unwell,’ I heard him say swiftly. And then he bent his mouth to Anne’s ear and whispered urgently to her. Through the avidly turning faces I saw her profile, I saw the colour drain from her face, and then she pushed her way through them all, George hurrying before her to fling open the door to her privy chamber and pull her in. The people at the back were craning forward, I caught sight of the back of her dress. There was a scarlet stain, blood-red against the silver-white of her gown. She was bleeding. She was losing the baby.

I dived through the press of people to follow her into her room. My mother came behind me and slammed the door on the avid faces staring inwards, on the king who was still looking, bewildered, at the sudden rush of Anne and her family into hiding.

Anne stood alone, facing George, plucking at the back of her gown to see the stain. 'I didn't feel a thing.'

'I'll get a physician,' he said, turning for the door.

'Don't say anything,' my mother cautioned him.

'Say!' I exclaimed. 'They all saw! The king himself saw!'

'It might still be all right. Lie down, Anne.'

Anne went slowly to the bed, her face as white as her hood. 'I don't feel anything,' she repeated.

'Then perhaps nothing is happening,' my mother said. 'Just a little speck.'

She nodded to the maids to take Anne's shoes off, and her stockings. They rolled her on her side and unlaced her stomacher. They peeled off the beautiful white gown with its great stain of scarlet. Her petticoats were drenched in blood. I looked at my mother.

'It might be all right,' she said uncertainly.

I went to Anne and took her hand since it was clear that she would be on her deathbed before our mother would lay a finger on her.

'Don't be afraid,' I whispered.

'This time we can't hide it,' she whispered back. 'They all saw.'



We did everything. We put a warming pan to her feet and the physicians brought a cordial, two cordials, a poultice and a special blanket blessed by a saint. We leeches her and put a hotter pan at her feet. But it was all no good. At midnight she went into labour, in the real struggle and pain of a proper labour, hauling at the sheet knotted from one bedpost to another, groaning at the pain of the baby tearing itself from her body, and then around two in the morning, she gave a sudden scream and the baby came away and there was nothing anyone could do to hold it in.

The midwife receiving it into her hands gave a sudden exclamation.

'What is it?' Anne gasped, her face red from straining, the sweat pouring down her neck.

'It's a monster!' the woman said. 'A monster.'

Anne hissed with fear, and I found myself shrinking from the bed with superstitious terror. In the midwife's bloody hands was a baby horribly malformed, with a spine flayed open and a huge head, twice as large as the spindly little body.

Anne gave a hoarse scream and clambered away from it, scrambling like a frightened cat to the top of the bed, leaving a trail of blood over the sheets and pillows. She shrank back against the bedposts, her hands outstretched as if she would push the very air away.

'Wrap it up!' I exclaimed. 'Take it away!'

The midwife looked at Anne, her face very grave. 'What did you do to get this on you?'

'I did nothing! Nothing!'

'This is not a child from a man, this is a child from a devil.'

'I did nothing!'

I wanted to say 'Nonsense,' but my throat was too tight with my own fear. 'Wrap it up!' I heard the panic in my voice.

My mother turned away from the bed and headed rapidly for the door, with her face as stern as if she was walking away from the executioner's block on Tower Green.

'Mother!' Anne cried out in a little croak.

My mother neither looked back at her nor checked her step. She walked from the room without a word. When the door clicked behind her I thought, this is the end. The end for Anne.

'I have done nothing,' Anne repeated. She turned to me and I thought of the potion from the witch and the night that she lay in the secret room with a gold mask over her face, like a bird's beak. I thought of her journey to the gates of hell and back to get this child for England.

The midwife turned away. 'I shall have to tell the king.'

At once I was between her and the door, barring her way. 'You are not to distress His Majesty,' I said. 'He would not want to know this. These are women's secrets, they should be kept among women. Let us keep this between ourselves and deal with it privately and you shall have the queen's favour, and mine. I shall see that you are well paid for tonight's work and for your discretion. I shall see that you are well paid, Mistress. I promise you.'

She did not even glance up at me. She was holding the bundle wrapped in her arms, the horror of it hidden by the swaddling bands. For one dreadful moment I thought I saw it move, I imagined the little flayed hand putting the

cloth aside. She lifted it up towards my face, and I shrank back from it. She took her chance and opened the door.

‘You shan’t go to the king!’ I swore, clinging to her arm.

‘Don’t you know?’ she asked me, her voice almost pitying. ‘Don’t you know that I am his servant already? That he sent me here to watch and listen for him? I was appointed for this from the moment that the queen first missed her courses.’

‘Why?’ I gasped.

‘Because he doubts her.’

I put my hand to the wall to support me, my head was whirling. ‘Doubts her?’

She shrugged. ‘He did not know what was wrong with her that she could not carry a child.’ She nodded to the limp huddle of cloth. ‘Now he will know.’

I licked my dry lips. ‘I will pay you anything you ask, to put that down and go to the king and tell him that she has lost a baby but she is able to conceive another,’ I said. ‘Whatever he is paying you, I will double it. I am a Boleyn, we are not without influence and wealth. You can be one of the Howard servants for the rest of your life.’

‘This is my duty,’ she said. ‘I have been doing it since I was a young girl. I have made a solemn vow to the Virgin Mary never to fail in my task.’

‘What task?’ I demanded wildly. ‘What duty? What are you talking about now?’

‘Witch-taking,’ she said simply. And then she slipped out of the door with the devil’s baby in her arms and was gone.

I shut the door on her and slid the bolt. I wanted no-one to come into the room until the mess was cleaned up, and Anne fit to fight for her life.

‘What did she say?’ she asked.

Her skin was white and waxy. Her dark eyes were like chips of glass. She was far away from this hot little room and the sense of danger.

‘Nothing of importance.’

‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing. Why don’t you sleep now?’

Anne glared at me. ‘I will never believe it,’ she said flatly, as if she were talking not to me, but to some inquisition. ‘You can never make me believe it. I am not some ignorant peasant crying over a relict which is chipwood and pig’s blood. I will not be turned from my way by silly fears. I will think and I will do, and I will make the world to my own desire.’

‘Anne?’

‘I won’t be frightened by nothing,’ she said staunchly.

‘Anne?’

She turned her face away from me, to the wall.



As soon as she was asleep I opened the door and called a Howard – Madge Shelton – into the room to sit with her. The maids swept away the bloodstained sheets and brought clean rushes for the floor. Outside in the presence chamber, the court was waiting for news, the ladies half-dozing, their heads in their hands, some people playing cards to while away the time. George was leaning against a wall in low-voiced conversation with Sir Francis, heads as close as lovers.

William came towards me and took my hand, and I paused for a moment and drew strength from his touch.

‘It’s bad,’ I said shortly. ‘I can’t tell you now. I have to tell Uncle something. Come with me.’

George was at my side at once. ‘How is she?’

‘The baby’s dead,’ I said shortly.

I saw him blanch as white as a maid and he crossed himself. ‘Where’s Uncle?’ I asked, looking round.

‘Waiting for news in his rooms like the rest of them.’

‘How’s the queen?’ someone asked me.

‘Has she lost the baby?’ someone else said.

George stepped forward. ‘The queen is sleeping,’ he said. ‘Resting. She bids you all to go to your beds and in the morning there will be news of her condition.’

‘Did she lose the baby?’ someone pressed George, looking at me.

‘How should I know?’ George said blandly, and there was an irritated buzz of disbelief.

‘It’s dead then,’ someone said. ‘What is wrong with her that she cannot give him a son?’

‘Come on,’ William said to George. ‘Let’s get out of here. The more you say, the worse it will get.’

With my husband and my brother on either side of me we pushed out through the court and down the stair to Uncle Howard’s chambers. His dark-liveried servant let us in without a word. My uncle was at the big table, some papers spread out before him, a candle throwing a yellow glow all around the

room.

When we entered he nodded to the servant to stir the fire and light another branch of candles.

‘Yes?’ he asked.

‘Anne went into labour and gave birth to a dead baby,’ I said flatly.

He nodded, his grave face showing no emotion.

‘There were things wrong with it,’ I said.

‘What sort of things?’

‘Its back was flayed open, and its head was big,’ I said. I could feel my throat tightening in disgust and I gripped William’s hand a little tighter. ‘It was a monster.’

Again he nodded as if I were telling him news of a most ordinary and distant nature. But it was George who gave a small strangled exclamation in his throat and felt for the back of a chair to support him. My uncle seemed to pay no attention, but he saw everything.

‘I tried to stop the midwife taking it out.’

‘Oh?’

‘She said that she was already hired by the king.’

‘Ah.’

‘And when I offered her money to stay or to leave the baby she said that it was her duty to the Virgin Mary to take the baby because she was a ...’

‘A ...?’

‘A witch-taker,’ I whispered.

I felt the odd sensation of the floor floating underneath my feet and all the sounds of the room coming from far away. Then William pressed me into a chair and held a glass of wine to my lips. George did not touch me, he was clinging to the back of the chair and his face was as white as mine.

My uncle was unmoved.

‘The king hired a witch-taker to spy on Anne?’

I took another sip of wine and nodded.

‘Then she is in very great danger,’ he remarked.

There was another long silence.

‘Danger?’ George whispered, pushing himself upright.

My uncle nodded. ‘A suspicious husband is always a danger. A suspicious king even more so.’

‘She’s done nothing,’ George said stoutly. I stole a curious sideways glance at him, hearing him repeat the litany Anne had sworn when she had seen the

monster that her body had made.

‘Perhaps,’ my uncle conceded. ‘But the king thinks she has done something, and that is enough to destroy her.’

‘And what will you do to protect her?’ George asked cautiously.

‘You know, George,’ my uncle said slowly, ‘the last time I had the pleasure of a private conversation with her she said that I might leave the court and be damned to me, she said that she had got where she was by her own efforts and that she owed me nothing, and she threatened me with imprisonment.’

‘She’s a Howard,’ I said, putting the wine aside.

He bowed. ‘She was.’

‘This is Anne!’ I exclaimed. ‘We all spent our lives to get her here.’

My uncle nodded. ‘And has she repaid us with great thanks? You were exiled from court, as I remember. You’d still be there if she had not needed your service. She has done nothing to recommend me to the king, on the contrary. And George, she favours you, but are you one shilling the richer than when she came to the throne? Did you not do as well when she was his mistress?’

‘This is not a matter of favour but a matter of life and death,’ George said hotly.

‘As soon as she bears a son her position is secure.’

‘But he can’t make a son!’ George shouted. ‘He couldn’t make a son on Katherine, he cannot make one on her. He is all but impotent! That’s why she has been going mad with fear ...’

There was a deadly silence. ‘God forgive you for putting all of us in such danger,’ my uncle said coldly. ‘It’s treason to say such a thing. I did not hear it. You did not say it. Now go.’

William helped me to my feet and the three of us went slowly from the room. On the threshold George spun around, about to complain, but the door silently closed in his face before he could speak.



Anne did not wake until the middle of the morning and then she had a raging temperature. I went to find the king. The court was packing to move to Greenwich Palace and he was away from the noise and the bustle, playing bowls in the garden, surrounded by his favourites, the Seymours very prominent among them. I was glad to see George at his side, looking confident and smiling, and my uncle among the watchers. My father offered the king a wager at good odds

and the king took the bet. I waited till the last ball had been rolled and my father, laughing, handed over twenty gold pieces, before I stepped forward and made my curtsey.

The king scowled to see me. I saw at once that neither Boleyn girl was in favour. 'Lady Mary,' he said coolly.

'Your Majesty, I am come from my sister, the queen.'

He nodded.

'She asks that the court delay the move to Greenwich for a week until she has perfectly recovered her health.'

'It's too late,' he said. 'She can join us there when she is well.'

'They have hardly started packing yet.'

'It's too late for her,' he corrected me. There was an instantly suppressed little mutter around the bowling green. 'It is too late for her to ask favours of me. I know what I know.'

I hesitated. A very strong part of me wanted to take him by the collar of his jacket and shake the fat selfishness out of him. I had left my sister sick after a nightmarish childbirth and here was her husband, taking his ease, playing bowls in the sunshine and warning the court that she was far from his favour.

'Then you must know that she, and I, and all we Howards have never swerved for a moment from our love and loyalty to you,' I said. I saw my uncle's scowl at the claim of kinship.

'Let us hope you are not all tested,' the king said unpleasantly. Then he turned from me and beckoned to Jane Seymour. Modestly, eyes downcast, she tiptoed forward from the queen's ladies.

'Walk with me?' he asked in a very different voice.

She curtsied as if it were too much of an honour for her even to speak, and then laid her little hand on his bejewelled sleeve and they walked off together, the court falling into line at a discreet distance behind them.



The court was buzzing with rumours which George and I, working alone, could not deny. Once it had been a hanging offence to say one word against Anne. Now there were songs and jokes about her flirtatious court circle, and scandalous insinuations about her inability to carry a child.

'Why doesn't Henry silence them?' I asked of William. 'God knows he has the power of the law to do so.'

He shook his head. 'He is allowing them to say anything,' he said. 'They say she has done everything but sell her soul to the devil.'

'Fools!' I stormed.

Gently he took my hands and unfolded the clenched fingers. 'But Mary. How else would she have made a monstrous child but from a monstrous union? She must have lain in sin.'

'With whom, for God's sake? Do *you* think she has made a contract with the devil?'

'Don't you think she would do so, if it got her a son?' he demanded.

That stopped me. Unhappily, I looked up into his brown eyes. 'Hush,' I said, afraid of the very words. 'I don't want to think it.'

'What if she did perform some witchcraft, and it gave her a monster child?'

'Then?'

'Then he would be right to put her aside.'

For a moment I tried to laugh. 'This is a sorry jest at this sorry time, William.'

'No jest, wife.'

'I can't see it!' I cried in sudden impatience at the way the world had so suddenly turned. 'I can't comprehend what's happened to us!'

Disregarding the fact that we were in the garden and that any of the court could come upon us at any moment, he slipped his arm around my waist and folded me in to him, as intimate as if we were in the stable yard of his farm. 'Love, my love,' he said tenderly. 'She must have done something very bad to give birth to a monster. And you don't even know what it was. Have you never run a secret errand for her? Fetched a midwife? Bought a potion?'

'You yourself ...' I started.

He nodded. 'And I have buried a dead baby. Please God this matter can be settled quietly and they never ask too many questions.'



The only previous time that the court had abandoned a queen in an empty palace was when the king and Anne had ridden out laughing, and left Queen Katherine alone. Now Henry did it again. Anne watched, unseen, from the window of her bedroom, kneeling up on a chair, still too weak to stand, while he, with Jane Seymour riding at his side, led the progress of the court to Greenwich, his favourite palace.

In the train of merry courtiers behind the laughing king and the new pretty favourite was my family, father, mother, uncle and brother, jockeying for the king's favour, while William and I rode with our children. Catherine was quiet and reserved, and she glanced back at the palace and then looked up at me.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘It doesn't seem right to be riding away without the queen,’ she said.

‘She'll join us later, when she feels well again,’ I said comfortingly.

‘D'you know where Jane Seymour will have her rooms at Greenwich?’ she asked me.

I shook my head. ‘Won't she share with another Seymour girl?’

‘No,’ my young daughter said shortly. ‘She says that the king is to give her beautiful apartments of her own, and her own ladies in waiting. So that she can practise her music.’



I did not want to believe Catherine but she was quite right. It was given out that Secretary Cromwell himself had given up his rooms at Greenwich so that Mistress Seymour could warble away to her lute without disturbing the other ladies. In fact, Secretary Cromwell's rooms had a private passage connecting the apartment to the king's privy chamber. Jane was ensconced in Greenwich as Anne had been before her, in rival rooms to the queen's apartment, as a rival court.

As soon as the court was settled, a little group of Seymours met and talked and danced and played in Jane's new grand apartments, and the queen's ladies, without the queen to wait on, found their way over to Jane's rooms. The king was there all the time, talking, reading, listening to music or poetry. He dined with Jane informally, in his rooms or hers, with Seymours around the table to laugh at his jests or divert him with gambling, or he took her into dinner in the great hall and sat her near to him, with only the queen's empty throne to remind anyone that there was a Queen of England left behind in an empty palace. Sometimes, as I looked at Jane leaning forward to say something to Henry over my sister's empty seat, I felt as if Anne had never been and there was nothing to stop Jane moving from one chair to the other.

She never wavered in her sweetness to Henry. They must have reared her on a diet of sugar beet in Wiltshire. She was utterly unendingly pleasant to Henry whether he was in a sour mood because of the pain in his leg, or whether he was

exultant as a boy crowing in triumph because he had brought down a deer. She was always very calm, she was always very pious – he often found her on her knees before her little prie dieu with her hands clasped on her rosary, and her head uplifted – and she was always unendingly modest.

She set aside the French hood, the stylish half-moon-shaped headdress which Anne had introduced when she first came back to England. Instead, Jane wore a gable hood, like Queen Katherine had done, which only a year ago marked the wearer as someone impossibly dowdy and dull. Henry himself had sworn that he hated Spanish dress, but its very sternness suited Jane's cool beauty as a foil. She wore it like a nun might wear a coif – to demonstrate her disdain for worldly show. But she wore it in palest blue, in softest green, in butter yellow: all clean light colours as if her very palette was mild.

I knew that she was halfway to my sister's place when Madge Shelton, bawdy, flirtatious, loose-living little Madge Shelton, appeared at dinner in a gable hood in pale blue with a high-necked gown to match and her French sleeves remodelled to an English cut. Within days every woman in the court wore a gable hood and walked with her eyes downcast.



Anne joined us in February, riding into court with the greatest show: the royal standard rippling over her head, the Boleyn standard coming along behind her, and a great train of liveried serving men and gentlemen on horseback. George and I were waiting for her on the steps with the great doors open wide behind us, and Henry noticeable by his absence.

‘Shall you tell her about Jane's rooms?’ George asked me.

‘Not I,’ I said. ‘You can.’

‘Francis says to tell her in public. She'll rule her temper in front of the court.’

‘You discuss the queen with Francis?’

‘You talk with William.’

‘He is my husband.’

George nodded, looking towards the first men in Anne's train as they approached the door.

‘You trust William?’

‘Of course.’

‘I feel the same about Francis.’

‘It’s not the same.’

‘How would you know what his love is like to me?’

‘I know that it can’t be as a man loves a woman.’

‘No. I love him as a man loves a man.’

‘It’s against holy writ.’

He took my hands and smiled his irresistible Boleyn smile. ‘Mary, have done. These are dangerous times and the only comfort to me is Francis’s love. Let me have that. Because as God is my witness I have few other joys, and I think we are in the greatest of danger.’

Anne’s train of escorts rode past and she pulled up her horse beside us with a radiant smile. She was wearing a riding habit in darkest red and a dark red hat set back on her head with a long feather pinned on the brim with a great ruby brooch.

‘*Vivat Anna!*’ my brother called, responding to her emphatic style.

She looked past us, into the shadows of the great hall, expecting to see the king waiting for her. Her expression did not change when she saw that he was missing.

‘Are you well?’ I asked, coming forward.

‘Of course,’ she said brightly. ‘Why should I not be?’

I shook my head. ‘No reason,’ I said cautiously. Clearly, we were to say nothing about this dead baby as we had always said nothing about the others.

‘Where is the king?’

‘Hunting,’ George said.

Anne strode into the palace, servants running before her to throw open the doors.

‘He knew I was coming?’ she threw over her shoulder.

‘Yes,’ George replied.

She nodded and waited until we were in her rooms with the doors shut. ‘And where are my ladies?’

‘Some of them are hunting with the king,’ I said. ‘Some of them are ...’ I found I did not know how to end the sentence. ‘Some of them are not,’ I said hopelessly.

She looked past me and raised a dark eyebrow at George. ‘Will you tell me what my sister means?’ she asked. ‘I knew her French and Latin were incomprehensible but now English seems to be beyond her too.’

‘Your ladies are flocking to Jane Seymour,’ he said flatly. ‘The king has given her Thomas Cromwell’s apartments, he dines with her every day. She has

a little court over there.'

She gasped for a moment and looked from our brother to me. 'Is this true?'

'Yes,' I said.

'He has given her Thomas Cromwell's rooms? He can go straight to her rooms without anyone even knowing?'

'Yes.'

'Are they lovers?'

I looked at George.

'No way of knowing,' he said. 'My wager is not.'

'Not?'

'She seems to be refusing to take the addresses of a married man,' he said. 'She is playing on her virtue.'

Anne went to the window, walking slowly, as if she would puzzle out this change in her world. 'What does she hope for?' she asked. 'If she is calling him on and holding him off at the same time?'

Neither of us answered her. Who would know better than us?

Anne turned, her eyes as sharp as a cat's. 'She thinks to put me aside? Is she mad?'

We neither of us answered.

'And Cromwell was ordered out for this shower of Seymours?'

I shook my head. 'Cromwell offered his rooms.'

She nodded slowly. 'So Cromwell is openly against me now.'

She looked to George for comfort, an odd look, as if she were not sure of him. But George had never failed her. Tentatively, he went closer to her and put his hand on her shoulder, brother-like. Instead of turning to him for a hug, she stepped back until he was standing behind her and then she rested her head back against his chest. He gave a sigh and wrapped his arms around her and rocked her gently as they stood, looking out of the window where the Thames sparkled in the wintry sunshine.

'I thought you might be afraid to touch me,' she said softly.

He shook his head. 'Oh, Anne. According to the laws of the land and the church I am anathematised ten times over before breakfast.'

I shuddered at that; but she giggled like a girl.

'And whatever we have done, it was done for love,' he said gently.

She turned in his arms and looked up at him, scrutinising his face. I realised that I had never in my life seen her look at anyone like that before. She looked at him as if she cared what he felt. He was not just a step on the stair of her

ambition. He was her beloved. 'Even when the outcome was monstrous?' she asked.

He shrugged. 'I don't pretend to know the theology. But my mare has dropped a foal with one leg joined to the other and I didn't dip her for a witch. These things happen in nature, they can't always mean something. You were unlucky, nothing more.'

'I won't let it frighten me,' she said staunchly. 'I've seen saint's blood made from the blood of pigs, and holy water scooped up from a stream. Half of this church's teaching is to lead you on, half to frighten you into your place. I won't be bribed onwards, and I won't be frightened. Not by anything. I took a decision to build my own road and I will do it.'

If George had been listening he would have heard the sharp nervous edge in her voice. But he was watching her bright determined face. 'Onwards and upwards, Anna Regina!' he said.

She beamed at him. 'Onwards and upwards. And the next will be a boy.'

She turned in his arms and put her hands on his shoulders and looked up at him, as if he were a trusted lover. 'So what am I to do?'

'You have to get him back,' he said earnestly. 'Don't rail at him, don't let him see your fear. Call him back to you with every trick you know. Enchant him again.'

She hesitated and then she smiled and told him the truth behind the bright face. 'George, I'm ten years older than when I courted him first. I am nearing thirty. He's had only one live child off me, and now he knows that I gave birth to a monster. I will repel him.'

George tightened his grip on her waist. 'You can't repel him,' he said simply. 'Or we all fall. You have to draw him back to you.'

'But it was me who taught him to follow his desires. Worse than that, I filled his stupid head with the new learning. Now he thinks that his desires are God's manifestations. He only has to want something to think that it is God's will. He doesn't have to confirm it with priest, bishop, or Pope. His whims are holy. How can anyone make such a man return to his wife?'

George looked over her head to me for help. I came a little closer. 'He likes comfort,' I said. 'A little soothing. Pet him, tell him he is wonderful, praise him, and be kind to him.'

She looked as blankly at me as if I were speaking Hebrew. 'I am his lover, not his mother,' she said flatly.

'He wants a mother now,' George said. 'He's hurt and he feels old and

battered. He fears old age, he fears death. The wound on his leg stinks. He is in terror of dying before he has made a prince for England. What he wants is a woman to be tender to him until he feels better again. Jane Seymour is all sweetness. You have to out-sweeten her.'

She was silent. We all knew that it was not possible to be sweeter than Jane Seymour when she had the crown in her sights. Not even Anne, that most consummate seductress, could out-sweeten Jane Seymour. The brightness had died from her face and for a moment in her thin pallor I saw the hard face of our own mother.

'By God I hope it kills her,' she suddenly swore vindictively. 'If she gets her hand on my crown and her arse on my throne I hope it is the death of her. I hope she dies young. I hope she dies in childbed in the very act of giving him a boy. And I hope the boy dies too.'

George stiffened. He could see from the window the return of the hunting party to court.

'Run downstairs, Mary, and tell the king I am come,' Anne said, not moving from George's embrace.

I ran downstairs as the king was dismounting from his horse. I saw him wince as he stepped to the ground and his weight went onto his injured leg. Jane was riding beside him, a phalanx of Seymours around them. I looked around for my father, for my mother, for my uncle. They were thrust to the back, eclipsed.

'Your Majesty,' I said, sweeping him a curtsy. 'My sister the queen has arrived and bids me to give Your Majesty her compliments.'

Henry looked at me, he was wearing his sulky face, his forehead grooved with pain, his mouth pursed. 'Tell her I am wearied from my riding, I will see her at dinner,' he said shortly.

He went past me with a heavy tread, walking unevenly, favouring his hurt leg. Sir John Seymour helped his daughter from her horse. I noted the new riding gown, the new horse, the diamond winking on her gloved hand. I longed so much to spit some venom at her that I had to bite the tip of my tongue, to make myself smile sweetly at her, and step back as her father and her brother escorted her through the great doors to her apartments – the apartments of the king's favourite.

My father and my mother followed the Seymours, in their train. I waited for them to ask me how Anne was, but they passed me with no more than a nod. 'Anne is well,' I volunteered, as my mother went by.

'Good,' she said coolly.

‘Will you not come to wait on her?’

Her face was as blank as a barren woman. It was as if none of us had ever been born to her. ‘I will visit her when the king goes to her rooms,’ she said.

I knew then that Anne and George and I were on our own.



The ladies returned to Anne’s room like a flock of buzzards, uncertain where the best pickings were to be had. I noted, with bitter amusement, the crisis in headgear which Anne’s confident return had caused. Some of them went back to French hoods which Anne continued to wear. Some of them stayed in the heavy gable hoods which Jane favoured. All of them were desperate to know whether they should be in the queen’s beautiful apartment or over the way with the Seymours. Where might the king come next? Where might he prefer? Madge Shelton wore a gable hood and was trying to wheedle her way into Jane Seymour’s circle. Madge for one thought that Anne was in decline.

I entered the room and three women fell silent the moment I approached them. ‘What’s the news?’ I asked.

No-one would tell me. Then Jane Parker, always the most reliable of all scandal mongers, came to my side. ‘The king has sent Jane Seymour a gift, a huge purse of gold, and she has refused it.’

I waited.

Jane’s eyes were bright with delight. ‘She said she could not take such gifts from the king until she was a married woman. It would compromise her.’

I was silent for a moment, trying to decode this arcane statement. ‘Compromise her?’

Jane nodded.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. I made my way through the women to Anne’s privy chamber. George was in there with her, Sir Francis Weston with him. ‘I would speak with you alone,’ I said flatly.

‘You can speak in front of Sir Francis,’ Anne said.

I took a breath. ‘Have you heard about Jane Seymour refusing the king’s gift?’

They shook their heads. ‘She is supposed to have said that she could not take such gifts from him until she was a married woman, because it might compromise her.’

‘Oho,’ Sir Francis said.

‘I suppose it is nothing more than her flaunting her virtue; but the court’s abuzz with it,’ I said.

‘It reminds the king that she could marry another,’ George said. ‘He’ll hate the sound of that.’

‘It parades her virtue,’ Anne added.

‘And it’ll get out,’ Sir Francis said. ‘This is theatre. She didn’t turn down that horse, did she? Or the diamond ring? Or the locket with his picture inside? But the court now thinks, and the world will soon think, that the king is interested in a young woman who has no ambition for wealth. Touché! And all in one tableau.’

Anne gritted her teeth. ‘She is insufferable.’

‘And there’s nothing you can do to pay her back,’ George said. ‘So don’t even think about it. Head up, smile on, and enchant him if you can.’

‘There may be mention at dinner of the alliance with Spain,’ Sir Francis cautioned her as she rose from her chair. ‘Better say nothing against it.’

Anne looked back over her shoulder at him. ‘If I have to become Jane Seymour myself, I might as well be set aside,’ she said. ‘If everything that is me – my wit and my temper and my passion for the reform of the church – has to be denied, then I have set my own self aside. If what the king wants is a biddable wife then I should never have tried for the throne in the first place. If I cannot be me, I might as well not be here at all.’

George went to her, raised her hand and kissed it. ‘No, for we all adore you,’ he said. ‘And this is just a passing whim of the king’s. He wants Jane now as he wanted Madge, as he wanted Lady Margaret. He’ll come to his senses and come back to you. Look how long the queen held him. He went and came back to her a dozen times. You are his wife, the mother of his princess, just as she was. You can hold him.’

She smiled at that, straightened her shoulders, and nodded to me to open the door. I heard the buzz as she went out, dressed in rich green velvet, emeralds in her ears, diamonds sparkling on her green hood, the golden ‘B’ on the choker of pearls at her neck.



It grew very cold towards the end of February and the Thames froze outside the palace. The landing stage extended like a path over a floor of white ice, the steps at the landing gate led down to a smooth sheet of glass. The river became like a

strange road, which might lead anywhere. In the thinner parts when I looked down I could see the water moving, green and perilous, below the clear sheet of ice.

The gardens, the walkways, the walls and the *allées* around Greenwich all took on a miraculous whiteness as it snowed and then froze and then snowed again. In the pleasure gardens the espaliered walkways were frosted. On the sunny mornings the spiders' webs shone with white crystals like magical lacemaking thrown over the thinnest branches. Every twig, every thinnest blade was lined with white, as if an artist had gone around the whole garden determined to make one see the detail of every branch on every tree.

It was freezing cold at night with an icy wind which blew from the east, a Russian wind. But during the day the sun was very bright and it was delightful to run in the gardens and to play at bowls on the frozen grass while the robins hopped in the dark yew trees of the *allée* and waited for crumbs, and great flocks of cold-loving geese flew overhead with their wings creaking and their long heads extended, searching for open water.

The king declared that we should have a winter fair and that there should be jousting on ice-skates and skate-dancing and a masque for winter with sledges and fire-eaters and Muscovite tumblers. There was a bear baiting, ten times funnier than an ordinary baiting, when the poor animal slid and fell and lunged towards the skidding dogs. One dog raced in for a snap and thought to race out again but found his scrabbling feet had no purchase on the ice and the bear drew him in to his death with one heavy paw on his back. The king roared with laughter at the sight.

They drove down oxen from Smithfield, using the frozen river as a high road, and roasted them on spits over great fires on the riverbank, and the lads ran from kitchen to riverside with hot bread, the kitchen dogs barking and running alongside them all the way, hoping for a mishap.

Jane was a winter princess in white and blue, white fur at her neck and on the hood of her cape. She skated very unsteadily and had to be held up by her brother on one side and her father on the other. They wheeled her towards the king and pushed her, passively beautiful, towards the throne and I thought that to be a Seymour girl must be very like being a Boleyn girl, when your father and your brother thrust you towards the king and you have neither the ability nor the wisdom to race away.

Henry always had a chair for her by his side. The throne for the queen was on his right, as it must be, but on his left there was a seat for Jane if she chose to

rest after skating. The king did not skate, his leg was still not healed and there was talk of French physicians or perhaps even a pilgrimage to Canterbury to ease his pain. Only Jane could wipe his frown away, and she managed it by doing nothing. She stood beside him, she let them push her around on skates before him, she flinched at the cockfighting, she gasped at the fire-eater, she behaved as she always had done, as a complete ninny, and it soothed the king in a way that Anne could not do.

Anne came down to dine on the ice with the king for every one of the three days, and seeing her glide about on her sharp whalebone skates with the grace of a Russian dancer, I thought that all we Boleyns were on thin ice this season. The most innocent word from her could make the king scowl, there was no pleasing him. He watched her all the time, with his suspicious piggy eyes screwed up. He rubbed his fingers as he watched her, pulling at the ring on his smallest finger.

Anne tried to dazzle him with her high spirits and her beauty. She kept her temper with him, though he was sour and dull. She danced, she gambled, she laughed, she skated, she was all joy, all light. She threw Jane Seymour into the background, no man ever had eyes for another woman when Anne was in radiant mood. Not even the king could look away from her as she went through the dancing court, her head high, that turn of the neck as someone spoke to her, surrounded by men who wrote poems to her beauty, musicians playing songs for her, the very centre of the excitement of the court at play. The king could not take his eyes off her, but his gaze was no longer entranced. He stared at her as if he would understand something about her, as if he would unravel her charm so that he might see her unwoven, robbed of everything that had made her once so lovely to him. He stared at her like a man might stare at a tapestry that has cost him a fortune and that he suddenly sees one morning as valueless, and wants to unknot. He stared at her as if he could not believe that she had cost him so dear, and repaid him so little. And not even Anne's charm and vivacity could make him think that the bargain was a good one.

While I watched Anne, George and Sir Francis were watching Cromwell. There was a whispered rumour that the king might put Anne aside on grounds that the marriage had been invalid from the start. George and I scoffed at it, but Sir Francis pointed to the fact that parliament was to be dissolved in April, with no good reason given.

'What difference does that make?' George asked him.

'So all the good country knights are back in their shires if the king makes a move against the queen,' Francis answered.

‘They’d hardly defend her,’ I said. ‘They hate her.’

‘They might defend the idea of queenship,’ he said. ‘They were forced to swear against Queen Katherine, they were forced to swear that they denied the Princess Mary, that they recognised Princess Elizabeth. If the king now sets Anne aside they might feel that he has played them for fools, and they won’t like that. If he returns to the Pope’s view, they might find it a turn-around too quick to swallow.’

‘But the queen is dead,’ I said, thinking of my old mistress Katherine. ‘Even if his marriage to Anne is dissolved, he can’t go back to the queen.’

George tutted under his breath at my slowness, but Sir Francis was more patient. ‘The Pope’s view is still that the marriage with Anne is invalid. And so now Henry is a widower; and free to marry again.’

Instinctively George and Francis and I all looked towards the king. He was rising from his throne on the ice-blue dais. Sir John Seymour and Sir Edward Seymour were either side of him, raising him up. Jane was standing before him, her lips slightly parted on a smile as if she had never seen a more handsome man than this fat invalid.

Anne, skating on the other side of the ice with Henry Norris and Thomas Wyatt, glided over and called casually: ‘How now, husband? Are you not staying?’

He looked at her. The colour was whipped into her cheeks by the cold wind, she was wearing her scarlet riding hat with the long feather, and a strand of hair was tickling her cheek. She looked radiant, undeniably beautiful.

‘I am in pain,’ he said slowly. ‘While you have been disporting yourself, I have been suffering. I am going to my rooms to rest.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ she said instantly, gliding forward. ‘If I had known I would have stayed at your side, but you told me to go and skate. My poor husband. I shall make you a tisane and sit with you and read to you, if you like.’

He shook his head. ‘I would rather sleep,’ he said. ‘I would rather have silence than your reading.’

Anne flushed. Henry Norris and Thomas Wyatt looked away, wishing themselves elsewhere. The Seymours kept their faces diplomatically bland.

‘I will see you at dinner then,’ Anne said, curbing her temper. ‘And I shall pray that you are rested and free from pain.’

Henry nodded and turned away from her. The Seymours took his arms and helped him over the rich rugs which had been laid on the ice so that he should not slip. Jane, with a meek little smile as if to apologise for being favoured,

tripped along in his wake.

‘And where d’you think you’re going, Mistress Seymour?’ Anne’s voice was like a whiplash.

The younger woman turned and curtsied to the queen. ‘He told me to follow and to read to him,’ she said simply, her eyes downcast. ‘I can’t read Latin very well. But I can read a little French.’

‘A little French!’ exclaimed my sister, tri-lingual since she was six years old.

‘Yes,’ Jane said proudly. ‘Though I don’t understand it all.’

‘I wager you understand nothing,’ Anne said. ‘You can go.’

Spring 1536

The ice melted but the weather hardly seemed to warm. The snowdrops flowered in clumps all around the bowling green, but the green was so waterlogged that we could not play, and the paths themselves were too wet for walking. The king's leg was not healing, it was an open wound and the different potions and poultices they laid on it seemed only to inflame it the more. He began to fear that he would never dance again, and the news that King Francis of France was in high spirits and good health made him all the more sour.

The season of Lent came and so there was no more dancing and no more feasting. No chance either that Anne might seduce him into her bed and get another baby in her belly. No-one, not even the king and the queen, could lie together in Lent and so Anne had to endure the sight of Henry seated on a padded chair, his lame leg resting on a footstool, with Jane reading devotional tracts at his side, in the knowledge that she could not even claim her right as his wife that he should come to her bed.

She was surpassed and overlooked. Every day there were fewer and fewer ladies in her chamber, they were nominated and paid to be ladies in waiting to the queen but they were all in Jane Seymour's rooms. The only ones who stayed faithful were those who were not welcome anyway: our family, Madge Shelton, Aunt Anne, my daughter Catherine, and me. Some days the only gentlemen in her rooms were George and his circle of friends: Sir Francis Weston, Sir Henry Norris, Sir William Brereton. I was mixing with the very men that my husband had warned me against, but Anne had no other friends. We would play cards, or send for the musicians, or if Sir Thomas Wyatt was visiting we would hold a tournament of poetry, each man writing a line of a love sonnet to the most beautiful queen in the world; but there was something hollow at the heart of it, an empty space where the joy should be. It was all falling away from Anne and she did not know how to recapture it.



In the middle days of March she swallowed her pride and sent me to summon our uncle.

‘I cannot come now, I have some business to attend to. You may tell the queen I will come to her this afternoon.’

‘I did not think that one could tell a queen to wait,’ I observed.

In the afternoon when he came, Anne greeted him without any sign of displeasure and drew him into the bay of a window so that they might talk alone. I was close enough to hear them speak, though neither of them ever raised their voices above a polite hiss.

‘I need your help against the Seymours,’ she said. ‘We have to get rid of Jane.’

He shrugged regretfully. ‘My niece, you have not always been as helpful to me as I might have wished. There was a moment only a little while ago when you accused me to the king himself. If you were no longer queen I do not think you could become a Howard again.’

‘I am a Boleyn girl, a Howard girl,’ she whispered, her hand on the golden ‘B’ at her throat.

‘There are many Howard girls,’ he said easily. ‘My wife the duchess keeps house with half a dozen of them at Lambeth, cousins of yours, all as pretty as you, as Mary, as Madge. All as high-spirited, as hot-blooded. When he is weary of a milksop there will be a Howard girl to warm his bed, there always will be another one.’

‘But I am the queen! Not another girl in waiting.’

He nodded. ‘I will make you an offer. If George gets the Order of the Garter in April then I will stand by you. See if you can achieve that for the family and we will see what the family can do for you.’

She hesitated. ‘I can ask it for him.’

‘Do that,’ my uncle counselled. ‘If you can bring some good to the family then we can make a new contract with you, defend you against your enemies. But this time you must remember, Anne, who your master is.’

She bit the inside of her lip against defiance, she curtsied to him, and she kept her head down.



On 23 April the king gave the Order of the Garter to Sir Nicholas Carew, a friend of the Seymours, nominated by them. My brother George was overlooked.

That night at the feast given to celebrate the new awards, my uncle and Sir John Seymour were seated side by side to share a trencher of good meats, and got on together wonderfully well.



Next day Jane Seymour was sitting with us in the queen's apartments for once, and so the queen's rooms were abuzz with the full complement of the court. The musicians had been called, there was to be dancing. The king was not expected, Anne had challenged him to a game of cards and he had replied coolly that he was much engaged with business.

'What's he doing?' she asked George when he came to her with the king's refusal.

'I don't know. He's seeing the bishops. And he's seeing most of the lords one by one.'

'About me?'

Carefully, neither of them looked towards Jane who was the centre of attention in the queen's own rooms.

'I don't know,' George said miserably. 'I suppose I'd be the last to know. But he did ask what men visit you daily.'

Anne looked quite blank. 'Well, they all do,' she said. 'I am the queen.'

'Certain names have been mentioned,' George said. 'Henry and Francis among them.'

Anne laughed. 'Henry Norris haunts the court for the benefit of Madge.' She turned around and saw him leaning over Madge's shoulder ready to turn the page for her as she sang. 'Sir Henry! Come here, if you please!'

With a word to Madge he came across to the queen and dropped with mock gallantry to one knee. 'I obey!' he said.

'It is time you were married, Sir Henry,' Anne said with pretended severity. 'I cannot have you hanging about my rooms bringing me into disrepute. You must make Madge an offer, I won't have my ladies other than perfectly behaved.'

He laughed outright, as well he might at the thought of Madge being perfectly behaved.

'She is my shield. My heart yearns elsewhere.'

Anne shook her head. 'I don't want pretty speeches,' she said. 'You must make a proposal of marriage to Madge and have done.'

‘She is the moon but you are the sun,’ Henry replied.

I rolled my eyes at George.

‘Don’t you sometimes want to kick him?’ he whispered loudly.

‘The man’s an idiot,’ I said. ‘And this will get us nowhere.’

‘I cannot offer Mistress Shelton a whole heart and so I will offer her none,’ Henry said, rescuing himself from a whole tangle of politesse. ‘My heart belongs to the queen of all the hearts of England.’

‘Thank you,’ Anne said shortly. ‘You can go back to turning pages for the moon.’

Norris laughed, got to his feet and kissed her hand. ‘But I cannot afford gossip in my rooms,’ Anne warned. ‘The king has turned severe since his fall.’

Norris kissed her hand again. ‘You shall never have grounds for complaint of me,’ he promised her. ‘I would lay down my life for you.’

He minced back to Madge who looked up and met my eye. I made a grimace at her and she grinned back. Nothing would ever make that girl behave like a lady.

George leaned over Anne’s shoulder. ‘You can’t scotch rumours one by one. You have to live as though none of them matter at all.’

‘I will scotch every single one,’ she swore. ‘And you find who the king is meeting, and what they are saying about me.’



George could not discover what was happening. He sent me to my father who only looked away and told me to ask my uncle for news. I found my uncle in the stable yard, looking over a new mare he was thinking of buying. The April sunshine was hot in the sheltered yard. I waited in the shade of the gateway until he was done, then I drew close to him.

‘Uncle, the king seems much engaged with Master Cromwell, and with the Master Treasurer, and with you. The queen is wondering what business is taking so much time.’

For once he did not turn from me with his bitter smile. He looked me straight in the face and his dark eyes were filled with something I had never seen in him before: pity.

‘I should get your son home from his tutors,’ he advised quietly. ‘He is taught with Henry Norris’s boy at the Cistercians, is he not?’

‘Yes,’ I said, confused at the change of tack.

‘I should have nothing to do with Norris, or Brereton, or Weston, or Wyatt, if I were you. And if they sent any letters to you, or love poems or nonsense or tokens, I should burn them.’

‘I am a married woman, and I love my husband,’ I said, bewildered.

‘That is your safeguard,’ he agreed. ‘Now go. What I know could not help you, and it burdens me alone. Go, Mary. But if I were you I would get both my children into my keeping. And I would leave court.’



I did not go to George and Anne who were anxiously waiting for me, I went straight to the king’s rooms to find my husband. He was waiting in the presence chamber, the king was in his private rooms with the inner core of advisors that had kept him busy indoors for all these spring days. As soon as William saw me enter he came across the room and led me into the corridor.

‘Bad news?’

‘No news at all, it is like a riddle.’

‘Whose riddle is it?’

‘My uncle’s. He tells me to have nothing to do with Henry Norris, William Brereton, Francis Weston or Thomas Wyatt. When I said I did not, he told me to take Henry away from his tutors and keep my children by me and leave court.’

William thought for a moment. ‘Where’s the riddle?’

‘In what he means.’

He shook his head. ‘Your uncle would always be a riddle to me,’ he said. ‘I shan’t think what he means, I shall act on his advice. I shall go at once and fetch Henry home to us.’

In two strides he was back in the king’s room, he touched a man on his arm and asked him to excuse him if the king called for him, he would be back within four days. Then he was out in the corridor with me, striding towards the stairs so fast that I had to run to keep up with him.

‘Why? What d’you think is going to happen?’ I asked, thoroughly frightened.

‘I don’t know. All I know is that if your uncle says that our son should not be with Henry Norris’s boy, then I shall get him home. And when I have fetched him here, we are all leaving for Rochford. I don’t wait to be warned twice.’

The big door to the yard was open and he ran outside. I snatched up the hem of my gown and ran after him. He shouted in the stable yard and one of the

Howard lads came tumbling out and was sent running to tack up William's horse.

'I cannot take him from his tutors without Anne's permission,' I said hastily.

'I'll just get him,' William said. 'We can get permission after – if we need it. Events are going too fast for me. I want us to have your boy safe.' He caught me in his arms and kissed me firmly on the mouth. 'Sweetheart, I hate to leave you here, in the middle of it all.'

'But what could happen?'

He kissed me harder. 'God knows. But your uncle does not issue warnings lightly. I shall fetch our boy and then we will all get clear of this before it drags us down.'

'I'll run and fetch your travelling cape.'

'I'll take one of the grooms'.' He went quickly into the tack room and came out with a common cape of fustian.

'Are you in so much of a hurry you can't wait for your cape?'

'I'd rather go now,' he said simply, and that stolid certainty made me more afraid than I had ever been before for the safety of my son.

'Have you got money?'

'Enough,' he grinned. 'I just won a purse of gold off Sir Edward Seymour. A good cause, isn't it?'

'How long d'you think you will be?'

He thought for a moment. 'Three days, maybe four. No more. I'll ride without stopping. Can you wait four days for me?'

'Yes.'

'If matters get worse then take Catherine and the baby and go. I will bring Henry to you at Rochford, without fail.'

'Yes.'

One more hard kiss and then William put his foot in the stirrup and leaped up into the saddle. The horse was fresh and eager but he held her to a walk as they went under the archway and out onto the road. I shaded my eyes with my hand and watched him go. In the bright sunlight of the stable yard I shivered as if the only man who could save me was leaving.



Jane Seymour did not reappear in the queen's apartments and a strange quietness fell over the sunny rooms. The maids still came in and did their work, the fire

was lit, the chairs arranged, the tables laid with fruit and water and wine, everything was prepared for company but none came.

Anne and I, my daughter Catherine, Aunt Anne, and Madge Shelton sat uneasily in the big echoing rooms. My mother never came, she had withdrawn from us as completely as if we had never been born. We never saw my father. My uncle looked through us as if we were panes of Venetian glass.

‘I feel like a ghost,’ Anne said. We were walking by the river, she was leaning on George’s arm. I was walking behind her with Sir Francis Weston, Madge was behind me with Sir William Brereton. I could hardly speak for anxiety. I did not know why my uncle had named these men to me. I did not know what secrets they brought with them. I felt as if there were a conspiracy and at any moment a trap might be sprung and I had walked into it, knowing nothing.

‘They are holding some kind of hearing,’ George said. ‘I got that much from a page who went in to pour the wine for them. Secretary Cromwell, our uncle, the Duke of Suffolk, the rest of them.’

Carefully, my brother and sister did not exchange a glance. ‘They can have nothing against me,’ Anne said.

‘No,’ George said. ‘But they can trump up charges. Think of what was said against Queen Katherine.’

Anne suddenly rounded on him. ‘It’s the dead baby,’ she said suddenly. ‘Isn’t it? And the testimony of that foul old midwife with her mad lies.’

George nodded. ‘Must be. They have nothing else.’

She whirled on her heel and took off towards the palace. ‘I’ll show them!’ she cried.

George and I ran after her. ‘Show them what?’

‘Anne!’ I cried. ‘Don’t be too hasty!’

‘I have crept around this palace like a little mouse afraid of my own shadow for three months!’ she exclaimed. ‘You advised me to be sweet. I have been sweet! Now I shall defend myself. They are holding a secret hearing to try me in secret! I shall make them speak out! I shan’t be condemned by a pack of old men who have always hated me. I shall show them!’

She ran across the grass to the doorway into the palace. George and I froze for a moment, and then we turned to the others. ‘Do go on walking,’ I said wildly.

‘We will go to the queen,’ George said.

Francis put out a quick instinctive hand to keep George with him.

‘It’s all right,’ George reassured him. ‘But I’d better go with her.’

George and I ran across the grass and followed Anne into the palace. She was not outside the king’s presence chamber and the soldier on the door said she had not been admitted. We drew a blank and waited, wondering where she had gone, when we heard her steps running on the stairs. She had the Princess Elizabeth in her arms, gurgling and laughing at being snatched up from her nursery, watching the flicker of light as Anne ran with her.

She was unbuttoning the child’s little gown as she ran. She nodded to the soldier who flung open the door for her and she was into the presence chamber before they realised she was upon them.

‘What am I accused of?’ she demanded of the king as she was half-over the threshold.

Awkwardly he rose from the head of the table. Anne’s angry black gaze raked the noblemen seated around him.

‘Who dares say a word against me to my face?’

‘Anne,’ the king started.

She turned on him. ‘You have been filled with lies and poison against me,’ she said rapidly. ‘I have a right to better treatment. I have been a good wife to you, I have loved you better than any other woman has ever done.’

He leaned on the back of his heavy carved chair. ‘Anne ...’

‘I have not brought a son to full term yet but that is not my fault,’ she said passionately. ‘Katherine did not either. Did you call her a witch for it?’

There was a hiss and a murmur at her naming the most potent word in that casual way. I saw one fist clench with the thumb between second and third finger, making the sign of the cross, to ward off witchcraft.

‘But I have given you a princess,’ Anne cried out. ‘The most beautiful princess that ever was. With your hair and your eyes, undeniably your child. When she was born you said that it was early days and we would have sons. You were not afraid of your shadow then, Henry!’

She had half-stripped the little girl and now she held her out for him to see. Henry flinched back though the child called out ‘Papa!’ and held out her arms for him.

‘Her skin is perfect, she has not a blemish on her body, not a mark anywhere! No-one can tell me that this is not a child blessed by God. No-one can tell me that she is not going to be the greatest princess this country has ever had! I have brought you this blessing, this beautiful child! And I shall bring you more! Can you look at her and not know that she will have a brother as strong

and as beautiful as she is?’

Princess Elizabeth looked around at the stern faces. Her lower lip trembled. Anne held her in her arms, her face bright with invitation and challenge. Henry looked at them both, then he turned his head away from his wife, and he ignored his little daughter.

I had thought that Anne would fly into a rage that he did not have the courage to face them, but when he turned his head away the passion suddenly went out of her as if she knew that his mind was made up, and that she would suffer for his stubborn wilful stupidity.

‘Oh my God, Henry, what have you done?’ she whispered.

He said only one word. He said ‘Norfolk!’ and my uncle rose from his seat at the table, and looked around for George and for me, hovering in the doorway, not knowing what we should do.

‘Take your sister away,’ he said to us. ‘You should never have allowed her to come here.’

Silently, we stepped into the room. I took little Elizabeth from Anne’s arms and she came to me with a cry of pleasure and settled on my hip, her arm around my neck. George put one arm around Anne’s waist and drew her from the room.

I looked back as we went out. Henry had not moved. He kept his face turned away from us Boleyns and our little princess until the door shut behind us and we were closed out, and still we did not know what they were discussing, what they had decided, nor what would happen next.



We went back to Anne’s rooms, the nursemaid came and took Elizabeth away. I released her with regret, conscious of my desire to hold my own baby. I was thinking of William, wondering how far he was down the road to fetch my son. The sense of foreboding hung over the palace like a storm.

As we opened the door to her private room, a lithe figure sprang forward and Anne screamed and fell back. George had a dagger at the ready, he nearly stabbed before he stopped himself.

‘Smeaton!’ he said. ‘What the devil are you doing here?’

‘I came to see the queen,’ the lad said.

‘For God’s sake, I nearly ran you through. You shouldn’t be here without invitation. Get out, lad. Go!’

‘I have to ask ... I have to say ...’

‘Out,’ George said.

‘Will you bear witness for me, Your Majesty?’ Smeaton cried over his shoulder as George thrust him towards the door. ‘They called me in and asked me so many questions.’

‘Wait a minute,’ I said urgently. ‘Questions about what?’

Anne dropped into the windowseat and looked away. ‘What does it matter?’ she said. ‘They’ll be asking everybody everything.’

‘They asked if I had been familiar with you, Your Majesty,’ the lad said, blushing as scarlet as a girl. ‘Or with you, sir,’ he said to George. ‘They asked if I had been a Ganymede to you. I didn’t know what they meant, and then they told me.’

‘And you said?’ George demanded.

‘I said no. I didn’t want to tell them ...’

‘Good,’ George said. ‘Stick to that and don’t come near the queen or me or my sister again.’

‘But I’m afraid,’ the lad said. He was trembling with earnestness, there were tears in his eyes. They had questioned him for hours about vices he had never even heard of. They were hardened old soldiers and princes of the church, they knew more about sin than he would ever learn. And then he had come running to us for help and was finding none.

George took him by the elbow and walked him to the door. ‘Get this into your thick and pretty head,’ he said flatly. ‘You are innocent, and you have told them so, and you just might get away with it. But if they find you here, they will think that you are our lad, suborned by us. So get out and stay out. This is the worst place in the world to come for help.’

He pushed him to the door, but the lad clung to the frame even as the soldier waited outside for a word from George to throw him down the stairs.

‘And don’t mention Sir Francis,’ George said in a rapid undertone. ‘Nor anything that you have ever seen or heard. D’you understand? Say nothing.’

The boy still clung on. ‘I have said nothing!’ he exclaimed. ‘I have been true. But what if they ask me again? Who will protect me? Who will stand my friend?’

George nodded to the soldier who made a swift downward chopping blow on the boy’s forearm. He released the door with a yelp of pain as George slammed it in his face. ‘No-one,’ George said grimly. ‘Just as no-one will protect us.’



Next day was May Day. Anne should have been woken at dawn with her ladies singing under her window and the maidens processing with peeled willow wands. But no-one had organised it and so, for the first year ever, it did not happen. She woke haggard and pale at the usual time and spent the first hour of the day on her knees at the prie dieu, before going to Mass at the head of her ladies.

Jane followed behind in white and green. The Seymours had brought in the may with flowers and singing, Jane had slept with flowers under her pillow and had, no doubt, dreamed of her husband-to-be. I looked at her bland sweet face and wondered if she knew how high were the stakes in the game she was playing. She smiled back at my hard face and wished me a joyous May morning.

We filed past the king's chapel and he looked away as Anne went by. She kneeled for the prayers and followed them carefully, saying every word, as pious as Jane herself. When the service was over and we were leaving the church the king emerged from his gallery and said briefly to her: 'You will attend the tournament?'

'Yes,' Anne said, surprised. 'Of course.'

'Your brother is in the lists to ride against Henry Norris,' he said, watching her closely.

Anne shrugged her shoulders. 'And so?' she asked.

'You will have trouble choosing a champion for that joust.' His every word was heavy with meaning, as if Anne should know what he was talking about.

Anne looked past him to me, as if I might help her. I raised my eyebrows. I did not know either.

'I should favour my brother as every good sister would do,' she said carefully. 'But Henry Norris is a very gentle knight.'

'Perhaps you cannot choose between them,' the king suggested.

There was something pitiful in her puzzled smile. 'No, sire. Which would you want me to choose?'

His face darkened at once. 'Be sure that I shall watch and see who you do choose,' he said with sudden abrupt spite, and he turned away, his limp very pronounced, his sore leg fat with the padding over the wound. Anne wordlessly watched him go.



The afternoon was hot and heavy, low clouds pressed down on the palace and the tiltyard was stultifying in the heat. Every other moment I found I was looking towards the road to London to see if William was returning, though I knew I could not expect him for another two days.

Anne was dressed in silver and white, carrying a white may wand as if she had been maying like a carefree girl in springtime. The knights prepared to joust in the tournament, riding in a circle before the royal gallery, their helmets under their arms, smiling up at the king with the queen seated beside him, and at the ladies behind her.

‘Shall you take a wager?’ the king asked Anne.

I saw the readiness of her smile at his normal tone of voice.

‘Oh yes!’ she said.

‘Who do you like best for the first joust?’

It was the same question that he had put to her in the chapel.

‘I must back my brother,’ she said, smiling. ‘We Boleyns must stick together.’

‘I have lent Norris my own horse,’ the king warned her. ‘I think you will find he is the better man.’

She laughed. ‘Then I shall give my favour to him and put my money on my brother. Would that please Your Majesty?’

He nodded, saying nothing.

Anne took a handkerchief from her gown and leaned towards the edge of the royal gallery and beckoned to Sir Henry Norris. He rode towards her and dipped his lance to her in salute. She reached out with her handkerchief and gracefully, holding the sidling horse still with one hand, he pointed the lance towards her hand and lifted the handkerchief from her in one smooth easy movement. It was beautifully done, the ladies in the gallery applauded and Norris smiled, dropped the lance through his hand, snatched the handkerchief from the top and tucked it into his breastplate.

Everyone was watching Norris but I was watching the king. I saw on his face a look I had never seen before but one I had somehow realised was there, like a shadow. The look he turned on Anne when she gave her kerchief to Norris was that of a man who has used a cup and is going to break it. A man who is weary of a dog and is going to drown it. He had finished with my sister. I saw it in that look. All I did not know was how he would be rid of her.

There was a rumble of thunder, as ominous as the roar of a baited bear, and the king shouted that the tournament should begin. My brother won the first

joust, and Norris the second, and then my brother the third. He took his horse back to the lines to let the next challenger take his place and Anne stood up to applaud him.

The king sat still, watching Anne. In the heat of the afternoon his leg began to stink but he took no notice. He was offered drink, some early strawberries. He ate and drank, he took a little wine and some cakes. The jousting went on. Anne turned and smiled at him, engaged him in talk. He sat beside her as if he were her judge, as if it were the day of judgement.

At the end of the joust Anne stood up to deliver the prizes. I did not even see who had won, I was watching the king as Anne gave the prizes and extended her little hand for a kiss. The king heaved himself to his feet and went to the back of the gallery. I saw him point to Henry Norris and beckon him as he left. Norris, stripped of his armour but still on his sweating horse, turned and rode round to meet the king in the rear of the gallery.

‘Where’s the king going?’ Anne said, looking round.

I glanced towards the London road, longing for the sight of William’s horse. But there, on the road, was the king’s standard, there was the unmistakable bulk of the king on his horse. There was Norris beside him, and a small escort of men. They were riding quickly, west to London.

‘Where is he going in such haste?’ Anne demanded, uneasily. ‘Did he say he was leaving?’

Jane Parker stepped forward. ‘Didn’t you know?’ she asked brightly. ‘Secretary Cromwell had that lad Mark Smeaton at his house all last night and has now taken him to the Tower. He sent to tell the king so. Perhaps the king is going to the Tower to see what the lad has confessed to? But why should he take Henry Norris?’



George and I were with Anne in her rooms like prisoners in hiding. We sat in silence. We had a sense of being completely besieged.

‘I shall leave at first light,’ I said to Anne. ‘I am sorry, Anne, I must get Catherine away.’

‘Where is William?’ George asked.

‘He went to fetch Henry home from his tutor.’

Anne’s head came up at that. ‘Henry is my ward,’ she reminded me. ‘You cannot take him without my consent.’

For once I did not rise to her. 'For God's sake, Anne, let me keep him safe. This is no time for you and I to quarrel over who can claim what. I shall keep him safe and if I can protect Elizabeth, I shall guard her too.'

She paused for a moment as if even now she would compete with me, but then she nodded. 'Shall we play cards?' she asked lightly. 'I can't sleep. Shall we play all night?'

'All right. Just let me go and make sure that Catherine is sleeping.'

I went to find my daughter. She had been at dinner with the other ladies and told me that the hall was buzzing with gossip. The king's throne was empty. Cromwell was missing too. No-one knew why Smeaton had been arrested. No-one knew why the king had ridden away with Norris. If it had been a mark of special honour then where were they tonight? Where were they dining on this special May Day night?

'Never mind,' I said repressively. 'I want you to pack a few things, a clean shift, and some clean stockings in a bag, and be ready to leave tomorrow.'

'Are we in danger?' She was not surprised, she was a child of the court now, she would never be a girl fresh from the country again.

'I don't know,' I said shortly. 'And I want you strong enough to ride all day, so you must sleep now. D'you promise?'

She nodded. I put her into my bed, and let her rest her head on the pillow where William usually lay. I prayed to God that tomorrow would bring William and Henry back and we all might go together, to where the apple tree leaned low over the road, and the little farm nestled in the sunshine. Then I kissed her goodnight and sent a pageboy running to our lodgings to warn the wet nurse that she must be ready to leave at dawn.

I slipped back to the queen's rooms. Anne was huddled over the fire with George at her side, seated on the hearthrug as if they were both chilled though the windows stood open and the hot airless night did not even stir the hangings.

'Boleyns,' I said, coming quietly through the door.

George turned and put an arm out for me and pulled me down beside him so he could hold us both.

'Bet you we brush through this,' he said stoutly. 'Bet you we rise up and confound them all, and this time next year Anne has a boy in the cradle and I am a Knight of the Garter.'



We spent the night huddled together like vagrants in fear of the beadle, and when the window started to grow light I went quietly down the stairs to the stable yard and threw a stone up at the window where the grooms slept. The first lad who put out his head got the job of pulling my horse out of the stable and tacking her up. But when he had Catherine's hunter in the yard he stopped and shook his head. 'Cast a shoe,' he said.

'What?'

'I'll have to take her to the smith.'

'Can she go now?'

'Smithy won't be open yet.'

'Tell him to open it!'

'Mistress, the forge will be cold. He has to wake and light the fire and get the forge hot and then he can shoe her.'

I swore in my frustration and turned away from him. 'You could take another horse,' the lad suggested, yawning.

I shook my head. It was a long ride and Catherine was not a strong enough rider to manage a new horse. 'No,' I said. 'We'll have to wait for the mare to be shod. Take her to the smith and wake him and get him to shoe her. Then come and find me, wherever I am, and tell me privately that she is ready. And don't tell the rest of the castle.' I glanced anxiously at the dark windows of the palace looking down on me. 'I don't want every fool in the world to know I am riding out.'

He pulled his forelock, his hand cupped empty air. I slid a coin from the pocket of my gown into his grimy palm. 'There's another one for you, if you do this right.'

I went back into the palace. The sentry at the door raised a sleepy eyebrow at me, wondering what I was doing strolling out at dawn and back in again. I knew he would report to someone: Secretary Cromwell, or perhaps my uncle, or perhaps Sir John Seymour, who was now grown so great that he must have men watching for him too.

I hesitated on the stairs. I wanted to go and see Catherine, sleeping sweetly in my big bed; but there was candlelight under the door of the queen's apartments and I felt I belonged to the night-long vigil of the two of them. The sentry stepped to one side and I opened the door and slipped in.

Still they were wakeful, cheek to cheek in the firelight, whispering as soothingly as a pair of doves cooing in the cote. Their heads turned together as I came into the room.

‘Not gone?’ Anne asked.

‘Catherine’s horse has cast a shoe. I couldn’t go.’

‘When will you leave?’ George asked.

‘As soon as she is shod. I paid a lad to take her to the smith and tell me as soon as she is fit to ride.’

I crossed the room and sat on the hearthrug with them. We all three turned our faces to the fire and watched the flames. ‘I wish we could stay here like this, for always,’ Anne said dreamily.

‘Do you?’ I said, surprised. ‘I was thinking that this is the worst night of my life. I was wishing that it had never started and that I might wake up in a moment and it could all have been a dream.’

George’s smile was dark. ‘That’s because you don’t fear tomorrow,’ he said. ‘If you feared tomorrow as much as we do, you would wish that the night would go on forever.’



However they wished, it grew steadily lighter, and we heard the servants stirring in the great hall and then a maid clanking up the stairs with a bucket of kindling to light the fire in the queen’s bedroom, followed by another with brushes and cloths to wipe the tables for the start of another new day.

Anne rose up from the hearthrug, her face bleak, her cheeks smeared with ash as if she had been mourning in church on Ash Wednesday.

‘Have a bath,’ George said encouragingly to her. ‘It’s so early. Send them for your bath and have a hot bath and wash your hair. You’ll feel so much better after.’

She smiled at the banality of the suggestion and then she nodded.

George leaned forward and kissed her. ‘I’ll see you at matins,’ he said, and he went from the room.

It was the last time we saw my brother as a free man.



George was not at matins. Anne and I, rosy from our bath and feeling more confident, looked for him but he was not there. Sir Francis did not know where he was, nor Sir William Brereton. Henry Norris had still not returned from

London. There was no news of what charge was laid against Mark Smeaton. The weight of fear came down on us again, like the low bellies of the clouds which rested on the palace roofs.

I sent a message to my baby's wet nurse to wait for my coming, we would try to leave within the next hour.

There was a tennis match and Anne had promised to award the prize, a gold coin on a gold chain. She went to the courts and sat under the awning, her head moving, with all the discipline of a dancer, to the left and to the right, her head following the ball but her eyes sightless.

I was standing behind her, waiting for the lad from the stables to come and tell me that the horse was ready, Catherine was at my side, waiting only for my word to run and change into her riding gown, when the gate to the royal enclosure opened behind me and two soldiers of the guard came in with an officer. The moment that I saw them I had the sense of something profound and dreadful happening. I opened my mouth to speak but no words came. Mutely, I touched Anne's shoulder. She turned and looked up at me, and then beyond me to the hard faces of the men.

They did not bow as they should have done. It was that which confirmed our fear. That, and the screaming of a seagull which suddenly flew low over the court and shrieked like an injured girl.

'The Privy Council commands your presence, Your Majesty,' the captain said shortly.

Anne said, 'Oh,' and rose up. She looked at Catherine and she looked at me. She looked around at all her ladies and suddenly their eyes were everywhere but looking at her. They were quite fascinated by the tennis. They had learned Anne's trick, their heads went left, right, while their eyes saw nothing and their ears were on the prick and their hearts were pounding in case she commanded them to go with her.

'I must have my companions,' Anne said flatly. Not one of the little vixens looked around. 'Some lady must come with me.' Her eyes fell on Catherine.

'No,' I said suddenly, seeing what she would do. 'No, Anne. No. I beg you.'

'I can take a companion?' she asked the captain.

'Yes, Your Majesty.'

'I shall take my maid in waiting, Catherine,' she said simply, and then she went quietly out of the gate which the soldier held open for her. Catherine shot one bewildered glance at me and then fell into step behind her queen.

'Catherine!' I said sharply.

She looked back at me, she did not know, poor little girl, what she should do.

‘Come along,’ Anne said in her dead calm voice, and Catherine gave me a little smile.

‘Be of good cheer,’ she said suddenly, oddly; as if she were acting a part in a play. Then she turned and followed the queen with all the composure of a princess.

I was too stunned to do anything but watch them go, but the minute they were out of sight I picked up my skirts and fled up the path to the palace to find George, or my father, anyone who might help Anne, and who would get Catherine away from her, safely back to me, and on the road to Rochford.

I ran into the hall and a man caught me as I headed for the stairs, I pushed him away and then I realised it was the one man in the whole world that I wanted. ‘William!’

‘Love, my love. You know, then?’

‘Oh my God, William. They have taken Catherine! They have taken my girl!’

‘Arrested Catherine? On what charge?’

‘No! She is with Anne. As maid in waiting. And Anne is ordered to the Privy Council.’

‘In London?’

‘No, meeting here.’

He released me at once, swore briefly, took half a dozen steps in a small circle and then came back to me and caught up my hands. ‘We’ll just have to wait then, until she comes out.’ He scanned my face. ‘Don’t look like that, Catherine is a little lass. They’re questioning the queen, not her. They probably won’t even speak to her, and if they do she has nothing to hide.’

I took a shuddering breath and nodded. ‘No. She has nothing to hide. She has seen nothing that is not common knowledge. And they would only question her. She is gentry. They wouldn’t do anything worse. Where is Henry?’

‘Safe. I left him at our lodgings with the wet nurse and the baby. I thought you were running because of your brother.’

‘What about him?’ I said suddenly, my heart hammering again. ‘What about George?’

‘They’ve arrested him.’

‘With Anne?’ I said. ‘To answer to the Privy Council?’

William’s face was dark. ‘No,’ he said. ‘They have taken him to the Tower. Henry Norris is there already, the king himself rode with him into the Tower

yesterday. And Mark Smeaton – you remember the singer? – he is there too.’

My lips were too numb to frame any words. ‘But what is the charge? And why question the queen here?’

He shook his head. ‘Nobody knows.’



We waited until noon for any further news. I hovered in the hall outside the chamber where the Privy Council were questioning the queen but I was not allowed into the antechamber for fear that I might listen at the door.

‘I don’t want to listen, I just want to see my daughter,’ I explained to the sentry. He nodded and said nothing, but gestured me back from the threshold.

A little after noon the door opened and a pageboy slipped out and whispered to the sentry. ‘You have to go,’ the sentry said to me. ‘My orders are to clear the way.’

‘For what?’ I asked.

‘You have to go,’ he said stubbornly. He gave a shout down the stairs to the great hall and an answering shout came ringing up. They gently pushed me to one side, away from the Privy Council door, away from the stairs, away from the hall, away from the garden door, and then out of the very garden itself. All the other courtiers encountered on the way were thrust to one side too. We all went as we were bid; it was as if we had not recognised how powerful the king was before that moment.

I realised that they had cleared a way from the Privy Council room to the river stairs. I ran to the landing stage where the common people disembarked when they came to the palace. There were no guards on the common landing stage, no-one to stop me standing at the very end of it, straining my eyes to see towards the Greenwich Palace stairs.

I saw them clearly: Anne in her blue gown that she had worn to watch the tennis, Catherine a pace behind her in her yellow gown. I was pleased to see that she had her cloak with her, in case it was cold on the river, then I shook my head at the folly of worrying if she would catch cold when I did not know where they were taking her. I watched them intently, as if by watching I could protect her. They went in the king’s barge, not the queen’s ship, and the roll of the drum for the rowers sounded to me as ominous and as doleful as the roll of drums when the executioner raises his axe.

‘Where are you going?’ I shouted as loudly as I could, unable to contain my

fear any longer.

Anne did not hear me but I saw the white shape of Catherine's face as she turned towards my voice, and looked all around for me in the palace garden.

'Here! Here!' I shouted more loudly and I waved to her. She looked towards me and she raised her hand in a tiny gesture, and then followed Anne on board the king's barge.

The soldiers pushed off in one smooth motion the moment that they had them on board. The lurch of the boat threw them both into their seats and there was a moment when I lost sight of her. Then I saw her again. She was seated on a little chair, next to Anne, and she was looking out over the water towards me. The oarsmen took the barge into the middle of the river and rowed easily with the inflowing tide.

I did not try to call again, I knew that the rowers' drum would drown out my voice, and I did not want to frighten Catherine, hearing her mother crying out for her. I stood very still and I raised my hand to her so that she could see that I knew where she was, and I knew where she was going, and I would come for her as soon as ever I could.

I sensed but did not look round as William came behind me and raised his hand to our daughter as well. 'Where d'you think they're taking them?' he asked, as if he did not know the answer as well as me.

'You know where,' I said. 'Why ask me? To the worst place we can think of. To the Tower.'



William and I did not delay. We went straight to our room and threw a few clothes into a bag and then hurried to the stables. Henry was waiting with the horses, and he had a quick hug and a bright smile for me before William threw me up into the saddle and mounted his own horse. We took Catherine's horse with us, newly shod. Henry led her alongside his own hunter while William led the wet nurse's broad-backed cob. She was waiting for us and we had her up in the saddle and the baby strapped safely at her breast and then we went quietly out of the palace and up the road to London without telling anyone where we were going nor how long we would be gone.

William took rooms for us behind the Minories, away from the riverside. I could see the Beauchamp Tower where Anne and my daughter were imprisoned. My brother and the other men were somewhere nearby. It was the tower where

Anne had spent the night before her coronation. I wondered if she remembered now the great gown that she wore and the silence of the City which warned her then that she would never be a beloved queen.

William ordered the woman of the house to make a dinner for us and went out to gather news. He came back in time to eat and when the woman had served dinner and got herself out of the room he told me what he knew. The inns around the Tower were all buzzing with the news that the queen had been taken up, and the word was that her charge was adultery and witchcraft and no-one knew what else.

I nodded. This sealed Anne's fate. Henry was using the power of gossip, the voice of the mob, to pave the way to an annulment of the marriage, and a new queen. Already in the taverns they were saying that the king was in love again and this time with a beautiful and innocent girl, an English girl from Wiltshire, God bless her, and as devout and sweet as Anne had been over-educated and French-influenced. From somewhere, someone had gathered the certainty that Jane Seymour was a friend to Princess Mary. She had served Queen Katherine well. She prayed in the old ways, she did not read disputatious books nor argue with men who knew better. Her family were not grasping lords but honest honourable men. And it was a fertile family. There could be no doubt but Jane Seymour would have sons where Katherine and Anne had both failed.

'And my brother?'

William shook his head. 'No news.'

I closed my eyes. I could not imagine a world where George was not free to come and go as he pleased. Who could accuse George? Who could blame him for anything, so sweet and so feckless?

'And who is waiting on Anne?' I asked.

'Your aunt, Madge Shelton's mother, and a pair of other ladies.'

I made a face. 'No-one she likes or trusts. But at least she can release Catherine now. She's not alone.'

'I thought you could write. She could have a letter if it was left open. I'll take it to William Kingston, the constable of the Tower and ask him to give it to her.'

I ran down the narrow stairs to the lodging-house keeper and asked her for a piece of paper and a pen. She let me use her writing desk and lit a candle for me as I sat by the window for the last of the light.

Dear Anne,

I know that you are served by other ladies now so please

*release Catherine from your service as I need her with me.
I beg you to let her come away now.
Mary.*

I dripped some candle wax and put my sealing ring into the puddle of wax to show the 'B' for Boleyn. But I left the letter open and gave it to William.

'Good,' he said, reading it quickly. 'I'll take it straightaway. Nobody can think you mean anything other than you say. I'll wait for an answer. Perhaps I'll bring her back with me and we can leave for Rochford tomorrow.'

I nodded. 'I'll wait up.'

Henry and I played cards in front of the little fire on a rickety table sitting on two wooden stools. We were playing for farthings and I was winning all of Henry's pocket money. Then I cheated to let him win a little back, misjudged it, and was bankrupted in earnest. Still William did not come.

At midnight he came in. 'I am sorry to have been so long,' he said to my white face. 'I don't have her.'

I gave a little moan and at once he reached out to me and pulled me close to him. 'I saw her,' he said. 'That was why I was so long. I thought you would want me to see her and know that she was well.'

'Is she distressed?'

'Very calm,' he said with a smile. 'You can go and see her tomorrow yourself at this time, and every day until the queen is released.'

'But she can't come away?'

'The queen wants to keep her and the constable is under instructions to give her whatever she reasonably desires.'

'Surely ...'

'I tried everything,' William said. 'But it is the queen's right to have attendants, and Catherine is the only one that she actually requested. The others are more or less forced on her. One of them is the constable's own wife, who is there to spy on everything she says.'

'And how is Catherine?'

'You would be proud of her. She sent you her love and said that she would like to stay and serve the queen. She says that Anne is ill and faint and weeping and that she wants to stay with her while she can help.'

I gave a little gasp, half of love and pride, half of impatience. 'She's a little girl, she shouldn't even be there!'

'She is a young woman,' William said. 'She is doing her duty as a young

woman should. And she's in no danger. No-one is going to ask her anything. Everyone is clear that she is in the Tower as Anne's companion. No harm will come to her because of it.'

'And is Anne to be charged?'

William glanced towards Henry and then decided that he was old enough to know. 'It looks as if Anne is to be charged with adultery. D'you know what adultery is, Henry?'

The boy blushed a little. 'Yes, sir. It's in the Bible.'

'I believe it is a false charge against your aunt,' William said levelly. 'But it is a charge that the Privy Council has chosen to bring against her.'

At last I was beginning to understand. 'And the others arrested too? They're charged with her?'

William nodded, tight-lipped. 'Yes. Henry Norris and Mark Smeaton are to be charged with her, for being her lovers.'

'That's nonsense,' I said flatly.

William nodded.

'And my brother is taken for questioning?'

'Yes,' he said.

Something in his tone of voice alerted me. 'They're not putting him on the rack?' I asked. 'They're not hurting him?'

'Oh no,' William assured me. 'They won't forget he's gentry. They'll keep him in the Tower while they question her and the others.'

'But what are they charging him with?'

William hesitated, a glance to my son. 'He's charged with the other men.'

For a moment I did not understand him. Then I said the word: 'Adultery?'

He nodded.

I was silent. My first thought was to cry out and deny it, but then I remembered Anne's absolute need for a son, and her certainty that the king could not give her a healthy baby. I remembered her leaning back against George and telling him that the church could not be relied upon to rule on what was and what was not sin. And him telling her that he could have been excommunicated ten times before breakfast – and she had laughed. I did not know what Anne might have done in her desperation. I did not know what George might have dared in his recklessness. I turned my thoughts away from the two of them, as I had done before. 'What shall we do?' I asked.

William put his arm around my son and smiled down at him. Henry was up to his step-father's shoulder now, he looked at him trustingly.

‘We’ll wait,’ William said. ‘As soon as this mess is sorted out we’ll have Catherine away and we’ll go home to Rochford. And then we’ll keep our heads down for a bit. Because whether Anne is set aside and allowed to live in a nunnery, or exiled, I think the Boleyns have had their moment. It’s time to go back to making cheese for you, my love.’



The next day there was nothing to do but wait. I let the wet nurse go away for the day and encouraged William and Henry to stroll about the town and take their dinner in an ale house while I stayed home and played with the baby. In the afternoon I took her for a little walk down to the river’s edge and felt the wind from the sea blowing against our faces. I unswaddled her when I got her home and gave her a cool bath, rumpling her sweet rosy body in a linen sheet and patting her dry, and then let her kick, free of her swaddling bands for a while. I bound her up in fresh bands in time for the others coming in for their dinner and then I left her with the nurse while William and Henry and I went down to the great gate of the Tower and asked if Catherine might come out to see us.

She looked very small as she walked along the inner wall from the Beauchamp Tower to the gateway. But she walked like a Boleyn girl, as if she owned the place, with her head up, looking around her, a pleasant smile to one of the passing guards and then a bright beam to me through the grille as they unlocked the door within the wooden gate and let her slip out.

I wrapped her in my arms. ‘My love.’

She hugged me back and then sprang towards Henry. ‘Hen!’

‘Cat!’

They looked at each other with mutual delight. ‘Grown,’ she said.

‘Fatter,’ he replied.

William smiled at me over their heads. ‘D’you think they ever use whole sentences?’

‘Catherine, I wrote to Anne to ask her to release you,’ I said hastily. ‘I want you to come away.’

At once she was grave. ‘I can’t. She is in such distress. You’ve never seen her like this. I can’t just leave her. And the other ladies around her are useless, two of them don’t know what they’re doing and the other two are my Aunt Boleyn and Aunt Shelton and they sit in a corner all the time and mutter behind their hands. I can’t leave her with them.’

‘What does she do all day?’ Henry asked.

Catherine flushed. ‘She cries, and prays. That’s why I can’t leave her. I just couldn’t go. It would be like leaving a baby. She can’t care for herself.’

‘Are you well fed?’ I asked hopelessly. ‘Where d’you sleep?’

‘I sleep with her,’ Catherine said. ‘But she hardly sleeps at all. And we could eat as well as we did at court. It’s all right, Mother. And it’s not for long.’

‘How d’you know?’

The captain of the guard leaned forward and said quietly to William, ‘Have a care, Sir William.’

William looked at me. ‘We gave an undertaking that we would not discuss the matter with Catherine. This is just for us to see her and know that she is well.’

I took a breath. ‘Very well. But Catherine, if this goes on for more than a week you will have to come away.’

‘I’ll do as you say,’ she said sweetly.

‘Do you need anything? Shall I bring you anything tomorrow?’

‘Some clean linen,’ she said. ‘And the queen needs another gown or two. Can you get them for her from Greenwich?’

‘Yes,’ I said, resigned. It seemed that all my life I had been running errands for Anne and even now, at this great crisis in our affairs, I was still at her beck and call.

William looked at the captain of the guard. ‘Is that well with you, Captain? That my wife brings some linen and gowns for the ladies?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the man said. He tipped his hat to me. ‘Of course.’

I smiled grimly. No-one had imprisoned a queen with no evidence and no charge before. It was difficult to know which was the safe side.

I held Catherine to me once more and felt her smooth hair at the front of her hood just under my chin. I pressed a kiss on her forehead and smelt the scent of her young warm skin. I could hardly bear to let her go but she slipped through the gate and went back down the stone-paved path under the great shadow of the tower and paused and waved, and was gone.

William raised his hand as she went and then turned back to me. ‘One thing the Boleyns have never lacked is absolute folly-driven courage,’ he said. ‘If you were horses I’d have no other breed because you’d jump anything. But as women you are insanely difficult to live with.’

May 1536

I took a boat downriver to Greenwich to fetch the queen's gowns and Catherine's extra linen, leaving William, Henry and the baby behind at the lodgings near the Tower. William was uneasy at my going without him and I was fearful too, it felt like going back into danger, returning to Greenwich Palace; but I preferred to go alone and to know that my son – that precious and rare commodity, a son of the king – was out of sight of the court. I promised to be no longer than a couple of hours and to stop for nothing.

It was an easy matter to get into my rooms but the queen's apartments were sealed on the word of the Privy Council. I thought of finding my uncle and asking him for Anne's gowns and linen and then I concluded that it was not worth drawing attention to another Boleyn girl when the first one was in the Tower for unnamed crimes. I bundled up some gowns of my own for her and was slipping from the room just as Madge Shelton came by. 'Good God, I thought you were arrested,' she said.

'Why?'

'Why is anyone arrested? You were gone. Of course I thought you were in the Tower. Did they let you go after questioning?'

'I've never been arrested at all,' I said patiently. 'I went to London to be with Catherine. She went with Anne as her maid in waiting. She's in the Tower with her still. I just came back for some linen.'

Madge dropped into a windowseat and burst into tears.

I threw a swift glance down the gallery and shifted my bundle from one arm to another. 'Madge, I have to go. What's the matter?'

'Dear God, I thought you were arrested and they would come for me next.'

'Why?'

'It's like being torn apart in the bear pit,' she said. 'They questioned me all morning until I could not tell you what I had seen and heard. They twisted my words around and around and made it sound as if we were a bunch of whores in the whorehouse. I never did anything very wrong. Neither did you. But they have to know everything about everything. They have to know times and places

and I felt so ashamed of everything!’

I paused for a moment, picking over the bones of this. ‘The Privy Council questioned you?’

‘Everyone. All the queen’s ladies, the maids, even the servants. Everyone who had ever danced in her rooms. They’d have questioned Purkoy the dog if he hadn’t been dead!’

‘And what do they ask?’

‘Who was bedding who, who was promising what? Who was giving gifts? Who was missing at matins? Everything. Who was in love with the queen, who wrote her poems? Whose songs she sang? Who did she favour? Everything.’

‘And what does everyone answer?’ I asked.

‘Oh we all say nothing at first,’ Madge said spiritedly. ‘Of course. We all keep our secrets and try to keep those of others. But they know one thing from one person and one from another and in the end they turn you round and catch you out and ask you things you don’t know and things you do, and all the time Uncle Howard looks at you as if you are an utter whore, and the Duke of Suffolk is so kind that you explain things to him, and then you find you have said everything you meant to keep secret.’

She finished on a great wail of tears, and mopped her eyes on a scrap of lace. Suddenly she looked up. ‘You go! Because if they see you they’ll have you in for questioning and the one thing they go on and on about is George and you and the queen and where were you all one night, and what were you doing another night.’

I nodded and walked away from her at once. In a moment I heard her pattering after me. ‘If you see Henry Norris will you tell him that I did my very best to say nothing?’ she said, as pitiful as a schoolboy hoping not to tell tales. ‘They trapped me into saying that the queen and I once gambled for a kiss from him, but I never said more than that. No more than that they would have got from Jane.’

Not even the name of George’s poisonous wife made me check, I was in such a hurry to get out of the place. Instead I grabbed Madge Shelton’s hand and dragged her along with me as I ran down the stairs and out through the door. ‘Jane Parker?’

‘She was in there the longest, and she wrote out a statement and she signed it too. It was after she had spoken to them that we all had to go in again and they were asking about George. Nothing but George and the queen and how much they drank together and how often you and he were alone with her, and whether

you left them alone.'

'Jane will have traduced him,' I said flatly.

'She was bragging of it,' Madge said. 'And that Seymour thing left court yesterday to stay with the Carews in Surrey, complaining of the heat while the rest of us have our lives picked over and everything torn apart.' Madge ended on a little sob, and I stopped and kissed her on both cheeks.

'Can I come with you?' she asked forlornly.

'No,' I said. 'Go to the duchess at Lambeth, she'll look after you. And don't say that you saw me.'

'I'll try not to,' she said fairly. 'But you don't know what it's like when they turn you round and around and ask you everything, over and over again.'

I nodded and left her, standing at the head of the stone steps: a pretty girl who had come to the most beautiful and elegant court in Europe, and seduced the king himself; and who had now seen the world turn around and the court turn dark and the king turn suspicious and learned that no woman, however flighty or pretty or high-spirited, could think herself safe.



I took the linen to Catherine that night and told her that I could not get the gowns for the queen. I did not tell her why, I did not want to draw any attention to myself nor to our little haven in the lodgings hidden behind the Minories. I did not tell her the other news I had heard from the boatman as he rowed me back to London: that Sir Thomas Wyatt, Anne's old flame who had vied with the king for her attention all those years ago when we had all been doing nothing but playing at love, was arrested and Sir Richard Page, another of our circle, was arrested too.

'They'll come for me soon,' I said to William, sitting over the fire in our little lodging. 'They are picking up everyone who is close to her.'

'You had better stop seeing Catherine every day,' he said. 'I'll go, or we can send a maid. You can follow behind, find a place by the river where you can see her so that you know that she is well.'

The next day we changed our lodgings, and this time we gave a false name. Henry went to the Tower in place of us, dressed like a stable lad delivering Catherine's linen or books for her. He dodged through the crowd to get to the gate, and dodged home after, certain that no-one had followed him. If my uncle had ever understood that a woman can love a girl child, he would have watched

Catherine and she would have led him to me. But he never knew that, of course. Few of the Howards ever realised that girls were anything more than counters to play in the marriage game.

And he had other things to do. We realised in the middle of the month that he had been busy indeed when the charges were published. William brought the news home from the bakery where he had been buying our dinner, and waited until I had eaten before he told me.

‘My love,’ he said gently. ‘I don’t know how to prepare you for this news.’

I took one look at his grave face and pushed my plate away. ‘Just tell me quickly.’

‘They have tried and found guilty: Henry Norris, Francis Weston, William Brereton and the lad Mark Smeaton for adultery with the queen your sister.’

For a moment I could not hear him. I could hear the words but it was as if they were coming from a long way away and muffled. Then William pulled back my chair from the table and thrust my head down and the dreamy feeling passed and I could see the floorboards beneath my boots and I struggled against him. ‘Let me up, I’m not fainting.’

He released me at once but knelt at my feet so that he could look into my face. ‘I am afraid you must pray for the soul of your brother. They are certain to find against him.’

‘He was not tried with the others?’

‘No. They were tried in the common court. He and Anne will have to face the peers.’

‘Then there will be some excuse. They will have made some arrangement.’

William looked doubtful.

I leaped up from my seat. ‘I must go to court,’ I said. ‘I shouldn’t have been skulking here in hiding like a fool. I shall go and tell them that this is wrong. Before it goes any further. If these are found guilty then I must get to court in time to testify that George is innocent, Anne too.’

He moved quicker than I, and was blocking the door before I was even two paces towards it.

‘I knew you would say that and you shall not go.’

‘William, this is my brother and my sister in the greatest of dangers. I have to save them.’

‘No. Because if you raise your head one inch they will have it off as well as theirs. Who d’you think is hearing the evidence against these men? Who will be president of the court against your brother? Your own uncle! Does he use his

influence to save him? Does your father? No. Because they know that Anne has taught the king to be a tyrant and now he is run mad and they cannot prevent his tyranny.'

'I have to defend him,' I said, pushing against his chest. 'This is George, my beloved George. D'you think I want to go to my grave knowing that at the moment of his trial he looked around and saw no-one lift a finger for him? If it is the death of me, I shall go to him.'

Suddenly, William stepped aside. 'Go then,' he said. 'Kiss our baby goodbye before you go, and Henry. I shall tell Catherine that you left your blessing for her. And kiss me farewell. For if you go into that courtroom you will never come out alive. I should think it a certainty that you will be taken up for witchcraft at the very least.'

'For doing what, for God's sake?' I exclaimed. 'What d'you think I have done? What d'you think any of us have done?'

'Anne is to be charged with seducing the king with sorcery. Your brother is said to have helped her. That is why their trials are to be done separately. Forgive me that I didn't tell you it all at once. It's not the sort of news I like to bring to my wife with her dinner. They are accused of being lovers, and of summoning the devil. They're being tried separately not because they will be excused, but because their crimes are too great to be heard in one sitting.'

I gasped and staggered against him. William caught me, and finished what he had to tell me.

'Together they are charged with undoing the king, making him impotent with spells, perhaps with poison. Together they are accused of being lovers and making the baby which was born a monster. Some of this is going to stick, say what you will. You have been party to many late nights in Anne's room. You taught her how to seduce the king, after you had been his lover for years. You found a wise woman for her, you brought a witch into the palace itself. Didn't you? You took out dead babies. I buried one. And there's more than that – more than even I know about. Isn't there? Boleyn secrets that you have not told even me?'

As I turned away, he nodded his head. 'I thought so. Did she take spells and potions to help her conceive?' He looked at me and I nodded again. 'She poisoned Bishop Fisher, poor sainted man, and she has the deaths of three innocent men on her conscience for that. She poisoned Cardinal Wolsey and Queen Katherine ...'

'You don't know that for sure!' I exclaimed.

He looked hard at me. 'You are her own sister and you cannot offer a better defence than that? That you don't know for sure how many she has killed?'

I hesitated. 'I don't know.'

'She is certainly guilty of dabbling in witchcraft, she is certainly guilty of seducing the king with bawdy behaviour. She is certainly guilty of threatening the queen, the bishop and the cardinal. You cannot defend her, Mary. She is guilty of at least half of the charge.'

'But George ...' I whispered.

'George went with her in everything she did,' William said. 'And he sinned on his own account. If Sir Francis and the others were to ever confess of what they did with Smeaton and the others they would be hanged for buggery, let alone anything else.'

'He is my brother,' I said. 'I cannot desert him.'

'You can go to your own death,' William said. 'Or you can survive this, bring up your children, and guard Anne's little girl who will be shamed and bastardised and motherless by the end of this week. You can wait out this reign and see what comes next. See what the future holds for the Princess Elizabeth, defend our son Henry against those who will want to set him up as the king's heir or even worse – flaunt him as a pretender. You owe it to your children to protect them. Anne and George have made their own choices. But the Princess Elizabeth and Catherine and Henry have their choices to make in the future. You should be there to help them.'

My hands, which had been in fists against his chest, dropped to my side. 'All right,' I said dully. 'I will let them go to their trial without me. I will not go into court to defend him. But I will go and find my uncle and ask him if something cannot be done to save them.'

I expected him to refuse me this too, but he hesitated. 'Are you sure that he won't have you taken up with them? He has just sat in trial over three men he knew from their boyhood and sent them to be hanged, castrated and quartered. This is not a man in a merciful mood.'

I nodded, thinking hard. 'Very well. I'll go to my father first.'

To my relief, William nodded. 'I'll take you,' he said.

I threw on a cloak over my gown and called to the wet nurse to mind the baby and to keep Henry by her for we were going out for a visit and would only be a little while, and then William and I went from the little lodging house.

'Where is he?' I asked.

'At your uncle's house,' William said. 'Half the court is still at Greenwich

but the king keeps to his rooms, he is said to be deeply grieved, but some say that he slips out every night to see Jane Seymour.'

'What happened to Sir Thomas and Sir Richard who were taken up with the others?' I asked.

William shrugged. 'Who knows? No evidence against them, or special pleading, or some kind of favour. Who ever knows when a tyrant runs mad? They are excused; but a little lad like Mark who only ever knew one thing and that was to play the lute is racked until he cries for his mother, and tells them anything they ask him.'

He took my cold hand and tucked it into his elbow. 'Here we are,' he said. 'We'll go in the stable door. I know some of the lads. I'd rather see how the land lies before we go in.'

We went quietly into the stable yard but before William could shout 'Holloa!' up at the window there was a clatter on the cobblestones and my father himself rode into the yard. I darted towards him out of the shadows and his horse shied and he swore at me.

'Forgive me, Father, I must see you.'

'You, is it?' he said abruptly. 'Where have you been hiding this last week?'

'She's been with me,' William said firmly, from behind me. 'Where she should be. And with our children. Catherine is with the queen.'

'Aye, I know,' my father said. 'The only Boleyn girl without a stain on her virtue, and that's only as far as we know.'

'Mary wants to ask you something and then we must go.'

I paused. Now it came to it, I hardly knew what I should ask my father. 'Are George and Anne to be spared?' I asked. 'Is Uncle working for them?'

He gave me a dark bitter glance. 'You would know as much about their doings as anyone,' he said. 'The three of you were as thick as sinners, God knows. You should have been questioned along with the other ladies.'

'Nothing happened,' I said passionately. 'Nothing more than you yourself know about, sir. Nothing more than Uncle himself commanded. He told me to teach Anne, to tell her how to enchant the king. He told her to conceive a baby whatever the price. He told George to stand by her and help her and comfort her. We did nothing more than that was ordered. We only ever did as we were commanded. Is she to die for being an obedient daughter?'

'Don't you bring me into it,' he said quickly. 'I had nothing to do with ordering her. She went her own way, and him and you with her.'

I gasped at his treachery and he dismounted, passed his reins to a groom and

would have walked away from me. I ran after him and caught his sleeve. 'But will Uncle find a way to save her?'

He put his mouth to my ear. 'She has to go,' he said. 'The king knows she is barren and he wants another wife. The Seymours have won this round, there'll be no denying them. The marriage will be annulled.'

'Annulled? On what grounds?' I asked.

'Affinity,' he said briefly. 'Since he was your lover, he cannot be her husband.'

I blinked. 'Not me, again.'

'Just so.'

'And what happens to Anne?'

'A nunnery, if she'll go quietly. Otherwise, exile.'

'And George?'

'Exile.'

'And you, sir?'

'If I can survive this, I can survive anything,' he said glumly. 'Now, if you don't want to be called to give evidence against them you'll make yourself scarce and keep out of sight.'

'But could I give evidence for their defence, if I come to court?'

He laughed shortly.

'There is no evidence for them,' he reminded me. 'In a treason trial there is no defence. All they can hope for is the clemency of the court and the forgiveness of the king.'

'Should I ask the king for forgiveness for them?'

My father looked at me. 'If your name isn't Seymour then you're not welcome in his sight. If your name is Boleyn then you're due for the axe. Keep out of the way, girl. If you want to serve your sister and your brother, let the business be done as quietly and as quickly as possible.'

William drew me back into the shadow of the stable as we heard a troop of horsemen on the road. 'That's your uncle,' William said. 'Come out this way.'

We went through a stone archway to the double doors where they brought the hay wagons in. A smaller door was cut into the big timbers and William opened it and helped me through. He shut it behind us as the torches flickered into the yard and the soldiers shouted for grooms to help his lordship unsaddle.

William and I went home by dark ways, unseen in the hidden streets of the City. The nurse let us in and showed me the baby asleep in the cradle and Henry in his little pallet bed, the gingery Tudor curls in ringlets around his head.

And then William drew me into the four-poster bed and closed the curtains around us and undressed me, laid me down on the pillows and wrapped himself around me and held me, saying nothing, while I clung to him and could not get warm all night.



Anne was to be tried by the peers in the King's Hall inside the Tower of London. They were afraid to take her through the City to Westminster. The mood of the City which had sulked at her coronation was now turning to defend her. Cromwell's plan had overreached itself. There were few people who could believe that a woman could be so gross as to seduce men when she was pregnant with a baby from her own husband, as the court had claimed she had done. They could not credit that a woman would seek two, three, four lovers under the nose of her husband when her husband was the King of England. Even the women at the dockside who had shouted 'Whore!' at Anne during Queen Katherine's trials now thought that the king had run mad again and was setting aside a legal wife on a pretext, for yet another unknown favourite.

Jane Seymour had moved into the City into the beautiful house of Sir Francis Bryan in the Strand, and it was common knowledge that the king's barge was tied up at the river stairs till well after midnight every night and that there was music and feasting and dancing and masquing while the queen was in the Tower and five good men held as well, four of them under sentence of death.

Henry Percy, Anne's old love, was among the rest of the peers, sitting in judgement on the queen at whose table they had all feasted, whose hand they had all kissed, who had danced with each and every one of them. It must have been an odd experience for them all when she walked into the King's Hall and took a seat before them, the gold 'B' at her throat, her French hood set back to show her dark shining hair, her dark gown setting off her creamy skin. The constant crying and the praying before the little altar in the Tower had left her calm for the day of her trial. She was as confidently lovely as she had been when she came from France, all those years ago, and was set on by my family to take my royal lover from me.

I could have gone along with the common people and taken a place behind the Lord Mayor and the guildsmen and the aldermen, but William was too afraid that I would be seen, and I knew I could not bear to hear the lies they would tell about her. I knew also that I could not bear to hear the truths. The woman from

the lodging house went to see the greatest show that London would ever be offered and came home with a garbled account of the list of times and places where the queen had seduced the men of the court by inflaming their desires by kissing with tongues, that she gave them great gifts, that they tried to outdo each other night after night; a story which sometimes touched the truth and sometimes veered off into the wildest of fantasies which anyone who knew the court would have realised could not be true. But it always had that fascination of scandal, it was always erotic, filthy, dark. It was the stuff that people wished that queens might do, that a whore married to a king would be sure to do. It told us much, much more about the dreams of Secretary Cromwell, a low man, than it did about Anne or George or me.

They called no witnesses who had ever seen her touching and blandishing, they called no witnesses to prove that Anne had ill-wished Henry into illness, either. They claimed that the ulcer on his leg and his impotence were her fault too. Anne pleaded not guilty and then tried to explain, to the peers who knew it already, that it was normal for a queen to give little gifts. That it was nothing for her to dance with one man, and then another. That of course poets would dedicate poems to her. That naturally the poems would be love poetry. That the king had never complained, not for one moment, against the tradition of courtly love which ruled every court in Europe.

On the last day of the trial the Earl of Northumberland, Henry Percy, her love from so long ago, went missing. He sent as his excuse that he was too ill to attend. That was when I knew that the verdict would go against her. The lords who had been in Anne's court, who would have sold their own mothers to the galleys to have her favour, gave their verdict, from the lowliest peer to our uncle. One after another, they all said: 'Guilty'. When it came to my uncle he choked on his tears and could barely say the word 'guilty', or speak the sentence: that she should be burned or beheaded on the Green, at the king's pleasure.

The lodging-house woman found a scrap of cloth in her pocket and dabbed at her eyes. She said it did not seem much like justice to her, if a queen had to be burned at the stake for dancing with a couple of young men.

'Very true,' William said judicially, and directed her from the room. When she was gone, he came back to me and took me onto his knee. I curled up like a child, and let him put his arms around me and rock me.

'She will hate to be in a nunnery.'

'She'll have to tolerate whatever the king rules,' he said. 'Exile or a nunnery, she will be glad of it.'



They tried my brother the next day, before they could lose their stomach for the lies. He was accused, as the other men had been, of being her lover and plotting against the king, and like them, he denied it completely. They accused him also of questioning the paternity of the Princess Elizabeth and of laughing at the king's impotence. George, speaking on his sacred oath, fell silent: he could not deny it. The strongest evidence against him was a statement written by Jane Parker, the wife he had always despised.

'They would listen to an aggrieved wife?' I asked William. 'On a hanging matter?'

'He's guilty,' he said simply. 'I'm not one of his intimates but even I've heard him laugh at Henry and say that the man couldn't mount a mare in season, let alone a woman like Anne.'

I shook my head. 'That's bawdy and indiscreet but ...'

He took my hand. 'It's treason, my love,' he said gently. 'You wouldn't expect it to come to court, but if it does, it is treason just as Thomas More was treasonous to doubt the king's supremacy in the church. This king can say what is a hanging offence and what is not. We gave him that power when we denied the Pope the right to rule the church. We gave Henry the right to rule everything. And now he rules that your sister is a witch and that your brother is her lover, and that they are both enemies of the realm.'

'But he'll let them go,' I insisted.



Every day my boy Henry went to the Tower and met his sister and saw that she was well. Every day William tracked him there and tracked him back, always watching that no-one else was watching. But there were no spies on Henry. It was as if they had done their worst in listening to the queen and entrapping her, in listening to George and his ridiculous indiscretions, and entrapping him.

One day in the middle of May I went with Henry and met my little girl as she walked out of the Tower of London. From where we stood, outside the gate, I could hear the knocking of the nails into the scaffold where they would execute my brother and the four men with him. Catherine was composed. She was a little pale.

‘Come home with me,’ I urged her. ‘And we can go to Rochford, all of us. There’s nothing more you can do here.’

She shook her little hooded head. ‘Let me stay,’ she said. ‘I want to stay until Aunt Anne is released to the nunnery and it is over.’

‘Is she well?’

‘She is. She prays all the time and she prepares herself for a life behind the walls. She knows that she has to give up queenship. She knows that she has to give up the Princess Elizabeth. She knows that she won’t be queen now. But it’s better since the trial is over. They don’t listen to her and watch her the same way. And she is more settled.’

‘Have you seen George?’ I asked. I tried to keep my voice light but my grief choked me.

Catherine looked up at me, her dark Boleyn eyes filled with pity. ‘This is a prison,’ she said gently. ‘I can’t go visiting.’

I shook my head at my own stupidity. ‘When I was here before it was one of the many castles of the king. I could walk where I wanted. I should have realised that everything is different now.’

‘Will the king marry Jane Seymour?’ Catherine asked me. ‘She wants to know.’

‘You can tell her it is a certainty,’ I said. ‘He is at her house every night. He is as he was, in the old days, when it was her.’

Catherine nodded. ‘I should go,’ she said, glancing at the sentry behind her.

‘Tell Anne ...’ I broke off. There was too much to send in one message. There were long years of rivalry and then a forced unity and always and ever, underpinning our love for each other, our sense that the other must be bested. How could I send her one word which would acknowledge all of that, and yet tell her that I loved her still, that I was glad I had been her sister, even though I knew she had brought herself to this point and taken George here too? That, though I would never forgive her for what she had done to us all, at the same time, I totally and wholly understood?

‘Tell her what?’ Catherine hovered, waiting to be released.

‘Tell her that I think of her,’ I said simply. ‘All the time. Every day. The same as always.’



The next day they beheaded my brother alongside his lover Francis Weston, with

Henry Norris, William Brereton and Mark Smeaton. They did it on the Green, before Anne's window, and she watched her friends and then her brother die. I walked on the muddy foreshore of the river with my baby on my hip and tried not to know that it was happening. The wind blew gently up the river and a seagull called mournfully over my head. The tideline was a mess of intriguing flotsam: bits of rope, scraps of wood, shells encrusted on weed. I watched my boots and smelled the salt in the air and let my pace rock my baby and tried to understand what had happened to us Boleyns who had been running the country one day and were condemned criminals the next.

I turned for home and found that my face was wet with tears. I had not thought to lose George. I had never thought that Anne and I would have to live our lives without George.



A swordsman was ordered from France to execute Anne. The king was planning a last-minute reprieve and he would extract every drop of drama from it. They built a scaffold for her beheading on the Green outside the Beauchamp Tower.

‘The king will release her?’ I asked William.

‘That’s what your father said.’

‘He will do it as a great masque,’ I said, knowing Henry. ‘At the very last moment he will send his pardon and everyone will be so relieved that they will forgive him for the deaths of the others.’



The swordsman was delayed on the road. It would be another day before he was on the platform, waiting for the pardon. Catherine at the gate that night was like a little ghost. ‘Archbishop Cranmer came today with the papers to annul the marriage and she signed them. They promised that she would be released if she signed. She can go to a nunnery.’

‘Thank God,’ I said, knowing only now how deeply I had been afraid. ‘When will she be released?’

‘Perhaps tomorrow,’ Catherine said. ‘Then she’ll have to live in France.’

‘She’ll like that,’ I said. ‘She’ll be an abbess in five days, you’ll see.’

Catherine gave me a thin smile. The skin below her eyes was almost purple

with fatigue.

‘Come home now!’ I said in sudden anxiety. ‘It’s all but done.’

‘I’ll come when it’s over,’ she said. ‘When she goes to France.’



That night, as I lay sleepless, staring up at the tester over the four-poster bed, I said to William, ‘The king will keep his word and release her, won’t he?’

‘Why should he not?’ William asked me. ‘He has everything he wants. An adultery charge against her so no-one can say that he fathered a monster. The marriage annulled as if it never was. Everyone who impugned his manhood is dead. Why should he kill her? It makes no sense. And he has promised her. She signed the annulment. He is honour-bound to send her to a nunnery.’



The next day a little before nine o’clock they took her out to the scaffold and her ladies, my little Catherine among them, walked behind her.

I was in the crowd, at the back, at Tower Green. From a distance I saw her come out, a little figure in a black gown with a dark cape. She lifted off her French hood, her hair was held back in a net. She said her final words, I could not hear them and I did not care. It was a nonsense, a piece of the masque, as meaningless as when the king was Robin Hood and we were villagers dressed in green. I waited for the watergate to roll up and the king’s barge to rush in with a beat of the drummer and the swirl of oars in the dark water and for the king to stride forward amongst us, and declare Anne forgiven.

I thought he was leaving it so late that he must have ordered the executioner to delay, to wait for the blast of royal trumpets from the river. It was typical of Henry to use this moment for its greatest drama. Now we had to wait for him to make his grand entrance and his speech of forgiveness and then Anne could go to France and I could fetch my daughter and go home.

I watched her turn to the priest for her final prayers, and then take off her French hood, and her necklace. Hidden in my long sleeves I was snapping my fingers with irritation at Anne’s vanity and Henry’s delay. Why could not the two of them finish this scene quickly and let us all go?

One of her women, not my daughter Catherine, stepped forward and tied a

blindfold over my sister's eyes, and then steadied her arm as she kneeled in the straw. The woman stepped back, Anne was alone. Like a field of corn bowing down in the wind, the crowd before the scaffold kneeled too. Only I stood still, staring over their heads to my sister where she kneeled in her black gown with the brave crimson skirt, her eyes blindfolded, her face white.

Behind her the executioner's sword went up and up and up in the morning light. Even then, I looked towards the watergate for Henry to come. And then the sword came down like a flash of lightning, and then her head was off her body and the long rivalry between me and the other Boleyn girl was over.

William pushed me unceremoniously in to one of the alcoves of the wall and thrust his way through the people who were gathering around to see Anne's body wrapped in linen and laid in a box. He scooped Catherine up as if she were no more than a baby and he brought her back through the chattering shocked crowd towards me.

'It's done,' he said tersely to us both. 'Now walk.'

Like a man in a rage he forced us before him, through the gate and out into the City. Blindly, we found our way back to our lodgings, through the crowds which were seething around the Tower and shouting the news to one another that the whore had been beheaded, that the poor lady had been martyred, that the wife had been sacrificed, all the different versions that Anne had carried in one ill-lived life.

Catherine stumbled as her legs gave way and William picked her up and carried her in his arms like a swaddled infant. I saw her head loll against his shoulder and realised that she was half asleep. She had stayed awake for days with my sister as they had waited for the clemency which had been inviolably promised. Even now as I stumbled on the cobbles of the road into the City I realised that it was hard for me to know that the clemency had never come and that the man I had loved as the most golden prince in Christendom had turned into a monster who had broken his word and executed his wife because he could not bear the thought of her living without him and despising him. He had taken George, my beloved George, from me. And he had taken my other self: Anne.



Catherine slept for all that day and all that night, and when she awoke, William had the horses ready and she was on her horse before she could protest. We rode to the river and took a ship downriver to Leigh. She ate while we were on board.

Henry beside her. I had my baby on my hip, watching my two older children, thanking God that we were out of the city and that, if we were lucky and kept our wits about us, we might escape notice in the new reign.

Jane Seymour had chosen her wedding clothes on the day that they executed my sister. I did not even blame her for that. Anne or I, would have done the same thing. When Henry changed his mind he always changed it fast, and it was a wise woman who went with him and did not oppose him. Even more so now that he had divorced one faultless wife and beheaded another. Now he knew his power.

Jane would be the new queen and her children, when she had them, would be the next princes or princesses. Or she might wait, as the other queens had waited, every month, desperate to know that she had conceived, knowing each month that it did not happen that Henry's love wore a little thinner, that his patience grew a little shorter. Or Anne's curse of death in childbed, and death to her son, might come true. I did not envy Jane Seymour. I had seen two queens married to King Henry and neither of them had much joy of it.

And as for us Boleyns, my father was right, all we could do now was survive. My uncle had lost a good hand with the death of Anne. He had thrown her onto the gaming table just as he had thrown me or Madge. Whether a girl was fit for seduction or a sop for the king's rage, or even to aim at the highest place in the land, he would always have another Howard girl at the ready. He would play again. But we Boleyns were destroyed. We had lost our most famous girl, Queen Anne, and we had lost George, our heir. And Anne's daughter Elizabeth was a nobody, worth even less than the despised Princess Mary. She would never be called princess again. She would never sit on the throne.

'I'm glad of it,' I said simply to William as the children slept, rocked by the movement of the boat on the ebbing tide. 'I want to live in the country with you. I want to bring up our children to love each other and fear God. I want to find some peace now, I have had enough of playing the great game at court. I have seen the price that has to be paid and it is too high. I just want you. I just want to live at Rochford and love you.'

He put his arm around me and held me close to him against the cold wind that blew steadily off the sea. 'It's agreed,' he said. 'Your part in this is done, please God.' He looked forward to where my two children were in the prow of the boat, looking downriver to the sea, swaying with the rhythmic beat of the oars. 'But those two? They'll be sailing upriver again, back to court and power, sometime in their lives.'

I shook my head in protest.

‘They’re half Boleyn and half Tudor,’ he said. ‘My God, what a combination. And their cousin Elizabeth the same. Nobody can say what they will do.’

Author's Note

Mary and William Stafford lived happily together at Rochford. When her parents died (in 1538 and 1539), Mary inherited the whole of the Boleyn family holdings in Essex, and she and William became wealthy landowners.

She died in 1543 and her son, Henry Carey, rose to become a major advisor and courtier at the court of his cousin, Queen Elizabeth I, the greatest queen England ever had. She made him Viscount Hunsdon. Mary's daughter Catherine married Sir Francis Knollys and founded a great Elizabethan dynasty.

I am indebted to Retha M. Warnicke, whose book *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn* has been a most helpful source for this story. I have followed Warnicke's original and provocative thesis that the homosexual ring around Anne, including her brother George, and her last miscarriage created a climate in which the king could accuse her of witchcraft and perverse sexual practices.

I am very grateful to the following authors, whose books helped me to trace the otherwise untold story of Mary Boleyn, or provided background for the period:

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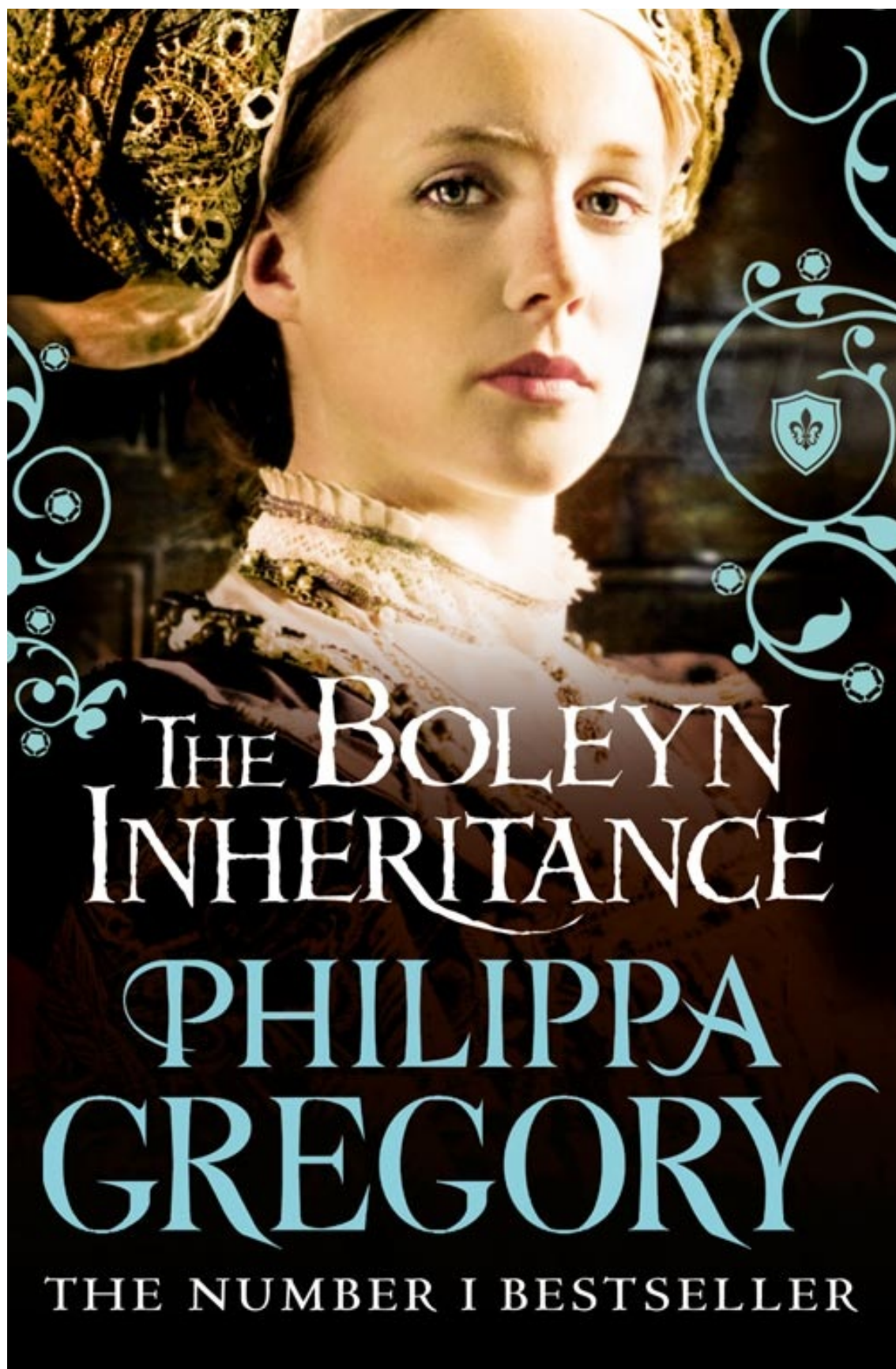
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THE BOLEYN
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HARPER

Dedication

For Anthony

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Five years later Anne, Hever Castle, January 1547

Author's Note

Jane Boleyn, Blickling Hall, Norfolk, July 1539

It is hot today, the wind blows over the flat fields and marshes with the stink of the plague. In weather like this, if my husband were still with me, we would not be trapped in one place, watching a leaden dawn and a sunset of dull red; we would be travelling with the king's court, on progress through the weald and downland of Hampshire and Sussex, the richest and most beautiful countryside in all of England, riding high on the hilly roads and looking out for the first sight of the sea. We would be out hunting every morning, dining under the thick canopy of the trees at midday and dancing in the great hall of some country house at night in the yellow light of flickering torches. We were friends with the greatest families in the land, we were the favourites of the king, kin to the queen. We were beloved; we were the Boleyns, the most beautiful, sophisticated family at the court. Nobody knew George without desiring him, nobody could resist Anne, everyone courted me as a passport to their attention. George was dazzling, dark-haired, dark-eyed and handsome, always mounted on the finest horses, always at the side of the queen. Anne was at the peak of her beauty and her wits, as alluring as dark honey. And I went everywhere with them.

The two of them used to ride together, racing, neck and neck like lovers, and I could hear their laughter over the thudding of the hooves as they went flying by. Sometimes, when I saw them together, so rich, so young, so beautiful, I couldn't tell which of them I loved more.

All the court was besotted with the two of them, those dark Boleyn flirtatious looks, their high living: such gamblers, such lovers of risk; both so fervent for their reform of the church, so quick and clever in argument, so daring in their reading and thoughts. From the king to the kitchenmaid there was not one person who was not dazzled by the pair of them. Even now, three years on, I cannot believe that we will never see them again. Surely, a couple so young, so radiant with life, cannot simply die? In my mind, in my heart, they are still riding out together, still young, still beautiful. And why would I not passionately long for this to be true? It has only been three years since I last saw them; three years, two months and nine days since his careless fingers brushed against mine, and he

smiled and said 'Good day, wife, I must go, I have everything to do today,' and it was a May Day morning and we were preparing for the tournament. I knew he and his sister were in trouble, but I did not know how much.

Every day in this new life of mine I walk to the crossroads in the village, where there is a dirty milestone to the London road. Picked out in mud and lichen, the carving says 'London, 120 miles'. It is such a long way, such a long way away. Every day I bend down and touch it, like a talisman, and then I turn back again to my father's house, which is now so small to me, who has lived in the king's greatest palaces. I live on my brother's charity, on the goodwill of his wife who cares nothing for me, on a pension from Thomas Cromwell the upstart moneylender, who is the king's new great friend. I am a poor neighbour living in the shadow of the great house that was once my own, a Boleyn house, one of our many houses. I live quietly, cheaply, like a widow with no house of my own that no man wants.

And this is because I am a widow with no house of my own that no man wants. A woman of nearly thirty years old, with a face scored by disappointment, mother to an absent son, a widow without prospect of re-marriage, the sole survivor of an unlucky family, heiress to scandal.

My dream is that one day this luck will change. I will see a messenger in Howard livery riding down this very road, bringing a letter for me, a letter from the Duke of Norfolk, to summon me back to court, to tell me that there is work for me to do again: a queen to serve, secrets to whisper, plots to hatch, the unending double-dealing life of a courtier, at which he is so expert, and I am his greatest pupil. My dream is that the world will change again, swing topsy-turvy until we are uppermost once more, and I am restored. I saved the duke once, when we were in the worst danger, and in return he saved me. Our great sorrow was that we could not save the two of them, the two who now ride and laugh and dance only in my dreams. I touch the milestone once more, and imagine that tomorrow the messenger will come. He will hold out a paper, sealed with the Howard crest deep and shiny in the red wax. 'A message for Jane Boleyn, the Viscountess Rochford?' he will ask, looking at my plain kirtle and the dust on the hem of my gown, my hand stained with dirt from the London milestone.

'I will take it,' I shall say. 'I am her. I have been waiting for ever.' And I shall take it in my dirty hand: my inheritance.

Anne, Duchess of Cleves, Duren, Cleves, July 1539

I hardly dare to breathe. I am as still as a block, a smile stuck on my face, my eyes wide open, looking boldly at the artist, appearing, I hope, trustworthy, my frank stare indicating honesty but not immodesty. My borrowed jewels are the best that my mother could lay her hands on, designed to show to a critical viewer that we are not quite paupers, even though my brother will offer no dowry to pay a husband. The king will have to choose me for my pleasant appearance and political connections. I have nothing else to offer. But he must choose me. I am absolutely determined that he will choose me. It is everything to me to get away from here.

On the other side of the room, carefully not observing my portrait forming under the painter's quick, sweeping strokes of the crayon, is my sister, awaiting her turn. God forgive me, but I pray that the king does not choose her. She is eager as me for the chance to leave Cleves, and to leap to such greatness as the throne of England; but she does not need it as I do. No girl in the world can need it as I do.

Not that I will speak so much as one word against my brother, nothing now, and nothing in the years to come. I will never say anything against him. He is a model son to my mother, and a worthy successor to the dukedom of Cleves. During the last months of my poor father's life, when he was clearly as mad as any fool, it was my brother who wrestled him into his chamber, locked the door from the outside and publicly gave out that he had a fever. It was my brother who forbade my mother to summon physicians or even preachers to expel the devils that occupied my poor father's wandering brains. It was my brother, cunning – like an ox is cunning, in a slow mean way – who said that we must claim my father was a drunkard rather than allow the taint of madness to diminish our family reputation. We will not make our way in the world if there is suspicion against our blood. But if we slander our own father, call him a sot, having denied him the help that he so desperately needed, then we may yet rise. This way I will make a good marriage. This way my sister will make a good marriage. This way my brother can make a good marriage and the future of our

house is assured, even though my father fought his demons alone, and without help.

Hearing my father whimper at the door of his chamber that he was a good boy now, and would we let him out? Hearing my brother answer so steadily and so firmly that he could not come out, I wondered then if actually we had it all wrong, and my brother was already as mad as my father, my mother too, and the only sane one in this household was me, since I alone was dumb with horror at what we were doing. But I didn't tell anyone that thought, either.

Since my earliest childhood I have served under my brother's discipline. He was always to be duke of these lands sheltered between the rivers of the Meuse and the Rhine. A small enough patrimony; but one so well-placed that every power of Europe seeks our friendship: France, the Hapsburg Spanish and Austrians, the Holy Roman Emperor, the Pope himself, and now Henry of England. Cleves is the keyhole to the heart of Europe, and the Duke of Cleves is the key. No wonder that my brother values himself so highly, he is right to value himself so highly; it is only I who sometimes wonder if he is not, in truth, a petty princeling seated below the salt at the grand banquet which is Christendom. But I tell no-one I think this, not even my sister Amelia. I do not trust anyone very readily.

He commands my mother by right of the greatness of his position in the world and she is his Lord Chamberlain, his Major Domo, his Pope. With her blessing, my brother commands my sister and myself because he is the son and the heir and we are burdens. He is a young man with a future of power and opportunity and we are young women destined to be either wives and mothers at the very best; or spinster-parasites at the worst. My older sister Sybilla has already escaped; she left home as soon as she could, as soon as her marriage could be arranged, she is now free of the tyranny of fraternal attention. I have to go next. It has to be me next. I must be freed. They cannot be so pointlessly cruel to me to send Amelia in my place. Her chance will come, her time will come. But I am the next sister in line, it has to be me. I cannot imagine why they even offered Amelia, unless it was to frighten me into greater subservience. If so, it has worked. I am terrified that I will be overlooked for a younger girl, and my brother has let this come about. In truth, he ignores his own best interests to torment me.

My brother is a petty duke, in every sense of the word. When my father died, still whispering for someone to open the door, my brother stepped into his shoes but can never fill them. My father was a man in the wider world, he attended the

courts of France and Spain, he travelled in Europe. My brother, staying at home as he has done, thinks that the world can show him nothing greater than his own duchy. He thinks there is no greater book than the Bible, no better church than one with bare walls, no better guide than his own conscience. With only a small household to rule, his command falls very heavily on very few servants. With only a small inheritance, he is alert to the needs of his own dignity, and I, who lack dignity, feel the full weight of his. When he is drunk or happy he calls me the most rebellious of his subjects and pets me with a heavy hand. When he is sober or irritated he says that I am a girl who does not know her place and threatens to lock me in my room.

This is no empty threat in Cleves today. This is a man who locked up his own father. I think he is quite capable of imprisoning me. And if I cried at the door, would anyone let me out?

Master Holbein indicates to me with one curt nod of his head that I can leave my seat and my sister can take my place. I am not allowed to look at my portrait. None of us may see what he sends to the king in England. He is not here to flatter us, nor paint us as beauties. He is here to sketch as accurate a representation as his genius can produce, so that the King of England can see which of us he would like, as if we were Flanders mares coming to the English stallion at stud.

Master Holbein, who leans back as my sister bustles forwards, takes a fresh sheet of paper, examines the point of his pastel crayon. Master Holbein has seen us all, all of the candidates for the post of Queen of England. He has painted Christina of Milan and Louise of Guise, Marie of Vendôme and Anne of Guise. So I am not the first young woman whose nose he has measured with his crayon held at arm's length and one eye squinting. For all I know, there will be another girl after my sister Amelia. He may stop off in France on his way home to England to scowl at another simpering girl and capture her likeness and delineate her faults. There is no point in my feeling demeaned, like a piece of fustian laid out for the pattern, by this process.

‘Do you not like being painted? Are you shy?’ he asked me gruffly as my smile faded when he looked at me like a piece of meat on the cook's draining slab.

I did not tell him what I felt. There is no sense in offering information to a spy. ‘I want to marry him,’ was all I said. He raised an eyebrow.

‘I just paint the pictures,’ he remarked. ‘You had better tell your desire to his envoys, Ambassadors Nicholas Wotton and Richard Beard. No point telling me.’

I sit in the window-seat, hot in my best clothes, constricted by a stomacher pulled so tight that it took two maids hauling on the laces to get it knotted, and I will have to be cut free when the picture is finished. I watch Amelia put her head on one side and preen and smile flirtatiously at Master Holbein. I hope to God that he does not like her. I hope to God that he does not paint her as she is, plumper, prettier than me. It does not really matter to her whether or not she goes to England. Oh! It would be a triumph for her, a leap from being the youngest daughter of a poor duchy to Queen of England, a flight that would lift her and our family and the whole nation of Cleves. But she does not need to get away as I need to get away. It is not a matter of need for her, as it is for me. I might almost say: desperation.

I have agreed not to look at Master Holbein's painting and so I do not look. One thing is true of me: if I give my word on something I keep it, although I am only a girl. Instead, I look out of the window, into the courtyard of our castle. The hunting horns sound in the forest outside, the great barred gate swings open, the huntsmen come in, my brother at their head. He glances up to the window and sees me before I can duck back. At once I know that I have irritated him. He will feel that I should not be at the window, where I can be seen by anyone in the castle yard. Although I moved too fast for him to see me in any detail, I feel certain that he knows that I am tightly laced and that the square neckline of my gown is low cut, though a muslin neckpiece covers me to my very chin. I flinch from the scowl that he shoots up to the window. Now he is displeased with me, but he will not say so. He will not complain of the gown that I could explain, he will complain of something else, but I cannot yet know what it will be. All I can be sure of is that sometime today or tomorrow, my mother will call me to her room, and he will be standing behind her chair, or turned away, or just entering the door, as if it were nothing to do with him at all, as if he were quite indifferent, and she will say to me, in tones of deep disapproval: 'Anne, I hear that you have ...' and it will be something which happened days ago, which I have quite forgotten, but which he will have known and saved up until now, so that I am in the wrong, and perhaps even punished, and he will not say a word about seeing me, sitting in the window, looking pretty, which is my real offence against him.

When I was a little girl, my father used to call me his *falke*, his white falcon, his gyrfalcon, a hunting bird of the cold northern snows. When he saw me at my books or at my sewing he would laugh and say, 'Oh, my little falcon, mewed up? Come away and I shall set you free!' and not even my mother could stop me

running from the school room to be with him.

I wish now, I so wish now, that he could call me away again.

I know that my mother thinks that I am a foolish girl, and my brother thinks worse; but if I were Queen of England the king could trust me with my position, I would not break into French fashions or Italian dances. They could trust me, the king could trust his honour to me. I know how important is a man's honour, and I have no desire to be anything but a good girl, a good queen. But I also believe that however strict the King of England, I would be allowed to sit in the window of my own castle. Whatever they say of Henry of England, I think he would tell me honestly if I offended him, and not order my mother to beat me for something else.

Katherine, Norfolk House, Lambeth, July 1539

Now let me see, what do I have?

I have a small gold chain from my long-dead mother that I keep in my special jewellery box, sadly empty but for this one chain; but I am certain to get more. I have three gowns, one of them new. I have a piece of French lace sent by my father from Calais. I have half a dozen ribbons of my own. And, more than anything else, I have me. I have me, glorious me! I am fourteen today, imagine that! Fourteen! Fourteen, young, nobly born though, tragically, not rich; but in love, wonderfully in love. My lady grandmother the duchess will give me a gift for my birthday, I know she will. I am her favourite and she likes me to look well. Perhaps some silk for a gown, perhaps a coin to buy lace. My friends in the maids' chamber will give me a feast tonight when we are supposed to be asleep; the young men will tap their secret signal on the door, and we will rush to let them in and I will cry, 'oh, no!' as if I wanted it to be just girls alone, as if I am not in love, madly in love, with Francis Dereham. As if I haven't spent all day just longing for tonight, when I shall see him. In five hours from now I will see him. No! I have just looked at my grandmother's precious French clock. Four hours and forty-eight minutes.

Forty-seven minutes.

Forty-six. I really am amazed at how devoted I am to him, that I should actually watch a clock tick down the time until we are together. This must be a most passionate love, a most devoted love, and I must be a girl of really unusual sensitivity to feel this deeply.

Forty-five; but it's dreadfully boring, just waiting, now.

I haven't told him how I feel, of course. I should die of embarrassment if I had to tell him myself. I think I may die anyway, die for love of him. I have told no-one but my dearest friend Agnes Restwold, and sworn her to secrecy on pain of death, on pain of a traitor's death. She says she will be hanged and drawn and quartered before she tells anyone that I am in love. She says she will go to the block like my cousin Queen Anne before she betrays my secret. She says they will have to pull her apart on the rack before she tells. I have told Margaret

Morton as well and she says that death itself would not make her tell, not if they were to fling her in the bear pit. She says they could burn her at the stake before she would tell. This is good because it means that one of them is certain to tell him before he comes to the chamber tonight, and so he will know that I like him.

I have known him for months now, half a lifetime. At first I only watched him but now he smiles and says hello to me. Once he called me by name. He comes with all the other young men of the household to visit us girls in our chamber, and he thinks he is in love with Joan Bulmer, who has eyes like a frog and if she were not so free with her favours, no man would ever look twice at her. But she is free, very free indeed; and so it is me that he does not look twice at. It isn't fair. It's so unfair. She is a good ten years older than me and married and so she knows how to attract a man, whereas I have much still to learn. Dereham is more than twenty as well. They all think of me as a child; but I am not a child, and I will show them. I am fourteen, I am ready for love. I am ready for a lover, and I am so in love with Francis Dereham that I will die if I don't see him at once. Four hours and forty minutes.

But now, from today, everything must be different. Now that I am fourteen, everything is certain to change. It has to, I know it will. I shall put on my new French hood and I shall tell Francis Dereham that I am fourteen and he will see me as I truly am: a woman now, a woman of some experience, a woman grown; and then we shall see how long he stays with old froggy face when he could come across the room to lie in my bed instead.

He's not my first love, it is true; but I never felt anything like this for Henry Manox and if he says I did, then he is a liar. Henry Manox was well-enough for me when I was a girl just living in the country, a child really, learning to play the virginal and knowing nothing of kissing and touching. Why, when he first kissed me I didn't even like it very much, and begged him to stop, and when he put his hand up my skirt I was so shocked I screamed aloud and cried. I was only eleven years old, I couldn't be expected to know the pleasures of a woman. But I know all about that now. Three years in the maids' chamber has taught me every little wile and play that I need. I know what a man wants, and I know how to play him, and I know when to stop too.

My reputation is my dowry – my grandmother would point out that I have no other, sour old cat – and no-one will ever say that Katherine Howard does not know what is due to her and her family. I am a woman now, not a child. Henry Manox wanted to be my lover when I was a child in the country, when I knew next to nothing, when I had seen nobody, or at any rate nobody that mattered. I

would have let him have me too, after he had bribed and bullied me for weeks to do the full deed, but in the end it was he that stopped short for fear of being caught. People would have thought badly of us since he was more than twenty and I was eleven. We were going to wait till I was thirteen. But now I live in Norfolk House in Lambeth, not buried in Sussex, and the king himself could ride past the door any day, the archbishop is our next-door neighbour, my own uncle Thomas Howard, the Duke of Norfolk, calls with all his great train, and he once remembered my name. I'm far beyond Henry Manox now. I'm not a country girl who can be bullied into giving him kisses and forced to do more, I am a good deal too high for that now. I know what's what in the bedroom, I am a Howard girl, I have a wonderful future before me.

Except – and this is such a tragedy that I really don't know how to bear it – although I am of an age to go to court, and as a Howard girl my natural place should be in the queen's chambers, there is no queen! It is a disaster for me. There is no queen at all, Queen Jane died after having her baby, which seems to me to be just laziness really, and so there are no places at court for maids in waiting. This is so terribly unlucky for me, I think no girl has ever been as unlucky as I have been: to have my fourteenth birthday in London, just as the queen has to go and die, and the whole court droop into mourning for years. Sometimes I feel that the whole world conspires against me, as if people want me to live and die an old lady spinster.

What is the point of being pretty if no nobleman is ever going to know me? How will anyone ever see how charming I can be if nobody ever sees me at all? If it were not for my love, my sweetest handsome love, Francis, Francis, Francis, I should utterly despair, and throw myself into the Thames before I am a day older.

But thank God, at least I do have Francis to hope for, and the world to play for. And God, if He truly does know everything, can only have made me so exquisite for a great future. He must have a plan for me? Fourteen and perfect? Surely He in His wisdom won't let me waste away in Lambeth?

Jane Boleyn, Blickling Hall, Norfolk, November 1539

It comes at last, as the days grow dark and I am starting to dread another winter in the country: the letter I have wanted. I feel as if I have waited for it for a lifetime. My life can begin again. I can return to the light of good candles, to the heat of sea-coal braziers, to a circle of friends and rivals, to music and good food and dancing. I am summoned to court, thank God, I am summoned back to court and I shall serve the new queen. The duke, my patron and my mentor, has found me a place in the queen's chamber once again. I shall serve the new Queen of England. I shall serve Queen Anne of England.

The name rings like a warning tocsin: Queen Anne, Queen Anne again. Surely, the councillors who advised the marriage must have had a moment when they heard the words Queen Anne and felt a shiver of horror? They must have remembered how unlucky the first Anne was for us all? The disgrace she brought to the king, and the ruin of her family, and my own loss? My unbearable loss? But no, I see a dead queen is quickly forgotten. By the time this new Queen Anne arrives, the other Queen Anne, my Queen Anne, my sister, my adored friend, my tormentor, will be nothing more than a rare memory – my memory. Sometimes I feel as if I am the only one in the whole country who remembers. Sometimes I feel as if I am the only one in the world who watches and wonders, the only one cursed with memory.

I still dream of her often. I dream that she is again young and laughing, careless of anything but her own enjoyment, wearing her hood pushed back from her face to show her dark hair, her sleeves fashionably long, her accent always so exaggeratedly French. The pearl 'B' at her throat proclaiming that the Queen of England is a Boleyn, as I am. I dream that we are in a sunlit garden, and George is happy, and I have my hand in his arm, and Anne is smiling at us both. I dream that we are all going to be richer than anyone could ever imagine, we will have houses and castles and lands. Abbeys will fall down to make stone for our houses, crucifixes will be melted for our jewellery. We will take fish from the abbey ponds, our hounds will range all over the church lands. Abbots and priors will give up their houses for us, the very shrines will lose their sanctity

and honour us instead. The country will be made over to our glory, our enrichment and amusement. I always wake then, I wake and lie awake shaking. It is such a glorious dream; but I wake quite frozen with terror.

Enough now of dreaming! Once again I shall be at court. Once again I shall be the closest friend of the queen, a constant companion in her chamber. I shall see everything, know everything. I shall be at the very centre of life again, I shall be the new Queen Anne's lady in waiting, serving her as loyally and well as I have served the other three of King Henry's queens. If he can rise up and marry again without fear of ghosts, then so can I.

And I shall serve my kinsman, my uncle by marriage, the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Howard, the greatest man in England after the king himself. A soldier, known for the speed of his marches and the abrupt cruelty of his attacks. A courtier, who never bends with any wind but always constantly serves his king, his own family, and his own interest. A nobleman with so much royal blood in his family that his claim to the throne is as good as any Tudor. He is my kinsman and my patron and my lord. He saved me from a traitor's death once, he told me what I should do and how to do it. He took me when I faltered and led me from the shadow of the Tower and into safety. Ever since then I am sworn to him for life. He knows I am his. Once again, he has work for me to do, and I shall honour my debt to him.

Anne, Cleves Town, November 1539

I have it! I am to be it! I shall be Queen of England. I have slipped my jesses like a free falcon and I shall fly away. Amelia has her handkerchief to her eyes because she has a cold and is trying to look as if she has been crying at the news of my going. She is a liar. She will not be at all sad to see me leave. Her life as the only duchess left in Cleves will be better by far than being the younger sister to me. And when I am married – and what a marriage! – her chances of a good alliance are much improved. My mother does not look happy either, but her anxiety is real. She has been strained for months. I wish I could think it is for the loss of me but it is not. She is worried sick about the cost of this journey and my wedding clothes on my brother's treasury. She is Lord of the Exchequer as well as housewife to my brother. Even with England waiving the demand for a dowry, this marriage is costing the country more than my mother wants to pay.

‘Even if the trumpeters come free, they will have to be fed,’ she says irritably, as if trumpeters are an exotic and expensive pet that I, in my vanity, have insisted on, instead of a loan from my sister Sybilla who wrote to me frankly that it does her no good in Saxony if I set off to one of the greatest kings in Europe in little more than a wagon with a couple of guards.

My brother says very little. This is a great triumph for him and a great step up in the world for his duchy. He is in a league with the other Protestant princes and dukes of Germany and they hope that this marriage will prompt England to join their alliance. If all the Protestant powers in Europe were united then they could attack France or the Hapsburg lands and spread the word of reform. They might get as far as Rome itself, they might curb the power of the Pope in his own city. Who knows what glory to God might come, if only I can be a good wife to a husband who has never been pleased before?

‘You must do your duty to God as you serve your husband,’ my brother says to me pompously.

I wait to see what exactly he means by this. ‘He takes his religion from his wives,’ he says. ‘When he was married to a princess from Spain he was named Defender of the Faith by the Pope himself. When he married the Lady Anne

Boleyn she led him away from superstition to the light of reform. With Queen Jane he became Catholic again and if she had not died he would have reconciled with the Pope, for sure. Now, although he is no friend of the Pope, his country is all but Catholic. He could become a Roman Catholic again in a moment. But if you guide him as you should do, he will declare himself as a Protestant king and leader, and he will join with us.'

'I will try my best,' I say uncertainly. 'But I am only twenty-four. He is a man of forty-eight and he has been king since he was a young man. He may not listen to me.'

'I know you will do your duty,' my brother tries to reassure himself; but as the time comes for me to leave, he grows more and more doubtful.

'You cannot fear for her safety?' I hear my mother mutter to him as he sits in the evening over his wine and stares at the fire as if he would foresee the future without me.

'If she behaves herself she should be safe. But God knows he is a king who has learned that he can do anything he wants in his own lands.'

'You mean to his wives?' she asks in a whisper.

He shrugs uneasily.

'She would never give him cause to doubt her.'

'She has to be warned. He will hold the power of life and death over her. He will be able to do what he likes to her. He will control her utterly.'

I am hidden in the shadows at the back of the room, and this revealing remark from my brother makes me smile. From this one phrase, I finally understand what has been troubling him for all these months. He is going to miss me. He is going to miss me like a master misses a lazy dog when he finally drowns it in a fit of temper. He has become so accustomed to bullying me, and finding fault with me, and troubling me in a dozen small daily ways, that now, when he thinks that another man will have the ordering of me, it plagues him. If he had ever loved me, I would call this jealousy; and it would be easy to understand. But it is not love that he feels for me. It is more like a constant resentment that has become such a habit to him that to have me removed, like an aching tooth, brings him no relief.

'At least she will be of service to us in England,' he says meanly. 'She is worse than useless here. She has to bring him to reformed religion. She has to make him declare as a Lutheran. As long as she doesn't spoil it all.'

'How should she spoil it?' my mother replies. 'She has only to have a child by him. There is no great skill in that. Her health is good and her courses regular,

and at twenty-four she's a good age for childbearing.' She considers for a moment. 'He should desire her,' she says fairly. 'She is well-made, and she carries herself well, I have seen to that. He is a man who is given to lust and falling in love on sight. He will probably take great carnal pleasure in her at first, if only because she is new to him, and a virgin.'

My brother leaps up from his chair. 'Shame!' he says, his cheeks burning with more than the heat from the fire. Everyone stops talking at the sound of his raised voice, then quickly they turn away, trying not to stare. Quietly, I rise from my stool and get myself to the very back of the room. If his temper is rising, I had better slip away.

'Son, I meant nothing wrong,' Mother says, quick to placate him. 'I just meant that she is likely to do her duty and please him ...'

'I can't bear the thought of her ...' He breaks off. 'I cannot stomach it! She must not seek him out!' he hisses. 'You must tell her. She must do nothing unmaidenly. She must do nothing wanton. You must warn her that she must be my sister, your daughter, before she is ever a wife. She must bear herself with coldness, with dignity. She is not to be his whore, she is not to act the part of some shameless, greedy ...'

'No, no,' my mother says softly. 'No, of course not. She isn't like that, William, my lord, dear son. You know she has been most strictly raised, in fear of God and to respect her betters.'

'Well, tell her again,' he cries. Nothing will soothe him, I had better get away. He would be beside himself if he knew that I have seen him like this. I put my hand behind me and feel the comforting warmth of the thick tapestry covering the rear wall. I inch along, my dark dress almost invisible in the shadows of the room.

'I saw her when that painter was here,' he says, his voice thick. 'Preening in her vanity, setting herself out. Laced ... laced ... tight. Her breasts ... on show ... trying to appear desirable. She is capable of sin, Mother. She is disposed to ... She is disposed to ... Her temperament is naturally filled with ...' He cannot say it.

'No, no,' Mother says gently. 'She only wants to be a credit to us.'

'... Lust.'

The word has become detached, it drops into the silence of the room as if it might belong to anybody, as if it might belong to my brother and not to me.

I am at the doorway now, my hand gently lifting the latch, my other finger muffling its click. Three of the women of the court casually rise and stand before

me to mask my retreat from the two at the fireside. The door swings open on oiled hinges and makes no sound. The cold draught makes the candles at the fireside bob, but my brother and my mother are facing each other, rapt in the horror of that word, and do not turn around.

‘Are you sure?’ I hear her ask him.

I close the door before I hear him reply, and I go quickly and quietly to our chamber where the maids are sitting up by the fireside with my sister and playing cards. They scramble them off the table when I tear open the door and stride in, and then they laugh when they see it is me in their relief that they have not been caught out gambling: a forbidden pleasure for spinsters in my brother’s lands.

‘I’m going to bed, I have a headache, I’m not to be disturbed,’ I announce abruptly.

Amelia nods. ‘You can try,’ she says knowingly. ‘What have you done now?’

‘Nothing,’ I say. ‘As always, nothing.’

I go through quickly to our privy chamber and fling my clothes into the chest at the foot of the bed and jump into bed in my shift, drawing the curtains around the bed, pulling the covers up. I shiver in the coldness of the linen, and wait for the order that I know will come.

In only a few moments, Amelia opens the door. ‘You’re to go to Mother’s rooms,’ she says triumphantly.

‘Tell her I’m ill. You should have said I’ve gone to bed.’

‘I told her. She said you have to get up and put on a cloak and go. What have you done now?’

I scowl at her bright face. ‘Nothing.’ I rise unwillingly from the bed. ‘Nothing. As always, I have done nothing.’ I pull my cloak from the hook behind the door and tie the ribbons from chin to knee.

‘Did you answer him back?’ Amelia demands gleefully. ‘Why do you always argue with him?’

I go out without replying, through the silenced chamber and down the steps to my mother’s rooms in the same tower on the floor below us.

At first it looks as if she is alone, but then I see the half-closed door to her privy chamber and I don’t need to hear him, and I don’t need to see him. I just know that he is there, watching.

She has her back to me at first, and when she turns I see she has the birch stick in her hand and her face is stern.

‘I have done nothing,’ I say at once.

She sighs irritably. ‘Child, is that any way to come into a room?’

I lower my head. ‘My lady mother,’ I say quietly.

‘I am displeased with you,’ she says.

I look up. ‘I am sorry for that. How have I offended?’

‘You have been called to a holy duty, you must lead your husband to the reformed church.’

I nod.

‘You have been called to a position of great honour and great dignity, and you must forge your behaviour to deserve it.’

Inarguable. I lower my head again.

‘You have an unruly spirit,’ she goes on.

True indeed.

‘You lack the proper traits of a woman: submission, obedience, love of duty.’

True again.

‘And I fear that you have a wanton streak in you,’ she says, very low.

‘Mother, that I have not,’ I say as quietly as her. ‘That is not true.’

‘You do. The King of England will not tolerate a wanton wife. The Queen of England must be a woman without a stain on her character. She must be above reproach.’

‘My lady mother, I ...’

‘Anne, think of this!’ she says, and for once I hear a real ring of earnestness in her voice. ‘Think of this! He had the Lady Anne Boleyn executed for infidelity, accusing her of sin with half the court, her own brother among her lovers. He made her queen and then he unmade her again with no cause or evidence but his own will. He accused her of incest, witchcraft, crimes most foul. He is a man most anxious for his reputation, madly anxious. The next Queen of England must never be doubted. We cannot guarantee your safety if there is one word said against you!’

‘My lady ...’

‘Kiss the rod,’ she says before I can argue.

I touch my lips to the stick as she holds it out to me. Behind her privy chamber door I can hear him slightly, very slightly, sigh.

‘Hold the seat of the chair,’ she orders.

I bend over and grip both sides of the chair. Delicately, like a lady lifting a handkerchief, she takes the hem of my cloak and raises it over my hips and then

my night shift. My buttocks are naked, if my brother chooses to look through the half-open door he can see me, displayed like a girl in a bawdy house. There is a whistle of the rod through the air and then the sudden whiplash of pain across my thighs. I cry out, and then bite my lip. I am desperate to know how many cuts I will have to take. I grit my teeth together and wait for the next. The hiss through the air and then the slice of pain, like a sword-cut in a dishonourable duel. Two. The sound of the next comes too fast for me to make ready, and I cry out again, my tears suddenly coming hot and fast like blood.

‘Stand up, Anne,’ she says coolly, and pulls down my shift and my cloak.

The tears are pouring down my face, I can hear myself sobbing like a child.

‘Go to your room and read the Bible,’ she says. ‘Think especially on your royal calling. Caesar’s wife, Anne. Caesar’s wife.’

I have to curtsy to her. The awkward movement causes a wave of new pain and I whimper like a whipped puppy. I go to the door and open it. The wind blows the door from my hand and, in the gust, the inner door to her privy chamber flies open without warning. In the shadow stands my brother, his face strained as if it were him beneath the whip of the birch, his lips pressed tightly together as if to stop himself from calling out. For one awful moment our eyes meet and he looks at me, his face filled with a desperate need. I drop my eyes, I turn from him as if I have not seen him, as if I am blind to him. Whatever he wants of me, I know that I don’t want to hear it. I stumble from the room, my shift sticking to the blood on the backs of my thighs. I am desperate to get away from them both.

Katherine, Norfolk House, Lambeth, November 1539

‘I shall call you wife.’

‘I shall call you husband.’

It is so dark that I cannot see him smile; but I feel the curve of his lips as he kisses me again.

‘I shall buy you a ring and you can wear it on a chain around your neck and keep it hidden.’

‘I shall give you a velvet cap embroidered with pearls.’

He chuckles.

‘For God’s sake be quiet, and let us get some sleep!’ someone says crossly from elsewhere in the dormitory. It is probably Joan Bulmer, missing these very same kisses that I now have on my lips, on my eyelids, on my ears, on my neck, on my breasts, on every part of my body. She will be missing the lover who used to be hers, and now is mine.

‘Shall I go and kiss her goodnight?’ he whispers.

‘Ssshhh,’ I reprove him, and I stop his reply with my own mouth.

We are in the sleepy aftermath of lovemaking, the sheets tangled around us, clothes and linen all bundled together, the scent of his hair, of his body, of his sweat all over me. Francis Dereham is mine as I swore he would be.

‘You know that if we promise to marry before God and I give you a ring, then it is as much a marriage as if we were wed in church?’ he asks earnestly.

I am falling asleep. His hand is caressing my belly, I feel myself stir and sigh and I open my legs to invite his warm touch again.

‘Yes,’ I say, meaning yes to his touch.

He misunderstands me, he is always so earnest. ‘So shall we do it? Shall we marry in secret and always be together, and when I have made my fortune, we can tell everyone, and live together as man and wife?’

‘Yes, yes.’ I am starting to moan a little from pleasure, I am thinking of nothing but the movement of his clever fingers. ‘Oh, yes.’

In the morning he has to snatch his clothes and run, before my lady grandmother’s maid comes with much hustle and ceremony to unlock the door to

our bedchamber. He dashes away just moments before we hear her heavy footstep on the stairs; but Edward Waldgrave leaves it too late and has to roll under Mary's bed and hope the trailing sheets will hide him.

'You're merry this morning,' Mrs Franks says suspiciously as we smother our giggles. 'Laugh before seven, tears before eleven.'

'That is a pagan superstition,' says Mary Lascelles, who is always pious. 'And there is nothing for these girls to laugh about if they considered their consciences.'

We look as sombre as we can, and follow her down the stairs to the chapel for Mass. Francis is in the chapel, on his knees, as handsome as an angel. He looks across at me and my heart turns over. It is so wonderful that he is in love with me.

When the service is done and everyone is in a hurry for their breakfast I pause in the pew to adjust the ribbons on my shoe and I see that he has dropped back to his knees as if deep in prayer. The priest slowly blows out the candles, packs up his things, waddles down the aisle and we are alone.

Francis comes across to me and holds out his hand. It is a most wonderfully solemn moment, it is as good as a play. I wish I could see us, especially my own serious face. 'Katherine, will you marry me?' he says.

I feel so grown up. It is I who am doing this, taking control of my own destiny. My grandmother has not made this marriage for me, nor my father. Nobody has ever cared for me, they have forgotten me, cooped up in this house. But I have chosen my own husband, I will make my own future. I am like my cousin Mary Boleyn, who married in secret a man that no-one liked and then picked up the whole Boleyn inheritance. 'Yes,' I say. 'I will.' I am like my cousin Queen Anne, who aimed at the highest marriage in the land when no-one thought it could be done. 'Yes, I will,' I say.

What he means by marrying, I don't know exactly. I think that he means I will have a ring to wear on a chain, which I can show to the other girls, and that we will be promised to one another. But to my surprise he leads me up the aisle towards the altar. For a moment I hesitate, I don't know what he wants to do, and I am no great enthusiast for praying. We will be late for breakfast if we don't hurry and I like the bread when it is still warm from the ovens. But then I see that we are acting out our wedding. I so wish that I had put on my best gown this morning, but it is too late now.

'I, Francis Dereham, do take thee, Katherine Howard, to be my lawful wedded wife,' he says firmly.

I smile up at him. If only I had put on my best hood, I would be perfectly happy.

‘Now you say it,’ he prompts me.

‘I, Katherine Howard, do take thee, Francis Dereham, to be my lawful wedded husband,’ I reply obediently.

He bends and kisses me. I can feel my knees go weak at his touch, all I want is for the kiss to last forever. Already, I am wondering if we were to slip into my lady grandmother’s high-walled pew, we could go a little further than this. But he stops. ‘You understand that we are married now?’ he confirms.

‘This is our wedding?’

‘Yes.’

I giggle. ‘But I am only fourteen.’

‘That makes no difference, you have given your word in the sight of God.’ Very seriously he puts his hand in his jacket pocket and pulls out a purse. ‘There is one hundred pounds in here,’ he says solemnly. ‘I am going to give it into your safekeeping, and in the New Year I shall go to Ireland and make my fortune so that I can come home and claim you openly as my bride.’

The purse is heavy, he has saved a fortune for us. This is so thrilling. ‘I am to keep the money safe?’

‘Yes, as my good wife.’

This is so delightful that I give it a little shake and hear the coins chink. I can put it in my empty jewel box. ‘I shall be such a good wife to you! You will be so surprised!’

‘Yes. As I told you. This is a proper wedding in the sight of God. We are husband and wife now.’

‘Oh, yes. And when you have made your fortune, we can really marry, can’t we? With a new gown and everything?’

Francis frowns for a moment. ‘You do understand?’ he says. ‘I know you are young, Katherine, but you must understand this. We are married now. It is legal and binding. We cannot marry again. This is it. We have just done it. A marriage between two people in the sight of God is a marriage as binding as one signed on a contract. You are my wife now. We are married in the eyes of God and the law of the land. If anyone asks you, you are my wife, my legally wedded wife. You do understand?’

‘Of course I do,’ I reply hastily. I don’t want to look stupid. ‘Of course I understand. All I am saying is that I would like a new gown when we tell everybody.’

He laughs as if I have said something funny and takes me in his arms again and kisses the base of my throat and nuzzles his face into my neck. 'I shall buy you a gown of blue silk, Mrs Dereham,' he promises me.

I close my eyes in pleasure. 'Green,' I say. 'Tudor green. The king likes green best.'

Jane Boleyn, Greenwich Palace, December 1539

Thank God I am here in Greenwich, the most beautiful of the king's palaces, back where I belong in the queen's rooms. Last time I was here I was nursing Jane Seymour as she burned up with fever, asking for Henry, who never came; but now the rooms have been repainted, and I have been restored and she has been forgotten. I alone have survived. I have survived the fall of Queen Katherine, the disgrace of Queen Anne and the death of Queen Jane. It is a miracle to me that I have survived but here I am, back at court, one of the favoured few, the very favoured few. I shall serve the new queen as I have served her predecessors, with love and loyalty and an eye to my own opportunities. I shall once again walk in and out of the best chambers of the best palaces of the land as my home. I am once again where I was born and bred to be.

Sometimes I can even forget everything that has happened. Sometimes, I forget I am a widow of thirty, with a son far away from me. I think I am a young woman again with a husband I worship, and everything to hope for. I am returned to the very centre of my world. Almost I could say: I am reborn.

The king has planned a Christmas wedding and the queen's ladies are being assembled for the festivities. Thanks to my lord duke, I am one of them, restored to the friends and rivals I have known since my childhood. Some of them welcome me back with a wry smile and a backhand compliment, some of them look askance at me. Not that they loved Anne so much – not they – but they were frightened by her fall and they remember that I alone escaped, it is like magic that I escaped, it makes them cross themselves and whisper old rumours against me.

Bessie Blount, the king's old mistress, now married far above her station to Lord Clinton, greets me kindly enough. I have not seen her since the death of her son Henry Fitzroy, who the king made a duke, Duke of Richmond, for nothing more than being a royal bastard, and when I say how sorry I am for her loss, shallow words of politeness, she suddenly grips my hand and looks at me, her face pale and demanding, as if to ask me wordlessly if I know how it was that he

died? Will I tell her how he died?

I smile coolly and unwrap her fingers from my wrist. I cannot tell her because truly I don't know, and if I did know I would not tell her. 'I am very sorry for the loss of your son,' I say again.

She will probably never know why he died nor how. But neither will thousands. Thousands of mothers saw their sons march out to protect the shrines, the holy places, the roadside statues, the monasteries and the churches, and thousands of sons never came home again. The king will decide what is faith and what is heresy, it is not for the people to say. In this new and dangerous world it is not even for the church to say. The king will decide who will live and who will die, he has the power of God now. If Bessie really wants to know who killed her son she had better ask the king his father; but she knows Henry too well to do that.

The other women have seen Bessie greet me and they come forwards: Seymours, Percys, Culpeppers, Nevilles. All the great families of the land have forced their daughters into the narrow compass of the queen's rooms. Some of them know ill of me and some of them suspect worse. I don't care. I have faced worse than the malice of envious women, and I am related to most of them anyway, and rival to them all. If anyone wants to make trouble for me they had better remember that I am under the protection of my lord duke, and only Thomas Cromwell is more powerful than us.

The one I dread, the one I really don't want to meet, is Catherine Carey, the daughter of Mary Boleyn, my mean-spirited sister-in-law. Catherine is a child, a girl of fifteen, I should not fear her, but – to tell the truth – her mother is a formidable woman and never a great admirer of mine. My lord duke has won young Catherine a place at court and ordered her mother to send her to the fount of all power, the source of all wealth, and Mary, reluctant Mary, has obeyed. I can imagine how unwillingly she bought the child her gowns and dressed her hair and coached her in her curtsy and her dancing. Mary saw her family rise to the skies on the beauty and wit of her sister and her brother, and then saw their bodies packed in pieces in the little coffins. Anne was beheaded, her body wrapped in a box, her head in a basket. George, my George ... I cannot bear to think of it.

Let it be enough to say that Mary blames me for all her grief and loss, blames me for the loss of her brother and sister, and never thinks of her own part in our tragedy. She blames me as if I could have saved them, as if I did not do everything in my power till that very day, the last day, on the scaffold, when in

the end there was nothing anybody could do.

And she is wrong to blame me. Mary Norris lost her father Henry on the same day and for the same cause, and she greets me with respect and with a smile. She bears no grudge. She has been properly taught by her mother that the fire of the king's displeasure can burn up anyone, there is no point in blaming the survivors who got out in time.

Catherine Carey is a maid of fifteen, she will share rooms with other young girls, with my cousin and hers, Katherine Howard, Anne Bassett, Mary Norris, with other ambitious maids who know nothing and hope for everything. I will guide and advise them as a woman who has served queens before. Catherine Carey will not be whispering to her friends of the time that she spent with her Aunt Anne in the Tower, the last-moment agreements, the scaffold-step promises, the reprieve that they swore was coming and yet never came. She will not tell them that we all let Anne go to the block – her saintly mother as guilty as any other. She has been raised as a Carey but she is a Boleyn, a king's bastard and a Howard through and through; she will know to keep her mouth shut.

In the absence of the new queen we have to settle into the rooms without her. We have to wait. The weather has been bad for her journey and she is making slow progress from Cleves to Calais. They now think that she will not get here in time for a Christmas wedding. If I had been advising her I would have told her to face the danger, any danger, and come by ship. It is a long journey, I know, and the English Sea in winter is a perilous place, but a bride should not be late for her wedding day; and this king does not like to wait for anything. He is not a man to deny.

In truth, he is not the prince that he was. When I was first at court and he was the young husband of a beautiful wife, he was a golden king. They called him the handsomest prince in Christendom and that was not flattery. Mary Boleyn was in love with him, Anne was in love with him, I was in love with him. There was not one girl at court, nor one girl in the country, who could resist him. Then he turned against his wife, Queen Katherine, a good woman, and Anne taught him how to be cruel. Her court, her clever young merciless court, persecuted the queen into stubborn misery and taught the king to dance to our heretic tune. We tricked him into thinking that the queen had lied to him, then we fooled him into thinking that Wolsey had betrayed him. But then his suspicious mind, rootling like a pig, started to run beyond our control. He started to doubt us as well. Cromwell persuaded him that Anne had betrayed him, the Seymours urged him to believe that we were all in a plot. In the end the king lost something greater

than a wife, even two wives; he lost his sense of trust. We taught him suspicion, and the golden boyish shine tarnished on the man. Now, surrounded by people who fear him, he has become a bully. He has become a danger, like a bear that has been baited into surly spite. He told the Princess Mary he would have her killed if she defied him, and then declared her a bastard and princess no more. The Princess Elizabeth, our Boleyn princess, my niece, he has declared illegitimate and her governess says that the child is not even properly clothed.

And lastly, this business with Henry Fitzroy, the king's own son: one day to be legitimised and proclaimed the Prince of Wales, the next day dead of a mystery illness and my own lord told to bury him at midnight? His portraits destroyed, and all mention of him forbidden? What sort of a man is it who can see his son die and be buried without saying a word? What sort of a father can tell his two little girls that they are no children of his? What sort of a man can send his friends and his wife to the gallows and dance when their deaths are reported to him? What kind of a man is this, to whom we have given absolute power over our lives and souls?

And perhaps even worse than all of this: the good priests hanged from their own church beams, the devout men walking to the stake to be burned, their eyes down, their thoughts on heaven, the uprisings in the North and the East, and the king swearing that the rebels could trust him, that he would be advised by them, and then the dreadful betrayal that put the trusting fools on gallows in their thousands around the country, that made my lord Norfolk the butcher of his countrymen. This king has killed thousands, this king goes on killing thousands of his own people. The world outside England says he has run mad and waits for our rebellion. But like frightened dogs in the bear pit we dare do no more than watch him and snarl.

He is merry now, anyway, despite the new queen's failure to arrive. I have yet to be presented to him but they tell me he will greet me and all her ladies kindly. He is at dinner when I steal into his rooms to see the new queen's portrait that he keeps in his presence chamber. The room is empty, the portrait is on an easel lit by big square candles. She is a sweet-looking thing, it must be said. She has an honest face, a straight gaze from lovely eyes. I understand at once what he likes in her. She has no allure; there is no sensuality in her face. She does not look flirtatious or dangerous or sinful. She has no polish, she has no sophistication. She looks younger than her twenty-four years, I could even say she looks a little simple to my critical gaze. She will not be a queen as Anne was a queen; that is a certainty. This is not a woman who will turn court and country

upside down to dance to a new tune. This is not a woman who will turn men half-mad with desire and demand that they write of love in poetry. And, of course, this is exactly what he wants now – never again to love a woman like Anne.

Anne has spoiled him for a challenge, perhaps forever. She set a fire under his court and in the end everything was burned up. He is like a man whose very eyebrows have been scorched, and I am the woman whose house is ashes. He does not want ever again to marry a desirable mistress. I never again want to smell smoke. He wants a wife at his side who is as steady as an ox at the plough, and then he can seek flirtation and danger and allure elsewhere.

‘A pretty picture,’ a man says behind me and I turn to see the dark hair and long, sallow face of my uncle, Thomas Howard, the Duke of Norfolk, the greatest man in the kingdom after the king himself.

I sweep him a deep curtesy. ‘It is indeed, sir,’ I say.

He nods, his dark eyes steady. ‘Do you think it will prove to be a good likeness?’

‘We’ll know soon enough, my lord.’

‘You can thank me for getting you a post in her household,’ he says casually. ‘It was my doing. I took it as a personal matter.’

‘I do thank you very much. I am in your debt for my life itself. You know, you have only ever to command me.’

He nods. He has never shown me kindness, except the once, one great favour: pulling me from the fire that burned down the court. He is a gruff man of few words. They say he only really loved one woman and that was Katherine of Aragon, and he watched her thrust down to poverty, neglect and death, in order to put his own niece in her place. So his affections are of little value, anyway.

‘You will tell me how things go on in her rooms,’ he says, nodding at the portrait. ‘As you always have done.’ He holds out his arm to me, he is giving me the honour of leading me into dinner. I curtesy again, he likes a show of deference, and I put my hand lightly on his arm. ‘I shall want to know if she pleases the king, when she conceives, who she sees, how she behaves, and if she brings in any Lutheran preachers. That sort of thing. You know.’

I know. We walk to the door together.

‘I expect her to try to lead him in the matter of religion,’ he says. ‘We can’t have that. We can’t have him turning any further to reform; the country won’t tolerate it. You must look at her books and see if she is reading any forbidden writing. And watch her ladies to see if they are spying on us, if they report to

Cleves. If any of them express any heresy I want to know at once. You know what you have to do.'

I do. There is not a member of this wide-ranging family who does not know their task. We all work to maintain the power and wealth of the Howards and we stand together.

I can hear the roar of the feasting court from the hall as we walk towards it, serving men with great jugs of wine and platters of meat marching in line to serve the hundreds of people who dine every day with the king. In the gallery above are the people who have come to watch, to see the great monster that is the inner court of the noblest people, a beast with a hundred mouths and a million schemes, and two hundred eyes watching the king as the only source of all wealth, all power, and all favour.

'You will find him changed,' the duke says very softly, his mouth to my ear. 'We all find him hard to please.'

I think of the spoiled boy who could be distracted in a moment with a joke or a bet or a challenge. 'He was always flighty.'

'He's worse than that now,' my lord says. 'His temper shifts without warning, he is violent; he will lash out against Cromwell and hit him in the face, he can turn in a moment. He can take a rage that turns him scarlet. Something that pleases him in the morning can anger him at dinner. You should be warned.'

I nod. 'They serve him on bended knee now.' I notice the new fashion.

He gives a short laugh. 'And they call him "Majesty",' he says. '"Your Grace" was good enough for the Plantagenets themselves; but not enough for this king. He has to be "Majesty" as if he were a god.'

'People do this?' I ask curiously. 'This extreme honour?'

'You will do it yourself,' he tells me. 'Henry will be as a god if he wishes, there is no-one who dares to deny him.'

'The lords?' I query, thinking of the pride of the great men of the kingdom who hailed this man's father as an equal, whose loyalty gave him his throne.

'You will see,' my lord says grimly. 'They have changed the laws of treason so that even to think of opposition is a capital offence. Nobody dares argue against him, there would be the knock on the door at midnight and a trip to the Tower for questioning and your wife a widow without even a trial.'

I look to the high table where the king is seated, a massive spreading bulk on his throne. He is cramming food into his mouth as we watch him, both hands up to his face, he is fatter than any man I have ever seen in my life before, his shoulders gross, his neck like an ox, his features dissolving into the moon-

shaped vat of his face, fingers like swollen puddings.

‘My God, he has blown up like a monster!’ I exclaim. ‘What has become of him? Is he sick? I would not have known him. God knows he is not the prince he was.’

‘He is a danger,’ my lord says, his voice no more than a breath. ‘To himself in his indulgences, and to others in his temper. Be warned.’

I am shaken more than I show when I go to the table for the queen’s ladies. They make a space for me and greet me by name, many of them calling me cousin. I feel the king’s little piggy eyes on me and I sweep him a deep curtsy before I sit down on my stool. Nobody else pays any attention to the beast that the prince has become, it is like a fairytale and we are all blinded by an enchantment not to see the ruin of the man in this pig of a king.

I settle to my dinner and serve myself from the common platter, the best wine is poured into my cup. I look around the court. This is my home. I have known most of these people for all of my life, and thanks to the duke’s care in marrying all the Howard children to his own advantage, I am related to most of them. Like most of them, I have served one queen after another. Like most of them, I have followed my royal mistress in the fashion of hoods: gable hood, French hood, English hood; and in the fashion of praying: papist, reformist, English Catholic. I have stumbled in Spanish and I have chattered in French, and I have sat in thoughtful silence and sewed shirts for the poor. There is not much about the Queens of England that I have not known, that I have not seen. And soon I shall see the next one and know all about her: her secrets, her hopes, and her faults. I shall watch her and I shall make my reports to my lord duke. And perhaps, even in a court grown fearful under a king who is swelling into a tyrant, even without my husband, and even without Anne, I shall learn to be happy again.

Katherine, Norfolk House, Lambeth, December 1539

And what shall I get for Christmas? I know I am to have an embroidered purse from my friend Agnes Restwold, a hand-copied page from a prayer book from Mary Lascelles (I'm so thrilled at the prospect of this I can hardly breathe) and two handkerchiefs from my grandmother. So far, so very dull indeed. But my dearest Francis is going to give me a shift of best embroidered linen, and I have woven him, with my own hands, and it has taken me days, an armband of my favourite colours. I am very pleased that he should love me so, and of course I love him too, but he has not bought me a ring as he promised, and he is sticking to his plan to go to Ireland to seek his fortune in the very next month, and then I shall be left all alone, and what is the point of that?

The court is at Greenwich for Christmas, I hoped it would be at Whitehall and then I might at least have gone to see the king eat his dinner. My uncle the duke is there, but he does not summon us; and although my grandmother went to dine she did not take me with her. Sometimes I think that nothing will ever happen for me. Nothing will ever happen at all and I will live and die an old spinster in my grandmother's service. I shall be fifteen next birthday and clearly no-one has given a single thought to my future. Who ever cares for me? My mother is dead and my father barely remembers my name. It is terribly sad. Mary Lumleigh is to be married next year, they are drawing up the contract now, and she makes much of herself and queens it over me, as though I cared for her and for her pimply betrothed. I should not want such a match if it were offered to me with a fortune attached, and so I told her, and so we have quarrelled and the lace collar she was going to give me for Christmas will be given to someone else, and I do not care about that either.

The queen should be in London by now but she has been so stupidly slow that she is delayed, so all my hopes of her great entry into London and a wonderful wedding have been put off too. It is as if the very fates themselves work to make me unhappy. I am doomed. All I want is a little dancing! Anyone would think that a girl of nearly fifteen, or at any rate fifteen next year, could go dancing once before she dies!

Of course we will have dancing here for Christmas, but that is not what I mean at all. What is the pleasure in dancing when everyone who sees you has seen you every day for a year before? What's the pleasure in a feast when every boy in the room is as familiar as the tapestries on the walls? Where's the joy in having a man's eyes on you when he is your own man, your own husband, and he would come to your bed whether you dance prettily or not? I try a special turn and curtsy that I have been practising and it does me no good at all. Nobody seems to notice except my grandmother, who sees everything, and she calls me out of the line and puts her finger under my chin and says: 'Child, there is no need to twinkle around like some slut of an Italian. We all watch you anyway.' By which I am supposed to understand that I should not dance like a lady, like an elegant young lady, with some style; but like a child.

I curtsy and say nothing. There is no point in arguing with my lady grandmother, she has such a temper she can send me from the room in a moment if I so much as open my mouth. I really do think I am very cruelly treated.

'And what's this I hear about you and young Master Dereham?' she suddenly asks. 'I thought I had warned you once already?'

'I don't know what you hear, Grandmother,' I say cleverly.

Too clever for her, because she raps my hand with her fan.

'Don't forget who you are, Katherine Howard,' she says sharply. 'When your uncle sends for you to wait on the queen, I take it you will not want to refuse because of some greensick flirtation?'

'Wait on the queen?' I go at once to the most important thing.

'Perhaps,' she says maddeningly. 'Perhaps she will have need of a maid in waiting if the girl has been gently raised and is not known to be an utter slut.'

I cannot speak, I am so desperate. 'Grandmother ... I ...'

'Never mind,' she says and waves me away back to the dancers. I clutch at her sleeve and beg to know more; but she laughs and sends me to dance. As she is watching me, I hop about like a little wooden doll, I am so correct in the steps and so polite in my deportment that you would think I had a crown on my head myself. I dance like a nun, I dance like a vestal virgin, and when I look up to see if she is impressed by my modesty she is laughing at me.

So that night, when Francis comes to the chamber door, I meet him on the threshold. 'You can't come in,' I say bluntly. 'My lady grandmother knows all about us. She warned me for my reputation.'

He looks shocked. 'But my love ...'

'I can't risk it,' I insist. 'She knows far more than we thought. God knows

what she has heard or who has told her.'

'We would not deny each other,' he says.

'No,' I say uncertainly.

'If she asks you, you must tell her that we are married in the eyes of God.'

'Yes, but ...'

'And I shall come to you as your husband now.'

'You can't.' Nothing in this world is going to prevent me from being the new queen's maid in waiting. Not even my undying love for Francis.

He puts his hand around my waist and nibbles at the nape of my neck. 'I shall be going to Ireland within days,' he whispers softly. 'You will not send me away with my heart breaking.'

I hesitate. It would be very sad for his heart to break, but I have to be maid in waiting to the new queen, there is nothing more important than that.

'I don't want your heart to break,' I say. 'But I have to take a post in the queen's household, and who knows what might happen?'

He lets me go abruptly. 'Oh, so you think you're going to go to court?' he asks crossly. 'And flirt with some great lord? Or one of your noble cousins or someone? A Culpepper or a Mowbray or a Neville or someone?'

'I don't know,' I say. It is really marvellous how dignified I can be. You would think I was my grandmother. 'I cannot discuss my plans with you now.'

'Kitty!' he cries, he is torn between anger and lust. 'You are my wife, you are my promised wife! You are my own beloved!'

'I must ask you to withdraw,' I say very grandly, and I close the door in his face and run and take a flying leap into my bed.

'What now?' asks Agnes. At the far end of the dormitory they have drawn the curtains around the bed, some boy and some loose girl are lovemaking, and I can hear his eager panting and her sighing.

'Can't you be quiet?' I shout down the long room. 'It's really shocking. It is offensive to a young maid such as me. It's shocking. It really shouldn't be allowed.'

Anne, Calais, December 1539

In all this long journey I have started to learn how I shall be when I am queen. The English ladies that my lord the king sent to be with me have spoken English to me every day, and my lord Southampton has been at my side at every town we have entered, and has prompted me and guided me in the most helpful way. They are a most formal and dignified people, everything has to be done by rote, by rule, and I am learning to hide my excitement at the greetings, the music, and the crowds who everywhere come out to see me. I don't want to seem like the country sister of a minor duke, I want to be like a queen, a true Queen of England.

At every town I have had a welcome of people thronging in the streets, calling out my name and bringing me posies and gifts. Most towns present me with a loyal address and give me a purse of gold or some valuable jewellery. But my arrival in my first English town, the port of Calais, is dwarfing everything that went before. It is a mighty English castle with a great walled town around it, built to withstand any attack from France, the enemy, just outside the powerfully guarded gates. We enter by the south gate that looks over the road towards the kingdom of France and we are greeted by an English nobleman, Lord Lisle, and dozens of gentlemen and noblemen, dressed very fine, with a small army of men dressed in red and blue livery.

I thank God for sending me Lord Lisle to be my friend and advisor in these difficult days for he is a kind man, with something of the look of my father. Without him, I would be speechless from terror as well as from my lack of English. He is dressed as fine as a king himself, and there are so very many English noblemen with him that they are like a sea of furs and velvet. But he takes my cold hand in his big warm grip and he smiles at me and says 'Courage'. I may not know the word till I ask my interpreter, but I know a friend when I see one, and I find a small peaky smile and then he tucks my hand into the crook of his arm and leads me down the broad street to the harbour. The bells are pealing a welcome to me, and all the merchants' wives and children are lining the streets to have a look at me and the apprentice boys and servants all shout, 'Anna of

Cleves, hurrah!’ as I go by.

In the harbour there are two huge ships, the king’s own, one called the *Sweepstake*, which means something about gambling, and one named the *Lion*, both flying banners and sounding the trumpets as they see me approach. They have been sent from England to bring me to the king, and with them comes a huge fleet to escort me. The gunners fire off rounds, and the cannon roar, and the whole town is drenched in smoke and noise, but this is a great compliment and so I smile and try not to flinch. We go on to the Staple Hall where the mayor of the town and the merchants give me greetings in long speeches and two purses of gold and Lady Lisle, who is here to greet me with her husband, presents my ladies in waiting to me.

They all accompany me back to the king’s house, the Chequer, and I stand as one after another comes forwards and says their name and presents their compliments and makes their bow or their curtsy. I am so tired and so overwhelmed by the whole day that I feel my knees start to weaken underneath me but still they come on, one after another. My lady Lisle stands beside me and says each name in my ear and tells me a little about them, but I cannot understand her words and, besides, there are too many strangers to take it all in. It is a dizzying crowd of people; but they are all smiling kindly at me, and they all bow so respectfully. I ought to be glad of such attention and not overwhelmed by it, I know.

As soon as the last lady, maid, servant and page has made their bow, and I can decently leave, I say that I should like to go to my privy chamber before we dine, and my interpreter tells them; but still I cannot be at peace. As soon as we walk into my private rooms there are more strange faces waiting to be presented as servants and members of my privy chamber. I am so exhausted by all these introductions that I say I should like to go to my bedchamber, but even here I cannot be alone. In comes Lady Lisle and other ladies and the maids in waiting to make sure that I have everything I need. A full dozen of them come in and pat the bed and straighten the curtains and stand about, looking at me. In absolute desperation I say that I want to pray and go into the little closet beside the bedchamber and close the door on their helpful faces.

I can hear them waiting outside, like an audience waiting for a fool to come out and juggle or play tricks: a little puzzled at the delay, but good-humoured enough. I lean back against the door and touch my forehead with the back of my hand. I am cold and yet I am sweating, as if I were ill with a fever. I must do this. I know I can do this, I know I can be Queen of England, and a good queen

as well. I will learn their language; already I can understand most of what is said to me, though I stumble over speech. I will learn all these new names and their rank and the proper way to address them so that I won't always have to stand like a little doll with a puppet-master beside me, telling me what to do. As soon as I get to England I shall see about ordering some new clothes. My ladies and I, in our German dress, look like fat little ducks beside these English swans. They go about half-naked with hardly a hood on their heads at all, they flit about in their light gowns, while we are strapped into fustian as if we were lumpy parcels. I shall learn to be elegant, I shall learn to be pleasing, I shall learn to be a queen. I shall certainly learn to meet a hundred people without sweating for fear.

It strikes me now that they will be finding my behaviour very odd. First, I say I want to dress for dinner, and then I step into a room that is little more than a cupboard, and make them wait outside. I will seem ridiculously devout or, worse, they will know I am painfully shy. As soon as this occurs to me I freeze inside the little room. I feel such a country-born dolt. I hardly know how to find the courage to come out.

I listen at the door. It has gone very quiet outside, perhaps they have become tired of waiting for me. Perhaps they have all gone off to change their clothes again. Hesitantly, I open the door a crack and look out.

There is only one lady left in the room, seated at the window, calmly looking down into the yard below, watching. As she hears the betraying creak of the door she looks up and her face is kind and interested.

'Lady Anne?' she says, and she rises to her feet and curtsies to me.

'I ...'

'I am Jane Boleyn,' she says, guessing rightly that I cannot remember a single name from the blur of this morning. 'I am one of your ladies in waiting.'

As she says her name I am utterly confused. She must be some relation to Anne Boleyn; but what is she doing in my chamber? Surely she cannot be here to wait on me? Surely she should be in exile, or in disgrace?

I look around for someone to translate for us, and she smiles and shakes her head. She points to herself and says 'Jane Boleyn,' and then she says, very slowly and steadily: 'I will be your friend.'

And I understand her. Her smile is warm and her face honest. I realise that she means that she will be a friend to me; and the thought of having a friend I can trust in this sea of new people and new faces brings a lump into my throat and I blink back the tears and I put out my hand to her to shake, as if I were a half-simple countrywoman in the market place.

‘Boleyn?’ I stammer.

‘Yes,’ she says, taking my hand in her cool grip. ‘And I know all about how fearful it is to be Queen of England. Who would know better than me how hard it can be? I will be your friend,’ she says again. ‘You can trust me.’ And she shakes my hand with a warm grasp, and I believe her, and we both smile.

Jane Boleyn, Calais, December 1539

She will never please him, poor child, not in a lifetime, not in a thousand years. I am amazed that his ambassadors did not warn him, they have been thinking entirely of making a league against France and Spain, of a Protestant league against the Catholic kings, and thinking nothing of the tastes of King Henry.

There is nothing she can do to become the sort of woman that pleases him. His preference runs to quick-witted, dainty, smiling women with an air that promises everything. Even Jane Seymour, though she was quiet and obedient, radiated a docile warmth that hinted at sensual pleasure. But this one is like a child, awkward like a child, with a child's honest gaze and an open, friendly smile. She looks thrilled when someone bows low to her, and when she first saw the ships in the harbour she seemed about to applaud. When she is tired or overwhelmed she goes pale like a sulky child and looks ready to weep. Her nose goes red when she is anxious, like a peasant in the cold. If it were not so tragic this would be the highest of comedies, this gawky girl stepping into the diamond-heeled shoes of Anne Boleyn. What can they have been thinking of when they imagined she could ever rise to it?

But her very awkwardness gives me a key to her. I can be her friend, her great friend and ally. She will need a friend, poor lost girl, she will need a friend who knows the way around a court such as ours. I can introduce her to all the things she will need to know, teach her the skills she must learn. And who should know better than I, who have been at the heart of the greatest court that England ever had, and seen it burn itself up? Who better than me to keep a queen safe, who watched one destroy herself and destroy her family with her? I have promised to be this new queen's friend and I can honour that promise. She is young, only twenty-four years old, but she will grow. She is ignorant but she can be taught. She is inexperienced but life will correct that. I can do much for this quaint young woman, and it will be a real pleasure and an opportunity to be her guide and mentor.

Katherine, Norfolk House, Lambeth, December 1539

My uncle is coming to see my grandmother and I must be ready in case he sends for me. We all know what is about to happen but I am as excited as if I were waiting for a great surprise. I have practised my walk towards him and my curtsy. I have practised my look of astonishment and my delighted smile at the wonderful news. I like to be prepared, I like to be rehearsed, and I have had Agnes and Joan play the part of my uncle until I am step-perfect in my approach, my curtsy and my genteel cry of joy.

The maids' room is sick of me, sick as if they had eaten a glut of green apples, but I tell them it is only to be expected, I am a Howard, of course I will be called to court, of course I will serve the queen and, sadly, of course they will be left behind; what a pity.

They say I will have to learn German, and there will be no dancing. I know this is a lie. She will live like a queen and if she is dull, I shall only shine more brightly in contrast. They say it is well-known that she will live in seclusion, and the Dutch eat no meat but only cheese and butter all day. I know this is a lie – why else would the queen's apartments at Hampton Court have been repainted but for her to have a court and guests? They say that all her ladies have already been appointed and half of them have already left to meet her in Calais. My uncle is coming to tell me that I have missed my chance.

This, finally, frightens me. I know that the king's nieces, Lady Margaret Douglas and the Marchioness of Dorset, have agreed to be the chiefest of her ladies and I fear it is too late for me. 'No,' I say to Mary Lascelles, 'he cannot be coming to tell me I must stay here. He cannot be coming to tell me that I am too late, that there will be no place left for me.'

'And if he does then let it be a lesson to you,' she says firmly. 'Let it be a lesson to you to mend your ways. You don't deserve to go to the queen's court as light as you have been with Francis Dereham. No true lady should have you in her chambers when you have played the slut with such a man.'

This is so unkind that I give a little gasp and feel the tears coming.

'Now don't cry,' she says wearily. 'Don't cry, Katherine. You will only

make your eyes red.'

Instantly, I hold my nose to stop the tears coming. 'But if he tells me I am to stay here and do nothing I shall die!' I say thickly. 'I will be fifteen next year, and then I will be eighteen, and then I will be nineteen and then I will be twenty and too old for marriage and I will die here, serving my grandmother, never having been anywhere, and never seen anything, and never danced at court.'

'Oh, nonsense!' she exclaims crossly. 'Can you never think of anything but your vanity, Katherine? Besides, some would think you have done quite enough already for a maid of fourteen.'

'Duthing,' I say, with my nose still pinched. I let it go and press my cool fingers against my cheeks. 'I have done nothing.'

'Of course, you will serve the queen,' she says scornfully. 'Your uncle is not likely to miss such a place for one of his family, however badly you have behaved.'

'The girls said ...'

'The girls are jealous of you because you are going, you ninny. If you were staying they would be all over you with pretend sympathy.'

This is so true that even I can see it. 'Oh, yes.'

'So wash your face again and come to my lady's chamber. Your uncle will be here at any moment.'

I go as fast as I can, pausing only to tell Agnes and Joan and Margaret that I know full well I am going to court and that I never believed their spite for a moment, and then I hear them shouting: 'Katherine! Katherine! He is here!' and I dash down to my lady's own parlour and there he is, my uncle, standing before the fire and warming his backside.

It would take more than a fire to warm this man through. My grandmother says that he is the king's hammer; whenever there is hard and dirty work to do it is my uncle who leads the English army to batter the enemy into submission. When the North rose up to defend the old religion just two years ago when I was a little girl, it was my uncle who brought the rebels to their senses. He promised them a pardon and then cozened them to the gallows. He saved the king's throne and he saved the king the trouble of fighting his own battles and putting down a great rebellion. My grandmother says that he knows no other argument but the noose. She says he strung up thousands even though inwardly, he agreed with their cause. His own faith did not stop him. Nothing will stop him. I can see by his face that he is a hard man, a man not easily softened; but he has come to see me and I will show him what sort of niece he has.

I dip down into a deep curtsy, as we have practised over and over again in the maids' chamber, leaning a little forwards so that my lord can see the tempting curve of my breasts pressed at the top of my gown. Slowly I look up at his face before I rise, so that he sees me almost on my knees before him, giving him a moment to think about the pleasure of what I could be doing down there, my little nose almost against his breeches. 'My lord uncle,' I breathe as I rise, as if I were whispering it in his ear in bed. 'Give you a very good day, sir.'

'Good God,' he says bluntly, and my grandmother gives a little 'Huh' of amusement.

'She is a ... a credit to you, ma'am,' he says as I rise without wobbling and stand before him. I clasp my hands behind my back to present my breasts to their full advantage, and I arch my back too so that he can admire the slimness of my waist. With my eyes modestly cast down I could be a schoolgirl except for the thrust of my body and the little half-hidden smile.

'She is a Howard girl through and through,' says my grandmother, who has no great opinion of Howard girls, known as we are for beauty and forwardness.

'I was expecting a child,' he says as if he is very pleased to find me grown.

'A very knowing child.' She gives me a hard look to remind me that nobody wants to know what I have learned while in her care. I widen my eyes innocently. I was seven years old when I first saw a maid bedding a pageboy, I was eleven when Henry Manox first got hold of me. How did she think I would turn out?

'She will do very nicely,' he says, after he has taken a moment to recover. 'Katherine, can you dance and sing and play the lute and so on?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Read, write, in English and French, and Latin?'

I shoot an anguished look at my grandmother. I am tremendously stupid, and everyone knows it. I am so stupid that I don't even know if I should lie about it or not.

'Why would she need that?' she asks. 'The queen speaks nothing but Dutch, doesn't she?'

He nods. 'German. But the king likes an educated woman.'

The duchess smiles. 'He did once,' she says. 'The Seymour girl was no great philosopher. I think he has lost his taste for argument from his wives. Do you like an educated woman?'

He gives a little snort at this. The whole world knows that he and his wife have been parted for years, they hate each other so much.

‘Anyway, what matters most is that she pleases the queen and pleases the court,’ my uncle rules. ‘Katherine, you are to go to court and be one of the new queen’s maids in waiting.’

I beam at him.

‘You are glad to go?’

‘Yes, my lord uncle. I am very grateful,’ I remember to add.

‘You have been placed in such a position of importance to be a credit to your family,’ he says solemnly. ‘Your grandmother here tells me you are a good girl and that you know how to behave. Make sure that you do, and don’t let us down.’

I nod. I dare not look at my grandmother, who knew all about Henry Manox, and who caught me once in the upper hall with Francis, with my hand down the front of his breeches and the mark of his bite on my neck, and called me a whore in the making and a stupid slut, and gave me a cuff that made my head ring, and warned me off him again at Christmas.

‘There will be young men who may pay attention to you,’ my uncle warns, as if I have never met a young man before. I dart a look at my grandmother but she is blandly smiling. ‘Remember that nothing is more important than your reputation. Your honour must be without stain. If I hear any unbecoming gossip about you – and I mean anything, and you can be sure that I hear everything – then I will remove you immediately from court and send you not even here, but back to your step-grandmother’s house in the country at Horsham. Where I will leave you forever. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, my lord uncle.’ It comes out in a terrified whisper. ‘I promise.’

‘I will see you at court almost daily,’ he says. I am almost beginning to wish that I was not going. ‘And from time to time I shall send for you to come to my rooms and tell me how you are getting on with the queen, and so on. You will be discreet and you will not gossip. You will keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. You will take advice from your kinswoman Jane Boleyn, who is also in the queen’s rooms. You will endeavour to become close to the queen, you shall be her little friend. From the favour of princes comes wealth. Never forget it. This could be the making of you, Katherine.’

‘Yes, my lord uncle.’

‘And another thing,’ he says warningly.

‘Yes, uncle?’

‘Modesty, Katherine. It is a woman’s greatest asset.’

I sink into a curtsy, my head bowed, as modest as a nun. A laugh of derision

from my grandmother tells me that she is not persuaded. But when I look up my uncle is smiling.

‘Convincing. You can go,’ he says.

I curtsy again and I flee from the room before he can say anything worse. I have been longing to go to court for the dancing and young men and he makes it sound like going into service.

‘What did he say? What did he say?’ They are all waiting in the great hall, desperate to know the news.

‘I am to go to court!’ I crow. ‘And I am to have new gowns and new hoods and he says I will be the prettiest girl in the queen’s chamber, and there will be dancing every night, and I daresay I will never see any of you ever again.’

Anne, Calais, December 1539

The weather to cross the English Sea is, thank God, fair at last, after days of delay. I hoped that I would have a letter from home before we set sail, but though we have had to wait and wait for good weather for the crossing, no-one has written to me. I thought that Mother might have written to me; even if she is not missing me I thought she might have sent me some words of advice. I thought Amelia might already be hoping for a visit to England and might write me a letter of sisterly greeting. I could almost laugh at myself tonight, to think how low my spirits must be if I am wanting a letter from Amelia.

The only one I was certain of was my brother. I was sure I would have a letter from him. He never regained his temper with me, not in all the long preparation of leaving, and we parted on the terms that we have lived all our lives: on my side with a resentful fearfulness of his power, and on his side with an irritation that he cannot voice. I thought that he might write to me to appoint me with business to transact at the English court; surely I should be representing my country and our interests? But there are all the Cleves lords who are travelling with me, no doubt he has spoken or written to them. He must have decided that I am not fit to do business for him.

I thought at any rate that he was certain to write to me to lay down rules for my conduct. After all, he has spent his life dominating me, I did not think he would just let me go. But it seems I am free of him. Instead of being glad of that, I am uneasy. It is strange to leave my family, and none of them even send me Godspeed.

We are to set sail tomorrow in the early morning to catch the tide and I am waiting in my rooms in the king's house, the Chequer, for Lord Lisle to come for me when I hear something like an argument in the presence chamber outside. By luck my Cleves translator, Lotte, is with me and at a nod from me she crosses quietly to the door and listens to the rapid English speech. Her expression is intent, she frowns, and then, when she hears footsteps coming, she scurries back into the room and sits beside me.

Lord Lisle bows as he comes into the room but his colour is up. He smooths

down his velvet jerkin, as if to compose himself. 'Forgive me, Lady Anne,' he says. 'The house is upside down with packing. I will come for you in an hour.'

She whispers his meaning to me and I bow and smile. He glances back at the door. 'Did she hear us?' he asks Lotte bluntly, and she turns to me to see me nod. He comes closer.

'Secretary Thomas Cromwell is of your religion,' he says quietly. Lotte whispers the German words into my ear so that I can be sure of understanding him. 'He has wrongly protected some hundreds of Lutherans in this city which is under my command.'

I understand the words, of course, but not their significance.

'They are heretics,' he says. 'They deny the authority of the king as a spiritual leader, and they deny the sacred miracle of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that his wine becomes blood. This is the belief of the Church of England. To deny it is a heresy punished with death.'

I put my hand gently on Lotte's arm. I know these are most perilous matters, but I don't know what I should say.

'Secretary Cromwell himself could be charged with heresy if the king knew that he had sheltered these men,' Lord Lisle says. 'I was telling his son, Gregory, that these men should be charged, whoever protects them. I was warning him that I cannot look to one side, I was warning him that good Englishmen think as I do, that God will not be mocked.'

'I know nothing of these English matters,' I say carefully. 'I wish only to be guided by my husband.' I think briefly of my brother who has charged me with bringing my husband away from these Papist superstitions into the clarity of reform. I think I shall have to disappoint him again.

Lord Lisle nods, he bows and steps back. 'Forgive me,' he says. 'I should not have troubled you with this. I just wanted to make clear that I resent Thomas Cromwell's protection of these people and that I am wholly loyal to the king and to his church.'

I nod, for what else can I say or do? And he goes out of the room. I turn to Lotte.

'That's not quite right,' she says very quietly. 'He did accuse the Master Cromwell of protecting Lutherans, but the son, Gregory Cromwell, accused him of being a secret Papist, and said that he would be watched. They were threatening each other.'

'What does he expect me to do?' I ask blankly. 'He can hardly think that I would judge on such a matter?'

She looks troubled. 'Perhaps to speak to the king? To influence him?'

'Lord Lisle as good as told me that in his eyes I am a heretic myself. I deny that the wine turns into blood. Anyone of any sense must know that such a thing cannot happen.'

'Do they really execute heretics in England?' the woman asks nervously.

I nod.

'How?'

'They burn them at the stake.'

At her aghast expression I am about to explain that the king knows of my faith and is supposed to be allying with my Protestant brother and his league of Protestant dukes; but there is a shout at the door and the ships are ready to leave.

'Come on,' I say with a sudden rush of bravado. 'Let's go anyway, whatever the dangers. Nothing can be worse than Cleves.'



Setting sail from an English port on an English ship feels like the start of a new life. Most of my companions from Cleves will leave me now, so there are more leave-takings, and then I board the ship and we cast off, the rowing barges take the ships into tow out of the harbour, and they raise the sails and they catch the wind and the sails start to creak and the ship lifts up as if it would take flight, and now, at this moment, I feel truly that I am a queen going to my country, like a queen in a story.

I go to the bow and stare over the side at the moving water, at the crest of white waves on the black sea, and wonder when I shall see my new home, my kingdom, my England. All around me are the other little lights on the ships that are sailing with us. It is a fleet of ships, fifty great vessels, the queen's fleet, and I am coming to realise the wealth and power of my new country.

We are to sail all the day, they say the sea is calm but the waves look very high and dangerous to me. The little ships climb up one wall of water and then belly down to the trough between the waves. Sometimes we lose sight of the other ships in the fleet altogether. The sails billow and creak as if they would tear, and the English sailors haul on ropes and dash around the deck like blasphemous madmen. I watch the dawn break, a grey sun over a grey sea, and I feel the immensity of the water all around me and even beneath me, then I go to rest in my cabin. Some of the ladies are sick, but I feel well. Lady Lisle sits with me for some of the day and some of the others, Jane Boleyn among them. I shall

have to learn the names of all the others. The day goes slowly by, I go up on deck but all I can see are the ships around us, almost as far as I can see is the English fleet, keeping company with me. I should feel proud at this attention being paid to me, but more than anything else I feel uncomfortable at being the centre and the cause of so much trouble and activity. The sailors on the ship all pull off their caps and bow whenever I come out of the cabin, and two of the ladies always have to escort me, even if it is just to the prow of the ship. After a while, I feel so conspicuous, so restless, that I force myself to sit still in my cabin and watch the waves going up and down through the little window rather than inconvenience everyone by wandering about.

The first sight I have of England is a dark shadow on darkening seas. It is getting late by the time we come into a tiny port called Deal, but even though it is dark and raining, I am greeted by even more grand people. They take me to rest in the castle, and to eat, and there are hundreds, truly hundreds, of people who come to kiss my hand and welcome me to my country. In a haze I meet lords and their ladies, a bishop, the warden of the castle, some more ladies who will serve in my chamber, some maids who will be my companions. Clearly, I will never be alone again for another moment in all my life.

As soon as we have eaten we are all to move on, there is a strict plan as to where we shall stay and where we shall dine, but they ask me very courteously, am I ready to travel now? I learn quickly that this does not mean, in truth, would I like to leave? It means, that the plan says we should go now, and they are waiting for me to give my assent.

So even though it is evening and I am so tired I would give a fortune to rest here, I climb into the litter that my brother equipped for me at such begrudged expense, and the lords mount their horses and the ladies mount theirs and we rattle on the road in the darkness with soldiers before us and behind us as if we were an invading army, and I remind myself that I am queen now, and if this is how queens travel and how they are served then I must become accustomed to it, and not long for a quiet bed and a meal without an audience watching my every move.

We stay this night in the castle in Dover, arriving in darkness. The next day I am so weary I can hardly rise, but there are half a dozen maids holding my shift and my gown and my hairbrush and my hood, and maids in waiting standing behind them, and ladies in waiting behind them, and a message comes from the Duke of Suffolk as to whether I would like to journey on to Canterbury once I have said my prayers and broken my fast? I know from this that he is anxious

that we should leave and that I should hurry to say my prayers and eat, and so I say that I shall be delighted, and that I myself am keen to press on.

This is clearly a lie since it has been raining all the night and now it is getting heavier and it is starting to hail. But everyone prefers to believe that I am anxious to see the king, and my ladies wrap me up as well as they can and then we trudge out of the courtyard with a gale blowing, and we set off up the road they call Watling Street to the town of Canterbury.

The archbishop himself, Thomas Cranmer, a gentle man with a kind smile, greets me on the road outside the city, and rides alongside my litter as we travel the last half a mile. I stare out through the driving rain; this was the great pilgrim road for the faithful going to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket at the cathedral. I can see the spire of the church long before I can see even the walls of the town, it is built so high and so beautiful, and the light catches it through dark clouds as if God was touching the holy place. The road is paved here and every other house alongside was built to accommodate pilgrims, who used to come from all over Europe to pray at this most beautiful shrine. This was once one of the great holy sites of the world – just a few short years ago.

It's all changed now. Changed as much as if they had thrown the church down. My mother has warned me not to remark on what we had heard of the king's great changes, nor on what I see – however shocking. The king's own commissioners went to the shrine of the great saint and took the treasure that had been offered at the shrine. They went into the vaults and raided the very coffin that held the saint's body. It is said that they took his martyred body and threw it on the midden outside the city walls, they were so determined to destroy this sacred place.

My brother would say it is a good thing that the English have turned their backs on superstition and Popish practices, but my brother does not see that the houses for pilgrims have been taken over by bawdy houses and inns and there are beggars without anywhere to go all along the roads into Canterbury. My brother does not know that half the houses in Canterbury were hospitals for the poor and sick and that the church paid for poor pilgrims to stay and be nursed back to health and that the nuns and monks spent their lives serving the poor. Now our soldiers have to push their way through a murmuring crowd of people who are looking for the holy refuge that they were promised; but it has all gone. I take care to say nothing when our cavalcade turns through great gates and the archbishop dismounts from his horse to welcome me into a beautiful house that was clearly an abbey, perhaps only months ago. I look around as we go into a

beautiful hall where travellers would have been freely entertained, and where the monks would have dined. I know that my brother wants me to lead this country still further away from superstition and papacy, but he has not seen what has been spoiled in this country in the name of reform.

The windows, which were once made of coloured glass to show beautiful stories, have been smashed so carelessly that the stone is broken and the tracery of stonework is all crushed. If a naughty boy did such a thing to windows he would be whipped. High in the vaulting roof were little angels and, I think, a frieze of saints, which has been knocked out by some fool with a hammer who cared for nothing. It is foolish, I know, to grieve for things of stone; but the men who did this godly work did not do it in a godly way. They could have taken the statues down and made good the walls after. But instead, they just knocked off the heads, and left the little angel bodies headless. How this serves the will of God, I cannot know.

I am a daughter of Cleves and we have turned against papacy and rightly; but I have not seen this sort of stupidity before. I can't think why men would believe that it is a better world where something beautiful is destroyed and something broken left in its place. Then they take me to my rooms, which clearly once belonged to the prior. They have been replastered and repainted and still smell of new limewash. And here I start to realise the real reason for religious reform in this country. This beautiful building, and the lands on which it stands, the great farms which pay it rent and the flocks of sheep which bear its wool, once all belonged to the church and to the Pope. The church was the greatest landowner in England. Now all that wealth belongs to the king. For the first time I realise that this is not just a matter of the worship of God. Perhaps it is nothing to do with God. There is the greed of man here too.

There is vanity as well, perhaps. For Thomas à Becket was a saint who defied a tyrant King of England. His body lay in the crypt of this most lavish cathedral, encased in gold and jewels, and the king himself – who ordered the throwing down of this shrine – used to come here to pray for help. But now the king needs no help, and rebels are hanged in this country, and the wealth and beauty must all belong to the king. My brother would say that this is a good thing and that a country cannot have two masters.

I am wearily changing my gown for dinner when I hear another roar of guns and although it is pitch black and nearly midnight Jane Boleyn comes smiling to tell me that there are hundreds of people in the great hall come to welcome me to Canterbury.

‘Many gentlemen?’ I ask her in my stilted English.

She smiles at once, she knows that I am dreading a long line of introductions.

‘They just want to see you,’ she says clearly, pointing to her eyes. ‘You just have to wave.’ She shows me a wave and I giggle at the masque that we play to each other while I learn her language.

I point to the window. ‘Good land,’ I say.

She nods. ‘Abbey land, God’s land.’

‘Now the king’s?’

She has a wry smile. ‘The king is now head of the church, you understand? All the wealth –’ she hesitates ‘– the spiritual wealth of the church is now his.’

‘And the people are glad?’ I ask. I am so frustrated by being unable to speak fluently. ‘The bad priests are gone?’

She glances towards the door as if she would be sure that we cannot be overheard. ‘The people are not glad,’ she says. ‘The people loved the shrines and the saints, they don’t know why the candles are being taken away. They don’t know why they cannot pray for help. But you should not speak of this to anyone but me. It is the king’s will that the church should be destroyed.’

I nod. ‘He is a Protestant?’ I ask.

Her quick smile makes her eyes sparkle. ‘Oh, no!’ she says. ‘He is whatever he wishes to be. He destroyed the church so that he could marry my sister-in-law; she believed in a reformed church and the king believed with her. Then he destroyed her. He has turned the church almost back to being Catholic, the Mass is almost completely restored – but he will never give back the wealth. Who knows what he will do next? What will he believe next?’

I understand only a little of this so I turn away from her and look out of the window at the driving rain and the pitch darkness. The thought of a king who can determine not only what life his people lead but even the nature of the God they worship makes me shiver. This is a king who has thrown down the shrine of one of the greatest saints in Christendom, this is a king who has turned the great monasteries of his country into private houses. My brother was quite wrong to command me to lead this king into right-thinking. This is a king who will have his own way, and I daresay nobody can stop or turn him.

‘We should go to dinner,’ Jane Boleyn says gently to me. ‘Do not speak of these things to anyone.’

‘Yes,’ I say, and with her just one pace behind me I open my privy chamber door to the crowds of people waiting for me in my presence chamber and I face the sea of unknown smiling faces once more.

I am so delighted to be out of the rain and out of the darkness that I take a large glass of wine and eat heartily at dinner, even though I sit alone under a canopy and I am served by men who kneel to offer dishes to me. There are hundreds of people dining in the hall and hundreds more who peer in at the windows and doorways to see me as if I were some strange animal.

I will grow accustomed to this, I know that I have to; and I will. There is no point being a Queen of England and being embarrassed by servants. This stolen abbey is not even one of the great palaces of the land and yet I have never seen a place so wealthy with gildings and paintings and tapestries. I ask the archbishop if this is his own palace and he smiles and says his own house is nearby. This is a country of such great riches that it is almost unimaginable.

I do not get to my bed till the early hours of the morning and then we rise again, early, to travel on. But however early we start it still takes us forever to leave as every day there are more people coming with us. The archbishop and all his train, truly hundreds of them, are now travelling with me, and this day I am joined by more great lords who escort me into Rochester. The people line the streets to greet me and everywhere I go I smile and wave.

I wish I could remember everyone's name, but every time we stop anywhere some richly dressed man comes up and bows before me, and Lady Lisle, or Lady Southampton, or one of the other ladies whispers something in my ear, and I smile and extend my hand, and try to fix a fresh set of names into my mind. And they all look the same anyway: all dressed in rich velvet and wearing gold chains and with pearls or jewels in their hats. And there are dozens of them, hundreds of them, half of England has come to pay their compliments to me, and I cannot tell one man from another any more.

We dine in a great hall with much ceremony and Lady Browne, who is to be in charge of my maids in waiting, is presented to me. She introduces my maids by name and I smile at the unending line of Katherines and Marys and Elizabeths and Annes and Bessies and Madges, all of them pert and pretty under tiny hoods that show their hair in a way that my brother would blame as immodest, all of them dainty in little slippers, and all of them stare at me as if I were a wild white falcon landed in a chicken coop. Lady Browne especially stares me out of countenance, and I beckon Lotte and ask her to tell Lady Browne in English that I hope she will advise me about my dress and English fashions when we get to London. When she gives her my message, Lady Browne flushes and turns away and does not stare any more, and I fear that she was indeed thinking that my dress is very odd and that I am ugly.

Jane Boleyn, Rochester, December 1539

‘Advise her about her dress!’ Lady Browne hisses at me, as if it is my fault that the new Queen of England looks so outlandish. ‘Jane Boleyn, tell me! Could she not have changed her dress in Calais?’

‘Who could have advised her?’ I ask reasonably. ‘All her ladies dress the same, after all.’

‘Lord Lisle could have advised her. He could have warned her that she couldn’t come to England looking like a friar in fustian. How can I be expected to keep her maids in order when they are laughing their heads off at her? I nearly had to smack Katherine Howard. That child has been one day in royal service and already she is mimicking the queen’s walk and, what is worse, she has her to the life.’

‘Maids are always naughty. You will command them.’

‘There is no time for dressmakers until she gets to London. She will have to go on as she has begun, even if she looks like a parcel. What is she doing now?’

‘She is resting,’ I say guardedly. ‘I thought I would leave her in peace for a moment.’

‘She is to be Queen of England,’ her ladyship snaps. ‘That is not a peaceful life for any woman.’

I say nothing.

‘Should we say anything to the king? Shall I speak to my husband?’ Lady Browne asks me, her voice very low. ‘Should we not tell Secretary Cromwell that we have ... reservations? Will you say anything to the duke?’

I think quickly. I swear that I am not going to be the first to speak against this queen. ‘Perhaps you should speak to Sir Anthony,’ I say. ‘Privately, as his wife.’

‘Shall I tell him that we are agreed? Surely my lord Southampton realises that she is not fit to be queen. She is so graceless! And all but mute!’

‘I have no opinion, myself,’ I say rapidly.

She laughs at once. ‘Oh, Jane Boleyn, you always have an opinion; not much ever escapes you.’

‘Perhaps. But if the king has chosen her because she brings with her the Protestant alliance, if my lord Cromwell has chosen her because it makes us safe against Spain and France, then perhaps the fact that her hood is the size of a house will not matter to him. She can always change her hood. And I would not want to be the one to suggest to the king that the woman he has solemnly and unbreakably betrothed is not fit to be queen.’

That stops her in her tracks. ‘You think I would be mistaken to criticise her?’

I think of the white-faced girl who peeped out of the closet in Calais, too shy and too frightened to sit in a room with her own court, and I find that I want to defend her against this unkindness. ‘Well, I have no criticism to make of her,’ I say. ‘I am her lady in waiting. I may advise her as to her gowns or her hair if she asks me; but I would not have one word to say against her.’

‘Or at any rate, not yet,’ Lady Browne amends coldly. ‘Until you see an advantage for yourself.’

I let it pass for just as I am about to answer the door opens and the guard announces: ‘Mistress Catherine Carey, the queen’s maid in waiting.’

It is her. My niece. I have to face the child at last. I find a smile and I hold out my hands to her. ‘Little Catherine!’ I exclaim. ‘How you have grown!’

She takes my hands but she does not turn up her face to kiss my cheek. She looks at me quietly, as if she is taking the measure of me. The last time I saw her was when she stood behind her Aunt Anne the queen on the scaffold, and held her cloak as the queen put her head on the block. The last time she saw me was outside the courtroom when they called my name to go in to give evidence. I remember how she looked at me then: curiously. She looked at me so curiously, as if she had never seen such a woman before.

‘Are you cold? How was your journey? Will you have some wine?’ I am drawing her to the fire and she comes, but she is not eager. ‘This is Lady Browne,’ I say. Her curtsy is good, she is graceful. She has been well taught.

‘And how is your mother? And your father?’

‘They are well.’ Her voice is clear with just a hint of the country in her speech. ‘My mother sent you a letter.’

She brings it out of her pocket and hands it to me. I take it over to the light of the large square candle that we use in the royal household and break the seal.

Jane,

So starts Mary Boleyn, without a word of a title as if I did not hold the very

name of her house in my name, as if I were not Lady Rochford while she lives at Rochford Hall. As if she did not have my inheritance and my house while I have hers, which is nothing.

Long ago I chose the love of my husband over the vanity and danger of the court, and we perhaps would all have been happier if you and my sister had done the same – God have mercy on her soul. I have no desire to return to court but I wish you and the new Queen Anne better fortune than before, and I hope that your ambitions bring you the happiness you seek, and not what some might think you deserve.

My uncle has commanded the attendance of my daughter Catherine at court and in obedience to him, she will arrive for the New Year. It is my instruction to her that she obeys only the king and her uncle, that she is guided only by my advice and her own good conscience. I have told her that, at the end, you were no friend to my sister nor my brother and advised her to treat you with the respect you deserve.

Mary Stafford

I am shaking after I have read this note and I re-read it again as if it might be different the second time. The respect I deserve? The respect I deserve? What did I do but lie and deceive to save the two of them till the very last moment, and then what did I do but protect the family from the disaster that they brought down on us? What could I do more? What should I have done differently? I obeyed the duke my uncle as I was bound to do, I did as he commanded me, and my deserts are these: that I am his faithful kinswoman and honoured as such.

Who is she to call me a woman who might have been a good wife? I loved my husband with every inch of my soul and being and I would have been everything to him if it were not for her and her sister and the net they made for him that he could not break, and that I could not break for him. Would he not be alive today if he had not gone down with his sister's disgrace? Would he not be my husband and the father of our son today, if he had not been named with Anne and beheaded with Anne? And what did Mary do to save him? What did she ever do but suit herself?

I could scream with sheer rage and despair that she should set these thoughts running again in my head. That she should doubt my love of George, that she

should reproach me! I am lost for words at the malice of her letter, at the veiled accusation. What else could I have done? I want to shout into her face. You were there, you were hardly the saviour of George and Anne. What else could any of us have done?

But she was always like this, she and her sister; they always had a way to make me feel that they saw better, understood better, considered better. From the moment that I married George I was aware that his sisters were supposed to be finer young women than I: one the king's lover and then the other. One, in the end, the king's wife and Queen of England. They were born for greatness! The Boleyn Sisters! And I was only ever a sister-in-law. Well, so be it. I have not got where I am today, I have not borne witness and sworn oaths to be reprimanded by a woman who ran away at the first sign of danger and married a man to hide in the country and pray Protestant prayers that good times would come.

Catherine, her daughter, looks at me curiously. 'Did she show you this?' I ask, my voice shaking. Lady Browne looks at me, avidly inquisitive.

'No,' Catherine says.

I put it into the fire, as if it were evidence against me. The three of us watch it burn to grey ash. 'I will reply later,' I say. 'It was not at all important. For now, I will go and see that they have prepared your room.'

It is an excuse to get away from the two of them and the soft ash from the notepaper in the fire. I go quickly out and I call the maids and scold them for inattention, and then I go quietly to my own room and lean my hot forehead against the cool, thick glass. I shall ignore this slander, I shall ignore this insult, I shall ignore this enmity. Whatever its cause. I live in the heart of the court. I serve my king and my family. In time they shall all acknowledge me as the finest of the family, the Boleyn girl who served king and family to the end, never shrinking, never faltering, even if the king has grown fat and dangerous, and the family are all dead but me.

Katherine, Rochester, New Year's Eve 1539

Now let me see, what do I have? What do I have now I am practically a grown-up lady at court?

I have three new gowns, which is good, but it is hardly a vast wardrobe for a girl who expects to be much observed and much commented on. I have three new hoods to match, which are very pretty but none of them are trimmed with anything more than gold lace and I see that many of the ladies of court have pearls and even precious stones on their hoods. I have some good gloves and a new cloak and a muff and a couple of lace collars, but I cannot say that I am overly indulged in my choice or quantity of clothes. And what is the point of being at court if I do not have a great deal of pretty things to wear?

For all my great hopes of court life, it is not proving to be very merry. We came down by boat from Gravesend in the worst weather I have ever seen, driving rain and terrible wind so my hood was all blown about and my hair a mess, and my new velvet cape got wet and I am sure it will be water-marked. The queen-to-be greeted us with a face as blank as a fish. They may say she is tired but she seems just amazed by everything, like some peasant come to town for the first time, she stares astounded at the commonest of sights. When people cheer for her she smiles and waves like a child at a travelling fair, but when she is called upon to greet a lord come to her court, she forever looks around for one of her Cleves companions and mutters to them in their stupid language, puts out her hand as if she was serving a joint of meat and says nothing in English at all.

When I was presented to her she barely looked at me, she looked at all of us new girls as if she did not know what we were doing in her chamber, nor what she should do with us. I thought she might at least ask for music and I have a song note-perfect and ready to sing but, absurdly, she said that she must pray and she went off and shut herself in her closet. My cousin Jane Boleyn says that she does that when she wants to be alone, and that it is a sign not of piety, but of her shyness, and that we must be kind to her and merry with her and she will soon learn our language and be less simple.

I can't see it myself. She has a shift under her gown that comes up nearly to

her chin. She has a hood that must be a ton in weight crammed on her head, she is broad in the shoulders and she could be any size in the hips under that pudding-bowl of a gown. Lord Southampton seems very taken with her, but perhaps he is just relieved that the journey will soon be over and his job done. The English ambassadors who were at Cleves with her chat to her in her language and then she is all smiles and chatters back at them like a quacking duckling. Lady Lisle seems to like her. Jane Boleyn is often at her side. But I am afraid that this is not going to be a very merry court for me, and what is the point of a court at all if it is not merry with dancing and flirtation? Indeed, what is the point of anyone being a young queen at all if she is not going to be merry and vain and silly?

Jane Boleyn, Rochester, New Year's Eve 1539

There is to be a bull-baiting after dinner and Lady Anne is shown to the window that overlooks the courtyard so that she can have the best view. As soon as she appears at the window a cheer goes up from the men in the yard below, even though they are bringing out the dogs and it is rare for common men to break off from gambling at such a moment. She smiles and waves to them. She is always easy with the ordinary people, and they like her for it. Everywhere we have been on the road she has a smile for the people who come out to see her, and she will blow a kiss to little children who throw posies of flowers in her litter. Everyone is surprised at this. Not since Katherine of Aragon have we had a queen who is so smiling and pleasant to the common people, and not since Aragon has England relished the novelty of a foreign princess. No doubt this one will learn to be easy with the court too, in time.

I stand beside her on one side and one of her German friends is on the other so that he can tell her what is being said. Lord Lisle is there, of course, and Archbishop Cranmer. He is devoting himself to being pleasing, of course. She may be Cromwell's candidate, and thus an asset for his rival; but his worst fear must have been that the king would bring in a Papist princess, and this reforming archbishop would see his church turned back to the old ways once more.

Some of the court are at the windows to see the baiting, some are gossiping quietly at the back of the room. I cannot hear exactly what is being said, but I think there are more than Lady Browne who think that the Lady Anne is not well-suited to the great position that she has been called on to fill. They judge her harshly for her shyness and her lack of speech. They blame her for her clothes and they laugh at her for not being able to dance or sing or play a lute. This is a cruel court, devoted to frivolity, and she is a girl easy to use as a butt for sarcasm. If this goes on, what will happen? She and the king are all but married. Nothing can stop the wedding. He can hardly send her home in disgrace, can he? For the crime of wearing a heavy hood? Not even the king can do that, surely? Not even this king can do it? It would bring Cromwell's treaty down about his ears, it would bring down Cromwell himself, it would leave

England friendless facing France and Spain without any Protestant alliance at our back. The king will never risk it, I am sure. But I cannot imagine what will happen.

Down in the yard below they are getting ready to release the bull, his handler unclips the rope from the ring in his nose, skips out of the way, vaults over the boards and the men who have been sitting on the wooden benches rise to their feet and start to shout bets. The bull is a great animal with heavy shoulders and a thick, ugly head. He turns this way and that, spotting the dogs from one little eye and then the other. The dogs are none too eager to be the first to run in, they are afraid of him in his power and his strength.

I feel a little breathless. I have not seen a bull-baiting since I was last at court, I had forgotten what a savage excitement it is to see the yapping dogs and the great beast that they will pull down. It is rare to see a bull as big as this one, his muzzle scarred from earlier fights, his horns barely blunted. The dogs hang back and bark, sharp, persistent barks with the thrilling sound of fear behind them. He turns from one to another, threatening them with the sweep of his horns, and they fall back into a circle around him.

One rushes in, and at once the bull spins, you would not think such a great animal could move so quickly, his head ploughs low and there is a scream like a human cry from the dog as the horns buffet his body, his bones are broken for sure. He is down and cannot crawl away, he is yelping like a baby, the bull stands over him, his head down, and grinds the side of his great horn into the screaming dog.

I find I am crying out, though whether for the dog or for the bull I couldn't say. There is blood on the cobbles but the bull's attack has left him unguarded to the other dogs, and another darts in and takes a bite at his ear. He turns, but at once another fastens on his throat and hangs there for a moment, his white teeth bared and gleaming in the torchlight, while the bull bellows for the first time and the roar of it makes all the maids scream and me among them, and everyone is now crowding to the windows to see as the bull rakes his head round and the dogs fall back and one of them howls with rage.

I find I am trembling, crying out for the dogs to go on! Go on! I want to see more, I want to see all of it, and Lady Anne beside me is laughing, she is excited too, she points to the bull where his ear is bleeding, and I nod and say, 'He will be so angry! He will kill them for sure!' And then suddenly, a bulky man I don't know, a stranger smelling of sweat and wine and horses, pushes in front of us, into the window bay where we are standing, pushes rudely by me, and says to

the Lady Anne, 'I bring you greetings from the King of England,' and he kisses her, full on the mouth.

At once I turn to shout for the guards. This is an old man of nearly fifty, a fat man, old enough to be her father. She thinks at once that he is some drunk fool who has managed to push his way into her chamber. She has greeted a hundred men, a thousand men, with a smile and an extended hand and now this man, wearing a marbled cape and a hood pulled over his head, comes up to her and pushes his face into hers and puts his slobbery mouth on hers.

Then I bite off my shout of alarm, I see his height, and I see the men who have come in with him in matching capes, and I know him at once for the king. At the same moment, like a miracle, at once he does not seem old and fat and distasteful. As soon as I know he is the king I see the prince that I have always seen, the one they called the handsomest prince in Christendom, the one that I was in love with myself. This is Henry, King of England, one of the most powerful men in the entire world, the dancer, the musician, the sportsman, the courtly knight, the lover. This is the idol of the English court, as big as the bull in the yard below us, as dangerous as a bull when wounded, as likely to turn on any challenger and kill.

I don't curtsy because he is in disguise. I learned from Katherine of Aragon herself that one should never see through his disguises, he loves to unmask and wait for everyone to exclaim that they had no idea who the handsome stranger was, that they admired him for himself, without knowing that he was our wonderful young king.

And so, because I cannot warn Lady Anne, the scene in our gallery becomes a baiting to equal what is going on, bloodily, in the courtyard below us. She pushes him away, two firm hands against his fat chest, and her face, sometimes so dull and stolid, is burning with colour. She is a modest woman, an untouched girl, and she is horrified that this man should come and insult her. She rubs the back of her hand over her face to erase the taste of his lips. Then, terribly, she turns her head and spits his saliva from her mouth. She says something in German that needs no translation, clearly it is a curse against this commoner who has presumed to touch her, to breathe his wine-scented breath into her face.

He stumbles back, he, the great king, almost falls back before her contempt. Never in his life has a woman pushed him away, never in his life has he ever seen any expression in any woman's face but desire and welcome. He is stunned. In her flushed face and bright, offended gaze he sees the first honest opinion of himself that he has ever known. In a terrible, blinding flash he sees himself as he

really is: an old man, long past his prime, no longer handsome, no longer desirable, a man that a young woman would push roughly away from her because she could not stand his smell, because she could not bear his touch.

He reels back as if he has taken a mortal blow to the face, to his heart. I have never seen him like this before. I can almost see the thoughts running behind his stunned, flabby face. The sudden realisation that he is not handsome, the realisation that he is not desirable, the terrible realisation that he is old and ill and one day he will die. He is no longer the handsomest prince in Christendom, he is a foolish old man who thought that he could put on a cape and a hood and ride out to meet a girl of twenty-four, and she would admire the handsome stranger, and fall in love with the king.

He is shocked to his soul, and now he looks foolish and confused like a muddled grandfather. Lady Anne is magnificent, she is drawn up to her full height and she is angry, she is powerful, she is standing on her dignity and she shoots a look at him which dismisses him from her court as a man that no-one would want to know. 'Leave me,' she says in heavy-accented English, and she turns her shoulder on him as if she would push him away again.

She looks around the room for a guard to arrest this intruder, and she notices for the first time that no-one is springing to save her, we are all appalled, no-one knows what they can say or do to recover this moment: Lady Anne outraged, the king humbled in his own eyes, thrown down before us all. The truth of the king's age and decay is suddenly, painfully, unforgiveably apparent. Lord Southampton steps forwards but is lost for words; Lady Lisle looks at me and I see my shock mirrored in her face. It is a moment of such intense embarrassment that all of us – we skilled flatterers, courtiers, liars – are lost for words. The world we have been building for thirty years, around our prince who is ageless, eternally handsome, irresistibly desirable, has been shattered about our ears – and by a woman we none of us respect.

He turns wordlessly, he almost stumbles as he goes, his stinking leg giving way beneath him, and Katherine Howard, that clever, clever little girl, catches her breath in a gasp of absolute admiration and says to him: 'Ooh! Forgive me, sir! But I am new to court myself, a stranger like you. May I ask – who are you? What is your name?'

Katherine, Rochester, New Year's Eve 1539

I am the only person to see him come in. I don't like bull-baiting, or bears, or cockfighting, or anything like that, I think it's just downright nasty – and so I am standing a little back from the windows. And I am looking round, actually, I am looking at a young man that I had seen earlier, such a handsome young man with a cheeky smile, when I see the six of them come in, old men, they must all be thirty at the least, and the big old king at the front, and they are all wearing the same sort of cape, like a masquing costume, so I guess at once that it is him, and that he has come in disguise like a knight errant, silly old fool, and that he will greet her and she will pretend not to know him, and then there will be dancing. Really, I am delighted to see him because this makes it a certainty that there will be dancing and so I am wondering how I can encourage the handsome young man to be near me in the dance.

When he kisses her it all goes terribly wrong. I can see at once that she has no idea who he is, someone should have warned her. She thinks he is just some drunk old man who has staggered in to kiss her for a wager, and of course she is shocked, and of course quite repelled, because when he is in a cheap cloak and not surrounded by the greatest court in the world he does not look at all like a king. In truth, when he is in a cheap cloak and with his companions, also dressed poorly, he looks like some common merchant, with a waddling walk and a red nose, who likes a glass of wine, and hopes to go to court and see his betters. He looks like the sort of man my uncle would not acknowledge if he called out in the street. A fat old man, a vulgar old man, like a drunk sheep farmer on market day. His face is terribly bloated, like a great round dish of dripping, his hair is thinning and grey, he is monstrously fat, and he has an old injury in his leg that makes him so lame that he rolls in his walk like a sailor. Without his crown he is not handsome, he looks like anybody's fat old grandfather.

He falls back, she stands on her dignity, rubbing her mouth to take the smell of his breath away, and then – it is so awful I could almost scream with shock – she turns her head and spits out the taste of him. 'Leave me,' she says and turns her back on him.

There is utter, dreadful silence, nobody says a word, and suddenly I know, as if my own cousin Anne Boleyn is at my side telling me, what I should do. I am not even thinking of the dancing and the young man, for once I am not even thinking of myself, and that almost never happens. I just think, in a flash, that if I pretend not to know him, then he can go on not knowing himself, and the whole sorry masque of this silly old man and his gross vanity will not tumble about our ears. I just feel sorry for him, to tell the truth. I just think that I can spare him this awful embarrassment of bouncing up to a woman and having her slap him down like a smelly old hound. If anyone else had said anything then I would have stayed silent. But nobody says anything and the silence goes on and on, unbearably, and he stumbles back, he almost falls back into me, and his face is all crumpled and confused and I am so sorry for him, poor humbled old fool, that I say, I coo: ‘Ooh! Forgive me, sir! But I am new to court myself, a stranger like you. May I ask – who are you?’

Jane Boleyn, Rochester, New Year's Eve 1539

Lady Browne is ordering the maids to their beds in a bellow as if she were a Yeoman of the Guard. They are over-excited and Katherine Howard among them is the centre of it all, as wild as any of them, a true Queen of the May. How she spoke to the king, how she peeped up at him from under her eyelashes, how she begged him, as a handsome stranger, new-come to court, to ask the Lady Anne for dancing, is being mimicked and re-enacted till they are drunk with their own laughter.

Lady Browne is not laughing, her face is like thunder, so I hustle the girls into bed and tell them that they are all very foolish and that they would do better to copy their lady, the Lady Anne, and show proper dignity, than mimic Katherine Howard's free and forward ways. They slip into their beds two by two like pretty angels and we blow out the candle and leave them in the darkness and lock the door. We have hardly turned away before we hear them whispering, but no power on earth can make girls behave well; and we do not even try.

'Are you troubled, Lady Browne?' I ask considerately.

She hesitates, she is longing to confide in someone, and I am here at her side, and known to be discreet.

'This is a bad business,' she says heavily. 'Oh, it all passed off pleasantly enough in the end, with the dancing and the singing and Lady Anne recovered quickly enough as soon as you had explained to her; but this is a bad, bad business.'

'The king?' I suggest.

She nods and folds her lips over as if she would stop herself saying more.

'I am weary,' I say. 'Shall we take a glass of warm ale together before we go to our beds? Sir Anthony is staying here tonight, is he not?'

'God knows he won't join me in my rooms for hours,' she says unguardedly. 'I doubt if any of the king's circle will sleep tonight.'

'Oh?' I say. I lead the way into the presence chamber. The other ladies have gone to bed, the fire is burning low, but there is a jug of ale set at the fireside and half a dozen tankards. I pour us both a drink. 'Trouble?'

She sits in her chair and leans forwards to whisper. 'My lord husband tells me that the king swears that he will not marry her.'

'No!'

'He does. He does. He swears it. He says that he cannot like her.'

She takes a long draw on the ale and looks at me over the top of the mug.

'Lady Browne, you must have this wrong ...'

'I have it from my husband this very night. The king seized him by the collar, almost by the throat, as soon as we retired, and said that the moment he saw Lady Anne, he had been struck with consternation, and that he saw nothing in her that he had been told.'

'He said that?'

'Those very words.'

'But he seemed so happy as we left?'

'He was as truly happy just as Katherine Howard was truly ignorant of his identity. He is as much a happy bridegroom as she is an innocent child. We are all actors here, but the king will not play the part of eager bridegroom.'

'He has to, they are betrothed and the contract signed.'

'He does not like her, he says. He cannot like her, he says, and he is blaming the men who made this marriage for him.'

I have to get this news to the duke, he has to be warned before the king gets back to London.

'Blaming the men who made the marriage?'

'And those who brought her to him. He is furious.'

'He will blame Thomas Cromwell,' I predict quietly.

'Indeed.'

'But what of the Lady Anne? Surely, he cannot refuse her?'

'There is some talk of an impediment,' she says. 'And that is why Sir Anthony and none of the others will have any sleep tonight. The Cleves lords should have brought a copy of an agreement to say that some old previous contract to marry has been withdrawn. Since they don't have it, perhaps there may be grounds to argue that the marriage cannot go ahead, it is not valid.'

'Not again,' I say, unguarded for a moment. 'Not the same objection that he put against Queen Katherine! We will all look like fools!'

She nods. 'Yes, the same. But better for her that an impediment is declared now and she is sent safely home, than she stays and marries an enemy. You know the king, he will never forgive her for spitting out his kiss.'

I say nothing. These are dangerous speculations.

‘Her brother must be a fool,’ I say. ‘She has come a long way if he has not secured her safety.’

‘I would not be in her shoes tonight,’ Lady Browne says. ‘You know I never thought she would please the king, and I told my husband so. But he knew best, the alliance with Cleves is vital, he tells me, we have to be protected from France and Spain, we have to be protected against the Papist powers. There are Papists who would march against us from every corner of Europe, there are Papists who would kill the king in his own bed, here in England. We have to strengthen the reformers. Her brother is a leader of the Protestant dukes and princes, that is where our future lies. I say: “Yes, my lord; but the king will not like her. Mark my words: he will not like her.” And then the king comes in, all ready for courtship, and she pushes him away from her as if he was a drunk tradesman.’

‘He did not look kingly at that moment.’ I will not say more than this cautious judgement.

‘He was not at his best,’ she says, as careful as I. Between us is the unsayable fact that our handsome prince has grown into a gross, ugly man, an old, ugly man; and for the first time we have all seen it.

‘I must go to my bed,’ she says, putting down her cup. She cannot bear even to think of the decay of the prince we have adored.

‘I too.’

I let her go to her room and I wait till I hear her door close, then I quietly go to the great hall where, drinking heavily, and clearly nearly dead drunk, is a man in Howard livery. I crook my finger at him and he rises up quietly and leaves the others.

‘Go to my lord duke,’ I say to him quietly, my mouth to his ear. ‘Go at once and get to him before he sees the king.’

He nods, he understands at once. ‘Tell him, and tell him only, that the king does not like the Lady Anne, that he will try to declare that the marriage contract is invalid, and that he is blaming those who made this marriage and will blame anyone who insists on it.’

The man nods again. I think hard, in case there is anything I should add.

‘That’s all.’ I need not remind one of the most skilled and unscrupulous men in England that our rival Thomas Cromwell was the architect and inspiration for this match. That this is our great chance to bring down Cromwell, as we brought down Wolsey before him. That if Cromwell is down then the king will need an advisor and who better than his commander in chief? Norfolk.

‘Go at once, and get to the duke before he sees the king,’ I say again. ‘Our lord must not meet the king without warning.’

The man bows, he leaves the room at once, without saying goodbye to his drinking companions. By his swift stride he is clearly completely sober.

I go to my own room. My bedfellow for tonight, one of the other ladies in waiting, is already asleep, her arm outflung to my side of the bed. Gently, I lift it and slide in between the warm sheets. I don’t sleep at once, I lie in the silence and listen to her breathing beside me. I am thinking about the poor young woman Lady Anne and the innocence of her face and the directness of her gaze. I am wondering if Lady Browne could possibly be right and this young woman could be in danger of her life simply by being the wife that the king does not want.

Surely not. Lady Browne is exaggerating for certain. This young woman is the daughter of a German duke, she has a powerful brother who will protect her. The king needs her alliance. But then I remember that this brother let her come to England without the one piece of paper which would secure her marriage, and I wonder that he should be so careless with her, to send her such a long way into such a bear pit with no protector.

Anne, New Year's Day, on the road to Dartford, 1540

Nothing could be worse, I feel such a fool. I am so glad to be travelling today, seated uncomfortably in the rolling litter, but at least alone. At least I don't have to face any sympathetic, secretly laughing faces, all buzzing with the disaster of my first meeting with the king.

But truly, how should I be blamed? He has a portrait of me, Hans Holbein himself humbled me to the ground with his unsmiling stare, so that the king had my portrait to scrutinise and criticise and study, he has a very good idea of who I am. But I have no picture of him except the picture in my mind that everyone has: of the young prince who came to his throne a golden youth of eighteen, the handsomest prince in the world. I knew well enough that he is all but fifty now. I knew that I was not marrying a handsome boy, not even a handsome prince. I knew I was marrying a king in his prime, even an ageing man. But I did not know what he was like. I had seen no new portrait of him to consider. And I was not expecting ... that.

Not that he is so bad, perhaps. I can see the man he once was. He has broad shoulders, handsome in a man at any age. He still rides, they tell me, he still hunts except when some wound in his leg is troubling him, he is still active. He runs his country himself, he has not handed over power to more vigorous advisors, he has all his wits about him, as far as one can tell. But he has small, piggy eyes and a small, spoiled mouth, in a great ball of a moon face swelling with fat. His teeth must be very bad, for his breath is very foul. When he grabbed me and kissed me the stink of him was truly awful. When he fell back from me he looked like a spoiled child, ready to cry. But, I must be fair, that was a bad moment for both of us. I daresay, as I thrust him away from me, that I did not appear at my best either.

I wish to God I had not spat.

This is a bad beginning. A bad and undignified beginning. Really, he should not have come on me unprepared and without warning. All very well for them to tell me now that he loves disguising and masquing and pretending to be an ordinary man so that people can discover him with delight. They never told me

this before. On the contrary, every day it has been dinned into my head that the English court is formal, that things must be done in a certain way, than I have to learn orders of precedence, that I must never be faulted by calling a junior member of a family to my side before a senior member, that these things matter to the English more than life itself. Every day before I left Cleves, my mother reminded me that the Queen of England must be above reproach, must be a woman of utter royal dignity and coldness, must never be familiar, must never be light, must never be overly-friendly. Every day she told me that the life of a Queen of England depends on her unblemished reputation. She threatened me with the same fate as Anne Boleyn if I was loose and warm and amorous like her.

So why should I ever dream that some fat old drunk would come up and kiss me? How would I ever dream that I am supposed to let an ugly old man kiss me without introduction or warning?

Still, I wish to God that I had not spat out the foul taste of him.

Anyway, perhaps it is not so bad. This morning he has sent me a present, a gift of rich sables, very expensive and very high quality. Little Katherine Howard, who is so sweet that she mistook the king for a stranger and greeted him kindly, has had a brooch of gold from him. Sir Anthony Browne brought the gifts this morning with a pretty speech, and told me that the king has gone ahead to prepare for our official meeting, which will happen at a place called Blackheath, outside the City of London. My ladies say that there will be no surprises between now and then, so I need not be on my guard. They say that this disguising is a favourite game of the king's and once we are married I must be prepared for him to come wearing a false beard or a big hat and ask me to dance, and we will all pretend not to know him. I smile and say how charming, though in truth I am thinking: how odd, and how childlike, and really, how very vain of him, how foolishly vain to hope that people will fall in love with him on sight as a common man, when he looks as he does now. Perhaps when he was young and handsome he could go about in disguise and people would welcome him for his good looks and charm; but surely, for many years now, many years, people must have only pretended to admire him? But I don't speak my thoughts. It is better that I say nothing now, having spoiled the game once already.

The girl who saved the day by greeting him so politely, little Katherine Howard, is one of my new maids in waiting. I call her to me in the bustle of departing this morning, and I thank her, as best I can manage in English, for her help.

She dips a little curtsy, and speaks to me in a rattle of English.

‘She says that she is delighted to serve you,’ my translator, Lotte, tells me. ‘And that she has not been to court before, so she did not recognise the king either.’

‘Why then did she speak to a stranger who had come without invitation?’ I ask, puzzled. ‘Surely, she should have ignored him? Such a rude man, pushing his way in?’

Lotte turns this into English, and I see the girl look at me as if there is more that divides us than language, as if we are on different worlds, as if I come from the snows and fly on white wings.

‘Was?’ I ask in German. I spread out my hands to her and raise my eyebrows. ‘What?’

She steps a little closer, she whispers in Lotte’s ear without ever taking her eyes from my face. She is such a pretty little thing, like a doll, and so earnest, that I cannot help smiling.

Lotte turns to me, she is near to laughing. ‘She says that of course she knew it was the king. Who else would be able to get into the chamber past the guards? Who else is so tall and fat? But the game of the court is to pretend not to know him, and to address him only because he is such a handsome stranger. She says she may be only fourteen, and her grandmother says she is a dolt; but already she knows that every man in England loves to be admired, indeed, the older they are the vainer they get, and surely, men are not so different in Cleves?’

I laugh at her, and at myself. ‘No,’ I say. ‘Tell her that men are not so different in Cleves but that this woman of Cleves is clearly a fool and I shall be guided by her in future even if she is only fourteen, whatever her grandmother calls her.’

Katherine, Dartford, 2 January 1540

Utter terror! Oh, God! Horror beyond my worst fears! I shall die of this, I shall. My uncle has come here, all the way from Greenwich, specially to see me, and summoned me to him. What on God's earth can he want with me? I am certain that my conversation with the king has come to his ears and he thinks the worst of it and will send me home to my grandmother for unmaidenly behaviour. I shall die. If he sends me to Lambeth I shall die of the humiliation. But if he sends me back to Horsham I shall be glad to die of boredom. I shall fling myself into the whatever it is called, the river there – the River Horsh, the River Sham – the duckpond if needs be, and drown, and they will be sorry when I am drowned and lost to all of them.

It must have been like this for my cousin Queen Anne when she knew she was to appear before him accused of adultery and knew he would not take her side. She must have been scared out of her wits, sick with terror, but I swear no worse than I am now. I could die of terror. I may just die of terror before I even see him.

I am to see him in my Lady Rochford's own room, the disgrace is obviously so bad that it has to be kept among us Howards, and when I go in, she is in the window-seat, so I suppose it is her who has told him all about it. When she smiles at me I scowl at her for a tale-bearing old tabby and I make a horrid face at her to let her know who I thank for my doom.

'Lord uncle, I beg of you not to send me to Horsham,' I say, the moment I am through the door.

He looks at me with a scowl. 'And good day to you, my niece,' he says icily.

I drop into a curtsey, I could almost fall to my knees. 'Please, my lord, don't send me back to Lambeth either,' I say. 'I beg of you. The Lady Anne is not displeased with me, she laughed when I told her ...' I break off. I realise, too late, that to tell my uncle that I have told the king's betrothed wife that although he is fat and old he is also unspeakably vain, is perhaps not the cleverest thing to say. 'I didn't tell her anything,' I correct myself. 'But she is pleased with me and she says she will take my advice even though my grandmother thinks I am a

dolt.'

His sardonic bark of laughter warns me that he agrees with my grandmother's verdict.

'Well, not my advice, exactly, sir; but she is pleased with me, and so is the king, for he sent me a gold brooch. Oh, please, uncle, if you let me stay I will never speak out again, I won't even breathe! Please, I beg of you. I am utterly innocent of everything!'

He laughs again.

'I am,' I say. 'Please, uncle, don't turn your face from me, please trust me. I shall be a good girl, I shall make you proud of me, I shall try to be a perfect ...'

'Oh, hush, I am pleased with you,' he says.

'I will do anything ...'

'I said, I am pleased with you.'

I look up. 'You are?'

'You seem to have behaved delightfully. The king danced with you?'

'Yes.'

'And talked with you?'

'Yes.'

'And seemed much taken with you?'

I have to think for a minute. I would not have called him exactly 'taken'. He was not like a young man whose eyes drift down from my face to peek at my breasts while he is talking to me, or who blushes when I smile at him. And besides, the king almost fell back into me when Lady Anne rebuffed him. He was still shocked. He would have spoken to anyone to hide his hurt and embarrassment.

'He did talk to me,' I repeat helplessly.

'I am very pleased that he honoured you with his attention,' my uncle says. He is speaking slowly as if he is a schoolmaster, and I should be understanding something.

'Oh.'

'Very pleased.'

I glance across at Lady Rochford to see if this is making any sense for her. She gives me a slight smile and a nod.

'He sent me a brooch,' I remind him.

He looks at me sharply. 'Valuable?'

I make a little face. 'Nothing to the sables that he sent Lady Anne.'

'I should hope not. But it was of gold?'

‘Yes, and pretty.’

He turns to Lady Rochford. ‘Is it?’

‘Yes,’ she says. They exchange a small smile, as if they understand each other well.

‘Should His Majesty honour you by speaking with you again, you will endeavour to be very charming and pleasing.’

‘Yes, my lord uncle.’

‘From such little attentions do great favours flow. The king is not pleased with the Lady Anne.’

‘He sent her sables,’ I remind him. ‘Very good ones.’

‘I know. But that is not the point.’

It seems the point to me, but very cleverly I don’t correct him but stand still and wait.

‘He will see you daily,’ my uncle says. ‘And you may continue to please him. Then perhaps he will send you sables. Do you understand?’

This, about the sables, I do understand. ‘Yes.’

‘So if you want presents, and my approval, you will do your best to behave charmingly and pleasantly to the king. Lady Rochford here will advise you.’

She nods at me.

‘Lady Rochford is a most skilled and wise courtier,’ my uncle goes on. ‘There can be few people who have seen more of the king throughout his life. Lady Rochford will tell you how you are to go on. It is our hope and our intention that the king will favour you, that he will, in short, fall in love with you.’

‘Me?’

They both nod. Are they quite mad? He is an old old man, he must have given up all thoughts of love years ago. He has a daughter Princess Mary, far older than me, nearly old enough to be my mother. He is ugly, his teeth are rotten and his limp makes him waddle like a fat old goose. A man like this must have put all thoughts of love out of his head years ago. He might think of me as a granddaughter but not in any other way.

‘But he is marrying Lady Anne,’ I point out.

‘Even so.’

‘He is too old to fall in love.’

My uncle shoots such a scowl at me that I give a little squeak of terror.

‘Fool,’ he says shortly.

I hesitate for a moment. Can they really mean that they want this old king to

be my lover? Should I say something about my virginity and my spotless reputation, which in Lambeth seemed to matter so very much?

‘My reputation?’ I whisper.

Again my uncle laughs. ‘That doesn’t matter,’ he says.

I look towards Lady Rochford, who was supposed to be my chaperone in a lewd court and watch my behaviour and guard my precious honour.

‘I can explain it all to you later,’ she says.

I take it then that I should say nothing. ‘Yes, my lord,’ I say very sweetly.

‘You are a pretty girl,’ he says. ‘I have given Lady Rochford money for you to have a new gown.’

‘Oh, thank you!’

He smiles at my sudden enthusiasm. He turns to Lady Rochford. ‘And I will leave a manservant with you. He can serve you and run errands. It seems that it may become worth my while to keep a man with you. Who would have thought it? Anyway, keep me informed as to how things go on here.’

She rises from her seat and curtsies. He goes out without another word. The two of us are left alone.

‘What does he want?’ I ask, utterly bewildered.

She looks at me as if she were measuring me for a gown, she looks me up and down. ‘Never mind for now,’ she says kindly. ‘He is pleased with you, that’s the main thing.’

Anne, Blackheath, 3 January 1540

This is the happiest day of my life, because today I have fallen in love. I have fallen in love, not like a silly girl falls in love, because a boy catches her eye or tells her some foolish story. I am in love and this love will last forever. I am in love with England this day, and the realisation has made this the happiest day of my life. This day I realise that I am to be queen of this country, this rich, beautiful country. I have been travelling through it like a fool, with my eyes shut – in all fairness, some of the time I have been travelling through it in darkness and in the worst weather that I could imagine – but today it is bright and sunny and the sky is so blue, blue as duck eggs, the air is fresh and bright, as exciting and cold as white wine. Today I feel like the gyrfalcon my father used to call me, I feel as if I am riding high on cool winds, looking down on this most beautiful country which will be mine. We ride from Dartford to Blackheath, the frost white and shining on the road all the way, and when we get to the park all the ladies of my court are presented to me, all dressed so beautifully and warm and friendly in their greetings. I am to have nearly seventy ladies altogether, the king's nieces and cousins among them, and they all greet me today as new friends. I am wearing my very best, and I know I look well, I think even my brother would be proud of me today.

They have made a city of tents of cloth of gold, flying brilliantly coloured flags, guarded by the king's own Yeomen of the Guard, men so tall and so handsome that they are a legend in England. While we wait for the king, we go inside and take a glass of wine and warm ourselves at the braziers, they are burning sea-coal for me, only the best, as I am to be a member of the royal family of England. The floors are lined with rich carpets and the tents hung with tapestries and silks for warmth. Then, when they say it is time, and everyone is smiling and chattering and almost as excited as I am, I mount my horse and ride out to meet him. I go out filled with hope. Perhaps, at this ceremonial meeting, I shall like him and he will like me.

The trees are tall and their bare black winter branches stretch out against the sky like dark threads on a tapestry of blue. The park extends for miles, so green

and so fresh, sparking with melting frost, the sun is bright and pale yellow, almost burning white in the sky. Everywhere, held back by gaily coloured ropes, there are the people from London smiling and waving at me and calling blessings down on me, and for the first time in my life I am not Anne – the middle daughter of Cleves: less pretty than Sybilla, less charming than Amelia – but here I am Anne, the only Anne. They have taken me to their hearts. These odd, rich, charming, eccentric people are all welcoming me, as if they want a good queen and an honest queen, and they believe and I know that I can be such a queen for them.

I know very well that I am not an English girl like the late Queen Jane, God rest her soul. But having seen the court and the great families of England I think it might be a good thing that I am not an English girl. Even I can see that the Seymour family is high in favour now, and could easily become overmighty. They are everywhere, these Seymours, handsome and conceited, always emphasising their child is the king's only son and heir to the throne. If I were the king and it were my court, I should be wary of them. If they are allowed to govern the young prince, to dominate him because of their kinship to his mother, then the balance of this court will all be thrown to them. From what I can see, the king is not careful who he chooses for his favourites. I may be half his age but I know well enough that a ruler's favour must be measured. I have lived my life with the disfavour of the favourite son and I know how poisonous is whim in a ruler. This king is whimsical; but perhaps I can make his court more balanced, perhaps I can give his son a level-headed stepmother who can maintain the flatterers and the courtiers at a safe distance from the little boy.

I know his daughters have been estranged from him. Poor girls, I so hope to be of service to little Elizabeth, who never knew her mother and has spent her life under the shadow of disgrace. Perhaps I can bring her to court and keep her near me and reconcile her to her father. And the Princess Mary must be lonely, without her mother and knowing herself to be far from her father's favour. I can be kind to her, I can overcome her fear of the king and bring her to court as my kinswoman, she need not say 'stepmother', but perhaps I could be as a good sister to her. For the king's children at least I can be a great force for good. And if we are blessed, if I am blessed, and we have a child of our own then perhaps I shall give a little prince to England, a godly youth who can help to heal the divisions in this country.

There is a murmur of excitement from the crowd and I see all the heads turn away from me and back again. The king is coming towards us, and all my fears

about him are gone in a moment. Now he is not pretending to be a common man, he is not hiding majesty in the disguise of a vulgar old fool, today he is dressed as a king and he rides as a king, in a coat embroidered with diamonds, with a collar of diamonds around his shoulders, on his head a hat of velvet sewn with pearls, and on the finest horse I think I have ever seen. He is magnificent, he looks like a god in the bright winter light, his horse curvetting on his own land, weighed down with jewels, surrounded by the royal guard with the trumpets singing out. He smiles when he draws near to me and we greet each other, and people cheer to see us together.

‘I give you welcome to England,’ he says slowly enough for me to understand, and I reply carefully in English: ‘My lord, I am very glad to be here, and I shall try to be a good wife to you.’

I think I will be happy, I think it can be done. That first embarrassing mistake can be forgotten and put behind us. We will be married for years, we will be happy together for all our lives. In ten years from now, who will ever remember a little thing like that?

Then my chariot comes and I ride through the park to the palace of Greenwich, which is by the river, and all the barges on the river are dressed out in colours with flags flying and the London citizens are dressed in their very best. They have musicians out on the water and they are playing a new song called ‘Merry Anna’, written for me, and there are pageants on the boats to celebrate my coming, and everyone is smiling and waving at me; so I smile and wave back.

Our procession turns up the sweeping approach to Greenwich and I realise again what a country it is, this new home of mine. For this Greenwich is not a castle at all, not fortified in fear against an enemy who might come, it is a palace built for a country at peace, a great, rich, fair palace, as fine as anything in France. It faces the river and is the most beautiful building of stone and precious Venice glass that I have ever seen in my life. The king sees my delighted face and brings his horse alongside my chariot and leans down to tell me that this is just one of his many palaces, but his favourite, and that in time, as we travel around the country, I shall see the others, and that he hopes I shall be happy with them all.

They take me to the queen’s rooms to rest, and for once I do not want to hide in the private rooms, but instead I am glad to be here, with my ladies around me in my privy chamber, and more of them waiting in the great presence chamber outside. I go into the private robing room and change into my taffeta gown,

which they have trimmed with the sables that the king gave me for the New Year. I think I have never had such a fortune on my back in my life before. I lead my ladies down to dinner feeling as if I am queen already and at the entrance to the great dining hall the king takes me by the hand and leads me around the tables, where everyone bows and curtsies and we smile and nod, hand-clasped, like husband and wife already.

I am starting to recognise people, and to know their names without prompting, so now the court is not such a friendless blur. I see Lord Southampton, who looks tired and troubled, as well he might be for the work he has done for me in bringing me here. His smile is strained and, oddly, his greeting is cool. He glances away from the king as if there is some trouble brewing, and I remember my resolution to be a fair queen in this court that is commanded by whim. Perhaps I will learn what is troubling Lord Southampton, perhaps I can help him.

The king's foremost advisor, Thomas Cromwell, bows to me and I recognise him from my mother's description as the man, more than any other, who sought alliance with us and with the Protestant dukes of Germany. I would have expected him to greet me more warmly, since my marriage is the triumph of his planning, but he is quiet and self-effacing and the king leads me past him with only a short word.

Archbishop Cranmer is dining with us as well, and I recognise Lord Lisle and his wife. He too is looking weary and guarded, and I remember his fears in Calais of the divisions in the kingdom. I smile warmly at him. I know that there is work for me to do in this country. If I can save one heretic from the fires then I will have been a good queen and I am sure I can use my influence to bring this country to peace.

I am starting to feel that I have friends in England, and when I look down the hall and see my ladies, Jane Boleyn, kind Lady Browne, the king's niece Lady Margaret Douglas and little Katherine Howard among them, I start to feel that this indeed can be my new home, and that the king is indeed my husband, his friends and his children shall be my family, and that I shall be happy here.

Katherine, Greenwich Palace, 3 January 1540

Just as I have always dreamed, there is to be dancing after dinner in a beautiful chamber filled with the most handsome young men in the world. And better than my greatest dreams I have a new gown and pinned to the gown, as obviously, as noticeable as possible, is my new gold brooch given to me by the King of England himself. I finger it all the time, almost as if I were pointing at it and saying to people: 'What d'you think of that then? Not bad for practically my very first day at court.' The king is on his throne looking powerful and fatherly, and Lady Anne is as pretty as she can be (given that awful dress) beside him. She might as well have just thrown the sables in the Thames as have them sewn on that taffeta tent. I am so distressed about such wonderful furs all but thrown away that it almost dims my pleasure for a moment.

But then I glance around the room – not in an immodest way, just glancing around as if looking for nothing in particular – and I see first one young, handsome boy and then another, half a dozen indeed that I would be glad to know better. Some of them are sitting together at a table, it is the pages' table, and every single one of them is a son of a good family, wealthy in their own right, and high in the favour of a lord. Dereham, poor Dereham, would be a nobody to them, Henry Manox would be their servant. These will be my new suitors. I can barely drag my eyes away from any one of them.

I catch a glance or two in my direction and know that prickle of excitement and pleasure that tells me that I am being watched, that I am desired, that my name will be mentioned, that a note will be passed to me, that the whole joyous adventure of flirtation and seduction will start again. A boy will ask my name, will send a message. I will agree to a meeting, there will be an exchange of looks and silly words over dancing and sports and dinner. There will be a kiss, there will be another, then slowly, deliciously, there will be a seduction and I shall know another touch, another boy's delicious kisses, and I shall fall head over heels in love again.

The dinner is delicious but I pick at my food because at court there is always someone watching you, and I don't want to seem greedy. Our table faces the

front of the hall so it is natural that I look up to see the king at his dinner. In his rich clothes and great collar of gold you might mistake him for one of the old pictures over an altar; I mean, a picture of God. He is so grand and so broad and so weighted with gold and jewels, he sparkles like an old treasure mountain. There is a cloth of gold spread over his great chair, with embroidered curtains hanging down on either side, and every dish is served to him by a servant on his knees. Even the server who offers him a golden bowl to dip his fingers and wipe his hands does so on bended knee. There is another server altogether to hand him the linen cloth. They bow their heads as well when they kneel to him, as if he were of such unearthly importance that they cannot meet his eyes.

So when he looks up and sees me watching him, I don't know whether I should look away, or curtsy, or what. I am so confused by this that I give him a little smile and half look away and half look back again, to see if he is still watching, and he is. Then I think that this is just what I would do if I was trying to attract a boy, and that makes me blush and look down at my plate, and I feel such a fool. Then, when I look up, under my eyelashes as it happens, to see if he is still looking at me, he is gazing away down the hall and clearly has hardly noticed me at all.

My uncle Howard's sharp black gaze is on me though, and I am afraid he will frown; perhaps I should have curtsied to the king when I first caught his eye. But the duke just gives a little approving nod and speaks to a man seated on his right. A man of no interest to me, he must be a hundred and ninety-two if he is a day.

I really am amazed at how old this court is, and the king is quite ancient. I always had the impression of it being a court of young people, young and beautiful and joyful; not such very old men. I swear that there cannot be a friend of the king's who is a day under forty years. His great friend Charles Brandon, who is said to be a hero of glamour and charm, is absolutely ancient, in his dotage at fifty. My lady grandmother talks about the king as if he was the prince that she knew when she was a girl, and of course this is why I have it all wrong. She is such an old lady that she forgets that long years have gone by. She probably thinks that they are all still young together. When she talks about the queen she always means Queen Katherine of Aragon, not Queen Jane or even the Lady Anne Boleyn. She just skips every queen since Katherine. Indeed, my grandmother was so frightened by the fall of her niece Anne Boleyn that she never speaks of her at all except as a terrible warning to naughty girls like me.

It wasn't always like that. I can just about remember first coming to my step-

grandmama's house at Horsham and every second sentence was 'my niece the queen' and every letter to London asked her for a favour or a fee, a place for a servant, or the pickings of a monastery, asked her to turn out a priest or pull down a nunnery. Then Anne had a girl and there was a good deal of 'our baby the Princess Elizabeth' and hopes that the next baby would be a boy. Everyone promised me I would have a place at court in my cousin's household, I would be kin to the Queen of England, who knew where I might look for a husband? Another Howard cousin, Mary, was married to the king's bastard son Henry Fitzroy, and a cousin was intended for Princess Mary. We were so inter-married with the Tudors that we would be royal ourselves. But then slowly, like winter coming when you don't at first notice the chill, there was less spoken of her, and less certainty about her court. Then one day my step-grandmother called the whole household into the great hall and said abruptly that Anne Boleyn (she called her that, no title, definitely no kinship), Anne Boleyn had disgraced herself and her family and betrayed her king and that her name and her brother's name would never again be mentioned.

Of course we were all desperate to know what had happened but we had to wait for servants' gossip. Only when the news finally came from London could I learn what my cousin Queen Anne had done. My maid told me, I can hear her now telling me, that Lady Anne was accused of terrible crimes, adultery with many men, her brother among them, witchcraft, treason, bewitching the king, a string of horrors from which only one thing stood out to me, an aghast little girl: that her accuser was her uncle, my uncle Norfolk. That he presided over the court, that he pronounced her death sentence and that his son, my handsome cousin, went to the Tower like a man might go to a fair, dressed in his best, to see his cousin beheaded.

I thought my uncle must be a man so fearsome that he might have been in league with the devil; but I can laugh at those childish fears, now that I am his favourite, so high in his favour that he has ordered Jane Boleyn, Lady Rochford, to take most particular care of me, and given her money to buy me a gown. Obviously, he has taken a great fancy to me, he likes me best of all the Howard girls he has placed at court, and thinks that I will advance the interests of the family by making a noble match or becoming friends with the queen, or charming to the king. I had thought him a man of fiendish heartlessness but now I find him a kindly uncle to me.

There is a masque after dinner and some very funny clowning from the king's fool, and then there is some singing that is almost unbearably dull. The

king is a great musician, I learn, and so most evenings we will have to endure one of his songs. There is a great deal of tra-la-la-ing and everyone listens very intently and applauds very loudly at the end. Lady Anne I think has no more opinion of it than me, but she makes the mistake of gazing round rather vacantly, as if she were quietly wishing to be elsewhere. I see the king glance at her, and then away, as if he is irritated by her inattention. I take the precaution of clasping my hands beneath my chin and smiling with my eyes half-closed as if I can hardly bear the joy of it. Such luck! He happens to glance my way again and clearly thinks his music has transported me. He gives me a broad, approving smile and I smile back and drop my eyes to the board as if fearful of looking at him for too long.

‘Very well done,’ says Lady Rochford, and I give her a little beam of triumph. I love, I love, I love court life. I swear it will quite turn my head.

Jane Boleyn, Greenwich Palace, 3 January 1540

‘My lord duke,’ I say, bowing very low.

We are in the Howard apartments at Greenwich Palace, a series of beautiful rooms opening the one into another, almost as spacious and beautiful as the queen’s own rooms. I stayed here once with George, when we were newly wed, and I remember the view over the river, and the light at dawn when I woke, so much in love, and I heard the sound of swans flying overhead going down to the river on their huge creaking wings.

‘Ah, Lady Rochford,’ says my lord duke, his lined face amiable. ‘I have need of you.’

I wait.

‘You are friendly with the Lady Anne, you are on good terms?’

‘As far as I can be,’ I say cautiously. ‘She speaks little English as yet but I have made a great effort to talk to her and I think she likes me.’

‘Would she confide in you?’

‘She would speak to her Cleves companions first, I think. But she sometimes asks me things about England. She trusts me, I think.’

He turns to the window and taps his thumbnail against his yellow teeth. His sallow face is creased in thought.

‘There is a difficulty,’ he says slowly.

I wait.

‘As you heard, they have indeed sent her without the proper documents,’ he says. ‘She was betrothed when she was a child to Francis of Lorraine, and the king needs to see that this engagement was cancelled and put aside before he goes any further.’

‘She is not free to marry?’ I demand, astounded. ‘When the contracts have been signed and she has come all this way and been greeted by the king as his bride? When the City of London has welcomed her as their new queen?’

‘It is possible,’ he says evasively.

It is absolutely impossible, but it is not my place to say so. ‘Who says that she may not be free to marry?’

‘The king fears to proceed. His conscience is uneasy.’

I pause, I cannot think fast enough to make sense of this. This is a king who married his own brother’s wife, and then put her aside because he said the lifelong marriage was invalid. This is a king who put Anne Boleyn’s head on the block as a matter of his own judgement under the exclusive guidance of God. Clearly, this is not a king who would be deterred from marrying a woman just because some German ambassador did not have the right piece of paper to hand. Then I remember the moment when she pushed him aside, and his face as he stepped back from her at Rochester.

‘It is true then. He doesn’t like her. He can’t forgive her for her treatment of him at Rochester. He will find a way to get out of the marriage. He is going to claim pre-contract again.’ One glance at the duke’s dark face tells me that I have guessed right and I could almost laugh aloud at this new twist in the play that is King Henry’s comedy. ‘He doesn’t like her and he is going to send her home.’

‘If she confessed that she was pre-contracted she could go home again, without dishonour, and the king would be free,’ the duke says quietly.

‘But she likes him,’ I say. ‘At any rate, she likes him enough. And she can’t go home again. No woman of any sense would go home again. Go back to be spoiled goods in Cleves when you could be Queen of England? She would never want that. Who would marry her if he refuses her? Who could marry her if he declares her pre-contracted? Her life would be over.’

‘She could clear herself of the pre-contract,’ he says reasonably.

‘Is there one?’

He shrugs. ‘Almost certainly not.’

I think for a moment. ‘Then how can she be released from something that does not exist?’

He smiles. ‘That is a matter for the Germans. She can be sent home against her will, if she does not co-operate.’

‘Not even the king can abduct her and fling her out of the kingdom.’

‘If she could be entrapped into saying that there was a pre-contract.’ His voice is like a whisper of silk. ‘If it came from her own mouth that she is not free to marry ...’

I nod. I begin to see the favour he would have of me.

‘The king would be most grateful to the man who could tell him that he had a confession from her. And the woman who brought such a confession about would be most high in his favour. And in mine.’

‘I am yours to command,’ I say to give myself time to think. ‘But I cannot

make her lie. If she knows she is free to marry, then she would be mad to say otherwise. And if I claim that she has said otherwise, she has only to deny it. Then it is her word against mine and we are back to the truth again.' I pause as a fear occurs to me. 'My lord, I take it that there is no possibility of an accusation?'

'What sort of accusation?'

'Of some crime?' I say nervously.

'Do you mean she might be charged with treason?'

I nod. I will not say the word myself. I wish that I could never hear the word again. It leads to the Tower Green and the executioner's block. It took the love of my life from me. It ended the life we lived forever.

'How could it be treason?' he asks me, as if we do not live in a dangerous world where everything can be treason.

'The law has changed so much, and being innocent is no defence any more.'

Abruptly he shakes his head. 'There's no possibility of him accusing her, anyway. The King of France is entertaining the Holy Roman Emperor in Paris at this very moment. They could be planning a joint attack on us even as we speak. We can do nothing that might upset Cleves. We have to have an alliance with the Protestant princes or we risk standing alone to face a Spain and France that have united against us. If the English Papists rise again as they did before we will be finished. She has to confess herself betrothed to another and go home by her own free will so that we lose the girl and keep the alliance. Or if someone were to trap her into making a confession, that would be good enough. But if she persists in saying that she is free to marry and if she insists upon marriage, then the king will have to do it. We cannot offend her brother.'

'Whether the king likes it or not?'

'Though he hates it, though he hates the man who contrived it, and even though he hates her.'

I pause for a moment. 'If he hates her and yet marries her he will find some way to be rid of her later.' I am thinking aloud.

The duke says nothing but his eyelids hood his dark eyes. 'Oh, who can foretell the future?'

'She will be in the greatest of danger every day of her life,' I predict. 'If the king wants rid of her he will soon think that it is God's will that he is rid of her.'

'That is generally the way that God's will seems to be manifest,' the duke says with a wolfish grin.

'Then he will find her guilty of some offence,' I say. I will not say the word

treason.

‘If you care for her at all, you would persuade her to go now,’ the duke says quietly.

I walk slowly back to the queen’s rooms. She will not be advised by me, in preference to her ambassadors; and I am not free to tell her what I truly think. But if I had been her true friend I would have told her that Henry is not a man to take as a husband if he hates you before the wedding day. His malice towards women who cross him is fatal. Who would know better than me?

Anne, Greenwich Palace, 3 January 1540

The lady in waiting Jane Boleyn seems troubled and I tell her that she can sit beside me and I ask her, in English, if she is well.

She beckons my translator to come and sit with us, and she says that she is troubled by a matter of some delicacy.

I think it must be something about precedence at the wedding, they are so anxious about the order of the service and what jewels everyone may wear. I nod as if it is a serious matter and ask her if I may serve her.

‘On the contrary; I am anxious to be of service to you,’ she says, speaking quietly to Lotte. She translates for me, I nod. ‘I hear that your ambassadors have forgotten to bring the contract that releases you from a previous betrothal.’

‘What?’ I speak so sharply that she guesses the meaning of the German word, and nods, her face as grave as my own.

‘So they have not told you?’

I shake my head. ‘Nothing,’ I say in English. ‘They tell nothing.’

‘Then I am glad to speak with you before you are ill-advised,’ she says rapidly and I wait as the words are translated. She leans forwards and takes my hands. Her clasp is warm, her face intent. ‘When they ask you about your previous betrothal you must tell them that it was annulled, and that you have seen the document,’ she says earnestly. ‘If they ask why your brother failed to send it, you can say that you don’t know, that it is not your responsibility to bring the papers – as indeed it was not.’

I am breathless; something about her intensity makes me feel fearful. I cannot think why my brother should be so careless of my marriage, then I remember his constant resentment of me. He has betrayed his own plan from malice; at the last moment he could not bear to let me go smoothly from him.

‘I see you are shocked,’ she says. ‘Dearest Lady Anne, be warned by me, and never let them think for a moment that there is no document, that you have a previous betrothal still in place. You must tell a powerful and convincing lie. You must tell them that you have seen the documents and that your previous betrothal was definitely annulled.’

‘But it was,’ I say slowly. I repeat in English so she cannot be mistaken. ‘I have seen the document. It is not a lie. I am free to marry.’

‘You are certain?’ she asks intently. ‘These things can be done without a girl knowing what plans are made. No-one would blame you if you were at all uncertain. You can tell me. Trust me. Tell me the truth.’

‘It was cancelled,’ I say again. ‘I know that it was cancelled. The betrothal was my father’s plan; but not my brother’s. When my father was ill and then died, then my brother ruled, and the betrothal was finished.’

‘Why do you not have the document, then?’

‘My brother,’ I start. ‘My foolish brother ... My brother is careless of my well-being,’ Lotte rapidly translates. ‘And my father died so recently, and my mother is so distressed, there has been too much for him to do. My brother has the document in our records room, I myself have seen it; but he must have forgotten to send it. There was so much to arrange.’

‘If you are in any doubt at all you must tell me,’ she cautions me. ‘And I can advise you what best we should do. You see from my coming to you and advising you that I am utterly loyal to you. But if there is any chance that your brother does not have the document you must tell me, Lady Anne, tell me for your own safety, and I will plan with you what we can best do.’

I shake my head. ‘I thank you for your care of me but there is no need. I have seen the documents myself, and so have my ambassadors,’ I say. ‘There is no impediment, I know I am free to marry the king.’

She nods as if she is still waiting for something else. ‘I am so glad.’

‘And I want to marry the king.’

‘If you wished to avoid the marriage, now you have seen him, you could do so,’ she says very quietly. ‘This is your chance to escape. If you did not like him, you could get safely home, with no word against you. I could help you. I could tell them that you had told me that you are not certain, that you may be pre-contracted.’

I withdraw my hands from hers. ‘I do not want to escape,’ I say simply. ‘This is a great honour for me and my country, and a great joy for me.’

Jane Boleyn looks sceptical.

‘Truly,’ I say. ‘I long to be Queen of England, I am coming to love this country and I want to make my life here.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Yes, on my honour.’ I hesitate and then I tell her the greatest reason. ‘I was not very happy at my home,’ I admit. ‘I was not highly regarded or well treated.

Here I can be somebody, I can do good. At home I will never be more than an unwanted sister.'

She nods. Many women know what it is to be in the way while the great affairs of men go on without them.

'I want to have a chance,' I say. 'I want to have a chance to be the woman I can be. Not my brother's creature, not my mother's daughter. I want to stay here and grow into myself.'

She is silent for a moment, I am surprised at the depth of my own feeling. 'I want to be a woman in my own right,' I say.

'A queen is not free,' she points out.

'She is better than a duke's disliked sister.'

'Very well,' she says quietly.

'I suppose the king must be angry with my ambassadors for forgetting the papers?' I ask.

'I am sure that he is,' she says, her eyes slide sideways. 'But they will give their word that you are free to marry and I am sure it will all go ahead.'

'There is no possibility of the marriage being delayed?' I am surprised at my own feeling. I have such a strong sense that I can do much for this country, that I can be a good queen here. I want to start at once.

'No,' she says. 'The ambassadors and the king's council will resolve it. I am sure.'

I pause. 'He does want to marry me?'

She smiles at me and touches my hand. 'Of course he does. This is just a small difficulty. The ambassadors will undertake to produce the document and the marriage will go ahead. Just as long as you are certain that the document is there?'

'It is there,' I say, and I am speaking nothing but the truth. 'I can swear to it.'

Katherine, Greenwich Palace, 6 January 1540

I am to help the queen to dress for her wedding and I have to get up extremely early to get everything ready, I would rather not get up early, but it is nice to be singled out from the other girls who sleep so late and so lazy. Really it's very bad of them to lie in bed so late when some of us are up and working for Lady Anne. Truly, everyone but me is completely idle.

I lay out her dress as she is washing in her closet. Catherine Carey helps me spread out the skirt and the underskirts on the closed chest as Mary Norris goes for her jewels. The skirt is enormous, like a great fat spinning top, I would rather die than marry in a dress like this; the greatest beauty in the world could not help but look like a pudding, waddling out to be eaten. It is hardly worth being queen if you have to go around like a tent, I think. The cloth is extremely fine – cloth of gold – and it is heavy with the most wonderful pearls, and she has a coronet to wear. Mary has put it out before the mirror and if no-one else was here I would try it on, but already, though it is so early, there are half a dozen of us, servants and maids and ladies in waiting, and so I have to give it a little polish and leave it alone. It is very finely wrought, she brought it from Cleves with her and she told me that the spiky bits are supposed to be rosemary, which her own sister wore as a fresh herb in her hair at her wedding. I say it looks like a crown of thorns and her lady secretary gives me a sharp look and doesn't translate my remark. Just as well, really.

She will wear her hair loose and when she comes out of the bathroom she sits before her silver looking-glass, and Catherine brushes her hair with long, smooth strokes, like you would a horse's tail. She is fair-haired, to be just to her she is quite golden-haired, and wrapped in a bath sheet and glowing from her wash, she looks well this morning. She is a little pale, but she smiles at all of us, and she seems happy enough. If I were her I would be dancing for joy to be Queen of England. But I suppose she is not the dancing sort.

Off she goes for the wedding and we all fall in behind her in strict order of importance, which means that I am so far back it is hardly worth my while being there, nobody will be able to see me, even though I am wearing my new gown

that is trimmed with silver thread, the most costly thing I have ever owned. It is a very pale grey-blue, and suits my eyes. I never looked better; but it is not my wedding and nobody pays any attention to me at all.

Archbishop Cranmer is to marry them: drone, drone, drone, like an old bee. He asks them if there is any reason why they cannot be married, and if we, the congregation, know of any impediment and we all say very cheerfully, 'no we don't', and I suppose only I am fool enough to wonder what would happen if someone said, 'stop the wedding, for the king has had three wives already and none of them died of old age!' but of course, nobody does.

If she had any sense, she should be alarmed. It is hardly a very reassuring record. He is a great man of course, and his will is the will of God, of course; but he has had three wives and all of them dead. It's not much of a prospect for a bride, when I come to think about it. But I don't think she thinks like that. Probably nobody thinks like this unless they are as stupid as me.

They are married and go off to hear Mass in the king's private closet and the rest of us wait around with nothing to do, which is, I find, one of the main activities at court. There is a very handsome young man whose name happens to be John Beresby and he manages to work his way through the people so that he is standing behind me.

'I am dazzled,' he says.

'I don't know what by,' I say pertly. 'It is hardly daybreak, it is so early.'

'Not by the sun, but by the greater light of your beauty.'

'Oh, that,' I say and give him a little smile.

'You are new to court?'

'Yes, I am Katherine Howard.'

'I am John Beresby.'

'I know.'

'You know? You have asked someone my name?'

'Not at all,' I say. Though it is a lie. I noticed him that first day at Rochester, and I asked Lady Rochford who he was.

'You have asked after me,' he says delightedly.

'Don't flatter yourself,' I say crushingly.

'Tell me that I may at least dance with you later, at the wedding feast.'

'Perhaps,' I say.

'I shall take that as a promise,' he whispers, and then the door opens and the king comes out with Lady Anne and we all curtsy very low because she is queen now, and a married woman, and I can't help but think that though that is

very nice for her, it would have been much better if she had worn a gown with a long train.

Anne, Greenwich Palace, 6 January 1540

So it is done. I am Queen of England. I am a wife. I sit on the right hand of my husband the king at the wedding feast and I smile down the hall so that everyone, my ladies, the lords at their tables, the common people in the gallery, everyone can see that I am happy to be their queen and that I will be a good queen and a merry wife.

Archbishop Cranmer performed the service according to the rites of the Holy Catholic Church in England, so I feel a little uneasy in my conscience. This is not bringing the country closer to the reformed religion as I promised my brother and my mother that I would do. My advisor, the Count Overstein, stands beside me and when there is a break in the dinner I remark quietly to him that I hope he and the lords of Cleves are not disappointed at my failure to lead the king to reform.

He says that I will be allowed to practise my faith as I wish, in private, but the king does not want to be troubled with matters of theology on his wedding day. He says that the king seems firm in keeping the church that he has made, which is Catholic but denies the leadership of the Pope. The king is as opposed to reformers as he is to fervent Papists.

‘But surely we could have found a form of words that could have suited both of us?’ I remark. ‘My brother was anxious that I should support the reform of the church in England.’

He makes a grimace. ‘The reform of the church is not as we understood it,’ he says, and from the closed line of his mouth I take it that he wants to say no more.

‘Certainly, it seems to have been a profitable process,’ I remark tentatively, thinking of the great houses that we stayed in on the way from Deal which were clearly former monasteries, or abbeys, and the medicine gardens around them being dug over for flowers, and the farms which fed the poor but are now being converted into parkland for hunting.

‘When we were at home we thought it was a godly process,’ he says shortly. ‘We did not realise it was drenched in blood.’

‘I cannot believe that to tear down the shrines where simple people liked to say their prayers can lead them closer to God,’ I say. ‘And what is the profit in forbidding them from lighting candles to remember their loved ones?’

‘Earthly profit as well as spiritual,’ he says. ‘The church’s tithes are not lifted, they are just paid to the king. But it is not for us to remark on how the country of England chooses to say its prayers.’

‘My brother ...’

‘Your brother would have done better to look to his own record keeping,’ he says, in sudden irritation.

‘What?’

‘He should have sent the letter which released you from your promise to marry the Duke of Lorraine’s son.’

‘It didn’t matter that much, did it?’ I ask. ‘The king has said nothing of it to me.’

‘We had to swear that we knew of its existence, and then we had to swear that it would be sent within three months, and then we had to swear that we ourselves would be hostage for it. If your brother does not find it and send it, God knows what will happen to us.’

I am aghast. ‘They cannot hold you to ransom for my brother’s record keeping? They cannot really think that there was an impediment?’

He shakes his head. ‘They know full well that you are free to marry and that the marriage is valid. But for some reason known only to themselves, they choose to throw a doubt over it all, and your brother’s error in letting us come without it has allowed that doubt. And we have been most cruelly embarrassed.’

I turn my eyes down. My brother’s resentment of me goes against his own interests, goes against the interests of his own country, even against the interests of his own religion. I can feel my temper rise at the thought of him jeopardising my very marriage from his jealousy and spite. He is such a fool, he is such a wicked fool. ‘He is careless,’ is all that I say; but I hear my voice shake.

‘This is not a king to be careless with,’ the count warns.

I nod, I am very conscious of the king sitting in silence on my left. He cannot understand German but I do not want him to look at me and see me anything other than happy.

‘I am sure I shall be very content,’ I say, smiling, and the count bows and goes back to his place.



The entertainment is finished and the archbishop rises from his place at the table. My councillors have prepared me for this moment and when the king rises to his feet, I know that I have to get up too. The two of us follow my lord Cranmer to the king's great chamber and stand in the doorway while the archbishop walks around the room, swinging the censer and sprinkling the bed with holy water. This really is most superstitious and outlandish. I don't know what my mother would say; but I know she would not like it.

Then the archbishop closes his eyes and starts to pray. Beside me, Count Overstein whispers a rapid translation. 'He prays for the two of you to sleep well and not be troubled with demonic dreams.' I make sure that my expression is one of interest and devotion. But I can hardly keep my face straight. Are these the people who have closed down shrines to stop people praying for miracles and yet here in a palace they have to pray for protection against dreams of demons? What sense can one make of them?

'He prays that you will not suffer from infertility, nor the king from impotence, he prays that the power of Satan will not unman the king nor unwoman you.'

'Amen,' I say promptly, as if anyone could believe this nonsense. Then I turn to my ladies and they escort me from the room to my own chamber where I will change into my nightgown.

When I come back the king is standing with his court beside the great bed, and the archbishop is still praying. The king is in his nightshirt with a great handsome cloak lined with fur thrown over his shoulders. He has laid aside his hose and I can see the bulky bandage on his leg where he has an open wound. The bandage is clean and fresh, thank God, but even so the smell of the wound seeps into the bedchamber to mingle, sickeningly, with the smell of incense. The prayers seem to have been going on while we both changed our clothes. Really, you would have thought that we were safe from demonic dreams and impotence by now. My ladies step forwards and slip my cloak from my shoulders. I am dressed only in my nightshift before the whole court and I am so mortified and embarrassed that I could almost wish myself back at Cleves.

Lady Rochford quickly lifts the covers from the bed to shield me from their inquisitive stares and I slip between them and sit up with my back against the pillows. On the other side of the bed a young man, Thomas Culpepper, kneels for Henry to lean on his shoulder and another man takes the king's elbow to push him upwards. King Henry grunts like a weary carthorse as he hauls himself

into bed. The bed dips at his great weight and I have to make an ungainly little wriggle and grab the side to stop myself rolling over towards him.

The archbishop raises his hands above his head for a final blessing and I look straight ahead. Katherine Howard's bright face catches my eye, she has her hands pressed together, held against her lips as if devoutly praying, but she is clearly struggling not to giggle. I pretend I have not seen her, for fear that she should set me laughing too, and when the archbishop completes his prayers I say: 'Amen.'

They all go then, thank God. There is no suggestion that they should watch the marriage being consummated, but I know that they will need to see the sheets in the morning and know that it has been done. This is the nature of the royal marriage. That, and marrying a man old enough to be your father, who you hardly know.

Jane Boleyn, Greenwich Palace, 6 January 1540

I am one of the last to leave and I close the door quietly on yet another marriage of the king's which I have seen progress through courtship to the marriage bed. Some, like that young fool Katherine Howard, would think that this is where the story ends, that this is the conclusion of everything. I know better. This is where the story of a queen begins.

Before this night there are contracts and promises, and sometimes hopes and dreams; rarely there is love. After this night there is the reality of two people working out their lives together. For some, it is a negotiation that cannot be done; my own uncle is married to a wife he cannot tolerate, they live apart now. Henry Percy married an heiress but could never free himself from his love for Anne Boleyn. Thomas Wyatt hates his wife with a vengeance, since he fell in love with Anne when she was a girl and he has never recovered. My own husband ... but I will not think about my own husband now. Let me remember that I loved him, that I would have died for love of him – whatever he thought of me when we were put to bed together for the first time. Whoever he thought of when he had to do the deed with me. God forgive him for holding me in his arms and thinking of her. God forgive me for knowing that, and letting it haunt me. In the end, God forgive me for having my head turned and my heart turned so I liked nothing more than to lie in his arms and think of him with another woman – jealousy and lust brought me so low that it was my pleasure, a wicked sinful pleasure, to feel his touch on me and think of him touching her.

It is not a matter of four bare legs in a bed and the business done. She will have to learn to obey him. Not in the grand things, any woman can put on a bit of a show. But in the thousand petty compromises that come to a wife every day. The thousand times a day when one has to bite the lip and bow the head and not argue in public, nor in private, nor even in the quiet recesses of one's own mind. If your husband is a king, this is even more important. If your husband is King Henry, it is a life or death decision.

Everyone tries to forget that Henry is a ruthless man. Henry himself tries to make us forget. When he is being charming, or setting himself out to please, we

like to forget that we are playing with a savage bear. This is not a man whose temperament is tamed. This is not a man whose mood is constantly sweet. This is not a man who can manage his feelings, he cannot keep constant from one day to another. I have seen this man love three women with an absolute passion. I have seen him swear to each of them an eternal, unchangeable fidelity. I have seen him joust under the motto 'Sir Loyal Heart'. And I have seen him send two to their deaths, and learn of the death of the third with quiet composure.

That girl had better please him tonight, and she had better obey him tomorrow, and she had better give him a son within a year, or I, personally, would not give a snap of my fingers for her chances.

Anne, Greenwich Palace, 6 January 1540

One by one they leave the room, and we are left in candlelight and an awkward silence. I say nothing. It is not for me to speak. I remember my mother's warning that whatever happens in England I must never, never give the king reason to think that I am wanton. He has chosen me because he has faith in the character of the women of Cleves. He has bought himself a well-mannered, self-controlled, highly disciplined Erasmian virgin and this is what I must be. My mother does not say outright that to disappoint the king could cost me my life, because the fate of Anne Boleyn has never been mentioned in Cleves since the day when the contract was signed to marry me to a wife-killer. Since my betrothal it is as if Queen Anne was snatched up to heaven in complete silence. I am warned, constantly warned, that the King of England will not tolerate lightness of behaviour in his wife; but no-one ever tells me that he might do to me what he did to Anne Boleyn. No-one ever warns me that I too might be forced to put my head down on the block to be beheaded for imaginary faults.

The king, my husband, in bed beside me, sighs heavily, as if he is weary, and for a moment I think that perhaps he will just fall asleep and this exhausting, frightening day will be over and I can wake tomorrow a married woman and start my new life as Queen of England. For a moment, I dare to hope that my duties for today will be done.

I lie, as my brother would want me to lie, like a frozen moppet. My brother had a horror of my body: a horror and a fascination. He commanded me to wear high necks, thick clothes, heavy hoods, big boots, so that all he could see of me, all anyone could see of me, was my overshadowed face and my hands from my wrists to my fingers. If he could have put me into seclusion like the Ottoman emperor with his imprisoned wives I think he would have done so. Even my gaze was too forward for him, he preferred me not to look directly at him; if he could, he would have had me veiled.

And yet, he constantly spied on me. Whether I was in my mother's chamber sewing under her supervision, or in the yard looking at the horses, I would glance up and see him staring at me with that look of irritation and ... I don't

know what ... desire? It was not lust. He never wanted me as a man wants a woman; of course I know that. But he wanted me as if he would dominate me completely. As if he would like to swallow me up so that I should trouble him no more.

When we were children he used to torment all three of us: Sybilla, Amelia and myself. Sybilla, three years older than him, could run fast enough to get away, Amelia would dissolve into the easy tears of the baby of the family; only I would oppose him. I did not hit him back when he pinched me or pulled my hair. I did not lash out when he cornered me in the stable yard or a dark corner. I just gritted my teeth and when he hurt me, I did not cry. Not even when he bruised my thin little-girl wrists, not even when he drew blood with a stone thrown at my head. I never cried, I never begged him to stop. I learned to use silence and endurance as my greatest weapons against him. His threat and his power was that he would hurt me. My power was that I dared to act as if he could not. I learned that I could endure anything a boy could do to me. Later, I learned that I could survive anything that a man might do to me. Later still I knew that he was a tyrant and he still did not frighten me. I have learned the power of surviving.

When I was older and watched his gentleness and his command of Amelia and his pleasant respect to my mother I realised that my stubbornness, my obstinacy, had created this constant trouble between us. He dominated my father, imprisoned him in his own bedroom, usurped him. He did all this with the blessing of my mother and with a proud sense of his own righteousness. He allied with Sybilla's husband, two ambitious princelings together, and so he still rules Sybilla, even after her marriage. He and my mother have forged themselves into a powerful partnership, a couple to rule Juliers-Cleves. They command Amelia; but I could not be dominated or patronised. I would not be babied or ruled. For him I became an itch that he had to scratch. If I had wept, or begged, if I had collapsed like a girl or clung like a woman he could have forgiven me, adopted me, taken me under his protection and cared for me. I would have been his little pet, as Amelia is: his sweetheart, the sister that he guards and keeps safe.

But by the time I understood all this it was too late. He was locked into his frustrated irritation with me and I had learned the joy of stubbornly surviving, despite all odds, and going my own way. He tried to make a slave of me, but all he did was teach me a longing to be free. I desired my freedom as other girls desire marriage. I dreamed of freedom as other girls dream of a lover.

This marriage is my escape from him. As Queen of England I command a

fortune greater than his, I rule a country bigger than Cleves, infinitely more populous and powerful. I shall know the King of France as an equal, I am stepmother to a granddaughter of Spain, my name will be spoken in the courts of Europe and if I have a son he will be brother to the King of England and perhaps king himself. This marriage is my victory and my freedom. But as Henry shifts heavily in the bed and sighs again like a weary old man, not like a bridegroom, I know, as I have known all along, that I have exchanged one difficult man for another. I shall have to learn how to evade the anger of this new man, and how to survive him.

‘Are you tired?’ he asks.

I understand the word tired. I nod, and say: ‘Little.’

‘God help me in this ill-managed business,’ he says.

‘I don’t understand? I am sorry?’

He shrugs, I realise he is not speaking to me, he is complaining of something for the pleasure of grumbling aloud, just as my father used to do before his ill-tempered mutterings became madness. The disrespect of this comparison makes me smile and then bite my lip to hide my amusement.

‘Yes,’ he says sourly. ‘You might well laugh.’

‘Will you like wine?’ I ask carefully.

He shakes his head. He lifts the sheet and the sickly smell of him blows over me. Like a man seeing what he has bought in a market, he takes the hem of my nightgown, lifts it up, pulls it past my waist and my breasts and leaves it, so that it is in a roll around my neck. I am afraid I look stupid, like a burgher with a scarf tied tight under the chin. My cheeks are burning with shame that he should just stare at my exposed body. He does not care for my discomfort.

He puts his hand down, and abruptly squeezes my breasts, slides his rough hand down to my belly, pinches the fat. I lie absolutely still so that he shall not think I am wanton. It is not hard to freeze in horror. God knows why anyone would feel wanton under such handling. I have stroked my horse with more affection than this cold-hearted groping. He rears up in the bed with a grunt of effort and pushes my thighs apart with a heavy hand. I obey him without making a sound. It is essential that he knows that I am obedient but not eager. He heaves himself over me and slumps between my legs. He is taking his full weight with his elbows planted on either side of my head, and with his knees, but even so his great flaccid belly, pressing down on me, is stifling me. The fat of his chest is pressing on my face. I am a good-sized woman but I am dwarfed underneath him. I fear that if he lies any more heavily I will not be able to breathe, it is quite

unbearable. His panting breath on my face is foul from his rotting teeth, I hold my head rigid to stop myself from turning my face away from him. I find I am breathless, trying not to inhale the stink of him.

He puts his hand down between us and grabs on to himself. I have seen them with the horses in the stables at Duren and I know well enough what is going on in this hard fumbling. I snatch a breath sideways, and I brace myself for the pain. He gives a little grunt of frustration and I can feel his hand pumping away, but still nothing happens. He punches repeatedly at my thigh with his moving hand but that is all. I lie very still, I don't know what he wants to do, nor what he expects of me. The stallion at Duren went rigid and reared up. This king seems to be weakening.

'My lord?' I whisper.

He throws himself off me and grunts a word that I don't know. His head is buried in the richly embroidered pillow, he is still face down. I don't know if he has finished or is merely beginning. He turns his head to me. His face is very red and sweating. 'Anne ...' he starts.

At that fatal name he stops, freezes into silence. I realise that he has said her name, the first Anne that he loved, that he is thinking of her, the lover that drove him to madness and whom he killed in jealous resentment.

'I, Anne of Cleves, am,' I prompt him.

'I know that,' he says shortly. 'Fool.'

With a great heave that pulls all the bedcovers off me, he turns around and lies with his back to me. The air released from the bed is stale with an awful smell. This is the smell of the wound on his leg, this is the smell of putrid flesh, this is the smell of him. It will scent my sheets for ever, till death us do part, I had better get used to it.

I lie very still. To put a hand on his shoulder would, I think, be wanton behaviour, and so I had better not, though I am sorry if he is weary and haunted by the other Anne tonight. I will have to learn not to mind about the smell and about the feeling of being pressed down. I shall have to do my duty.

I lie in the darkness and look up at the rich canopy of the bed above me. In the dimming light which gets darker as each square block candle, one by one, gutters and goes out, I can see the glint of gold thread and the rich colours of the silks. He is an old man, poor old man, forty-eight years old, and it has been a long and exhausting day for us both. I hear him sigh again and then the sigh turns into a deep, bubbling snore. When I am certain that he is asleep I put my hand lightly on his shoulder where the thick damp linen of his nightshirt covers

the fat sweaty bulk of him. I am sorry that he should fail this night, and if he had stayed awake, and if we had spoken the same language, and were able to tell each other the truth, then I would have told him that even though there is no desire between us that I hope to be a good wife to him and a good queen for England. That I feel pity for him in his old age and weariness, and that no doubt when he is rested and less tired we will be able to make a child, the son that we both want so much. Poor sick old man, I would have given much to be able to tell him not to worry, that it will come out all right, that I do not want a young handsome prince, that I will be kind to him.

Katherine, Greenwich Palace, 7 January 1540

The king was already gone before we arrived in the chamber on the day after the wedding, so I missed seeing the King of England in his nightshirt on his wedding morning, though I had set my heart on it. The maids of work went in with her ale, and wood for her fire, and water to wash in, and we waited until we were called to help her dress. She was sitting up in bed with her nightcap on and a neat plait down her back, not a hair out of place. She didn't look like a girl who has made merry all night, I must say. She looked exactly the same as when we put her to bed last night, quite calm and pretty in that cow-like way, and pleasant enough with everyone, not asking for any special favours and not complaining of anything. I was by the bed and since nobody was taking any notice of me I twitched up the sheet and had a quick look.

I didn't see a thing. Exactly so. Not one solitary thing. Speaking as a girl who has had to smuggle a sheet down to the pump and wash it quickly and sleep on it damp more than once, I know when a man and a maid have used a bed for more than sleeping. Not this bed. I would put my precious reputation on the fact that the king did not have her and she did not bleed. I would put the Howard fortune on a bet that they slept just as we left them, when we put them to bed, side by side like a pair of little dolls. The bottom sheet was not even rumpled, never mind soiled. I would bet Westminster Abbey that nothing has happened between them.

I knew who would want to know at once, Lady Nosy-Parker of course. I made a curtsy and went from the room as if I were running an errand and found her, just coming from her own chamber. As soon as she saw my face she snatched my hands and drew me back into her room.

'I bet you a fortune that he has not had her,' I say triumphantly, without a word of explanation.

One thing that I like about Lady Rochford is that she always knows what I am talking about. I never have to explain anything to her.

'The sheets,' I say. 'Not a mark on them, they're not even creased.'

'Nobody has changed them?'

I shake my head. 'I was first in, after the maids.'

She reaches in the cupboard by the bed and brings out a sovereign and gives it to me. 'That's very good,' she says. 'You and I, between us, should always be the first to know everything.'

I smile, but I am thinking about some ribbons I shall buy with the sovereign to trim my new gown and perhaps some new gloves.

'Don't tell anyone else,' she cautions me.

'Oh?' I protest.

'No,' she says. 'Knowledge is always precious, Katherine. If you know something that no-one else knows then you have a secret. If you know something that everyone else knows then you are no better than them.'

'Can't I at least tell Anne Bassett?'

'I'll tell you when you can tell her,' she says. 'Perhaps tomorrow. Now go back to the queen. I am coming in a minute.'

I do as I am told, and as I go out I see she is writing a note. She will be writing to my uncle to tell him that I believe that the king has not bedded his wife. I hope she tells him that it was I who thought this first and not her. Then there may be another sovereign to go with the first. I begin to see what he means about great places bring great favours. I have only been in royal service for a matter of days and already I am two sovereigns wealthier. Give me a month and I shall make my fortune.

Jane Boleyn, Whitehall Palace, January 1540

We have moved to Whitehall Palace, where the wedding is to be celebrated by a week-long jousting tournament, and then the last of the visitors will go back to Cleves and we will all settle into our new lives with a new Queen Anne. She has never before seen anything on the scale or of the style of this tournament, and she is rather endearing in her excitement.

‘Lady Jane, where I sit?’ she demands of me. ‘And how? How?’

I smile at her bright face. ‘You sit here,’ I say, showing her the queen’s box. ‘And the knights will come into the arena, and the heralds will announce them. Sometimes they will tell a story, sometimes recite a poem about their costume. Then they fight either on horseback, riding down the lists here; or hand-to-hand fighting with swords, on the ground.’ I think how to explain.

I never know how much she understands now, she is learning to speak so quickly. ‘It is the greatest tournament the king has planned in many years,’ I say. ‘It will last for a week. There will be days of celebrations with beautiful costumes and everyone in London will come to see the masques and the battles. The court will be at the forefront, of course, but behind them will be the gentry and the great citizens of London and then behind them the common people will come in their thousands. It is a great celebration for the whole country.’

‘I sit here?’ she says, gesturing at the throne.

I watch her take her seat. Of course, to me this box is filled with ghosts. The seat is hers now; but it was Queen Jane’s before her, and Queen Anne’s before that, and when I was a young woman, not even married, just a girl filled with hopes and ambitions and passionately in love, I served Queen Katherine, who sat in that very chair under her own canopy which the king had ordered should be sewn with little gold Ks and Hs for Katherine and Henry, and he himself had ridden out under the name Sir Loyal Heart.

‘This new is?’ she asks, patting the curtains that are swagged around the royal box.

‘No,’ I say, forced by my memories to tell the truth. ‘These are the curtains that are always used. Look, you can see.’ I turn the fabric over and she can see

where other initials have been. They have cut the embroidery from the front of the curtains but left the old sewing at the back. Clearly one can see K and H, entwined with lovers' knots. Oversewn, beside each H, is an H&A. It is like summoning a ghost to see her initials here again. These were the curtains which kept the sun from her head that May Day tournament when it was so hot, and we all knew that the king was angry, and we all knew that the king was in love with Jane Seymour, but none of us knew what would happen next.

I remember Anne leaning over the front of the box and dropping her handkerchief down to one of the jousters, shooting a sidelong smile at the king to see if he was jealous. I remember the cold look on his face and I remember she went pale and sat back again. He had the warrant for her arrest in his doublet then, at that very moment; but he said nothing. He was planning to send her to her death but he sat beside her for much of the day. She laughed and she chattered and she gave out her favours. She smiled at him and flirted and she had no idea he had made up his mind that she would die. How could he do such a thing to her? How could he? How could he sit beside her, with his new lover standing smiling, behind them both, and know that within days Anne would be dead? Dead, and my husband dead with her, my husband dying for her, my husband dying for love of her. God forgive me for my jealousy. God forgive her for her sins.

Seated in her place, her initials showing like a dark stain on the hidden underside of her curtains, I shudder as if someone has laid a cold finger on my neck. If any place is haunted it will be here. These curtains have been stitched and overstitched with the initials of three doomed, pretty girls. Will the court seamstresses be ripping out another A in a few years? Will this box host another ghost? Will another queen come after this new Anne?

'What?' she asks me, the new girl who knows nothing.

I point to the neat stitches. 'K: Katherine of Aragon,' I say simply. 'A: Anne Boleyn. J: Jane Seymour.' I turn the curtain right side round so that she can see her own initials standing proud and new on the fair side of the fabric. 'And now, Anne of Cleves.'

She looks at me with her straight gaze and for the very first time I think that perhaps I have underestimated this girl. Perhaps she is not a fool. Perhaps behind that honest face there is quick intelligence. Because she cannot speak my language I have talked to her as if she is a child and I have thought of her with the wit of a child. But she is not frightened by these ghosts – she is not even haunted by them, as I am.

She shrugs. 'Queens before,' she says. 'Now: Anne of Cleves.'

Either this is a high courage; or it is the stoicism of the very stupid.

'Are you not afraid?' I ask very quietly.

She understands the words, I know she does. I can see it in her stillness and the sudden attentive tilt of her head. She looks at me directly. 'Afraid of nothing,' she says firmly. 'Never afraid.'

For a moment I want to warn her. She is not the only brave girl to sit in this box to be honoured as queen and then end her life stripped of her title, facing death alone. Katherine of Aragon had the courage of a crusader, Anne the nerves of a whore. The king brought them both down to nothing. 'You must take care,' I say.

'I afraid of nothing, am,' she says again. 'Never afraid.'

Anne, Whitehall Palace, January 1540

I was dazzled by the beauty of the palace of Greenwich, but I am shaken to my shoes by Whitehall. More like a town than a palace, it is a thousand halls and houses, gardens and courts, in which only the nobly born and bred seem to find their way around. It has been the home of the Kings of England forever, and every great lord and his family have their own houses built inside the half-dozen acres of the sprawling palace. Everyone knows a secret passage, everyone knows a quick route, everyone knows a door that is conveniently left open to the streets, and a quick way down to a pier on the river where you can get a boat. Everyone but me and my Cleves ambassadors, who are lost inside this warren a dozen times a day and who feel more stupid and more like peasants abroad each time.

Beyond the gates of the palace is the city of London, one of the most crowded, noisy, populous cities in the world. From dawn I can hear the street sellers calling, even from my set of rooms hidden deep inside the palace. As the day goes on the noise and business increases until it seems that there is nowhere in the world that can be at peace. There is a constant stream of people through the palace gates with things to sell and bargains to make and, from what Lady Jane tells me, a continual stream of petitions for the king. This is the true home of his Privy Council; his parliament sits just down the road at the Palace of Westminster. The Tower of London, the great fortified lodestone of every king's power, is just down the river. If I am to make this great kingdom my home I shall have to learn my way around this palace, and then find my way around London. There is no point in hiding in my closet, overwhelmed by the noise and the bustle, I have to get out into the palace and let the people – who crowd in their thousands from dawn till nightfall – look at me.

My stepson, Prince Edward, is on a visit to court, he can watch the jousting tomorrow. He is allowed to court only seldom for fear of taking an infection and never in the summertime for fear of the plague. His father worships the boy, for his own little fair head, I am sure; but also because he is the only boy, the only Tudor heir. A single boy is such a precious thing. All the hopes of this new line rest on little Edward.

Lucky that he is such a strong healthy child. He has hair of the fairest gold, and a smile that makes you want to catch him up and hug him. But he is strongly independent and would be most offended if I were to press my kisses on him. So when we go to his nursery I take care only to sit near him and let him bring his toys to me, one by one, and each one he puts into my hand, with great pleasure and interest. 'Glish,' he says. 'Maow.' And I never catch his little fat hand and plant a kiss in the warm palm, though he looks up at me with eyes as dark and as round as toffee and with a smile as sweet.

I wish I could stay in his nursery all day. It does not matter to him that I cannot speak English or French or Latin. He hands a carved wooden top to me and says solemnly, 'moppet,' and I reply, 'moppet,' and then he fetches something else. We neither of us need a great deal of language nor a great deal of cleverness to pass an hour together.

When it is time for him to eat he allows me to lift him up into his little seat, and sit beside him as he is served with all the honour and respect that his own father commands. They serve this little boy on bended knee, and he sits up and takes his share from any one of a dozen rich dishes as if he were king already.

I say nothing as yet, because it is early days for me as his stepmother; but after I have been here a while longer, perhaps after my coronation next month, I shall ask my lord the king if the boy cannot have a little more freedom to run about and play, and a plainer diet. Perhaps we can visit him more often in his own household, even if he cannot come to court. Perhaps I might be allowed to see him often. I think of him, poor little boy, without a mother to care for him, and I think that I might have the raising of him, and see him grow into a young man, a good young man to be King Edward for England. And then I could laugh at myself for the selfishness of duty. Of course I want to be a good stepmother and queen to him, but more than anything else I long to mother him. I want to see his little face light up when I come into the room, not just for these few days, but every day. I want to hear him say 'Kwan', which is all he can manage of 'Queen Anne'. I want to teach him his prayers and his letters and his manners. I want him for my own. Not just because he is motherless; but because I am childless and I want someone to love.

This is not my only stepchild, of course. But the Lady Elizabeth is not allowed to come to court at all. She is to stay at Hatfield Palace, some distance from London, and the king does not recognise her except as his bastard, got on Lady Anne Boleyn; and there are those who say she is not even that, but another man's child. Lady Jane Rochford – who knows everything – showed me a

portrait of Elizabeth and pointed to her hair, which is red as coals in a brazier, and smiled as if to say that there could be little doubt that this is the king's child. But King Henry has made it his right to decide which children he shall acknowledge, and Lady Elizabeth will be brought up away from court as a royal bastard and married to a minor nobleman when she is of age. Unless I can speak to him first. Perhaps, when we have been married a while, perhaps if I can give him a second son, perhaps then he will be kinder to the little girl who needs kindness.

In contrast, the Princess Mary is now allowed to court, though Lady Rochford tells me that she has been out of favour for years, ever since the defiance of her mother. The refusal of Queen Katherine to let Henry go meant that he denied the marriage and denied their child. I have to try not to think the worse of him for this. It was too long ago, and I am not fit to judge. But to visit on a child the coldness earned by the mother seems to me to be cruel. Just so did my brother blame me for the love that my father felt for me. Of course the Princess Mary is a child no longer. She is a young woman and ready for marriage. I think she is in poor health, she has not been well enough to come to court and meet me, though Lady Rochford says that she is well enough but that she is trying to avoid the court because the king has a new betrothal in mind for her.

I cannot blame her for that, she was to be betrothed to my brother William at one time, and then to a Prince of France, and then to a Hapsburg prince. It is natural that her marriage should be a matter of continual debate until she is settled. What is more odd is the fact that no-one can ever know what they are getting when they buy her. There is no telling her pedigree, since her father has disowned her once and now recognises her again, but could disown her again at any time, since nothing has any weight with him but his own opinion, which he says is the will of God.

When I become more of a power and an influence with my lord the king I shall talk to him about settling the Princess Mary's position once and for all. It is not fair to her that she should not know whether she is princess or a nothing, and she will never be able to marry any man of any substance while her position is so unreliable. I daresay the king has not thought of it from her point of view. And there has been no-one to be an advocate for her. It would surely be the right thing to do, as his wife, to help him see the needs of his daughters, as well as the demands of his own dignity.

Princess Mary is a most determined Papist; and I have been raised in a

country that rejects the abuses of Papists and calls for a purer church. We might be enemies over doctrine and yet become friends. More than anything, I want to be a good queen for England, and a good friend to her, and surely, she should understand that. Of all the things that people say of Katherine of Aragon, everyone knows that she was a good queen and a good mother. All I want to do is follow her example; her daughter might even welcome that.

Katherine, Whitehall Palace, January 1540

I am summoned to practise a masque, a tableau to open the tournament. The king is going to come in disguised as a knight from the sea, and we are to be waves or fish or something like that in his train and dance for the queen and the court. His composer has the score of the music and there are to be six of us. I think we represent the muses, but I am not sure. Now I come to think of it, I don't even know what a muse is. But I hope that it is the sort of thing that has a costume made from very fine silks.

Anne Bassett is another dancer, and Alison, and Jane, Mary, Catherine Carey and me. Of the six of us probably Anne is the prettiest girl, she has the fairest blonde hair and big blue eyes and she has this trick, which I must learn, of looking down and looking up again as if she had heard something most interesting and indecent. If you tell her the price of a yard of buckram she will look down and back up, as if you have whispered that you love her. Only if someone else is watching, of course. If we are just on our own she doesn't bother with it. It does make her most engaging when she is trying hard. After her, I am certain that I am the prettiest girl. She is the daughter of Lord and Lady Lisle and a great favourite of the king's, who is very much taken with this up and down look and has promised to give her a horse, which I think a pretty good fee for doing nothing more than fluttering eyelashes. Truly, there is a fortune to be made at court if you know how.

I enter the room at a run because I am late and there is the king himself, with two or three of his greatest friends, Charles Brandon, Sir Thomas Wyatt and young Thomas Culpepper, standing with the musicians with the score in his hand.

I curtsy very low at once, and I see that Anne Bassett is there, in the forefront, looking very demure and with her are the four others, preening themselves like a nest of cygnets and hoping to catch the royal eye.

But it is me that the king smiles to see. He really does. He turns and says, 'Ah! My little friend from Rochester.'

Down I go into my curtsy again and up I come tilted forwards so that the

men can get a good sight of my low neckline and my breasts and, 'Your Grace!' I breathe, as if I can hardly speak for lust.

I can see they all enjoy this and Thomas Culpepper, who has the most dazzling blue eyes, gives me a naughty wink as one Howard kinsman to another.

'Did you really not know me at Rochester, sweetheart?' the king asks. And he comes across the room and puts his finger under my chin and turns my face up to him as if I were a child, which I don't like much; but I make myself stand still and say: 'Truly, sire, I did not. I would know you again, though.'

'How would you know me again?' he says indulgently, like a kind father at Christmas.

Well, this has me stuck because I don't know. I don't have anything to say, I was simply being pleasant. I have to say something; but nothing at all comes to mind. So I look up at him as if my head were full of confessions but I dare say nothing, and to my enormous pleasure I can feel a little heat in my cheeks and I know that I am blushing.

I am blushing for nothing but vanity, of course, and the pleasure of being singled out by the king himself in front of that slut Anne Bassett, but also for the discomfort of having nothing to say and not a thought in my head; but he sees the blush and mistakes it for modesty, and he at once tucks my hand in the crook of his arm and leads me away from the others. I keep my eyes down, I don't even wink back at Master Culpepper.

'Hush, child,' he says very kindly. 'Poor sweet child, I didn't mean to embarrass you.'

'Too kind,' is all I manage to murmur. I can see Anne Bassett looking after us as if she would kill me. 'I'm so shy.'

'Sweetest child,' he says more warmly.

'It was when you asked me ...'

'When I asked you what?'

I take a little breath. If he were not king, I would know better how to play this. But he is the king, and this makes me uncertain. Besides he is a man old enough to be my grandfather, it seems quite indecent to flirt with him. Then I take a little glance upwards at him and I know I am right. He has got that look on his face. The look that so many men have when they look at me. As if they want to just swallow me up, just capture me, and have me in one gulp.

'When you asked me whether I would know you again,' I say in a thin, little-girl voice. 'Because I would.'

'How would you?' He bends down to hear me, and I suddenly realise in a

rush of excitement that it does not matter that he is king. He is sweet on me like my lady grandmother's steward. It is exactly the same soft, doting look in his face. I swear I recognise it. I should do; I have seen it often enough. It is that stupid, wet look that old men have when they see me, rather nasty really. It is how old men look at women young enough to be their daughters and imagine themselves to be as young as their sons. It is how old men look when they lust for a woman who is young enough to be their daughter, and they know they should not.

'Because you are so handsome,' I say, looking directly at him, taking the risk and seeing what will happen. 'You are the handsomest man at court, Your Grace.'

He stands quite still, almost like a man who suddenly hears beautiful music. Like a man enchanted. 'You think I am the handsomest man at court?' he asks incredulously. 'Sweet child, I am old enough to be your father.'

Closer to my grandfather if truth be told, but I gaze up at him. 'Are you?' I pipe, as if I don't know that he is near to fifty and I am not yet fifteen. 'But I don't like boys. They always seem so silly.'

'They trouble you?' he demands instantly.

'Oh, no,' I say. 'I have nothing at all to do with them. But I would rather walk and talk with a man who knows something of the world. Who can advise me. Someone I can trust.'

'You shall walk and talk with me this very afternoon,' he promises. 'And you shall tell me all your little troubles. And if anyone has troubled you, anyone, no matter how great: he shall answer to me for it.'

I sink into a curtsy. I am so close to him that I almost brush his breeches with my bent head. If that doesn't cause a little stirring, then I shall be very surprised. I look up at him and I smile up at him and I give a tiny little shake of my head as if in wonderment. I think to myself that this really is awfully good. 'Such an honour,' I whisper.

Anne, Whitehall Palace, 11 January 1540

This is a most wonderful day, I feel that I am queen indeed. I am seated in the royal box, my own box, the queen's box, in the newly built gatehouse at Whitehall, and in the jousting ground below me is half the nobility of England, with some great gentlemen from France and Spain come also to show their courage and to seek my favour.

Yes, my favour, for though I am inside still Anne of Cleves, not much regarded and neither the prettiest nor the sweetest of the Cleves girls, on the outside I am now Queen of England and it is amazing how much taller and more beautiful I turn out to be once I have a crown on my head.

The new gown does much to help with my confidence. It is made in the English style and, although I feel dangerously naked with a low-cut gown and no neckpiece of muslin to come up to my chin, at last I am looking more like the other ladies and less like a newcomer to court. I am even wearing a hood in the French style though I have it pulled forwards to hide my hair. It feels very light and I have to remember not to toss my head about and laugh at the sense of freedom. I do not want to seem too changed, too loose in my behaviour. My mother would be terribly shocked by my appearance, I don't want to let her down, nor my country.

Already, I have young men asking for my favour to ride in the lists, bowing low and smiling up at me with a special warmth in their eyes. With meticulous care, I keep my dignity and I award my favour only to those who already carry the king's regard, or those who carry his wagers. Lady Rochford is a safe advisor in these matters, she will keep me away from the danger of causing offence, and the far greater danger of causing scandal. I never forget that a Queen of England must be above any whisper of flirtation. I never forget that it was at a joust, such as this one, when one young man and then another carried the queen's handkerchief and that day was ended with their arrest for adultery, and her merry day was ended on the block.

This court has no memory of that; though the men who gave evidence and handed down the sentence of her death are here today in the bright sunshine,

smiling and shouting orders into the jousting ring, and those who survived, like Thomas Wyatt, smile at me as if they have not seen three other women in the place where I sit now.

The arena is lined with painted boards and marked out with poles painted in the Tudor green-and-white stripes, standards fluttering at every flagpole. There are thousands of people here, all dressed in their best and looking for entertainment. The place is noisy with people shouting their wares, the flower girls singing out their prices, and the chink of coins as bets change hands. The citizens cheer me whenever I glance in their direction, and their wives and their daughters wave their handkerchiefs and call, 'Good Queen Anne!' to me when I raise my hand to acknowledge their attention. The men throw their hats in the air and bellow my name, and there is a constant stream of noblemen and gentry to the royal box to bow over my hand and introduce their ladies, come to London especially for the tournament.

The arena is sweet with the smell of a thousand nosegays and freshly dampened clean sand, and when the horses enter at a gallop, skid to a standstill and rear, they kick up a golden spray. The knights are glorious in their armour, each piece burnished to shine like silver and most of them gorgeously engraved and inlaid with rich metals. Their standard bearers carry flags of brilliant silks embroidered with special mottoes. There are many who come as mystery knights, with their visors down and strange and romantic names bellowed out as their challenge, some of them are accompanied by a bard who tells their tragic story in poetry, or sings their song before the joust. I was afraid that it would be a day of fighting and that I wouldn't understand what was going on, but it is as good as the most beautiful pageant to see the fine horses come into the lists, the handsome men in their pride, and the crowds of thousands cheering them on.

They promenade before they start and there is a tableau to welcome them to the arena. The king himself is the centre of the scene, dressed as a knight from Jerusalem and the ladies of my court are in his train, dressed in costume and sitting on a great wagon that comes in towed by horses who are draped in yards of blue silk. They represent the sea, I can tell, but what the ladies are supposed to be is beyond me. Given the brilliant smile of little Katherine Howard as she stands at the front, her hand raised to shield her bright eyes, I think she is supposed to be lookout mermaid, or something of that nature, perhaps a siren. Certainly she is swathed in white muslin drapery which might represent sea foam and she has accidentally let it fall so that one lovely shoulder is showing, as if she is emerging naked from the sea.

When I have a little more command of the language I shall talk to her about taking care with her reputation and modesty. She does not have a mother, who died when she was a little child, and her father is a careless spendthrift who lives abroad in Calais. She was brought up by a step-grandmother, Jane tells me, so perhaps she has not had anyone to warn her that the king is most alert to any sort of improper behaviour. Her dress today is perhaps allowed, since it is part of a tableau; but the way it is sliding down to show her slim white back is, I know, very wrong.

The ladies dance in the arena and then curtsy and escort the king to my box and he comes to sit beside me. I smile and give him my hand, it is as if we are part of the pageant, and the crowd roars their pleasure to see him kiss my hand. It is my part to smile very sweetly and curtsy to him and welcome him to his great reinforced seat which towers over mine. Lady Jane sees that he is served with a cup of wine and some sweetmeats, and she nods to me that I am to take my seat beside him.

The ladies retreat as half a dozen knights, all in dark armour and flying a sea-blue flag, ride in, so I imagine that they are the tide or Neptune or something. I feel very ignorant not understanding all the meaning of this, but it hardly matters for once they ride around the ring and the heralds bawl out their titles and the crowds roar their approval the jousting will start.

The crowds are packed into the tiered seating and the poorer people are crammed into the spaces between. Every time a knight comes to present his arms to me there is a great bellow of approval from the crowd and they shout 'Anna! Anna Cleves!' over and over again. I stand and smile and wave my thanks, I cannot imagine what I have done to earn such public acclaim, but it is so wonderful to know that the people of England have taken to me, just as naturally and easily as I have taken to them. The king stands up beside me and takes my hand before them all.

'Well done,' he says shortly to me, and then he goes from the box. I look to Lady Jane Boleyn, in case I should go with him. She shakes her head. 'He will have gone to talk with the knights,' she says. 'And the girls of course. You stay here.'

I take my seat and see that the king has appeared in his own royal box opposite to mine. He waves at me, and I wave at him. He sits, and I sit a few moments after him.

'You are already beloved,' Lord Lisle says quietly to me in English, and I grasp what he means.

‘Why?’

He smiles. ‘Because you are young.’ He pauses for my nod of comprehension. ‘They want you to have a son. Because you are pretty, and because you smile and wave at them. They want a pretty, happy queen who will give them a son.’

I shrug a little at the simple ways of these most complicated people. If all they want is for me to be happy, that is easy. I have never been so happy in my life. I have never been so far from my mother’s disapproval and my brother’s rages. I am a woman in my own right, with my own place, with my own friends. I am queen of a great country that I think will grow yet more prosperous and more ambitious. The king is a whimsical master of a nervous court, even I can see that; but here too I might be able to make a difference. I might give this court the steadiness that it needs, I might even be able to advise the king to have more patience. I can see my life here, I can imagine myself as queen. I know I can do this. I smile at Lord Lisle who has been distant from me over these last few days and who has not been his usual kindly self.

‘Thank you,’ I say. ‘I hope.’

He nods.

‘You are well?’ I ask awkwardly. ‘Happy?’

He looks surprised at my question. ‘Er, yes. Yes, Your Grace.’

I think for the word I need. ‘No trouble?’

For a moment I see it, the fear that crosses his face, the momentary thought of confiding in me. Then it is gone. ‘No trouble, Your Grace.’

I see his eyes drift across the jousting arena to the opposite side where the king is sitting. Lord Thomas Cromwell is at his side, whispering in his ear. I know that in a court there are always factions, a king’s favour comes and goes. Perhaps Lord Lisle has offended the king in some way.

‘I know you good friend to me,’ I say.

He nods. ‘God keep Your Grace, whatever comes next,’ he says and steps away from my chair to stand at the back of the box.

I watch the king stand and go to the front of his box. A pageboy keeps him steady on his lame leg. He takes his great gauntlet and holds it above his head. The people in the crowd fall silent, their eyes on this, their greatest king, the man who has made himself king, emperor and Pope. Then, cleverly, when all the attention is on him, he bows to me and gestures with his gauntlet. The crowd roars its approval. It is for me to start the joust.

I rise from my great chair with the gold canopy over my head. Either side of

the box the curtains billow in the Tudor colours of green and white, my initials are everywhere, my crest is everywhere. The other initials of all the other queens are only on the underside of the curtains and they don't show. To judge from today, there has only ever been one queen: myself. The court, the people, the king, all conspire to forget the others and I am not going to remind them. This joust is for me as if I were the very first of Henry's queens.

I raise my hand and the whole arena goes silent. I drop my glove and at either end of the jousting line the horses dive forwards as the spurs strike their sides. The two riders thunder towards each other, the one on the left, Lord Richman, lowers his lance a little later, and his aim is good. With a tremendous thud like an axe going into a tree, the lance catches his opponent in the very centre of his breastplate and the man bellows out and is thrown violently backwards off his horse. Lord Richman rides to the end of the line and his squire catches the horse as his lordship pushes back his dark visor and looks at his opponent, thrown down into the sand.

Among my ladies, Lady Lisle gives a little scream and rises to her feet.

Unsteadily, the young man rises, his legs tottering.

'He is hurt?' I ask in a quiet undertone to Lady Rochford.

She is avidly watching. 'He may be,' she says, a delighted exultant tone in her voice. 'It is a violent sport. He knows the risks.'

'Is there a ...' I do not know the English word for doctor.

'He is walking.' She points. 'He is unhurt.'

They have his helmet off, he is white as a sheet, poor young man. His brown curly hair is dark with sweat and sticking to his pale face.

'Thomas Culpepper,' Lady Rochford tells me. 'A distant kinsman of mine. Such a handsome boy.' She gives me a sly smile. 'Lady Lisle had given him her favour, he has a desperate reputation with the ladies.'

I smile down at him as he takes a few shaky strides to come before the queen's box and bows low to me. His squire has a hand on his elbow to help him up from his bow.

'Poor boy,' I say. 'Poor boy.'

'I am honoured to fall in your service,' he says. His words are obscured by the bruise on his mouth. He is a devastatingly handsome young man, even I, raised by the strictest of mothers, have a sudden desire to take him away from the arena and bathe him.

'With your permission, I shall ride for you again,' he says. 'Perhaps tomorrow, if I can mount.'

‘Yes, but take care,’ I say.

He gives me the most rueful sweet smile, bows and steps to one side.

He limps from the arena and the victor of this first joust takes a slow canter around the outside circle, his lance held upright, acknowledging the shouts from the crowd who have won their bets on him. I look back at my ladies and Lady Lisle is gazing after the young man as if she adores him and Katherine Howard, with a cape thrown around her costume, is watching him from the back of the box.

‘Enough,’ I say. I have to learn to command my ladies. They have to behave as my mother would approve. The Queen of England and her ladies must be above question. Certainly the three of us should not be gawping after a handsome young man. ‘Katherine, get dressed at once. Lady Lisle, where your husband his lordship?’

They both nod, and Katherine whisks away. I sit back on my throne while another champion and his challenger ride into the ring. This time the poem is very long and in Latin, and my hand creeps to my pocket where a letter rustles. It is from Elizabeth, the six-year-old princess. I have read it and re-read it so often that I know I have her meaning, indeed, I almost have every word by heart. She promises me her respect as a queen and her entire obedience to me as her mother. I could almost weep for her, dear little girl, creating these great solemn phrases and then copying them over and over until the handwriting is as regular as any royal clerk. Clearly, she hopes to come to court and indeed, I do think that she might be allowed to enter my household. I have maids in waiting who are not very much older than her and it would be such a pleasure to have her with me. Besides, she lives all but alone, in her own household with her governess and nurse. Surely the king would prefer her to be near us, to be supervised by me?

There is a fanfare of trumpets and I look up to see the riders drawn to one side and saluting as the king limps across the arena to the front of my box. The pages spring to open the doors so that he can mount the steps. He has to be heaved up by a young man on either side. I know enough about him by now to know that this, before a watching crowd, will make him bad-tempered. He feels humiliated and self-conscious and his first desire will be to humiliate someone else. I stand and curtsy to greet him, I never know whether I should put out my hand or reach forwards in case he wants to kiss me. Today, before the crowd that likes me, he draws me to him and kisses me on the mouth and everyone cheers. He is clever at this; he always does something to please the crowd.

He sits on his chair and I stand beside him.

‘Culpepper took a hard knock,’ he says.

I don’t quite understand this so I say nothing to it. There is an awkward silence and clearly it is my turn to speak. I have to think hard to find something to say and the correct English words. Finally I have it: ‘You like to joust?’ I ask.

The scowl he turns on me is quite terrifying, his eyebrows are drawn down so hard that they almost cover his furious little eyes. I have clearly said utterly the wrong thing and offended him very deeply. I gasp, I don’t know what I have said that is so very bad.

‘Excuse me, forgive ...’ I stammer.

‘I like to joust?’ he repeats bitterly. ‘Indeed yes, I would like to joust, but for being crippled with pain with a wound that never heals, that is poisoning me every day, that will be the death of me. Probably in a matter of months. That makes it agony to walk and agony to stand and agony to ride, but no fool thinks of it.’

Lady Lisle steps forwards. ‘Sire, Your Grace, what the queen means to say is, do you like to watch the joust?’ she says quickly. ‘She did not mean to offend you, Your Grace. She is learning our language with remarkable speed, but she cannot help small errors.’

‘She cannot help being as dull as a block,’ he shouts at her. Spittle from his pursed mouth sprays her face but she does not flinch. Steadily she sinks into a curtsy and stays down low.

He looks her over but does not tell her to rise. He leaves her in her discomfort and turns to me. ‘I like to watch it because it is all that is left for me,’ he says bitterly. ‘You know nothing; but I was the greatest champion. I took on all-comers. Not once, but every time. I jousting in disguise so that no-one did me any favours, and even when they rode as hard as they could I still defeated them. I was the greatest champion in England. Nobody could defeat me, I would ride all day, I would break dozens of lances. Do you understand that, you dullard?’

Still shaken, I nod, though in truth, he speaks so fast and so angrily that I can understand hardly any of this. I try to smile but my lips are trembling.

‘No-one could beat me,’ he insists. ‘Ever. Not one knight. I was the greatest jouster in England, perhaps in the world. I was unbeatable and I could ride all day and dance all night, and be up the next day at dawn to go hunting. You know nothing. Nothing. Do I like to joust? – good God, I was the heart of chivalry! I was the darling of the crowd, I was the toast of every tournament! There was none like me! I was the greatest knight since those of the round table! I was a

legend.'

'No-one who saw you could ever forget it,' Lady Lisle says sweetly, raising her head. 'You are the greatest knight that ever entered a ring. Even now I have never seen your equal. There is no equal. None of them in these days can equal you.'

'Hmm,' he says irritably, and falls silent.

There is a long, awkward pause and there is nobody in the jousting arena to divert us, and everyone is waiting for me to say something pleasant to my husband, who sits in silence, scowling at the herbs on the floor.

'Oh, get up,' he says crossly to Lady Lisle. 'Your old knees will lock up if you stay down for much longer.'

'I have letter,' I say quietly, trying to change the subject to something less controversial to him.

He turns and looks at me, he tries to smile, but I can see he is irritated by me, by my accent, by my halting speech.

'You have letter,' he repeats, in harsh mimicry.

'From Princess Elizabeth,' I say.

'Lady,' he replies. 'Lady Elizabeth.'

I hesitate. 'Lady Elizabeth,' I say obediently. I take out my precious letter and show it to him. 'May she come here? May she live with me?'

He twitches the letter from my hand, and I have to stop myself from snatching it back. I want to keep it. It is my first letter from my little stepdaughter. He screws up his eyes to stare at it then he snaps at his pageboy who hands him his spectacles. He puts them on to read but he shades his face from the crowd so that the common people shall not know that the King of England is losing the sight of his squinty eyes. He scans the letter quickly, then he hands it with the spectacles to his page.

'Is my letter,' I say quietly.

'I shall reply for you.'

'Can she come to me?'

'No.'

'Your Grace, please?'

'No.'

I hesitate, but my stubborn nature, learned under the hard fist of my brother, a bad-tempered, spoiled child just like this king, urges me on.

'So, why not?' I demand. 'She writes me, she asks me, I wish to see her. So why not?'

He rises to his feet and leans on the back of the chair to look down on me. 'She had a mother so unlike you, in every way, that she ought not to ask for your company,' he says flatly. 'If she had known her mother she would never ask to see you. And so I shall tell her.' Then he rises to his feet and stamps down the stairs, out of my box, and across the arena to his own.

Jane Boleyn, Whitehall Palace, February 1540

I have been expecting this summons to confer with my lord the duke at some stage during the tournament but he did not send for me. Perhaps he too remembers the tournament at May Day and the fall of her handkerchief and the laughter of her friends. Perhaps even he cannot hear the trumpet sound without thinking of her white-faced and desperate on that hot May Day morning. He waits until the tournament is over and life in the palace of Whitehall has returned to normal and then he tells me to come to his rooms.

This is a palace for plotting, all the corridors twist round and about each other, every courtyard has a little garden at the centre where one may meet by accident, every apartment has at least two entrances. Not even I know all the secret ways from the bedrooms to hidden water gates. Not even Anne did, not even my husband, George, who stole away so often.

The duke commands me to come to him privately after dinner and so I slip away from the dining hall and go the long way round in case anyone is watching me before entering his rooms without knocking, in silence.

He is seated at his fireside. I see by the servant clearing the plates that he has dined alone and eaten better than we did in the hall, I imagine. The kitchens are so far from the dining hall in this old fashioned palace that the food is always cold. Everyone who has private rooms has their food cooked for them in their own chambers. The duke has the best rooms here, as he does almost everywhere. Only Cromwell is better housed than the head of our house. The Howards have always been the first of families, even when their girl is not on the throne. There is always dirty work to be done and that is our speciality. The duke waves the server away and offers me a glass of wine.

‘You can sit,’ he says.

I know by this honour that the work he has for me will be confidential and perhaps dangerous. I sit and sip my wine.

‘And how are matters in the queen’s rooms?’ he asks agreeably.

‘Well enough,’ I reply. ‘She is learning more of our language every day, and she understands almost everything now, I think. Some of the others

underestimate her understanding. They should be warned.'

'I hear the warning,' he nods. 'And her temper?'

'Pleasant,' I say. 'She shows no signs of missing her home, indeed she seems to have a great affection and interest in England. She is a good mistress to the younger maids, she watches them and considers them, and she has high standards; she keeps good command in her rooms. She is observant but not overly religious.'

'She prays like a Protestant?'

'No, she follows the king's order of service,' I say. 'She is meticulous in it.'

He nods. 'No desire to return to Cleves?'

'None that she has ever mentioned.'

'Odd.'

He waits. This is his way. He stays silent until one feels obliged to comment.

'I think there is bad feeling between her and her brother,' I volunteer at last. 'And I think Queen Anne was beloved of her father who was sick from drink at the end of his life. It sounds as if the brother took his place and his authority.'

He nods. 'So no chance of her being willing to step down from the throne and go home?'

I shake my head. 'Never. She loves being queen and she has a fancy to be a mother to the royal children. She would have Prince Edward at her side if she could, and she was bitterly disappointed that she could not see the Prin – the Lady Elizabeth. She hopes to have children of her own and she wants to gather her stepchildren around her. She is planning her life here, her future. She will not go willingly, if that is in your mind.'

He spreads his hands. 'Nothing is in my mind,' he lies.

I wait for him to tell me what he wants next.

'And the girl,' he says. 'Our young Katherine. The king has taken a liking to her, hasn't he?'

'Very much so,' I agree. 'And she is as clever with him as a woman twice her age. She is very skilled. She appears completely sweet and very innocent, and yet she displays herself like a Smithfield whore.'

'Charming indeed. Does she have ambitions?'

'No, only greed.'

'She has no thought that the king has married his wives' maids in waiting before now?'

'She is a fool,' I say shortly. 'She is a skilled flirt because that is her great delight, but she can plan no more than a lapdog.'

‘Why not?’ He is momentarily diverted.

‘She has no thought of the future, she cannot imagine beyond the next masque. She will do tricks for sweets, but she does not dream that she might learn to hunt and pull down the greatest prize.’

‘Interesting.’ He bares his yellow teeth in a smile. ‘You are always interesting, Jane Boleyn. And so: to the king and queen. I escort him to her room every other night. Do you know if he has yet managed to do the act?’

‘We are all certain that he has not,’ I say. I lower my voice though I know I am safe in these rooms. ‘I think he is unmanned.’

‘Why d’you think that?’

I shrug. ‘It was the case in the last months with Anne. We all know that.’

He gives a short laugh. ‘We know it now.’

It was George, my George, who told the world that the king was impotent when he was on trial for his life. Typical of George, with nothing left to lose, to say the unsayable, the one thing he should have kept secret. He was daring to the very steps of the scaffold.

‘Does he show her that he is discontented? Does she know that she does not please him?’

‘He is courteous enough, but cold. It’s as if he doesn’t even think of her with pleasure. As if he cannot get pleasure from anything.’

‘D’you think he could do it with anyone else?’

‘He is old,’ I start; but the quick glare from the old duke reminds me that he is no stripling himself. ‘That should not prevent him, of course. But he is sick with the pain of his leg and I think that this is worse recently. Certainly, it smells worse and he limps very heavily.’

‘So I see.’

‘And he is costive.’

He makes a face. ‘As we all know.’ The latest movement of the king’s bowels is of constant concern to the court, for their own interest as much as his; when he is bound his temper is much worse.

‘And she does nothing to arouse him.’

‘She discourages him?’

‘Not exactly, but my guess is that she does nothing to help him.’

‘Is she mad? If she wants to stay married it all depends on her getting a son from him.’

I hesitate. ‘I believe that she has been cautioned against appearing light or wanton.’ I can hear a little gurgle of laughter in the back of my voice. ‘Her

mother and her brother are very strict, I think. She has been severely brought up. Her great concern seems to be not to give the king cause to complain that she is amorous or hot-blooded.'

He lets out a crack of laughter. 'What are they thinking of? Would you send a king like this a block of ice, and expect him to thank you?' Then he sobers again. 'So do you believe that she is a virgin still? He has managed nothing?'

'Yes, sir, I think she is.'

'She will be anxious about these matters, I suppose?'

I take a sip of wine. 'She has taken no-one into her confidence, as far as I know. Of course she may speak to her own countrywomen in their language but they are not intimate, there is no whispering in corners. Perhaps she is ashamed. Perhaps she is discreet. I think she is keeping the king's failure as a secret between the two of them.'

'Commendable,' he says dryly. 'Unusual in a woman. D'you think she would talk to you?'

'She might. What do you want her to say?'

He pauses. 'The alliance with Cleves may no longer be so important,' he says. 'The friendship between France and Spain is weakening. Who knows? it may be falling apart even as we speak. So if they are not allies, then we no longer need the friendship of the Lutherans of Germany against the united Papists of France and Spain.' He pauses. 'I am going to France myself, on the king's command, to the court of King Francis to find how friendly he is with Spain. If King Francis tells me that he has no love of Spain, that he is weary of them and their perfidy, then he might choose to join with England against them. In such a case we wouldn't need the friendship of Cleves, we wouldn't need a Cleves queen on the throne.' He pauses for emphasis. 'In such a case we would be better with an empty throne. We would do better if our king was free to marry a French princess.'

My head is spinning, as it often does when I talk with the duke. 'My lord, are you saying that the king could make an alliance with France now, and so he does not need the Queen Anne's brother as his friend any more?'

'Exactly so. Not only does he not need him, the friendship of Cleves could become an embarrassment. If France and Spain are not arming against us, we don't need Cleves, we don't want to be tied up with Protestants. We might ally with either France or Spain. We might want to join the great players again. We might even reconcile with the Pope. If God were with us then we might get the king forgiven, restore the old religion and bring the church in England back

under the rule of the Pope. Anything, as always with King Henry, is possible. In all of the Privy Council there was only one man who thought that Duke William would prove to be a great asset, and that man may be about to fall.'

I gasp. 'Thomas Cromwell is about to fall?'

He pauses. 'The most important diplomatic mission, that of discovering the feeling in France, has been given to me, not Thomas Cromwell. The king's thoughts that the reform of the church has gone too far are shared with me, not with Thomas Cromwell. Thomas Cromwell made the Cleves alliance. Thomas Cromwell made the Cleves marriage. It turns out that we don't need the alliance and that the marriage is not consummated. It turns out the king does not like the Cleves mare. *Ergo* (that means therefore, my dear Lady Rochford), *ergo* we might dispense with the mare, the marriage, with the alliance, and with the broker: Thomas Cromwell.'

'And you become the king's chief advisor?'

'Perhaps.'

'You would advise him into alliance with France?'

'God willing.'

'And speaking of God, he reconciles with the church?'

'The Holy Roman Church,' he corrects me. 'Please God we can see it restored to us. I have long wanted it restored, and half the country feels as I do.'

'And so the Lutheran queen is no more?'

'Exactly, she is no more. She stands in my way.'

'And you have another candidate?'

He smiles at me. 'Perhaps. Perhaps the king has already chosen himself another candidate. Perhaps his fancy has alighted and his conscience will follow.'

'Little Kitty Howard.'

He smiles.

I speak out bluntly: 'But what of the young Queen Anne?'

There is a long silence. 'How would I know?' he says. 'Perhaps she will accept a divorce, perhaps she will have to die. All I know is: she is in my way and she will have to go.'

I hesitate. 'She is without friends in this country and most of her countrymen have gone home. She has no support or counsel from her mother or her brother. Is she in danger of her life?'

He shrugs. 'Only if she is guilty of treason.'

'How could she be? She cannot speak English, she knows no-one but those

people we have presented to her. How could she plot against the king?’

‘I don’t know yet.’ He smiles at me. ‘Perhaps I will one day ask you to tell me how she has played the traitor. Perhaps you will stand before a court and offer evidence of her guilt.’

‘Don’t,’ I say through cold lips.

‘You have done it before,’ he taunts me.

‘Don’t.’

Katherine, Whitehall Palace, February 1540

I am brushing the queen's long fair hair as she sits before her silvered mirror. She is looking at her reflection but her eyes are quite blank, she is not seeing herself at all. Fancy that! Having such a wonderful looking-glass that it will give a perfect reflection, and not looking at yourself! I seem to have spent my life trying to get a view of myself in silver trays and bits of glass, even leaning over the well at Horsham, and here she is before a perfectly made looking-glass and she is not entranced. Really, she is most peculiar. Behind her, I admire the movement of the sleeve of my gown as my hands move up and down, I bend down a little to see my own face and tip my head to one side to see the light catch my cheek then I tip it the other way. I try a small smile, then I raise my eyebrows as if I am surprised.

I glance down and find she is watching me, so I giggle and she smiles.

'You are a pretty girl, Katherine Howard,' she says.

I flutter my eyelashes at our reflected images. 'Thank you.'

'I am not,' she says.

One of the awkward things about her not knowing how to speak properly is that she says these dreadfully flat statements and you can't quite tell how you should reply. Of course she is not as pretty as me, but on the other hand she has lovely hair, thick and shiny, and she has a pleasant face and good, clear skin and really quite beautiful eyes. And she should remember that almost no-one at court is as pretty as me, so she need not reproach herself for that.

She has no charm at all but that is partly because she is so stiff. She can't dance, she can't sing, she can't chatter. We are teaching her to play cards and everything else, like dancing and music and singing, of which she has absolutely not a clue; but in the meantime she is fearfully dull. And this is not a court where dull goodness counts for much. Not at all, really.

'Nice hair,' I say helpfully.

She points to her hood on the table before her, that is so very large and heavy. 'Not good,' she says.

'No,' I agree with her. 'Very bad. You like try mine?' One of the really

funny things about trying to talk to her is that you start speaking like she does. I do it for the maids when we are supposed to be sleeping at night. 'You sleep now,' I say into the darkness and we all scream with laughter.

She is pleased at this offer. 'Your hood? Yes.'

I take the pins out and I lift it off my head. I take a little glance at myself in the mirror as my hood comes off and my hair tumbles down. It reminds me of dear Francis Dereham, who used to love to take off my hood and rub his face in my loose hair. Seeing myself do this in a good mirror with a true likeness for the first time in my life I understand how desirable I was to him. Really, I can't blame the king for looking at me as he does, I can't blame John Beresby or the new page who is with Lord Seymour. Thomas Culpepper could not take his eyes off me at dinner last night. Truly, I am in extraordinarily good looks since I have come to court, and every day I seem to be prettier.

Gently I hold out the hood for her and when she takes it I stand behind her to gather back her hair as she sets the hood on her head.

It makes a tremendous improvement; even she can see it. Without the heavy square frame of her German hood sitting like a roof slap on her forehead, her face becomes at once rounder and prettier.

But then she pulls my pretty hood forwards so it is practically on her eyebrows, just like she wore her new French hood at the joust. She looks quite ridiculous. I give a little tut of irritation, and push it so that it is far back on her head, and then I pull some waves of hair forwards to show the fair shiny thickness of it.

Regretfully, she shakes her head and pulls the hood forwards again, tucking her lovely hair out of sight. 'It is better so,' she says.

'Not as pretty, not as pretty! You have to wear it set back. Set back!' I exclaim.

She smiles at my raised voice. 'Too French,' is all she says.

She silences me. I suppose she is right. The last thing any Queen of England can dare to look is too French. The French are the absolute last word in immodesty and immorality and a previous English queen educated in France, quintessentially French, was my cousin Anne Boleyn who brought the French hood to England and took it off only to put her head on the block. Queen Jane wore the English hood in a triumph of modesty. It is like the German hood, quite ghastly, only a little lighter and slightly curved, and that's what most ladies wear now. Not me: I wear a French hood and I wear it as far back as I dare and it suits me, and it would suit the queen too.

‘You wore it at the joust and nobody dropped dead,’ I urge her. ‘You are queen. Do what you like.’

She nods. ‘Maybe,’ she says. ‘The king likes this?’

Well, yes, he likes this hood but only because I am under it. He is such a doting old man that I think he would like me if I wore a jester’s cap on my head and danced about in motley, shaking a pig’s bladder with bells.

‘He likes it well enough,’ I say carelessly.

‘He likes Queen Jane?’ she asks.

‘Yes. He did. And she wore an awful hood, like yours.’

‘He comes to her bed?’

Saints, I don’t know where this is going but I wish that Lady Rochford were here. ‘I don’t know, I wasn’t at court then,’ I say. ‘Honestly, I lived with my grandmother. I was just a girl. You could ask Lady Rochford, or any of the old ladies. Ask Lady Rochford.’

‘He kiss me goodnight,’ she says suddenly.

‘That’s nice,’ I say faintly.

‘He kiss me good morning.’

‘Oh.’

‘That all.’

I look around the empty dressing chamber. Normally there should be half a dozen maids in here, I don’t know where they can all be. They just wander off sometimes, there is nothing so idle as girls, really. I can see why I irritate everybody so much. But now I really need some help with this embarrassing confession and there is no-one here at all.

‘Oh,’ I say feebly.

‘Just that: kiss, goodnight, and then kiss, good morning.’

I nod. Where are the idle sluts?

‘No more,’ she says, as if I am so stupid that I don’t understand the really disastrous thing she is telling me.

I nod again. I wish to God someone would come in. Anyone. I should even be glad to see Anne Bassett right now.

‘He cannot do more,’ she says bluntly.

I see a dark colour rising up her face, the poor thing is blushing with embarrassment. At once I stop feeling awkward and I feel such pity for her; really, this is as bad for her to tell me as it is for me to hear. Actually, it must be worse for her to say than for me to hear, since she is having to tell me that her husband feels no desire for her, and she doesn’t know what to do about it. And

she is a very shy, very modest woman; and God knows, I am not.

Her eyes are filling with tears as her cheeks are growing red. The poor thing, I think. The poor, poor thing. Fancy having an ugly old man for a husband and him not being able to do it. How disgusting would that be? Thank God I am free to choose my own lovers and Francis was as young and sleek-skinned as a snake, and kept me awake all night with his unstoppable lust. But she is stuck with a sick old man and she will have to find a way to help him.

‘Do you kiss him?’ I ask.

‘No,’ she says shortly.

‘Or ...’ I mime a stroking motion with my right hand lightly clenched at hip level; she knows well enough what I mean.

‘No!’ she exclaims, quite shocked. ‘Good God, no.’

‘Well, you have to do that,’ I tell her frankly. ‘And let him see you, leave the candles burning. Get out of bed and undress.’ I make a little gesture to indicate how she should let her shift slide off her shoulders, slither down over her breasts. I turn away from her and look over my shoulder with a little smile, slowly I bend over, still smiling over my shoulder. No man can resist that, I know.

‘Stop,’ she says. ‘Not good.’

‘Very good,’ I say firmly. ‘Must be done. Must have baby.’

She turns her face one way and the other, like a poor trapped animal. ‘Must have baby,’ she repeats.

I mime for her the opening of a shift, I stroke my hand down from my breasts to my fanny. I close my eyes and sigh as if in the grip of tremendous pleasure. ‘Like this. Do this. Let him watch.’

She looks at me with her serious face very grave. ‘I cannot,’ she says quietly. ‘Katherine, I cannot do anything like that.’

‘Why not? If it would help? If it would help the king?’

‘Too French,’ she says sadly. ‘Too French.’

Anne, Hampton Court, March 1540

This great court is on the move, from the palace at Whitehall to another of the king's houses, called Hampton Court. No-one has described it to me but I am expecting to see a good-sized farmhouse in the country. In truth, I am hoping for a smaller house where we can live more simply. The palace of Whitehall is like a little town inside the city of London and twice a day, at least, if I were not guided by my ladies I should get lost. The noise is constant, of people coming and going, striking deals, having arguments, musicians practising, tradesmen offering their goods, even pedlars come to sell things to the housemaids. It is like a village filled with people who have no real work to do but gossip and spread rumours and cause trouble.

All the great tapestries, carpets, musical instruments, treasures, plate, glasses and beds are packed on a train of wagons, on the day of our departure, as if a city were on the move. All the horses are saddled, and the falcons settled in their special wagons, standing on their posts with wickerwork screens around them, their hooded heads turning eagerly, this way and that, the pretty feathers at the top of the hood bobbing like a knight's jousting crest. I watch them and think that I am as blind and as powerless as them. We have both been born to be free, to go where we want, and here we both are, captives of the king's pleasure, waiting for his command.

The dogs are whipped in by their huntsmen, they spill around the courtyards, yelping and tumbling over in their excitement. All the great families pack their own goods, order their own servants, prepare their own horses and luggage train and we fall into procession, early in the morning like a small army, to ride out through the gates of Whitehall and along the river, to Hampton Court.

For once, God be praised, the king is merry, in high spirits. He says he will ride with me and my ladies and he can tell me about the countryside as we go by. I do not have to go in a litter as I did when I first came to England; I am now allowed to ride and I have a new gown for riding in with a long skirt that drapes down either side of the saddle. I am not a skilled rider, for I was never properly taught. My brother only let Amelia and me ride the safest fat horses in his small

stable, but the king has been kind to me and given me a horse of my own, a gentle mare with steady paces. When I touch her with my heel she will go forwards into a canter but when fear makes me jerk on the reins she goes back into a courteous walk. I love her for this obedience, as she helps me hide my fear in this fearless court.

It is a court that loves riding and hunting and galloping out. I should look like a fool if it were not for little Katherine Howard who can ride only a little better than me, and so with her to keep me company the king goes along slowly between the two of us, and tells us both to tighten our reins and sit up straighter, and praises our courage and progress.

He is so kind and pleasant that I stop fearing that he will think me a coward and I start to ride with more confidence, and to look about me, and to enjoy myself.

We leave the city by winding roads, so narrow that we can only go two abreast, and all the people of the city are leaning out of the overhanging windows to see us go by, the children shouting and running alongside our train. On the broad highways we take up both sides of the road and the market vendors in the central section shout blessings and pull off their caps as we ride by. The place is rich with life, a cacophony of noise from people shouting their wares and the thunderous rumble of cart wheels on cobblestones. The city stinks with its own special smell of manure from the thousands of animals kept in the alleys, the offal of butchers' shops and fishmongers, the reek of the leather tanning, and the constant drift of smoke. Every now and then there is a great house, set amongst the squalor, indifferent to the beggars at its doors. High walls shield it from the street and I can just see the tops of great trees in the enclosed gardens. The noblemen of London build their great houses next to hovels and rent their doorways to pedlars. It is so loud and so confusing that it makes me dizzy and I am glad to rattle through the great gates and find myself outside the city wall.

The king shows me the old moats that have been dug in the past to defend London from invaders.

'No men come now?' I ask him.

'There is no trusting any man,' he says grimly. 'The men would come from the North and the East if they had not felt the hammer of my anger already; and the Scots would come if they thought they could. But my nephew King James fears me, as well he should, and the Yorkshire rabble have been taught a lesson they will not forget. Half of them are in mourning for the other half who are dead.'

I say no more for fear of spoiling his happy mood, and Katherine's horse stumbles and she gives a little gasp and clutches the horse's mane, and the king laughs at her and calls her a coward. Their talk leaves me free to look about me.

Beyond the city walls are bigger houses set back from the road with little gardens before them or close-planted little fields. Everyone has a pig in their field, and some people have cows or goats as well as hens in their gardens. It is a rich country, I can see it in the faces of the people who have the shining round cheeks and the smiles of the well fed. Another mile from the city and we come into countryside of open fields and little hedgerows and neat farms and sometimes little villages and hamlets. At every crossroads there is a shrine that has been destroyed, sometimes a statue of the mother of Christ stands with her head casually knocked off and still a little fresh posy of flowers at her feet; not all the English are convinced by the changes in the law. In every other village a small monastery or abbey is being remodelled or broken down. It is extraordinary to see the change that this king has made to the face of his country in a matter of years. It is as if oak trees had been suddenly banned and every great sheltering and beautiful tree had been savagely felled overnight. The king has plucked the heart out of his country and it is too soon to see how it will live and breathe without the holy houses and the holy life that have guided it forever.

The king breaks off from his conversation with Katherine Howard and says to me: 'I have a great country.'

I am not such a fool to comment that he has destroyed or stolen one of its greatest treasures.

'Good farms,' I say, 'and ...' I stop for I do not know the English word for the beasts. I point to them.

'Sheep,' he says. 'This is the wealth of this country. We supply the wool to the world. There is not a coat made in Christendom that is not woven with English wool.'

This is not quite true, for in Cleves we shear our own sheep and weave our own wool, but I know that the English wool trade is very great, and besides, I don't want to correct him.

'Grandmama has our flock on the South Downs,' Katherine pipes up. 'And the meat is so good, sire. I will ask her to send you some.'

'Will you, pretty girl?' he asks her. 'And shall you cook it for me?'

She laughs. 'I could try, sir.'

'Now confess, you cannot dress a joint or make a sauce. I doubt you have ever been so much as inside a kitchen.'

‘If Your Grace wants me to cook for you, then I will learn,’ she says. ‘But I admit you might eat better with your own cooks.’

‘I am quite sure of it,’ he says. ‘And a pretty girl like you does not need to cook. I am sure you have other ways to enchant your husband.’

Their speech is too quick for me to quite follow but I am glad that my husband is merry and that Katherine has the way of managing him. She chatters to him like a little girl and he finds her amusing, as an old man might pet a favoured granddaughter.

I let them talk together, and go on looking around me. Our road now runs beside the wide, fast-flowing river which is busy with boatmen, barges of the noble families, wherry boats, barges of trade travelling laden into London, and fishermen with rods out for the good river fish. The watermeadows, still wet with the winter floods, are lush and shiny with pools of standing water. A great heron lifts up slowly from a mere as we go past and flaps his great wings and flies west before us, tucking his long legs up.

‘Is Hampton Court a little house?’ I ask.

The king spurs his horse forwards to talk to me. ‘A great house,’ he says. ‘The most beautiful house in the world.’

I doubt very much that the French king who built Fontainebleau or the Moors who built the Alhambra would agree, but since I have not seen either palace I won’t correct him. ‘Did you build it, Your Grace?’ I ask.

As soon as I speak I discover that it is once again the wrong thing to say. I thought it would encourage him to tell me about the planning and building of it; but his expression, which was so smiling and handsome, suddenly darkens. Little Katherine quickly answers.

‘It was built for the king,’ she says. ‘By an advisor who proved to be a false counsellor. The only good thing he did was make a palace fit for His Majesty. Or at least, that’s what my grandmother told me.’

His face lightens, he laughs aloud. ‘You speak truly, Mistress Howard, indeed, though you must have been a child when Wolsey betrayed me. He was a false counsellor and the house that he built and gave to me is a fine one.’ He turns to me. ‘It is mine now,’ he says less warmly. ‘That is all you need to know. And it is the finest house in the world.’

I nod and ride forwards. How many men have offended this king, in the long years of his rule? He drops back for a moment and speaks to his Master of Horse who is riding beside the young man Thomas Culpepper, talking and laughing together.

The riders ahead of us turn from the road and I see the great gateway before us. I am stunned at the sight of it. It really is a tremendous palace, of beautiful scarlet brick, the most expensive of all building materials, with arches and quoins of shining white stone. I had no idea that it was so great and fine. We ride through the huge stone gate and down the sweeping road towards it, under the entry gate and our horses' hooves sound like thunder on the cobbles of the great inner yard. Inside is a great court, and the servants coming out of the house fling open the huge double doors so that I can see the hall beyond. They line up, like a guard of honour, in the liveries of the royal Tudor house, according to their rank, row on row of men and women dedicated to our service. This is a house for hundreds of people, a massive place built for the pleasure of the court. Again, I am overwhelmed, the wealth of this country too much for me.

'What happened to the man who built the house?' I ask Katherine as we dismount in the great courtyard, amid the noise of the court, the seagulls calling on the river beyond the house, the rooks cawing on the turrets. 'What happened to the counsellor who offended the king?'

'That was Cardinal Wolsey,' she says quietly. 'He was found guilty of acting against the king and he died.'

'He died too?' I ask. I find I dare not ask what blow felled the builder of this kingly house.

'Yes, died and disgraced,' she says shortly. 'The king turned on him. Sometimes he does, you know.'

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, March 1540

I am back in my old rooms at Hampton Court and sometimes, when I go from the garden to the queen's rooms, it is as if time has stood still and I am still a bride with everything to hope for, my sister-in-law is on the throne of England, expecting her first child, my husband has just been given the title of Lord Rochford, and my nephew will be the next King of England.

Sometimes, when I pause by one of the wide-paned windows and look down to the garden running down to the river I think I might almost see Anne and George walking down the gravelled paths, her hand tucked in his, their heads close together. I think I might watch them again, as I used constantly to watch them then, and see his little gestures of affection, his hand in the small of her aching back, her head brushing his shoulder. When she was with child she used to cling to him for comfort and he was always tender with her, the sister who might be carrying the next King of England in her belly. But when I was big with my child, it was during our last months together and he never took my hand or felt any sympathy for my fatigue. He never put his hand on my swelling belly to feel the baby move, he never put my hand in his arm and encouraged me to lean on him. There was so much that we never did together that I miss now. If we had been happily married I could not be more filled with regret at the loss of him. We had so much left unfinished and unsaid between the two of us; and it will never be said or finished now. When he was dead I sent his son away. He is being raised by friends of the Howards and he will enter the church, I have no ambition for him. I lost the great Boleyn inheritance that I was amassing for him, and there is no credit to be had from his family name; only shame. When I lost the two of them, Anne and George, I lost everything.

My lord the Duke of Norfolk is returned from his mission to France and closets himself with the king for hours. He is in the highest of favour, anyone can see that he has brought the king good news from Paris. If I could not see the rise of our family in the swagger of our men, in our ally Archbishop Gardiner's added air of authority, in the appearance of rosaries and crucifixes at belts and throats, I would see it in the decline of the party of reform: Thomas Cromwell's

ill-concealed bad temper, the quiet thoughtfulness of Archbishop Cranmer, the way they seek to see the king and cannot get an interview with him. If I read the signs correctly then our party, the Howards and the Papists, are in the ascendant once more. We have our faith, we have our traditions, and we have the girl that is taking the king's eye. Thomas Cromwell has sucked the church dry, he has no more wealth to offer the king, and his girl, the queen, may learn English but cannot learn how to flirt. If I were an undecided courtier I would find a way to befriend the Duke of Norfolk and join his side.

He summons me to his rooms. I go to him down the familiar corridors, the smell of lavender and rosemary around my feet from the strewing herbs, the light from the river falling through the great windows ahead of me, and it is as if their ghosts are running just ahead of me, down the panelled gallery, as if her skirt has just flicked out of sight around the corner, as if I can hear my husband's easy laughter still on the sunlit air. If I went a little faster I would catch them – and so even now, it is just as it always was. I always felt that if only I could go a little faster I would catch them, and learn the secrets they shared.

I hurry despite myself but when I round the corner the panelled corridor is empty but for the Howard guards at the door and they have seen no ghosts. I have lost the two of them, as I always did. They are too fast for me in death as they were in life. They didn't wait for me, they never wanted me with them. The guards knock and swing open the door for me, and I go in.

'How is the queen?' the duke asks abruptly from his seat behind a table, and I have to remember that it is a new queen and not our beloved, infuriating Anne.

'She is in good spirits and good looks,' I say. But she will never be the beauty that our girl was.

'Has he had her?'

This is crude, but I assume he is tired from his journey and has no time for the courtesies.

'He has not. As far as I can tell, he is still incapable.'

There is a long pause while he rises from his chair and goes to the window to look out. I think of when we stood here before, when he asked me about Anne and George, when he looked out of the window to see them walking on the gravelled paths down to the river. I wonder if he can see them still, even now, as I can. He asked me then if I envied her, if I would be prepared to act against her. He said I might save my husband by putting her at risk. He asked me if I loved George more than her. He asked me if I would mind very much if she were dead.

His next question breaks into the memories that I wish I could forget. 'Do

you think he might have been ...' He pauses. 'Ill-wished?'

Ill-wished? I can hardly believe what I am hearing. Is the duke seriously suggesting that the king is impotent with his wife as a result of a curse, or a spell, or an ill-wishing? Of course the law of the land says that impotence in a healthy man can only be caused by the action of a witch; but in real life everyone knows that illness or old age can render a man feeble and the king is grossly fat, almost paralysed with pain and sick as a dog in both body and soul. Ill-wishing? The last time the king claimed to be a victim of ill-wishing, the woman he accused was my sister-in-law Anne, who went to the block, guilty of witchcraft, the evidence being the king's impotence with her and her lust with other men.

'You cannot think that the queen ...' I break off. 'No-one could think that *this* queen ... that yet another queen ...' The suggestion is so preposterous and so fraught with danger I cannot even put it into words. 'The country would not stand ... nobody would believe it ... not again ...' I break off. 'He can't go on doing this ...'

'I am thinking nothing. But if he is unmanned then someone must be ill-wishing him. Who could it be, if not her?'

I am silent. If the duke is collecting evidence of the queen ill-wishing her husband, then she is a dead woman.

'He has no desire for the queen at the moment,' I begin. 'But surely it is nothing worse than that? Desire may come. After all, he is not a young man, he is not a well man.'

He nods. I am trying to judge what he wants to hear. 'And he has desire for others,' I go on.

'Ah, this proves the accusation,' he says slickly. 'It could be that he has been ill-wished only when he lies with the queen, so that he cannot be a man with her, so he cannot give England a son and heir.'

'If you say so,' I agree. Pointless to say that it is far more likely that since he is old and often ill, he has not the lust that he used to have; and only a little slut like Katherine Howard with her tricks and her charm can arouse him.

'So who would ill-wish him?' he persists.

I shrug. Whoever I name should say their farewells, for if charged with witchcraft against the king, then they are dead. There can be no proof of innocence and no plea of not guilty; under the new laws any treasonous intent, any thought is a crime as grave as the deed itself. King Henry has passed a law against his people thinking, and his people dare not think that he is wrong. 'I don't know who would do such wickedness,' I say firmly. 'I cannot imagine.'

‘Does the queen entertain Lutherans?’

‘No, never.’ This is true, she is most careful to conform to English ways and takes Mass according to the rules of Archbishop Cranmer, as if she were another Jane Seymour, born to serve.

‘Does she see Papists?’

I am astounded by this question. This is a girl from Cleves, the heartland of reform. She was raised to think of Papists as Satan on earth. ‘Of course not! She was born and bred a Protestant, she was brought here by the Protestant set, how would she entertain Papists?’

‘Is Lady Lisle intimate with her?’

My swift glance to his face tells him of my shock.

‘We have to be ready, we have to be prepared. Our enemies are everywhere,’ he cautions me.

‘The king himself appointed Lady Lisle to her household and Anne Bassett, her daughter, is one of his own favourites,’ I say. ‘I have no evidence against Lady Lisle.’ Because there is none, and there could never be any.

‘Or Lady Southampton?’

‘Lady Southampton?’ I repeat incredulously.

‘Yes.’

‘I know of nothing against Lady Southampton either,’ I say.

He nods. We both know that evidence, especially of witchcraft and ill-wishing, is not hard to create. It is a whisper, and then an accusation, and then a shower of lies, and then a show trial and then a sentence. It was done before to rid the king of a wife he did not want, a woman who could be sent to the block without her family lifting a finger to save her.

He nods, and I wait for long moments in silent dread, thinking that he may order me to frame evidence that will be the death of an innocent woman, thinking what I can say if he makes such a terrible demand of me. Hoping that I can find the courage to refuse him, knowing that I will not. But he says nothing, so I curtsy to him and move towards the door; perhaps he has finished with me.

‘He will find evidence of a plot,’ he predicts as my hand is on the brass latch.

‘He will find evidence against her, you know.’

At once I freeze. ‘God help her.’

‘He will find evidence that either the Papists or the Lutherans have set a witch in his household to unman him.’

I try to keep my face expressionless; but this is such a disaster for the queen, perhaps such danger for me, that I can feel my panic rising at my uncle’s calm

words.

‘Better for us if he names Lutherans as the traitors,’ he reminds me. ‘And not our party.’

‘Yes,’ I agree.

‘Or if he does not seek her death he will get a divorce on the grounds that she was pre-contracted, if that fails he will get a divorce on the grounds that he did not desire her and so he did not consent to the wedding.’

‘He said “I do” before witnesses,’ I whisper. ‘We were all there.’

‘Inwardly, he did not consent,’ he tells me.

‘Oh.’ I pause. ‘He says this now?’

‘Yes. But if she denies that she was pre-contracted then he can still claim that he cannot consummate the marriage because witchcraft by his enemies is working against him.’

‘These Papists?’ I ask.

‘Papists like her friend Lord Lisle.’

I gasp. ‘He would be accused?’

‘It is possible.’

‘Or Lutherans?’ I whisper.

‘Lutherans like Thomas Cromwell.’

My face shows him my shock. ‘He is a Lutheran now?’

He smiles. ‘The king will believe what he wishes,’ he says silkily. ‘God will guide him in his wisdom.’

‘But who does he think has unmanned him? Who is the witch?’

It is the most important question to ask, especially for a woman. It is always the most important thing for a woman to know. Who will be named as the witch?

‘Do you have a cat?’ he asks, smiling.

I can feel myself grow icy with terror, as if my breath is snow. ‘I?’ I repeat. ‘I?’

The duke laughs. ‘Oh, don’t look like that, Lady Rochford. No-one will accuse you while you are under my protection. Besides, you don’t have a cat, do you? No familiar tucked away? No wax dolls? No midnight Sabbaths?’

‘Don’t joke,’ I say unsteadily. ‘It is not a laughing matter.’

At once he sobers. ‘You are right, it is not. So who is the witch who is unmanning the king?’

‘I don’t know. None of her ladies. None of us.’

‘Perhaps it might be the queen herself?’ he suggests quietly.

‘Her brother would defend her,’ I gabble. ‘Even if you do not need his

alliance, even if you have come home from France with a promise of their friendship, you surely cannot risk her brother's enmity? He could raise the Protestant league against us.'

He shrugs. 'I think you will find he may not defend her. And I have indeed secured the friendship of France, whatever happens next.'

'I congratulate you. But the queen is the sister of the Duke of Cleves. She cannot be named as a witch and strangled by a village blacksmith and buried at a crossroads with a stake through her heart.'

He spreads his hands as if he had nothing to do with these decisions. 'I don't know. I merely serve His Majesty. We will have to see. But you should watch her closely.'

'I am to watch her for witchcraft?' I can hardly keep the incredulity from my voice.

'For evidence,' he says. 'If the king wants evidence, of anything, then we Howards will give it to him.' He pauses. 'Won't we?'

I am silent.

'As we always have done.' He waits for my assent. 'Won't we?'

'Yes, my lord.'

Katherine, Hampton Court, March 1540

Thomas Culpepper, my kinsman, in the king's service and high in his favour for no better reason than his pretty face and his deep blue eyes, is a rogue and a promise breaker, and I shall see him no more.

I first saw him years ago, when he came to visit my step-grandmother at Horsham and she would make a fuss over him and swear he would go far. I daresay he didn't even see me then, though now he swears that I was the prettiest maid at Horsham and always his favourite. It's true that I saw him. I was in love with Henry Manox then, the nobody; but I could not help but notice Thomas Culpepper. I think even if I were betrothed to the greatest man in the land I would notice Thomas Culpepper. Anybody would. Half the ladies of the court are driven mad for love of him.

He has dark curly hair and eyes that are very blue, and when he laughs his voice cracks on his laughter in a way which is so funny that it makes me want to laugh, just for hearing it. He is the most handsome man at court, without doubt. The king adores him because he is witty and merry and a wonderful dancer and a great huntsman and as brave as a knight in a jousting tournament. The king has him at his side, night and day, and calls him his pretty boy and his little knight. He sleeps in the king's bedchamber to serve him in the night and he has hands so gentle that the king would rather he dress the wound on his leg than any apothecary or nurse.

All the girls have seen how much I like him and they swear that we should marry, being cousins, but he has no money to his name and I have no dowry and so how would that ever serve us? But if I were to choose one man in the world to marry, it would be him. A naughtier smile I have never seen in my life and when he looks at me, it feels as if he is undressing me and then stroking me all over.

Thank God that now I am one of the queen's ladies and she such a strict and modest queen there will be none of that, though if he had come to the dormitory at Lambeth I swear he could have come to my bed and found a warm welcome there. I should have thrown my handsome Francis back to Joan Bulmer if I had been given a chance at a boy like Tom Culpepper.

He is back at court after resting at his home from his wounding in the joust. He took a bad blow but he says he is young, and young bones mend quickly. It is true, he is young and as filled with life as a hare, leaping for no reason in a spring field. You only have to look at him to see the joy going through his veins. He is like quicksilver, he is like a spring wind blowing. I am glad he has come back to court, even in Lent he makes the place more merry. But just this very morning he has made me wait an hour for him in the queen's garden when I should have been in her rooms and when he came late he said he could not stay but had to run to wait upon the king.

This is not how I am to be treated and I shall teach him so. I shall not wait for him again, I shall not even agree to meet him next time he asks me. He will have to ask me more than once, I swear it. I shall give up flirtation for Lent and it will serve him right. Indeed, perhaps I shall grow thoughtful and serious and never flirt with anyone again.

Lady Rochford asks me why I am in such a temper when we go in to dine and I swear to her that I am as happy as the day is long.

'Mind your smiles then,' she says as if she doesn't believe me for a moment. 'For my lord duke is back from France and he will be looking for you.'

I lift my chin at once and I smile at her quite dazzlingly, as if she has just said something very witty. I even give a little laugh, my court laugh, 'ha ha ha', very light and elegant, as I have heard the other ladies do. She gives a little nod.

'That's better,' she says.

'What was the duke doing in France, anyway?' I ask.

'You are taking an interest in affairs of the world?' she asks quizzically.

'I am not a complete fool,' I say.

'Your uncle is a great man in the favour of the king. He went to France to secure the friendship of the French king so that our country is not faced with the danger of the Holy Father, I mean the Pope, the emperor and the King of France all in alliance against us.'

I smile that Jane Boleyn herself should nearly say 'Holy Father', which we can't say any more. 'Oh, I know about that,' I say cleverly. 'Because they want to put Cardinal Pole on our own throne, out of wickedness.'

She shakes her head. 'Don't speak of it,' she warns me.

'They do,' I insist. 'And that is why his poor old mother and all the Poles are in the Tower. For the Cardinal would call on the Papists of England to come against the king, just as they did before.'

'They won't come against the king any more,' she says dryly.

‘Because they know they are wrong now?’

‘Because most of them are dead,’ she says shortly. ‘And that was your uncle’s doing too.’

Anne, Hampton Court, March 1540

I was told the court would observe the period of Lent with great solemnity. I was assured that we would eat no red meat at all. I was expecting to dine on fish for the whole of the forty days but I discover, the very first night at dinner, that English consciences are easy. The king is tender to his own needs. Despite the fast of Lent there is an enormous range of dishes marching into the hall held high above the heads of the servers, and they come first to the royal table and the king and I take a little from each, as is the custom, and send them out to our friends and favourites around the hall. I make sure I send them to my ladies' table and to the great ladies of court. I make no mistake about this and I never send my favourite dish to any man. This is no empty politeness, the king watches me. Every word I speak at dinner, everything I do, his bright little eyes almost hidden by his fat cheeks follow everything, as if he would like to catch me out.

To my surprise there is chicken, in pies and fricassees, roasted with mouth-watering herbs, carved from the bone; but in this season of Lent it is not called meat. For the purposes of the Lenten fast, the king has ruled that chicken counts as fish. There are all the game birds (also not meat, according to God and the king) beautifully presented, enfolded one within another for the flavour and tenderness. There are rich dishes of eggs (which are not meat), and there is indeed fish: trout from the ponds and wonderful fish dishes from the Thames and deep sea fish, brought by the fishermen who go far out to sea to feed this greedy court. There are freshwater crayfish and stargazy pies with little tasty whitebait heads all peeping out through a thick pastry crust. And there are great dishes of spring vegetables which are rarely served at court, and I am glad to have them on my plate in this season. I shall eat lightly now, and anything that I especially enjoy will be brought to me again for a private dinner in my chamber later. I have never been fed so richly or so well in my life, my Cleves maid has had to let out the stomacher of my gown and there was much arch comment about me growing and blooming, as if to suggest that it is a baby making me fatter. I cannot contradict them without exposing myself, and the king my husband, to even worse comment, so I had to smile and listen to them tease me as if I were a

wife wedded and bedded and hoping to be with child; and not a virgin untouched by her husband.

Little Katherine Howard came in and said that they were all ridiculous and that the good butter of England had made me gain a little weight and they were blind if they did not see how well it suits me. I was so grateful to her for that. She is a foolish, frivolous little thing but she has the cleverness of a stupid girl, since, like any stupid girl, she only thinks about one thing, and so she has become very expert in that. And the one thing that she thinks about? All the time, every moment of every day, Kitty Howard thinks about Kitty Howard.

We surrender other pleasures for the time of Lent. There are no court entertainments of the merry kind, though there are readings of holy texts after dinner, and the singing of psalms. There are no masquings nor mumming and no jousts of course. I am greatly relieved by this because, best of all, it means that there is no possibility of the king coming in disguised. The memory of our first disastrous meeting still lingers with me, and I fear it stays with him too. It was not that I did not recognise him that was so offensive; it was the blatant fact that at first sight I was utterly repelled by him. Never since that day, by word, deed, or even look, have I let him know that I find him so unpleasant: fat, very old, and the stink of him turns my stomach. But however much I hold my breath and smile, it is too late to make amends. My face, when he tried to kiss me, told him everything in that moment. The way I pushed him off me, the way I spat the taste of him from my mouth! I still bow my head and flush hot at the terrible embarrassment. All this has left an impression with him that no later good manners can erase. He saw the truth of my view of him in that one swift glimpse, and – what is worse – he saw himself through my eyes: fat, old, disgusting. Sometimes I fear his vanity will never recover from this blow. And since his vanity is damaged I think his potency has gone with it. I am certain that his manhood was destroyed by my spit on the floor, and there is nothing I can do to recall it.

And that is another thing we give up for Lent. Thank God. I shall look forward to this time every year. For various blessed feast days and forty wonderful days every year of my married life, there will be forty nights when the king will not come to my chamber, when I will not smile at his entrance, and try to arrange myself in such a way that it is easy for him to lever his great bulk above me, and try to show my willingness but not wantonness in a bed that stinks of the festering wound of his leg, in half-darkness, with a man who cannot do the task.

The burden of this insulting misery night after night is utterly defeating me, it is humbling me to dust. I wake every morning in despair; I feel humiliated, though the failure is all his. I lie awake in the night and hear him fart and groan with the pain of his swollen belly and I wish myself away, almost anywhere rather than in his bed. I shall be so glad to be spared, for these forty days, the terrible ordeal of his attempt and his failing and my lying awake and knowing that tomorrow night he will try again, but still he will not be able to do it, and that each time he fails he blames me a little more and likes me even less.

At least we can have this time when we are allowed a little peace. I need not worry how I should help him. He need not work above me like a great heaving boar. He will not come to my room, I can sleep in sheets that smell of lavender instead of pus.

But I know that this time will end. Easter will come with the celebrations; my coronation which was planned for February and put off for our grand entrance into London, will now take place in May. I must take this time as a welcome rest from the presence of my husband, but I must use this time to make sure that when he comes back to my chamber we can deal better together. I must find a way to help him to come to my bed, and for me to help him to do the act.

Thomas Cromwell must be the man to help me. Kitty Howard's advice is what I should have expected of her: the seductive skills of a naughty girl. How she must have behaved before she was taken into my rooms I dare not imagine. When I am a little more settled myself I shall have to talk to her. A girl – a child – such as her should not know how to drop a shift and smile over a naked shoulder. She must have been very badly guarded and very ill-advised. The ladies of my court must be as above criticism as myself. I shall have to tell her that whatever flirtatious tricks she knows she must put them aside. And she cannot teach them to me. I cannot have a shadow of suspicion over my behaviour. A queen has died in this country for less.

I wait for the dinner to end and for the king to leave his place and walk between the tables, greeting men and women as he goes. He is affable tonight, his leg must be less painful. It is often hard to tell what ails him, for he is bad-tempered for so many different reasons, and if I inquire after the wrong cause, that can give offence too.

As I see him walk away I look down the hall and I catch Thomas Cromwell's eye. I crook my finger and he comes to me, and I rise and take his arm and let him lead me away from the dining table and to a window overlooking the river, as if we are admiring the view and the icy night with a dozen sparkling stars.

‘I need help, Master Secretary,’ I say.

‘Anything,’ he says. He is smiling but his face is strained.

‘I cannot please the king,’ I say in the words I have rehearsed. ‘Help me.’

At once, he looks quite sick with discomfort. He glances around him as if he would shout for help for himself. I am ashamed to be speaking so to a man, but I have to get good advice from somewhere. I cannot trust my women, and to speak to my advisors from Cleves, even Lotte, would be to alert my mother and brother whose servants they are. But this is not a true marriage, this is not a marriage in deeds as well as words. And if it is not a marriage then I have failed in my duty to the king, to the people of England, and to myself. I have to make this marriage a real one. I have to do it. And if this man can tell me what is wrong then he must do so.

‘These are ... private matters,’ he says, his hand half-covering his mouth as if to stop any words coming out. He is pulling at his lip.

‘No. This is the king,’ I say. ‘This is England. Duty, not private.’

‘You should be advised by your women, by your Mistress of Maids.’

‘You made the wedding,’ I say, groping for words. ‘Help me make it true.’

‘I am not responsible ...’

‘Be my friend.’

He glances around as if he would like to run away, but I will not release him.

‘These are early days.’

I shake my head. ‘Fifty-two days.’ Who has counted the days more carefully than me?

‘Has he explained his dislike of you?’ he demands suddenly. The English is too fast for me, and I don’t understand the words.

‘Explained?’

Cromwell makes a little noise of irritation at my stupidity and glances around as if he would summon one of my countrymen to translate. Then he checks himself as he remembers that this must be a complete secret.

‘What is wrong with you?’ he says very simply and very quietly, his mouth to my ear.

I realise that my face is stunned, and quickly I turn to the window before the court can see my shock and distress.

‘It is me?’ I demand. ‘He says it is me?’

His little dark eyes are anguished. He cannot answer me for shame; and that is how I know. It is not that the king is old or tired or sick. It is that he does not like me, that he does not desire me, perhaps even that I disgust him. And I guess

from Thomas Cromwell's scrunched-up, worried little face that the king has already discussed his repulsion with this nasty little man.

'He tell you he hate me?' bursts out of me.

His agonised grimace tells me that 'yes', the king has told this man that he cannot force himself to be my lover. Perhaps the king has told others, perhaps all his friends. Perhaps all this time the court has been laughing behind their white hands at the ugly girl from Cleves who came to marry the king and now repels him.

The humiliation of this makes me give a little shudder and turn away from Cromwell, and I do not see his bow and his swift retreat as he rushes to get away from me as you would avoid a person with poisonous bad luck.

I spend the rest of the evening in a daze of misery, I cannot put words to my shame. If I had not served such a hard apprenticeship at my brother's court of Cleves I should have fled to my bedroom and cried myself to sleep. But I long ago learned to be stubborn, and long ago learned to be strong, and I have faced the dangerous dislike of a powerful ruler before, and survived.

I keep myself alert, like a wakened frightened falcon. I do not droop and I do not let my pleasant smile slip from my face. When it is time for the ladies to retire I curtsy to the king my husband without betraying for a moment my anguish that he finds me so disgusting that he cannot do to me what men can do to beasts of the field.

'Goodnight, Your Grace,' I say.

'Goodnight, sweetheart,' he says with such easy tenderness that for a moment I want to cling to him as my only friend at this court and tell him of my fear and unhappiness. But he is already looking beyond me, away from me. His glance is idly resting on my ladies and Katherine Howard steps forwards and curtsies to him and then I lead them all away.

I say nothing during the slow taking off of my gold collar, my bracelets, my rings, net, my hood, my sleeves, my stomacher, the two skirts, the padding, the petticoats and the shift. I say nothing when they throw my nightdress over my head and I sit before the mirror and they brush my hair and plait it and pin my nightcap on my head. I say nothing when Lady Rochford lingers and asks kindly if I need anything, if she can be of service to me, if my mind is easy tonight.

My priest comes in, and the ladies and I kneel together for the night-time prayers, and my thoughts beat in rhythm to the familiar words while I cannot help but think that I disgust my husband and have done from the very first day.

And then I remember it again. That first moment at Rochester when he came

in all puffed up in his vanity and looking so very ordinary, exceptional only in that he stepped up to me, just like a drunken tradesman might do. But this was not a drunken old man of the country town, this was the King of England playing knight errant and I humiliated him before the whole court and I think he will never forgive me.

His dislike of me springs from that moment, I swear it. The only way that he can bear the memory of it is to say, like a hurt child: 'Well, I don't like her either'. He recalls me pushing him away and refusing to kiss him and now he pushes me away and refuses to kiss me. He has found a way to redress the balance by naming me as the undesirable one. The King of England, especially this king, cannot be seen to be the undesirable one, especially to himself.

The priest finishes the prayers and I rise to my feet as the maids troop from the room, their heads bowed, as sweet as little angels in their nightcaps. I let them go. I ask for no-one to wake with me though I know I will not sleep this night. I have become an object of disgust, just as I was in Cleves. I have become an object of disgust to my own husband and I cannot see how we shall reconcile and make a child while he cannot bear to touch me. I have become an object of disgust to the King of England and he is a man of utter power and no patience.

I am not weeping for the insult to my beauty because now I have a far greater worry. If I am an object of disgust to the King of England and he is a man of utter power and no patience, what might he do to me? This is a man who killed one beloved wife with studied cruelty, the second that he adored he executed with a French sword; and the third, who had given him a son, he left to die of poor nursing. What might he do to me?

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, March 1540

That she is not happy is a certainty, but she is a discreet young woman, wiser by far than her years, and she cannot be led into confidences. I have been as kind and as sympathetic as I can to her, but I don't want her to feel that I am probing for my own sake; and I don't want to make her feel any worse than she must do already. For certain she must feel very friendless and strange in a country where she is only starting to grasp the language and where her husband shows such obvious relief when he can avoid her, and such blatant attention to another girl.

Then in the morning, after Mass, she comes to me as the girls are preening themselves before going to breakfast. 'Lady Rochford, when will the princesses come to court?'

I hesitate. 'Princess Mary,' I remind her. 'But only Lady Elizabeth.'

She gives a little 'ach' noise. 'Yes. So. Princess Mary and Lady Elizabeth.'

'They usually come to court for Easter,' I say helpfully. 'And then they can see their brother, and they can greet you. We were surprised that they did not greet you on your entry to London.' I stop myself. I am going too fast for her. I can see her frown as she struggles to follow my speech. 'I am sorry,' I say more slowly. 'The princesses should come to court to meet you. They should greet their stepmother. They should have welcomed you to London. Usually they come to court for Easter.'

She nods. 'So. I may invite them?'

I hesitate. Of course, she can; but the king will not like her taking the power upon herself in this way. However, my lord duke will not object to any trouble between the two of them, and it is not my job to warn her.

'You can invite them,' I say.

She nods to me. 'Please write.'

I go to the table and pull the little writing box towards me. The quills are ready-sharpened, the ink in the little pot, the sand in the sifter for scattering on the wet ink, and there is a stick of sealing wax. I love the luxury of court, I love to pick up the quill and take a sheet of paper and wait for the queen's orders.

'Write to the Princess Mary that I should be glad to see her at court for

Easter and that she will be welcome as a guest in my rooms,' she says. 'Is that the right way to say it?'

'Yes,' I say, writing rapidly.

'And write to the governess of the Lady Elizabeth that I shall be glad to see her at court too.'

My heart beats a little faster, like it does at a bear-baiting. She will walk straight into trouble if she sends these letters. These are an absolute challenge to the absolute power that is Henry. Nobody issues invitations in his household but he, himself.

'Can you send these for me?' she asks.

I am almost breathless. 'I can,' I say. 'If you wish.'

She puts out her hand. 'I shall have them,' she says. 'I shall show them to the king.'

'Oh.'

She turns to hide a little smile. 'Lady Rochford, I would never do anything against the king's wishes.'

'You have the right to have what ladies you please at your court,' I remind her. 'It is your right as queen. Queen Katherine always insisted that she appoint her own household. Anne Boleyn too.'

'These are his daughters,' she says. 'So I shall ask him before I invite them.'

I bow, she leaves me with nothing to say. 'Will there be anything else?' I ask her.

'You may go,' she says pleasantly, and I walk from the room. I am rather conscious that she tricked me into giving her bad advice, and she knew of it all along. I must remember that she is far more astute than any of us ever credit.

A page in Norfolk livery is idling outside the queen's rooms. He passes me a folded note and I step into one of the window embrasures. Outside the garden is bobbing with yellow Lenten lilies, daffodils, and in a chestnut tree which is studded with fattening sticky buds there is a blackbird singing. The spring is coming at last, the queen's first spring in England. The summer days of picnics and jousts and hunting and pleasure trips, boating on the river and the summer progress around the great palaces will start again. Perhaps the king will learn to tolerate her, perhaps she will find a way to please him. I shall see it all. I shall be in her rooms, where I should be. I lean against the polished panelling to read my note. It is unsigned, like every note from the duke.

The king will keep company with the queen only until the moment

that France quarrels with Spain. It is agreed. Her time with us can be measured in days. Watch her. Gather evidence against her. Destroy this.

I look around for the boy. He is leaning against the wall and idly tossing a coin, catching one side up and then the other. I beckon him to me. 'Tell your master that she wants the princesses at court,' I say quietly in his ear. 'That is all.'

Katherine, Hampton Court, March 1540

The king is most angry at dinner tonight, I can tell from the way that he leads in the queen and he does not glance over to me as he usually does. I am sorry about this because I have a new gown (another one!) in creamy yellow, and it is gathered under the bust so that my breasts are on display in the most ravishing and shameless way. But it is a waste of time and trouble trying to please a man. When you are at your very best his mind is elsewhere, or when he agrees to meet you he has to go off somewhere else, with less than half a decent excuse. Tonight, the king is so cross with the queen that he hardly looks at me and I have wasted my new gown for nothing. On the other hand, there is a most delicious young man sitting at the Seymour table who is clearly appreciating the gown and the contents; but I have no time for young men any more, sworn as I am to a life of self-denial starting this Lent. I see Tom Culpepper trying to catch my eye but I don't even look at him. I will not easily forgive him for promising to meet me and then failing me. I shall probably live and die a spinster and it will be his fault.

Why the king is angry, and what she has done, I don't know until after dinner when I go up to the table to take her a handkerchief that she had embroidered to give to the king. It is a new fashion and very elegant. She certainly can sew. If a man prized a wife for her sewing she would be his very favourite. But she never even gives it to him, for as I come up he suddenly turns to her and says: 'We shall have a merry court for Easter.'

She would have been better advised to say, 'yes', and leave it at that. But she says, 'I am glad. I wish for the Lady Elizabeth and the Princess Mary to come to court.'

He looks furious, and I see her hands grip together on the table before her. 'Not the Lady Elizabeth,' he says gruffly. 'You should not wish for her company nor she for yours.'

This is too fast for her and I see her puzzled little frown, but she understands well enough that he is saying, 'no'.

'Princess Mary,' she says quietly. 'She is my stepdaughter.'

I can hardly breathe, I am so amazed at her daring to reply. Fancy having him snarl at you like that and then standing your ground!

‘I cannot think why you should want to summon a determined Papist to court,’ he says icily. ‘She is no friend of your faith.’

The queen understands the tone well enough even if she does not quite comprehend the words.

‘I her stepmother am,’ she says simply. ‘I guide her.’

He gives a sharp bark of laughter and I am afraid of him, even if she is not. ‘She is all but your own age,’ he says unkindly. ‘I don’t think she will want any mothering from the likes of you. She was mothered by one of the greatest princesses of Christendom, and when I parted them they defied me rather than huddle together for love. D’you think she will need a girl her own age to take care of her? When she and her mother let death part them rather than deny their faith? D’you think she’ll want a mother now who can’t even speak English? She can talk to you in Latin or Greek or Spanish or French or English, but not German. And what do you have? Oh, yes, only High German.’

I know I should say something to distract his temper, but he is so spiteful and so sharp that he frightens me. I can’t say anything, I stand there like a fool and wonder how she can find the strength not to faint in her chair.

She is flushed scarlet with embarrassment, from the neck of her gown to her heavy hood, I can see the blush under her muslin shift and under the collar of gold and her neckpiece. It is painful to see her embarrassment before his anger and I wait for her to burst into tears and run from the room. But she does not.

‘I learn English,’ she says with quiet dignity. ‘All the time. And I her stepmother am.’

The king gets up from the table so fast that his heavy gold chair scrapes on the floor and almost tips over. He has to steady himself on the table. His face is red and there is a pulse beating at his temple. I am half-dead of terror just looking at him, but she is still seated, her hands gripped together on the table before her. She is like a little block of wood, rigid with fear but not moving, not crumbling. He glares down at her as if to frighten her into silence; but she speaks.

‘I shall do my duty. To our children, and to you. Forgive me if I offend.’

‘Invite her,’ he snarls and he stamps from the high table to the door behind the throne which leads to his private rooms. He hardly ever uses this door, so there is no-one there to open it for him and he has to throw it open himself, and then he is gone, and we are all left dumbstruck.

She looks at me and I see that her stillness is not calm, she is frozen with terror. Now he has gone and the court scrambling to their feet to bow to the slammed door, and we are all alone.

‘It is the queen’s right to invite ladies to her household,’ she says unsteadily.

‘You won,’ I say disbelievingly.

‘I shall do my duty,’ she says again.

‘You won,’ I repeat incredulously. ‘He said: “invite her”.’

‘It is the right thing,’ she says. ‘I do my duty, for England. I shall do my duty to him.’

Anne, Hampton Court, March 1540

I am waiting in my rooms at Hampton Court for my new ambassador who arrived late last night and is to come to see me this morning. I had thought that the king would see him before I did, but there are no plans for a royal greeting yet.

‘Is that right?’ I ask Lady Rochford.

She looks a little uncertain. ‘Ambassadors usually have a special reception to introduce them to the court and all the king’s council,’ she says. She spreads her hands as if to say she does not know why the ambassador from Cleves is to be treated differently. ‘It is Lent,’ she suggests. ‘He should not have come during Lent but at Easter.’

I turn to the window so she cannot see the irritation in my face. He should have travelled with me, and come to England when I did. Then I would have had a representative with the king from the moment that I set foot in England, and one who would have stayed with me. Counts Overstein and Olisleger were my escorts but they knew they would leave me and go home, and they were not experienced in foreign courts. I should have had an ambassador at my side from the first day. If he had been with me at Rochester when I insulted the king at our first meeting ... But this is pointless to regret. Perhaps now that he is here, he will find a way to help me.

There is a knock at the door and the two guards swing it open. ‘Herr Doktor Carl Harst,’ the guard announces, labouring over the title, and the Cleves ambassador comes into the room, looks around for me, and bows low. All the ladies in waiting curtsy while looking him over and noting, in a breeze of critical whispers, the worn shine on the collar of his velvet jacket and the scuffed heels on his boots. Even the feather in his bonnet looks as if it has had a hard journey overland from Cleves. I can feel myself flush with shame that this man should be representing my country to the wealthiest and most frivolous court in Christendom. He will make himself laughable, and me with him.

‘Herr Doktor,’ I say and stretch out my hand for him to kiss.

I can see he is taken aback by my fashionable dress, my English hood set

neatly on my hair, the rich rings on my fingers and the gold chains at my waist. He kisses my hand and says in German: 'I am honoured to present myself to you, Your Grace. I am your ambassador.'

Dear God, he looks more like a poor clerk. I nod.

'You have broken your fast?' I ask.

He makes a little embarrassed face. 'I ... er ... I could not quite ...'

'You have not eaten?'

'I could not find the hall, Your Grace. I am sorry. The palace is very large and my rooms are some way from the main building, and there was no-one ...'

They have put him somewhere halfway to the stables. 'You did not ask someone? There are thousands of servants?'

'I don't speak English.'

I am truly shocked. 'You don't speak English? How will you conduct the business of our country? Nobody here speaks German.'

'Your brother the duke thought that the councillors and the king would speak German?'

'He knows full well that they do not.'

'And he thought I would learn English. I already speak Latin,' he adds defensively.

I could cry, I am so disappointed. 'You must certainly have some breakfast,' I say, trying to recover myself. I turn to Kitty Howard who, as usual, is lingering at my side eavesdropping. She is welcome to our conversation so far. If she can speak German well enough to spy then she can translate for this useless ambassador. 'Mistress Howard, would you send one of the maids for some bread and cheese for the ambassador? He has not broken his fast. And some small ale.'

As she goes I turn back to him. 'Do you have any letters for me from my home?'

'Yes,' he says. 'I have instructions from your brother, and your mother sends her maternal love and hopes you are a credit to your home and have not forgotten her loving discipline.'

I nod. I would prefer it if she had sent me a competent ambassador who could also have been a credit to my home, rather than this chilly blessing, but I take the package of letters that he holds out to me, and he settles to his breakfast at one end of the table and I read my letters at the other end.

I read the letter from Amelia first. She starts with a list of the compliments that have been paid to her and how happy she is with her own court at Cleves. She likes to be in sole possession of our rooms. She tells me of her new gowns,

and of dresses that were mine but have been adapted for her use. This is to form her trousseau, for she is to be married. I give a little gasp at this and Lady Rochford says kindly: 'Not bad news I hope, Your Grace?'

'My sister is to be married.'

'Oh, how lovely. A good match?'

It is nothing compared to my good fortune, of course. I should be laughing at the small scale of Amelia's triumph. But I have to blink back tears before I can answer. 'She is to marry my brother-in-law. My older sister Sybilla is already married to the Duke of Saxony, and she is to go to their court and marry his younger brother.' And so become a happy little neighbouring family, I think bitterly. So they are all together: mother, brother, two sisters and their two husbands, and only I am sent far away to wait for letters which bring me no joy but just continue the sense of exclusion and unkindness that my brother has dealt me all my life.

'Not a match like yours then.'

'There is no other match like mine,' I say. 'But she will like to live with my sister, and my brother likes to keep the others close.'

'No sables for her,' Kitty Howard points out, and makes me smile at her unending shameless greed.

'No, that is the main thing of course.' I smile at her. 'Nothing matters more than sables.'

I put Amelia's letter aside, I cannot bring myself to read her confident predictions of family Christmases and joining together for hunting in summer, and celebrating birthdays and bringing up their children, the Saxony cousins all together in the same happy nursery.

I open the letter from my mother instead. If I had hoped for some comfort here I would be disappointed. She has spoken with Count Olisleger and she is filled with anxiety. He tells her that I have been dancing with men not my husband, that I wore a gown without a muslin filet up to my ears. She hears that I have put aside Cleves dress and am wearing an English hood. She reminds me that the king married me because he wanted a Protestant bride of impeccable behaviour and that he is a man of jealous and difficult temperament. She asks me if I want to dance my way to Hell, and reminds me that there is no sin worse than wantonness in a young woman.

I put down the letter and go to the window to look out over the beautiful garden of Hampton Court, the ornate walkways near to the palace and the paths, running down to the river with the pier and the royal barges rocking at their

moorings. There are courtiers walking with the king in the garden, dressed as richly as if they were going to a joust. The king, a head taller than any man in his train and broad as a bull, is wearing a cloak of cloth of gold, and a bonnet of velvet which sparkles, even at this distance, with diamonds. He is leaning on the shoulder of Thomas Culpepper, who is dressed in the most glorious dark green cloak pinned with a diamond brooch. Cleves with its uniform of fustian and broadcloth, seems a long way away. I will never be able to explain to my mother that I do not peacock in English fashions for the sake of vanity, but only so that I do not seem more despicable and more repellent than I already am. If the king puts me aside, God knows that it will not be for dressing too fine. It will be because I disgust him, and I seem to do that whether I wear my hood like my grandmother, or like pretty little Kitty Howard. Nothing I can do can please the king; but my mother could spare herself the trouble of cautioning me that my life depends upon pleasing him. I already know that. And it cannot be done. At any rate, I cannot do it.

The ambassador has finished eating. I return to the table and motion to him that he may stay seated while I read my last letter, from my brother.

Sister, he starts. I have been much troubled by the report of Counts Overstein and Olisleger as to your reception and behaviour at the court of your new husband, King Henry of England. Your mother will deal with matters of clothing and decorum, I can only beg that you listen to her and do not allow yourself to be led into behaviour that can only embarrass us, and shame yourself. Your tendency to vanity and ill-conditioned behaviour is known to us all; but we hoped that it would remain a family secret. We beg you to reform, especially now that the eyes of the world are upon you.

I skip the next two pages, which are nothing but a list of the times that I have disappointed him in the past and warnings that a false step at the English court could have the gravest consequences. Who would know this better than I?

Then I read on.

This letter is to introduce the ambassador who will represent our country to King Henry and his council. You will extend to him every assistance. I expect you to work closely with him to further our hopes for this alliance that has so far disappointed us.

Indeed, the King of England seems to think that he has made a very vassal of Cleves and now he is hoping for our alliance against the emperor, with whom we have no quarrel and are not likely to make one to oblige your husband or you. You should make this clear to him.

I understand that a senior Englishman, the Duke of Norfolk, has enjoyed a visit to the French court and there is no doubt in my mind but that England is drawing closer to France. This is the very thing that you were sent to England to prevent. Already, you are failing your country of Cleves, failing your mother, and me. The ambassador should advise you as to how you can do your duty and not forget it in the pleasures of the flesh.

I have provided him with transport to England and a servant to attend him, but you will have to pay him directly. I assume, from what I hear of your jewels and your new clothes and other ungodly extravagances including, I am told, expensive sables, that you can well afford to do this. Certainly, you would do better to spend your new-found wealth on the future of your country than on items of personal vanity and adornment which can only attract contempt. Just because you have been raised to a high position does not mean that you can neglect your conscience as you have done in the past. I urge you most earnestly to mend your ways, Sister. As the head of your house I advise you to abjure vanity and wantonness.

Trusting that this letter finds you in good health as it leaves me, certainly I hope that it finds you in good spiritual health, Sister. Luxury is no substitute for a good conscience, as you will find if you are spared to grow old.

As prays your loving brother

William.

I put down the letter and I look at the ambassador. 'Tell me, at least, that you have done this work before, that you have been an ambassador in another court.'

It is my fear that he is some Lutheran preacher that my brother has decided to employ.

'I served your father at the court of Toledo and Madrid,' Dr Harst replies

with some dignity. 'But never before at my own expense.'

'My brother's finances are a little difficult,' I say. 'At least you can live for free at court here.'

He nods. 'He indicated to me that you would pay my salary.'

I shake my head. 'Not I. The king gives me my court and my ladies and my clothes, but no money as yet. That can be one of the questions that you raise with him.'

'But as the crowned Queen of England ...'

'I am married to the king, but not crowned queen,' I say. 'Instead of my coronation in February I had a formal welcome into London, and now I expect to be crowned after Easter. I have not yet been paid my allowance as queen. I have no money.'

He looks a little anxious. 'I take it there is no difficulty? The coronation will go ahead?'

'Well, you will have brought the papers that the king requires?'

'What papers?'

I can feel my temper rising. 'The papers that prove that my earlier betrothal was annulled. The king demanded them, Counts Overstein and Olisleger swore that they would send them. They swore on their honour. You must have them.'

His face is quite aghast. 'I have nothing! Nobody said anything about these papers to me.'

I am stammering in my own language, I am so distraught. 'But there could be nothing more important! My wedding was delayed because there was fear of a pre-contract. The emissaries from Cleves swore that they would send the evidence as soon as they got home. They had to offer themselves as hostages. They must have told you. You must have them! They offered themselves as security!'

'They said nothing to me,' he repeats. 'And the duke your brother insisted that I delayed my journey to meet with them. Can they have forgotten such a thing?'

At the mention of my brother the fight goes out of me. 'No,' I say wearily. 'My brother agreed to this marriage but does not assist me. He does not seem to care for my embarrassment. Sometimes I fear that he has sent me to this country just to humiliate me.'

He is shocked. 'But why? How can such a thing be?'

I pull myself back from indiscretion. 'Oh, who knows? Things occur between children in the nursery and are never forgotten or forgiven. You must

write to him at once and tell him that I have to have the evidence that shows my earlier betrothal was annulled. You have to persuade him to send it. Tell him that without it, I can do nothing, I can have no influence on the king. Tell him that without it we appear guilty of double dealing. The king could suspect us, and he would be right to suspect us. Ask my brother if he wants my very marriage to be questioned? If he wants me sent home in disgrace? If he wants this marriage annulled? If he wants me crowned queen? Because every day that we delay we give the king grounds for suspicion.'

'The king would never ...' he begins. 'Everybody must know ...'

'The king will please himself,' I say fiercely. 'That is the first thing that you learn in this court. The king is king, and head of the church, he is a tyrant who answers to nobody. He rules men's bodies and their souls. He speaks for God in this country. He himself believes that he knows God's will, that God speaks directly through him, that he is God on earth. He will do exactly what he wishes and he will decide if it is right or wrong, and then he will say that God wills it. Tell my brother that he puts me in very real danger and discomfort if he fails me in this one small thing. He has to send the documents or I fear for myself.'

Katherine, Hampton Court, March 1540

Easter morning and a happy Easter for me. I so hate Lent – for whatever have I to do penance for, or regret? Next to nothing. But I hated Lent even worse this year when it meant no dancing at court and no music except the dreariest of hymns and psalms; and worst of all no masquing and no plays. But for Easter we shall at last be merry. The Princess Mary is to come to court and we are all desperate to know how she likes her new stepmother. We are already laughing in anticipation of that greeting as the queen tries to be a mother to a child only one year her junior, tries to speak to her in German, tries to guide her to the reformed religion. It will be as good as a play. Princess Mary is said to be very grave and sad and pious; while the queen is light-hearted and merry in her rooms and born and bred a Lutheran or an Erasmian or one of those sorts of things, reformed, anyway. So we are all on the tips of our toes to get a good view from the window as the Princess Mary rides up to the front of the palace, and then we all scuttle like a flock of frantic hens to get into the queen's rooms before the Princess Mary is shown up the stairs. We fling ourselves into the seats around the room and try to look as if we are quietly sewing and listening to a sermon, and the queen says, 'Naughty girls,' with a smile and then there is the knock on the door, and in comes the princess, and – such a surprise – she has the Lady Elizabeth with her, by the hand.

Up we all pop and drop into very careful curtseys, we have to curtsy to the Princess Mary low enough to indicate our respect to a Princess of the Blood Royal, and rise up before the Lady Elizabeth can take the credit since she is only a bastard of the king, and perhaps not his at all. But I give her a smile and poke out my tongue at her as she goes past me for she is only a little girl, poor little poppet, only six years old, and besides, she is my cousin, but with the most distressing hair you can imagine, red as a carrot. I should die if I had hair like that, but it is her father's hair and that must be worth having for a child whose parentage is in doubt.

The queen rises to greet her two stepdaughters and she gives them each a kiss on both cheeks and then she draws them into her privy chamber and closes

the door on all of us, as if she would be alone with them. So we have to wait about outside with no music and no wine and no merriment at all, and worst of all, no idea what is going on behind the closed door. I take a little stroll towards the privy chamber; but Lady Rochford frowns me away and I raise my eyebrows and say, 'What?' as if I have no idea that she is preventing me from eavesdropping.

Within minutes anyway we can all hear the laughter and the chatter of little Elizabeth, and within half an hour they throw open the door and out they come and Elizabeth has hold of the queen's hand and Princess Mary, who was so dour and sad when she came in, is smiling and looking quite flushed and pretty. The queen presents us by name one after another and Princess Mary smiles graciously at each of us, knowing half of us to be her sworn enemy, and then at last they call for refreshments and the queen sends a message to the king to tell him that his daughters are come to court and are in her rooms.

Now things improve even more, for the next thing is that the king himself is announced and all the men come in with him, and I sink into a curtsy but he goes past me with hardly a second glance to greet his daughters.

He is very fond of them, he has some sugared plums in his pocket for the little Lady Elizabeth and he speaks kindly and gently to Princess Mary. He sits by the queen and she puts her hand over his and says something quietly in his ear and clearly they are a merry little family which would be very sweet if he were a wise old grandfather with his three pretty granddaughters around him, as one might almost think.

I feel a little sour and irritated by all this, since no-one is paying the least attention to me, and then Thomas Culpepper – whom I have not forgiven for one moment – comes up to me and kisses my hand and says, 'Cousin.'

'Oh, Master Culpepper,' I exclaim as if I am surprised to see him. 'Are you here?'

'Where else could I be? Is there a prettier girl in the room?'

'I don't know, I'm sure,' I say. 'The Princess Mary is a beautiful young lady.'

He makes a face. 'I am talking about a girl that can turn a man's heart upside down.'

'I don't know of a girl like that for you, since I don't know of any girl that could make you keep an appointment on time,' I say sharply.

'You cannot still be cross with me,' he says, as if this is a great wonder. 'Not a girl like you, who could have any man she wanted with a snap of her fingers.'

You cannot be cross with someone as unimportant as me when I am commanded away from you, though my heart was breaking at the thought of leaving you.'

I give a little crow of laughter, and put my hand over my mouth as the queen glances over to me. 'Your heart was never breaking,' I say. 'You have none.'

'It was,' he insists. 'Broken in two. But what could I do? The king commanded my attendance but my heart lies with you. I had to break my heart and do my duty, and now you still will not forgive me.'

'I don't forgive you because I don't believe a word of it,' I say cheerfully. I look towards the queen and I see that the king is now watching us. Carefully, I turn my head a little away from Thomas Culpepper and withdraw slightly. It will not do to seem too engaged with him. I glance under my eyelashes and indeed the king is looking at me. He beckons me to him with a crook of his finger, and I ignore Thomas Culpepper and step up to the royal chair.

'Your Grace?'

'I am saying that we should have some dancing. Will you partner the Princess Mary? The queen tells me you are the best of her dancers.'

So now, who capers like an Italian? I flush hot with pleasure and I wish with all my heart that my grandmother could see me now, being ordered to dance by the king himself on the recommendation of the queen.

'Of course, Your Grace.' I curtsy beautifully; I cast down my eyes modestly as well, since everyone is watching me, and I put out my hand to the Princess Mary. Well, toll-loll, she doesn't exactly leap up to take it, and she walks to the centre of the room to form the first line of the dance with me as if she were not much honoured by her partner. I toss my head a little at her grave face and summon the other girls, who form a line behind us. The musicians strike a chord and we start to dance.

And who would have thought it? She's rather a good dancer. She moves gracefully and she holds her head high. Her feet twinkle through the steps, she has been wonderfully taught. I give a little sway of my hips just to make sure that the King, and every man in the room, keeps his eyes on me, but to be honest, I am sure that half of them are watching the princess, whose colour rises as she dances and who is smiling by the time we have gone through the chain part of the dance and the walking your partner down the archway. I try to look modestly pleased with the success of my partner but I am afraid I look as if I am sucking lemons. I can't be a foil to someone else's performance, I just can't. It's not my nature, I just don't aspire to second place.

So we finish with a curtsy and the king rises to his feet and calls '*Brava!*'

Brava!’ which is Latin or German or something for hurrah, and I smile and try to look quietly pleased while he comes towards us and takes the princess by the hand and kisses her on both cheeks and tells her he is delighted with her.

I stand back, as modest as a little flower, but as green with envy as a spike of grass at all the praise being showered on the dull creature; but then he turns to me, and bends down to whisper in my ear. ‘And you, sweetheart, dance like a little angel. Any partner of yours would look the better for being at your side. Will you ever dance for me, d’you think? Just on your own, for my pleasure?’

And I, looking up at him, fluttering my eyelashes down as if I am overwhelmed by him, say: ‘Oh, Your Grace! I should quite forget my steps if I were to dance for you. I would have to be guided, every step of the way. You would have to lead me wherever you wanted.’

So he says: ‘Pretty little thing, I know where I would lead you, if I could.’

Oh, do you? I think. Well, you naughty old man. Can’t muster a salute for your own wife and yet whispering to me.

The king steps back and leads the Princess Mary back to the queen and the musicians strike a chord and the young men of the court step forwards for their partners. I feel a hand take mine and I turn around with my eyes cast down as if I am shy at being asked. ‘No need to trouble yourself with that,’ says my uncle Norfolk coldly. ‘I want a word with you.’

Rather shocked that it is not handsome young Thomas Culpepper, I let him escort me to the side of the chamber and there is Lady Rochford, as if waiting, of course she is waiting, and I am between the two of them and my heart sinks down into my little dancing shoes, I am sure, I am certain-sure that he is going to send me home for flirting with the king.

‘What d’you think?’ he asks Lady Rochford over my head.

‘Uncle, I am innocent,’ I say, but no-one pays any attention to me.

‘Possible,’ she says.

‘I’d say certain,’ he returns.

They both look at me as if I were a cygnet for the carving.

‘Katherine, you have taken the king’s eye,’ my uncle says.

‘I have done nothing,’ I squeak. ‘Uncle, I swear I am innocent.’ I give a little gasp when I hear myself. I am thinking of Anne Boleyn, who said those very words to him and found no mercy. ‘Please ...’ I whisper. ‘Please, I beg you ... Truly I have done nothing ...’

‘Keep your voice down,’ says Lady Rochford, glancing around, but nobody is paying us any attention, nobody is going to call me away.

‘You have taken his fancy, now you have to take his heart,’ he goes on, as if I had said nothing. ‘You have done beautifully so far; but he is a man of a certain age and he doesn’t want a little slut on his knee, he likes to fall in love, he likes the pursuit better than the capture. He wants to think he is courting a girl of unblemished reputation.’

‘I am! Truly, I am! Unblemished!’

‘You have to lead him on and bring him on and yet forever draw back.’

I wait, I have no idea what he wants of me.

‘In short he is not just to lust for you, he has to fall in love with you.’

‘But why?’ I ask. ‘So that he gets me a good husband?’

My uncle leans forwards, his mouth to my ear. ‘Listen, fool. So that he makes you his wife, his own wife, the next Queen of England.’

My exclamation of surprise is silenced by Lady Rochford, who pinches the back of my hand sharply. ‘Ow!’

‘Listen to your uncle,’ she says. ‘And keep your voice down.’

‘But he is married to the queen,’ I mutter.

‘He can still fall in love with you,’ my uncle says. ‘Stranger things have happened. And he has to know that you are a virgin untouched, a little rose, that you are a good enough girl to be Queen of England.’

I glance back towards the woman who already is the Queen of England. She is smiling down at the Lady Elizabeth, who is doing a little hopping dance in time to the music. The king is tapping his good foot in time to the beat, even Princess Mary looks happy.

‘Perhaps not this year, perhaps not next,’ my uncle says. ‘But you must keep the king interested and you must lead him into honourable love. Anne Boleyn led him on and held him off, and kept him coming on for six years, and she started when he was in love with his wife. This is not the work of a day, this is a masterpiece, it will be your life’s work. You are not to give him the least idea that he could make you his mistress. He has to honour you, Katherine, as if you were a young lady fit only for marriage. Can you do that?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘He is king. Doesn’t he know everybody’s thoughts anyway? Doesn’t God tell him?’

‘God help us, the girl is an idiot,’ my uncle mutters. ‘Katherine, he is a man like any other, only now, in his old age, more suspicious and more vindictive than most. He has enjoyed an easier life than most, he has been idle for all his days. He has had kindness everywhere he has ever gone, no-one has said “no” to him since he got rid of Katherine of Aragon. He is used to having his own way

in everything. This is the man you have to delight, a man brought up to indulgence. You have to make him think you are special, he is surrounded by women who pretend to adore him. You have to do something special. You have to make him aroused and yet keep his hands off you. This is what I am asking you to do. You can have new gowns and Lady Rochford's help but this is what I want. Can you do it?

'I can try,' I say doubtfully. 'But what happens then? When he is in love and aroused but trusting? What happens then? I can hardly tell him that I am hoping to be queen while I serve the queen.'

'You leave that to me,' he says. 'You do your part and I will do mine. But you have to do your part. Just as you are: but a little more, a little more warmly. I want you to bring him on.'

I hesitate. I am longing to say yes, I am longing for the gifts that will come my way and the fuss that everyone will make of me if I am seen to take the king's eye. But Anne Boleyn, my cousin, this man's niece, must have felt that too. He may have given her the very same advice, and look where it got her. I don't know how much of a part he played in helping her to the throne, nor whether he helped her on to the scaffold. I don't know if he will take better care of me than he did of her. 'What if I can't do it?' I ask. 'What if something goes wrong?'

He smiles down at me. 'Are you telling me that you doubt for a moment that you can make any man fall in love with you?'

I try to keep my face grave; but my own vanity is too much for me and I smile back at him. 'Not really,' I say.

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, March 1540

We are riding to London, to the palace of Westminster for the opening of parliament. But this riding back to London is not the same as when we were riding out. Something has happened. I feel as if I am an old hound, the pack leader, who can lift her grizzled head and smell the change in the wind. When we rode out, the king was between the queen and young Kitty Howard and anyone looking at them would have seen him distribute his smiles between his wife and her friend. Now, to me, perhaps only to me, the scene is quite different. Once again the king rides between the queen and her little favourite but this time his head is turned, all the time, to his left. It's as if his round face has swivelled on the fleshy neck and got stuck. Katherine holds his attention like a dancing mayfly holds the attention of the fat, gaping carp. The king is goggling at Katherine Howard as if he cannot take his eyes from her; and the queen, on his right, and even the Princess Mary on her other side, cannot divert him, cannot distract him, can do nothing but provide a shield for his infatuation.

I have seen this before – my God – so many times. I have been at Henry's court since I was a maid and Henry was a boy, and I know him: a boy in love, a man in love, and now an old fool in love. I saw him run after Bessie Blount, after Mary Boleyn, after her sister Anne, after Madge Shelton, after Jane Seymour, after Anne Bassett, and now this: this pretty child. I know how Henry looks when he is besotted: a bull, ready to be led by the nose. He is at this point now. If we Howards want him, we have him. He is caught.

The queen reins back to speak with me, and leaves Katherine Howard, Catherine Carey, Princess Mary and the king riding together before us. They barely turn their heads to see that she has gone. She is becoming a cipher, a person of no significance.

‘The king likes Kitty Howard,’ she observes to me.

‘And Lady Anne Bassett,’ I say equably. ‘Young people make him merry. You have enjoyed the company of the Princess Mary, I think.’

‘No,’ she says shortly, there is no diverting her. ‘He likes Katherine.’

‘No more than any other,’ I persist. ‘Mary Norris is a favourite.’

‘Lady Rochford, be my friend: what am I to do?’ she asks me simply.

‘Do? Your Grace?’

‘If he has a girl ...’ She breaks off to find the right word. ‘A whore.’

‘A lover,’ I correct her rapidly. ‘Whore is a very bad word, Your Grace.’

She raises her eyebrows. ‘Ach, so? Lover.’

‘If he takes a lover, you must pay no attention.’

She nods. ‘This is what Queen Jane do?’

‘Yes indeed, Your Grace. She did not notice.’

She is silent for a second. ‘They do not think her a fool for this?’

‘They thought her queenly,’ I say. ‘A queen does not complain of her husband the king.’

‘That is what Queen Anne do?’

I hesitate. ‘No. Queen Anne was very angry, she made much noise.’ God spare us ever again from the storm that broke over our heads on the day that Anne found Jane Seymour squirming and giggling on the king’s lap. ‘The king was then angry with her. And ...’

‘And?’

‘It is dangerous to anger the king. Even if you are queen.’

She is silent at this, it has not taken her long to learn that the court is a death-trap for the unwary.

‘Who was the king’s lover then? When Queen Anne made much noise?’

This is rather awkward to tell the king’s new wife. ‘He was courting Lady Jane Seymour, who became queen.’

She nods. I have learned that when she looks most stolid and stupid it is then that she is thinking the most furiously.

‘And Queen Katherine of Aragon? She makes a noise?’

I am on firmer ground here. ‘She never once complained to the king. She always greeted him with a smile, whatever she had heard, whatever she feared. She was always a most courteous wife and queen.’

‘But he took a lover? Just the same? With such a queen at his side? Her, a princess that he had married for love?’

‘Yes.’

‘And was that lover Lady Anne Boleyn?’

I nod.

‘A lady in waiting? Her own lady in waiting?’

I nod again at the remorseless march of her logic.

‘So both his two queens were ladies in waiting? He see them in the queen’s

rooms? He meet them there.'

'That is so,' I say.

'He meets them while the queen watches. He dances with them in her rooms. He agrees that they should meet later?'

I cannot deny it. 'Er, yes.'

She looks ahead to where Katherine Howard is riding close to the king and watches as he leans over and puts his hand on hers, as if to correct how she is holding the reins. Katherine looks up at him as if his touch is an honour she can hardly bear. She leans slightly towards him, yearning, we both hear her breathless little giggle.

'Like that,' she says flatly.

I can think of nothing to say.

'I see,' says the queen. 'I understand now. And a wise woman say nothing?'

'She says nothing.' I hesitate. 'You cannot prevent it, Your Grace. Whatever comes of it.'

She bows her head and to my surprise I see a tear fall on to the pommel of her saddle and she covers it quickly with her gloved finger. 'Yes, I can do nothing,' she whispers.



We have been settled in our apartments at Westminster for only a few days when I am summoned to the rooms of my kinsman the Duke of Norfolk. I go at midday, before we dine, and I find him pacing about his rooms, not his usual contained self at all. It is so unusual to see him disturbed that I am at once alert to danger. I do not enter the room but stay by the wall, as I would if I had opened the wrong door in the Tower and found myself among the king's lions. I stay by the door and my hand rests on the door knob.

'Sir?'

'Have you heard? Did you know? Cromwell is to be an earl? A damned earl?'

'He is?'

'Did I not just say so? Earl of Essex. Earl of bloody Essex! What do you think of that, madam?'

'I think nothing, sir.'

'Have they consummated the marriage?'

'No!'

‘Do you swear? Are you certain? They must have done. He’s got it up at last and he’s paying his bawd. He must be pleased with Cromwell for something!’

‘I am utterly certain. I know they have not. And she is unhappy, she knows he is attracted to Katherine, and she is anxious about that. She spoke to me of it.’

‘But he is rewarding the minister who gave him the queen. He must be pleased with the marriage, something must have pleased him. He must have learned something, he must be turning from us for some reason. He is rewarding Cromwell, and Cromwell brought him the queen.’

‘I swear to you, my lord, I have held nothing back from you. The king has been coming to her bed almost every night since the end of Lent but it is no better than it was before. The sheets are clean, her hair is still in plaits, her nightcap straight every morning. She cries sometimes, during the day, when she thinks no-one is watching. This is not a well-loved woman, this is a hurt girl. I swear she is a virgin still.’

The duke rounds on me in his rage. ‘Then why would he make Cromwell Earl of Essex?’

‘It must be for some other reason.’

‘What other reason? This is Cromwell’s great triumph, this alliance with the Protestant dukes and the king, this alliance against France and Spain, sealed with this marriage with the Flanders girl. I have an alliance with the King of France at my fingertips. I have filled the king’s head with suspicions against Cromwell. Lord Lisle has told him that Cromwell favours reformers, has hidden heretics away in Calais. Cromwell’s favourite preacher is to be accused of heresy. Everything is piling up against him but then he gets an earldom. Why is that? The earldom is his reward. Why would the king reward him if he is not pleased with him?’

I shrug my shoulders. ‘My lord uncle. How should I know?’

‘Because you are here to know!’ he shouts at me. ‘You are put at court and kept at court and dressed and fed at court so that you shall know everything, and so that you shall tell me! If you know nothing, what is the point of you being here? What was the point of sparing you from the scaffold?’

I feel my face grow stiff with fear at his anger. ‘I know what goes on in the queen’s rooms,’ I say softly. ‘I cannot know what happens in the Privy Council.’

‘You dare to say that I should know? That I am remiss?’

Mutely, I shake my head.

‘How should anybody know what the king thinks when he keeps his own counsel and rewards the man whose face he has been slapping in public for the

past three months? How should anyone know what is happening when Cromwell is blamed for the worst marriage the king has ever made and is now to lord it around us as earl, as damned Earl of damned-to-hell Essex?’

I find that I am pressed back against the wall and the silky feel of the tapestry is behind my outspread hands. I can feel the fabric grow damp with my cold sweat.

‘How is anybody to know what the hell is in the king’s mind when he is by turns as cunning as a crow and as mad as a hare?’

I shake my head in silence. That he should name the king in the same breath as madness is as good as treason. I will not repeat it even here, safe in Howard rooms.

‘At any rate, you are sure that he still likes Katherine?’ the duke says more quietly.

‘Hotly. There is no doubt in my mind.’

‘Well, tell her to keep him at arm’s length. We gain nothing if she becomes his whore, but he stays married to the queen.’

‘There can be no doubt ...’

‘I doubt everything,’ he says flatly. ‘And if he beds her and then beds the queen and gets a son on her and thanks Cromwell for the addition to his nursery then we are ruined, along with the little slut.’

‘He will not bed the queen,’ I say, returning to my only certainty.

‘You don’t know anything,’ he says rudely. ‘All you know is what can be gleaned from keyholes and privy chamber whispers, out of the chamber sweepings and the midden. You know everything that can be found in the dirt of life, you know nothing of policy. I tell you, he is rewarding Cromwell with rank beyond his dreams for bringing him the Cleves queen; and your plans and my plans are all thrown down. And you are a fool.’

There is nothing I can say to this so I wait for him to tell me to leave, but he turns to the window and pauses, looking out and gnawing his thumbnail. After a little while a page comes to tell him that he is required at the House of Lords and he goes out without another word to me. I curtsy, but I don’t think he even sees me.

When he is gone, I should go too but, I do not leave. I walk around his room. When the room is quiet and no-one comes to the door, I draw back the chair. Then I sit behind his table in his big carved chair with the crest of the Howards, hard and uncomfortable behind my head. I wonder what it would have been like if George had lived and his uncle had died and George had been the great man of

this family and I might have sat here, beside him, in my own right. We might have had matching chairs at this great table, and hatched our own plans, our own schemes. We might have made a great house of our own and raised our own children in it. We would have been brother and sister-in-law to the queen, our children would have been cousins to the next king. George would have been a duke for sure, I would have been a duchess. We would have been wealthy, the greatest family in the kingdom. We might have grown old together, he would have prized me for my advice and my fierce loyalty, I would have loved him for his passion and his good looks, and his wit. He would have turned to me, in the end he would surely have turned to me. He would have tired of Anne and her temper. He would have learned that a steady love, a faithful love, a wife's love is the best.

But George died, and so did Anne, both of them dead before they could learn to value me. And all that is left of the three of us is me, the only survivor, wishing for the Boleyn inheritance, perching in the Howard chair, dreaming that they are still alive and that there is greatness before us, instead of loneliness and old age, petty plots and disgrace and death.

Katherine, Westminster Palace, April 1540

I am on my way to the queen's rooms just before dinner when I feel a gentle hand on my sleeve. I think at once that it is John Beresby or Tom Culpepper and I turn with a laugh, to tell him to let me go, when I see that it is the king, and I swoop into a curtsy.

He says, 'You know me then,' and I see that he is wearing a big hat and a big cape and thinks himself quite unrecognisable. I don't say: you are the fattest man at court, of course I know you. You must be the only man who is six feet tall and more than four feet round. You are the only man who stinks like mouldy meat. I say: 'Your Grace, oh, Your Grace, I think I would know you at any time, anywhere.'

He steps forwards, out of the shadows, and there is no-one else with him, which is extraordinary. Usually he has half a dozen men with him wherever he is. Whatever he is doing. 'How do you know me?' he asks.

I have a little trick now which is, whenever he speaks to me like this, I imagine it is Thomas Culpepper, the utterly delicious Thomas Culpepper, and I think how I would answer him to enchant him, and I smile as I would for Thomas, and I say the words I would use to him, to the king. So I say easily: 'Your Grace, I dare not tell you,' thinking, 'Thomas, I dare not tell you.'

And he says: 'Tell me.'

And I say: 'I cannot.'

And he says: 'Tell me, pretty Katherine.'

This could go on all day, so I change the tune and say: 'I feel so ashamed.'

And he says: 'There's no need to feel ashamed, sweetheart. Tell me how you know me.'

And I say, thinking of Thomas: 'It is a scent, Your Grace. It is a scent like a perfume, a goodly smell that I love, like a flower like jasmine or roses. And then there is a deeper smell, like the sweat of a good horse when it is hot from hunting, then there is a smell like leather, and then a sort of tang like the sea.'

'I smell like this?' he asks and there is wonder in his voice, and I realise, with a little shock, that of course this will hit home since in truth he smells of

pus from his leg, poor man, and often of farting since he is so costive, and this stink goes with him everywhere so that he has to carry a pomader all the time to block it out from his own nose, but he must know that to everyone he smells of decay.

‘You do to me,’ I say faithfully, thinking hard of Thomas Culpepper and the clean smell of his brown curly hair. ‘There is a scent of jasmine and sweat and leather and salt.’ I look down and lick my lips, just lightly, nothing bawdy. ‘I always know you by this.’

He takes me by the hand and he draws me to him. ‘Sweet maid,’ he breathes. ‘Oh God, sweet maid.’

I give a little gasp as if I am afraid, but I look up at him as if I would be kissed. This is rather nasty, really. He is awfully like my step-grandmother’s steward at Horsham – very old. Old enough to be my grandfather almost, and his mouth is trembling and his eyes are wet. I admire him because he is the king, of course. He is the greatest man in the world and I love him as my king. And my uncle has made clear that there are new dresses involved if I can lead him on. But it is not very nice when he holds me round the waist and puts his mouth wetly on my neck, and I can feel his spittle cold on my skin.

‘Sweet maid,’ he says again, and he nuzzles me with a moist kiss, which is like being sucked by a fish.

‘Your Grace!’ I say breathlessly. ‘You must let me go.’

‘I will never let you go!’

‘Your Grace, I am a maid!’

This works wonderfully well, he lets me go a little way and I can step back and though he takes both my hands, at least I don’t have him breathing down the front of my gown.

‘You are a sweet maid, Katherine.’

‘I am an honest maid, sire,’ I say breathlessly.

He has tight hold of my hands and he draws me to him. ‘If I were a free man would you be my wife?’ he asks simply.

I am so surprised by the speed of this, that I cannot say a word. I just look at him as if I were a complete milkmaid, and stupid as a dairy cow. ‘Your wife? Your wife, sire?’

‘My marriage is not a true one,’ he says quickly, all the time he is pulling me closer, his hand sliding round my waist again. I think that the words are just to dazzle me while he backs me into the corner and gets a hand up my skirt, so I keep moving and he keeps talking. ‘My marriage is invalid. For several reasons.

My wife was pre-contracted and not free to marry. My conscience warned me of this and for my soul's sake I cannot lie with her in a holy union. I know in my deepest heart that she is another man's wife.'

'Is she?' Surely, he can't imagine I am fool enough to believe this for a moment.

'I know it, my conscience warns me. God speaks to me. I know it.'

'Does He? Do you?'

'Yes,' he says firmly. 'And so I did not fully consent at my wedding. God knew of my doubts then; and I have not lain with her. So the marriage is no marriage and I will soon be free.'

So he does think me fool enough, because he has fooled himself. Good God, what men can do to their brains when their cocks are hard. It is truly amazing.

'But what will happen to her?' I ask.

'What?' His hand, which is creeping up my stomach to my breast, is halted at the thought.

'What will happen to the queen?' I ask. 'If she is no queen any more?'

'How should I know?' he says, as if it is nothing to do with him. 'She should not have come to England if she was not free to marry. She is a promise-breaker. She can go home again.'

I don't think that she will want to go home again, not to that brother of hers, and she has taken a liking to the royal children, and to England. But his hand is pulling urgently on my waist and he is turning me to face him.

'Katherine,' he says longingly. 'Tell me that I can think of you? Or is there another young man? You're a young woman, surrounded by temptation in a lascivious court, a dirty-minded, lustful court with many bad, filthy-headed boys, I suppose one of them will have taken your fancy? Promised you some fairing for a kiss?'

'No,' I say. 'I told you. I don't like boys. They are all too silly.'

'You don't like boys?'

'Not at all.'

'So what do you like?' he asks. His voice is lilting with admiration of himself. He knows the reply in this song.

'I daren't say.' His hand is creeping up from my waist again, in a moment he will be fondling my breast. Oh, Thomas Culpepper, I wish to God this was you.

'Tell me,' he says. 'Oh, tell me, pretty Katherine, and I will give you a present for being an honest girl.'

I snatch a quick breath of clean air. 'I like you,' I say simply, and one hand

clamps – smack – on my breast and the other pulls me towards him and his mouth comes down on mine, all wet and sucking, and it is really very horrible; but on the other hand I have to wonder what present I get for being an honest girl.



He gives me the estates of two convicted murderers: that is, a couple of houses and some goods, and some money. I can't believe it. That I should have houses, two houses, and land, and money of my own!

I have never had such wealth in my life, and never any gift so easily earned. I have to acknowledge: it was easily earned. It is not nice to lead on a man who is old enough to be my father, almost old enough to be my grandfather. It is not very nice to have his fat hand rubbing at my breasts and his stinking mouth all over my face. But I must remember that he is the king, and he is a kind old man and a sweet, doting old man, and I can close my eyes most of the time and pretend that it is someone else. Also, it is not very nice to have dead men's goods, but when I say this to Lady Rochford she points out that we all have dead men's goods one way or another, everything is either stolen or inherited, and a woman who hopes to rise in the world can't afford to be particular.

Anne, Westminster Palace, April 1540

I thought that I would be crowned as part of the May Day celebrations but we are already less than a month away and no-one has ordered any gowns or planned the order of the coronation, so I begin to think it won't be this May Day, it can't be. In the absence of any better advisor I wait until the Princess Mary and I are walking back from the Lady Chapel to the palace, and I ask her what she thinks. I have grown to like her more and more and trust her opinion. Also, because she has been the child and then the exile of this court, she knows better than most what it is to live here and yet know yourself to be an outsider.

At the very word 'coronation' she gives me a quick look of such concern that I cannot take another step. I freeze to the spot and cry: 'Oh, what have you heard?'

'Dear Anne, don't cry,' she says quickly. 'I beg your pardon. Queen Anne.'

'I'm not crying.' I show her my shocked face. 'I am not.'

At once we both look round to see if anyone is watching us. This is how it is at court, always the glance over your shoulder for the spy; truth told only in whispers. She steps closer to me and I take her hand and put it through my arm and we walk together.

'It can't be this May Day because we would have had everything planned and ready by now if he was going to crown you,' she says. 'I thought that in Lent, myself. But it's not so bad. It means nothing. Queen Jane wasn't crowned either. He would have crowned her if she had lived, once she had given him an heir. He will be waiting for you to tell him that you are with child. He will be waiting for you to have a child and then there will be the christening and then your coronation after that.'

I flush deeply at this and say nothing. She takes a glance at my face and waits until we have gone up the stairs, through my presence chamber, through my privy chamber and to my little withdrawing chamber where nobody comes without invitation. I close the door on the curious faces of my ladies and we are alone.

'There is a difficulty?' she says with careful tact.

‘Not of my making.’

She nods but neither of us wants to say more. We are both virgins in our mid-twenties, old for spinsters, afraid of the mystery of male desire, afraid of the power of the king, both living on the edge of his acceptance.

‘You know, I hate May Day,’ she says suddenly.

‘I thought it was one of the greatest days of celebration of the year?’

‘Oh, yes, but it is a savage celebration, pagan: not a Christian one.’

This is part of her Papist superstition and I am going to laugh for a moment but the gravity of her face stops me.

‘It’s just to welcome the coming of spring,’ I say. ‘There is no harm in it.’

‘It is the time for putting off the old and taking on the new,’ she says. ‘That’s the tradition and the king lives it to the full, like a savage. He rode in a May Day tournament with a love message to Anne Boleyn on his standard, and then he put my mother aside for the Lady Anne on a May Day. Less than five years later, it was her turn: the Lady Anne was the new Queen of the Joust, with her champions fighting for her honour before her royal box. But the knights were arrested that afternoon and the king rode away from her without even saying goodbye, and that was the end of the Lady Anne, and the last time she saw him.’

‘He didn’t say goodbye?’ For some reason, this seems to me the worst thing of all. No-one had told me this before.

She shakes her head. ‘He never says goodbye. When his favour has gone then he goes swiftly too. He never said goodbye to my mother either, he rode away from her and she had to send her servants after him to wish him Godspeed. He never told her that he would not return. He just rode out one day, and never came back. He never said goodbye to the Lady Anne. He rode away from the May Day tournament and sent his men to arrest her. Actually, he never even said goodbye to Queen Jane, who died in giving him his son. He knew she was fighting for her life but he did not go to her. He let her die alone. He is hard-hearted but he is not hard-faced; he cannot stand women crying, he cannot stand goodbyes. He finds it easier to turn his heart, and turn his face, and then he just leaves.’

I give a little shudder, and I go to the windows and check that they are tight shut, I have to stop myself from closing the shutters against the hard light. There is a cold wind coming off the river, I can almost feel it chilling me as I stand here. I want to go out to the presence chamber and surround myself with my silly girls, with a pageboy playing the lute, and the women laughing. I want the comfort of the queen’s rooms around me, even though I know that three other

women have needed their comfort before, and they are all dead.

‘If he turn against me, as he turn against the Lady Anne, I would have no warning,’ I say quietly. ‘Nobody at this court is my friend, no-one even tell me that danger is coming.’

Princess Mary does not attempt to reassure me.

‘It could be, like for the Lady Anne, a sunny day, a tournament, and then the men at arms come and there is no escape?’

Her face is pale. She nods. ‘He sent the Duke of Norfolk against me to order my obedience. The good duke, who had known me from childhood and served my mother loyally, with love, said to my face that if he were my father he would swing me by the heels and split my head open against the wall,’ she says. ‘A man I had known from childhood, a man who knew me to be a Princess of the Blood, who had loved my mother as her most loyal servant. He came with my father’s goodwill, under his orders, and he was ready to take me to the Tower. The king sent his executioner against me and let him do what he would.’

I take a handful of priceless tapestry, as if the touch of it can comfort me. ‘But I am innocent of offence,’ I say. ‘I have done nothing,’

‘Neither had I,’ she replies. ‘Neither had my mother. Neither had Queen Jane. Perhaps even the Lady Anne was innocent too. We all saw the king’s love turn to spite.’

‘And I have never had it,’ I say quietly to myself in my own language. ‘If he could abandon his wife of sixteen years, a woman he had loved, how readily, how easily can he dispose of me, a woman he has never even liked?’

She looks at me. ‘What will become of you?’

I know my face is bleak. ‘I don’t know,’ I say honestly. ‘I don’t know. If the king allies with France and takes Kitty Howard as his lover then I suppose he will send me home.’

‘If not worse,’ she says very softly.

I give a rueful smile. ‘I don’t know what could be worse than my home.’

‘The Tower,’ she says simply. ‘The Tower would be worse. And then the scaffold.’

The silence that follows those words seems to last a long time. Without speaking I rise up from my chair and go to the door that leads out to my public rooms and the princess steps back to let me precede her. We go through the withdrawing room in silence, both of us haunted by our own thoughts, and enter through the small door of my rooms to a great bustle and fuss. Servants are running from gallery to chamber carrying goods. A dining table is being set up

in my presence chamber and it is laid with the gold and silver plate of the royal treasury.

‘What is happening now?’ I ask, bewildered.

‘His Majesty the King has announced that he will dine in your rooms,’ Lady Rochford bustles forwards and curtseys to tell me.

‘Good.’ I try to sound as if I am very pleased but I am still filled with dread at the thought of the king’s spite and the Tower and the scaffold. ‘I am honoured to invite His Grace by my rooms.’

‘To my rooms,’ Princess Mary corrects me quietly.

‘To my rooms,’ I repeat.

‘Shall you change your gown for dinner?’

‘Yes.’ I see that my ladies in waiting have already put on their best, Kitty Howard’s cap is so far back on her head she might as well dispense with it altogether, and she is loaded with chains of gold strung with little seed pearls. She has diamonds dancing in her ears, she has pearls wound round and round her neck. She must have come into some money from somewhere. I have never seen her wear more than a little chain of thin gold before. She sees me looking at her and she sweeps me a curtsey and then spins on the spot so I can admire the effect of a new gown of rose silk with an underskirt of deep pink.

‘Pretty,’ I say. ‘New?’

‘Yes,’ she says, and then her eyes slide away like a child caught out in thieving and I know at once that all this finery has come from the king.

‘Shall I come and help you dress?’ she asks, almost apologetically.

I nod and she and two of the other maids in waiting follow me into my inner privy chamber. My gown for dinner is already laid out and Katherine runs to the chest and takes out my linen.

‘So fine,’ she says approvingly, smoothing the white-on-white embroidery on my shifts.

I slip on the shift and sit before the mirror so that Katherine can brush my hair. Her touch is gentle as she twists my hair up into a gold-encrusted net, and we only disagree when she puts my hood far back on my head. I put it right and she laughs at me. I see our faces side by side in the mirror, and her eyes meet mine, as innocent as a child, without any shadow of deceit. I turn and speak to the other girls. ‘Leave us,’ I say.

From the glances they exchange as they go, I see that her new riches are common knowledge and everyone knows where those pearls come from, and they are expecting a jealous storm to break on Kitty Howard’s little head.

‘The king likes you,’ I say to her bluntly.

The smile has faded from her eyes. She shifts from one little pink-slippered foot to another. ‘Your Grace ...’ she whispers.

‘He does not like me,’ I say. I know I am too blunt but I have not the words to dress this up like a lying Englishwoman.

Her colour rises up from her low-cut neckline to burn in her cheeks. ‘Your Grace ...’

‘Do you desire him?’ I ask. I don’t have the words to disguise the question in a lengthy conversation.

‘No!’ she says instantly, but then she bows her head. ‘He is the king ... and my uncle says, indeed, my uncle orders me ...’

‘You are not free?’ I suggest.

Her grey eyes meet mine. ‘I am a girl,’ she says. ‘I am only a young girl, I am not free.’

‘Can you refuse to do what they want?’

‘No.’

There is a silence between us, as we both come to realise the simple truth that is being spoken. We are two women who have recognised that we cannot control the world. We are players in this game but we do not choose our own moves. The men will play us for their own desires. All we can do is try to survive whatever happens next.

‘What will happen to me, if the king wants you for his wife?’ I know, as the words come awkwardly into my mouth, that this is the central, unsayable question.

She shrugs. ‘I don’t know. I don’t think anyone knows that.’

‘Would he have me killed?’ I whisper.

To my horror she does not start back in terror and exclaim a denial. She looks at me very steadily. ‘I don’t know what he will do,’ she says again. ‘Your Grace, I don’t know what he wants nor what he can do. I don’t know the law. I don’t know what he is able to do.’

‘He will command you to his side,’ I say through cold lips. ‘I see that. Wife or whore. But will he send me to the Tower? Will he have me killed?’

‘I don’t know,’ she says. She looks like a frightened child. ‘I can’t tell. Nobody tells me anything except that I have to please him. And I have to do that.’

Jane Boleyn, Westminster Palace, May 1540

The queen is in the royal box high above the jousting lists and though she is pale with anxiety she carries herself like a queen indeed. She has a smile for the hundreds of Londoners who have flocked to the palace to see the royal family and the nobles, the mock battles, the pageants, and the jousts. There are to be six challengers and six defenders and they circle the arena with their entourage and their shields and their banners and the trumpets scream out the fanfare and the crowd shouts their bets and it is like a dream with the noise and the heat and the glare of the sun beating off the golden sand in the arena.

If I stand at the rear of the royal box and half-close my eyes I can see ghosts today. I can see Queen Katherine leaning forwards and waving her hand to her young husband, I can even see his shield with this motto: Sir Loyal Heart.

Sir Loyal Heart! I would laugh if the king's changeable heart had not been the death of so many. Loyal only to its own desires is the king's heart, and this day, this May Day, it has changed again, like the spring wind, and is blowing another way.

I step to one side and a ray of sunshine peeping through a gap in the awning dazzles me and for a moment I see Anne at the front of the box, my Anne, Anne Boleyn with her head flung back in laughter and the white line of her throat exposed. It was a hot May Day that year, Anne's last year, and she blamed the sun when she was sweating with fear. She knew that she was in trouble but she had no idea of her danger. How should she have known? We none of us knew. We none of us dreamed that he would put that long, lovely neck down on a block of wood and hire a French swordsman to hack it off. How should anyone dream that a man would do that to the wife he had adored? He broke the faith of his kingdom to have her. Why would he then break her?

If we had known ... but it is pointless to say: if we had known.

Perhaps we would have run away. Me, and George my husband, and Anne his sister, and Elizabeth her daughter. Perhaps we might have run away and been free of this terror and this ambition and this lust for this life that is the English court. But we did not run. We sat like hares, cowering in the long grass at the

sound of the hounds, hoping that the hunt would pass by; but that very day the soldiers came for my husband and for my beloved sister-in-law Anne. And I? I sat mum, and let them go, and never said one word to save them.

But this new young queen is no fool. We were afraid, all three of us; but we did not know how very afraid we should have been. But Anne of Cleves knows. She has spoken with her ambassador and she knows there is to be no coronation. She has spoken with the Princess Mary and knows that the king can destroy a blameless wife by sending her far away from court, to a castle where the cold and damp will kill her if the poison does not. She has even spoken to little Katherine Howard and now she knows that the king is in love. She knows that ahead of her there must be shame and divorce at the least, execution at the worst.

Yet here she sits, in the royal box, with her head held high, dropping her handkerchief to signify the start of a charge, smiling with her usual politeness on the victor, leaning forwards to put the circlet of bay leaves on his helmet, to give him a purse of gold as his prize. Pale under her modest, ugly hood, doing her duty as Queen of the Joust as she has done her duty every day since she set foot in this country. She must be sick to her belly with terror but her hands on the front of the box are gently clasped and do not even tremble. When the king salutes her she rises up from her chair and curtsies respectfully to him, when the crowd calls her name she turns and smiles and raises her hand when a lesser woman would scream for rescue. She is utterly composed.

‘She knows?’ asks a quiet voice in my ear, and I turn to the Duke of Norfolk. ‘Can she possibly know?’

‘She knows everything but what is going to become of her,’ I say.

He looks at her. ‘She cannot know. She cannot have understood. She must be too stupid to understand what is going to happen to her.’

‘She isn’t stupid,’ I say. ‘She is incredibly courageous. She knows everything. She has more courage than we know.’

‘She’ll need it,’ he says unsympathetically. ‘I am taking Katherine away from court.’

‘Taking her away from the king?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is that not a risk? Will you deprive the king of the girl of his choice?’

The duke shakes his head. He cannot hide his triumph. ‘The king himself has told me to take her from court. He will marry Katherine as soon as he is rid of Anne. It is he who wants Katherine taken away. He wants her away from court so that she is not exposed to gossip while this false queen is ended.’ He bites

down on a smile, he is almost laughing. 'He wants no shadow of gossip attached to Katherine's unsullied name.'

'The false queen?' I pick out the strange new title.

'She was not free to marry. The marriage was never valid, it has not been consummated. God guided his conscience and he did not fulfil his vows. God prevented him from consummating the marriage. The marriage is false. The queen is false. It is probably treason to make a false declaration to the king.'

I blink. It is the king's right, as God's representative on earth, to rule on such matters but sometimes us mortals are a little slow to follow the whimsical changes of God. 'It is over for her?' I make a little gesture to the girl at the front of the box who stands now to acknowledge the salute of the champion, and raises her hand and smiles at the crowd who shouts her name.

'She is finished,' the duke says.

'Finished?'

'Finished.'

I nod. I suppose this means that they will kill her.

Anne, Westminster Palace, June 1540

My brother has finally sent the documents that show that indeed I was never married before I came to England, that my marriage to the king was my first wedding, and it is valid, as I know, as everybody knows. The documents arrived by messenger today, but my ambassador cannot present them. The king's Privy Council is in almost constant meeting, and we cannot find out what they are discussing. Having insisted on having this document, they now cannot be troubled even to see it; and what this new indifference means I cannot guess.

God knows what they are planning to do with me, my horror is that they will accuse me of something shameful and I will die in this distant land, and my mother will believe that her daughter died a whore.

I know that terrible trouble is brewing because of the danger that has come to my friends. Lord Lisle, who welcomed me so kindly to Calais, has been arrested and no-one can tell me the charges he faces. His wife has disappeared from my rooms, without saying goodbye. She did not come to ask me to intercede for him. This must mean either that he is to die without trial – dear God, perhaps he is dead already – or that she knows I have no influence with the king. Either way this is a disaster for him and for me. Nobody can tell me where Lady Lisle is hiding, and, in truth, I am afraid to ask. If her husband is charged with treason then any suggestion that he was a friend of mine will count against me.

Their daughter, Anne Bassett, is still in my service but she claims that she is ill and has taken to her bed. I wanted to see her but Lady Rochford says that it is safer for the girl if she is allowed to be alone. So her bedroom door is shut and the shutters in her room are closed. Whether she is a danger to me or I am to her, I dare not ask.

I have sent for Thomas Cromwell who, at least, is blessed with the king's favour since he was made Earl of Essex only a few weeks ago. Thomas Cromwell at least must stand my friend while my women whisper behind their hands and everyone at court is poised for disaster. But my lord Cromwell has, so far, sent me no reply. Someone surely must tell me what is happening.

I wish we were back at Hampton Court. It is hot today, and I feel cooped up,

like a gyrfalcon in a crowded mews, a white falcon, hardly of this world: a bird as white as the winter snows and born to be free in the cold, wild places. I could wish myself back at Calais or even Dover when the road ahead of me lay to London and to my future as Queen of England, and I was full of hope. I could wish myself almost anywhere but here, looking through the little leaded window panes to a bright blue sky, wondering why my friend Lord Lisle is in the Tower of London, and why my supporter Thomas Cromwell does not reply to my urgent request that he come to me at once. Surely he can come and tell me why the council has been meeting in all but secret for days? Surely he will come and tell me why Lady Lisle has disappeared and why her husband is under arrest? Surely he will come soon?

The door opens and I start up, expecting him; but it is not Cromwell, nor his man, but little Katherine Howard, her face wan and her eyes tragic. She has her travelling cape over her arm and as soon as I see it I feel a wave of nausea from sheer terror. Little Kitty has been arrested, she too has been charged with some crime. Quickly I go to her and take her hands.

‘Kitty? What is it? What is the charge?’

‘I’m safe,’ she gasps. ‘It’s all right. I am safe. I am just to go home to my grandmother, for a while.’

‘But why? What do they say you have done?’

Her little face is twisted with distress. ‘I am not to be your maid in waiting any more.’

‘You are not?’

‘No. I have come to say goodbye.’

‘What have you done?’ I cry out. Surely this girl, not much more than a child, cannot have committed any crime? The worst thing that Katherine Howard is capable of is vanity and flirtation, and this is not a court that punishes such sins. ‘I will not let them take you away. I defend you. I know you are good girl. What do they say against you?’

‘I have done nothing,’ she says. ‘But they tell me it is better for me to be away from court while all this is happening.’

‘All what? Oh, Kitty, tell me quickly, what you know?’

She beckons me and I bend down so that she can whisper in my ear. ‘Anne, Your Grace I mean, dearest queen. Thomas Cromwell has been arrested for treason.’

‘Treason? Cromwell?’

‘Ssh. Yes.’

‘What has he done?’

‘He conspired with Lord Lisle and the Papists to put the king under an enchantment.’

My mind is spinning, and I don’t fully understand what she is saying. ‘A what? What is that?’

‘Thomas Cromwell made a spell,’ she says.

When she sees I still do not understand the word she gently takes my face and draws it down so that she can whisper in my ear again. ‘Thomas Cromwell employed a witch,’ she says softly, without any inflection. ‘Thomas Cromwell hired a witch to destroy His Majesty the king.’

She leans back to see if I understand her now and the horror in my face tells her that I do.

‘They know this for true?’

She nods.

‘Who is the witch?’ I breathe. ‘What has she done?’

‘She has put the king under a spell so he is unmanned,’ she says. ‘She has cursed the king so that he shall not have a son by you.’

‘Who is the witch?’ I demand. ‘Who is Thomas Cromwell’s witch? Who has unmanned the king? Who do they say she is?’ Katherine’s little face is pinched with fear. ‘Anne, Your Grace, my dearest queen, what if they say it is you?’



I live almost withdrawn from the world, emerging from my rooms only to dine before the court when I try to appear serene, or, better still, innocent. They are questioning Thomas Cromwell and the arrests go on, other men are accused of treason against the king, accused of employing a witch to blight his manhood. There is a network of plotters unfolding. Lord Lisle is said to have been the focus in Calais, he aided the Papists and the Pole family who have long wanted to recapture the throne from the Tudors. His second in command at the fortress has fled to Rome to serve under Cardinal Pole, which proves the guilt. They say that Lord Lisle and his party have worked with a witch to make sure that the king should not have a fruitful marriage with me, shall not make another heir to his reformed religion. But at the same time, it is said that Thomas Cromwell was aiding the Lutherans, the reformers, the evangelicals. It is said he brought me in to marry the king and ordered a witch to unman the king so that he could put his own line on the throne. But who is the witch? the court asks itself. Who is the

witch who was friends with Lord Lisle, and was brought to England by Thomas Cromwell? Who is the witch? What woman is indicated by both of these nightmares of evil? Ask it again, what woman was brought to England by Thomas Cromwell; but is friends with Lord Lisle?

Clearly, there is only one woman.

Only one woman, brought to England by Thomas Cromwell, befriended by Lord Lisle, unmanning the king so that he was impotent on the night of his wedding and every night thereafter.

No-one has named the witch yet, they are gathering evidence.

Princess Mary's departure has been brought forwards and I have only a moment with her as we wait for them to bring the horses round from the stables.

'You know I am innocent of any wrongdoing,' I say to her under cover of the noise of the servants running around and her guards calling for their horses. 'Whatever you hear in the future about me, please believe me: I am innocent.'

'Of course,' she says levelly. She does not look at me. She is Henry's daughter, she has served a long apprenticeship in learning not to betray herself. 'I shall pray for you every day. I shall pray that they all see your innocence as I do.'

'I am certain that Lord Lisle is innocent too,' I say.

'Without doubt,' she replies in the same abrupt way.

'Can I save him? Can you?'

'No.'

'Princess Mary, on your faith, can nothing be done?'

She risks a sideways glance at me. 'Dearest Anne, nothing. There is nothing to do but to keep our own counsel and pray for better times.'

'Will you tell me something?'

She looks around and sees that her horses have not yet come. She takes my arm and we walk a little way towards the stable yard as if we are looking to see how long they will be. 'What is it?'

'Who is this Pole family? And why does the king fear the Papists when he defeated them so long ago?'

'The Poles are the Plantagenet family, of the House of York, some would say the true heirs to the throne of England,' she says. 'Lady Margaret Pole was my mother's truest friend, she was as a mother to me, she is utterly loyal to the throne. The king has her in the Tower now, with all of her family that he could capture. They are accused of treason, but everyone knows they have committed no offence but being of Plantagenet blood. The king is so fearful for his throne

that I think he will not allow this family to live. Lady Margaret's two grandsons, two little boys, are in the Tower also, God help them. She, my dearest Lady Margaret, she will not be allowed to live. Others of the family are in exile, they can never come home.'

'They are Papists?' I ask.

'Yes,' she says quietly. 'They are. One of them, Reginald, is a cardinal. Some would say they are the true kings of the true faith of England. But that would be treason and you would be put to death for saying it.'

'And why does the king fear the Papists so much? I thought England was converted to the reformed faith? I thought the Papists were defeated?'

Princess Mary shakes her head. 'No. I should think fewer than half the people welcome the changes and many wish for the old ways back again. When the king denied the authority of the Pope and destroyed the monasteries there was a great rising of men in the north of the country, determined to defend the church and the holy houses. They called it the Pilgrimage of Grace and they marched under the banner of the five wounds of Jesus Christ. The king sent the hardest man in the kingdom against them at the head of the army, and he feared them so badly that he called for a parley, spoke with sweet words, and promised them a pardon and a parliament.'

'Who was that?' Already I know.

'Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk.'

'And the pardon?'

'As soon as the army had disbanded, he beheaded the leaders and hanged the followers.' She speaks with as little inflection as if she is complaining that the luggage wagon is badly packed. 'He promised a parliament and a pardon on the king's sacred word. He gave his own word too, on his honour. It meant nothing.'

'They are defeated?'

'Well, he hanged seventy monks from the roof timbers of their own abbey,' she says bitterly. 'So they won't defy him again. But no, I believe the true faith will never be defeated.'

She turns us so that we are strolling back to the door again. She smiles and nods at someone who calls 'safe journey' to her, but I cannot smile too.

'The king fears his own people,' she says. 'He fears rivals. He even fears me. He is my father and yet sometimes I think he has gone half-mad with mistrust. Any fear he has, however foolish, is real to him. If he so much as dreams that Lord Lisle has betrayed him, then Lord Lisle is a dead man. If someone suggests that his troubles with you are part of a plot, then you are in the gravest of danger.'

If you can get away, you should do. He cannot tell fear from truth. He cannot tell nightmares from reality.'

'I am Queen of England,' I say. 'They cannot accuse me of witchcraft.'

She turns to face me for the first time. 'That won't save you,' she says. 'It didn't save Anne Boleyn. They accused her of witchcraft and they found the evidence and they found her guilty. She was as much queen as you.' She suddenly laughs as if I have said something funny, and I see that some of my ladies have come out of the hall and are watching us. I laugh too but I am sure anyone could hear the fear in my voice. She takes my arm. 'If anyone asks me what we were talking about when we walked out and back to the steps again, I shall say that I was complaining that I would be late, and I was afraid of being tired.'

'Yes,' I agree but I am so frightened that I am shaking as if I were chilled with cold. 'I shall say you were looking to see when they would be ready.'

Princess Mary presses my arm. 'My father has changed the laws of this land,' she says. 'It is now a crime of treason, punishable by death, even to think ill of the king. You don't have to say anything, you don't have to do anything. Your own secret thoughts are treason now.'

'I am queen,' I maintain stubbornly.

'Listen,' she says bluntly. 'He has changed the process of justice too. You don't have to be condemned by a court. You can be condemned to death on a Bill of Attainder. That is nothing more than the king's order, supported by his parliament. And they never refuse to support him. Queen or beggar, if the king wants you dead he just has to order it now. He does not even have to sign the warrant for an execution, he only has to use a seal.'

I find I am clenching my jaw to stop my teeth from chattering. 'What do you think I should do?'

'Get away,' she says. 'Get away before he comes for you.'



After she has gone I feel as if my last friend has left court. I go back to my rooms and my ladies set up a table of cards. I let them start to play and then I summon my ambassador and take him into the window bay where we cannot be overheard, to ask him if anyone has questioned him about me. He says they have not, he is ignored by everyone, isolated as if he were carrying the plague. I ask him if he could hire or buy two fast horses and keep them outside the castle

walls in case of my sudden need. He says he has no money to hire or buy horses, and in any case the king has guards on my doors night and day. The men who I thought were there to keep me safe, to open the doors to my presence chamber, to announce my guests, are now my gaolers.

I am very afraid. I try to pray but even the words of the prayers are a trap. I cannot appear as if I am becoming a Papist, a Papist like Lord Lisle is now said to be; and yet I must not appear to have held to my brother's religion; the Lutherans are suspected of being part of Cromwell's plot to ruin the king.

When I see the king I try to behave pleasantly and calmly before him. I dare not challenge him, nor even protest my innocence. Most frightening of all is his manner to me, which is now warm and friendly, as if we were acquaintances about to part after a short journey together. He behaves as if our time together has been an enjoyable interlude that is now naturally drawing to a close.

He will not say goodbye to me, I know that. Princess Mary has warned me of that. There is no point waiting for the moment when he tells me that I am to face an accusation. I know that one of these evenings when I rise from the dinner table and curtsy to him and he kisses my hand so courteously will be the last time I ever see him. I may walk from the hall with my ladies following me to find my rooms filled with soldiers and my clothes already packed, my jewels returned to the treasury. It is a short journey from the palace of Westminster to the Tower, they will take me by river in the darkness and I will go in by the watergate, and I will leave by the block on Tower Green.

The ambassador has written to my brother to say that I am desperately frightened; but I do not hope for a reply. William will not mind me being sick with fear, and by the time they learn of the charges against me it will be too late to save me. And perhaps William would not even choose to save me. He has allowed this peril to come about, he must have hated me more than I ever knew.

If anyone is to save me, it will have to be me, myself. But how can a woman save herself against the charge of witchcraft? If Henry tells the world that he is impotent because I have unmanned him, how can I prove differently? If he tells the world that he can lie with Katherine Howard but not with me, then his case is proved and my denial is just another instance of satanic cunning. A woman cannot prove her innocence when a man bears witness against her. If Henry wants me strangled as a witch then nothing can save me. He claimed that Lady Anne Boleyn was a witch and she died for it. He never said goodbye to her, and he had loved her with a passion. They just came for her one day and took her away.

I am waiting now, for them to come for me.

Jane Boleyn, Westminster Palace, June 1540

A note, dropped into my lap by one of the servers at dinner as he leans over to clear the meat platter, bids me go to my lord at once, and as soon as dinner is over, I do as I am told. These days, the queen goes into her bedroom straight after dinner, she will not miss me from the nervous huddle of those of us that are left in her depleted rooms. Katherine Howard is missing from court, gone back to her grandmother's house at Lambeth. Lady Lisle is under house arrest for her husband's grave crimes, they say she is quite frantic with distress and fear. She knows he will die. Lady Rutland is quiet and goes to her own rooms at night, she must be fearful too; but I don't know what accusation she might face. Anne Bassett has gone to stay with her cousin under the pretence of illness, Catherine Carey has been sent for by her mother, Mary. She asks permission for Catherine to come home as she is unwell. I could laugh at the transparent excuse. Mary Boleyn was always skilled at keeping herself and hers far from trouble. A pity she never exerted herself for her brother. Mary Norris has to help her mother in the country with some special tasks. Henry Norris's widow saw the scaffold last time the king plotted against his wife. She won't want to see her daughter climb the steps that her husband trod.

We are all of us guarded in our speech and retiring in our behaviour. The bad times have come to King Henry's court once more, and everyone is afraid, everyone is under suspicion. It is like living in a nightmare, every man, every woman knows that every word they say, every gesture they make, might be used in evidence against them. An enemy might work up an indiscretion into a crime, a friend might trade a confidence for a guarantee of safety. We are a court of cowards and tale bearers. Nobody walks any more, we all tiptoe, nobody even breathes, we are all holding our breath. The king has turned suspicious of his friends and nobody can be sure that they are safe.

I creep to my lord duke's rooms, walking in the shadows, and I open the door and slip in, in silence. My lord duke is standing by the window, the shutters open to the warm night air, the candles on his desk bobbing their flames in the draught. He looks up and smiles when I enter the room, I could almost think that

he is fond of me.

‘Ah, Jane, my niece. The queen is to go to Richmond with a much-reduced court, I want you to go with her.’

‘Richmond?’ I hear the quaver of fear in my own voice and I take a breath. This means house arrest while they inquire into the allegations against her. But why are they sending me in with her? Am I to be charged too?

‘Yes. You will stay with her and keep a careful note of who comes and goes, and anything she says. In particular, you are to be alert for Ambassador Harst. We think he can do nothing, but you would oblige me by seeing that she has no plans to escape, sends no messages, that sort of thing.’

‘Please ...’ I stop myself, my voice has come out weak. I know this is not the way to deal with him.

‘What?’ He is still smiling but his dark eyes are intent.

‘I cannot prevent her escaping. I am one woman, alone.’

He shakes his head. ‘The ports are closed from tonight. Her ambassador has discovered that there is not a horse to buy or hire in the whole of England. Her own stables are barred. Her rooms closed. She won’t be able to escape or send for help. Everyone in her service is her gaoler. You just have to watch her.’

‘Please let me go and serve Katherine,’ I take a breath to say. ‘She will need advice if she is to be a good queen.’

The duke pauses for thought. ‘She will,’ he says. ‘She is an idiot, that girl. But she can come to no harm with her grandmother.’

He taps his thumbnail against his tooth, considering.

‘She will need to learn to be a queen,’ I say.

He hesitates. We two have known Queens of England who were queens indeed. Little Katherine is not fit to touch their shoes, let alone walk in them, years of training would not make her regal. ‘No she won’t,’ he says. ‘The king doesn’t want a great queen beside him any more. He wants a girl to pet, a little filly, a young brood-mare for his seed. Katherine need be nothing more than obedient.’

‘Then let me say the truth: I don’t want to go to Richmond with Queen Anne. I don’t want to bear witness against this queen.’

His sharp, dark eyes look up quickly at me. ‘Witness of what?’ he demands.

I am too weary to fence. ‘Witness of whatever you want me to see,’ I say. ‘Whatever the king want me to say, I don’t want to say it. I don’t want to bear witness against her.’

‘Why not?’ he asks, as if he did not know.

‘I am sick of trials,’ I say from the heart. ‘I am afraid of the king’s desires now. I don’t know what he wants. I don’t know how far he will go. I don’t want to give evidence at a queen’s trial – not ever again.’

‘I am sorry,’ he says without regret. ‘But we need someone to swear that she had a conversation with the queen in which the queen made it clear that she was a virgin untouched, absolutely untouched, and moreover quite ignorant of any doings between a man and a maid.’

‘She has been in bed with him night after night,’ I say impatiently. ‘We all put her to bed the first night. You were there, the Archbishop of Canterbury was there. She was raised to conceive a son and bear an heir, she was married for that single purpose. She could hardly be ignorant of the doings of a man and a maid. No woman in the world has endured more unsuccessful attempts.’

‘That is why we need a lady of unimpeachable reputation to swear it,’ he says smoothly. ‘Such an unlikely lie needs a plausible witness: you.’

‘Any of the others can do that for you,’ I protest. ‘Since the conversation never happened, since it is an impossible conversation, surely it does not matter who says that it took place?’

‘I should like our name entered as witness,’ the duke says. ‘The king would be pleased to see our service. It would do us good.’

‘Is it to prove her a witch?’ I ask bluntly. I am too weary of my work and sick of myself to pick my way around my ducal uncle tonight. ‘Is it, in fact, to prove her a witch and have her sent to her death?’

He draws himself up to his full height and looks down his nose at me. ‘It is not for us to predict what the king’s commissioners might find,’ he says. ‘They will sift the evidence, and give the verdict. All you will provide is a sworn statement, sworn on your faith before God.’

‘I don’t want her death on my conscience.’ I can hear the desperation in my voice. ‘Please. Let someone else swear to it. I don’t want to go with her to Richmond and then swear a lie against her. I don’t want to stand by while they take her to the Tower. I don’t want her to die on the basis of my false evidence. I have been her friend, I don’t want to be her assassin.’

He waits in silence till my torrent of refusals is finished, then he looks at me and smiles again, but now there is no warmth in his face at all. ‘Certainly,’ he says. ‘You will swear only to the statement that we will have prepared for you, and your betters will decide what is to be done for the queen. You will keep me informed of whom she sees and what she does in the usual way, my man will go with you to Richmond. You will watch her with care. She is not to escape. And

when it is over, you will be Katherine's lady in waiting, you will have your place at court, you will be lady in waiting to the new Queen of England. That will be your reward. You will be the first lady at the new queen's court. I promise it. You will be head of her privy chamber.'

He thinks he has bought me with this promise but I am sick of this life. 'I can't go on doing this,' I say simply. I am thinking of Anne Boleyn, and of my husband, and of the two of them going into the Tower with all the evidence against them, and none of it true. I am thinking of them going to their death knowing that their family had borne witness against them, and their uncle passed the death sentence. I am thinking of them, trusting in me, waiting for me to come to give evidence for their defence, confident in my love for them, certain that I would save them. 'I cannot go on doing this.'

'I should hope not,' he says primly. 'Please God that you will never do it again. In my niece Katherine, the king has at last found a true and honourable wife. She is a rose without a thorn.'

'A what?'

'A rose without a thorn,' the duke repeats. He keeps his face perfectly straight. 'That is what we are to call her. That is what he wants us to call her.'

Katherine, Norfolk House, Lambeth, June 1540

Now, let me see, what do I have? I have the murderers' houses that the king first gave me, and their lands. I have the jewels I earned by a quick squeeze in a quiet gallery. I have half a dozen gowns, paid for by my uncle, most of them new, and hoods to match. I have a bedchamber of my own at my grandmother's house and my own presence chamber too, and a few maids in waiting but no ladies as yet. I buy dresses almost every day, the merchants come across the river with bolts of silk as if I were a dressmaker on my own account. They fit me with gowns and they mutter with their mouths filled with pins that I am the most beautiful, the most exquisite girl ever to be stitched into a too-tight stomacher. They bend to the floor to hem up my gown and say that they have never seen such a pretty girl, a very queen among girls.

I love it. If I were more thoughtful, or a graver soul, then I know I would be troubled by the thought of my poor mistress the queen and what will become of her, and the disagreeable thought that soon I shall marry a man who has buried three wives and maybe will bury his fourth, and is old enough to be my grandfather, as well as very smelly ... but I cannot be troubled with such worries. The other wives did as they had to do, their lives ended as God and the king willed; it is really nothing to me. Even my cousin Anne Boleyn shall be nothing to me. I shall not think of her, nor of our uncle pushing her on to the throne and then pushing her on to the scaffold. She had her gowns and her court and her jewels. She had her time of being the finest young woman at court, she had her time of being the favourite of her family and the pride of us all; and now I shall have mine.

I will have my time. I will be merry. I am as hungry as she was, for the colour and the wealth, for the diamonds and the flirting, the horses and the dancing. I want my life, I want the very, very best of everything; and by luck, and by the whim of the king (whom God preserve), I am to have the very, very best. I had hoped to be spotted by one of the great men of the court and chosen for his kinswoman and given in marriage to a young nobleman who might rise through the court. That was the very pinnacle of my hopes. But instead,

everything is to be different. Much better. The king himself has seen me, the King of England desires me, the man who is God on earth, who is the father of his people, who is the law and the word, desires me. I have been chosen by God's own representative on earth. No-one can stand in his way and no-one would dare deny him. This is no ordinary man who has seen me and desired me, this is not even a mortal. This is a half-god who has seen me. He desires me and my uncle tells me it is my duty and my honour to accept his proposal. I will be Queen of England – think of that! I will be Queen of England. Then we shall see what I, little Kitty Howard, can count as my own!

Actually, in truth I am torn between terror and excitement at the thought of being his consort and his queen, the greatest woman in England. I have a vain thrill that he wants me, and I make sure that I think about that, and ignore my sense of disappointment that although he is almost God, he is only a man like any other, and a very old man at that, and an old man who is half-impotent at that, an old man who cannot even do the job in the jakes, and I must play him as I would any old man who in his lust and vanity happened to desire me. If he gives me what I want, he shall have my favour, I cannot say fairer than that. I could almost laugh at myself, granting the greatest man in the world my little favour. But if he wants it, and if he will pay so highly for it, then I am in the market like any huckster: selling myself.

Grandmother, the duchess, tells me that I am her clever, clever girl and that I will bring wealth and greatness to our family. To be queen is a triumph beyond our most ambitious dreams, but there is a hope even beyond that. If I conceive a son and give birth to a boy, then our family will rise as high as the Seymours. And if the Seymour boy Prince Edward were to die (though God forbid, of course), but *if* he were to die then my son would be the next King of England and us Howards would be kinsmen to the king. Then we would be the royal family, or as good as, and then we would be the greatest family in England, and everyone would have to thank me for their good fortune. My uncle Norfolk would bow his knee to me and bless me for my patronage. When I think of this, I giggle and cannot daydream any more, for sheer delight.

I am sorry to my heart for my mistress Queen Anne. I would have liked to stay as her maid and to see her become happy. But what cannot be, cannot be, and I would be foolish indeed to mourn over my own good fortune. She is like those poor men executed so that I can have their lands, or the poor nuns thrown from their homes so that we can all be richer. Such people have to suffer for our benefit. I have learned that this is the way of the world. And it's not my fault that

the world is a hard place for others. I hope she finds happiness as I will do. Perhaps she will go home to her brother in wherever-it-is. Poor dear. Perhaps she will marry the man that she was betrothed to marry. My uncle tells me that she was very wrong to come to England when she knew she was bound to marry another man. This was a very shocking thing to do and I am surprised at her. She always seemed such a well-behaved young woman, I cannot believe that she would do such a naughty thing. Of course when my uncle speaks of a prior betrothal I cannot help but think of my poor, dear Francis Dereham. I have never mentioned the promises we exchanged, and really, I think it best that I just forget all about it, and pretend that it never happened. It is not always easy to be a young woman in this world that is full of temptation for sure, and I do not criticise Queen Anne for being betrothed to another and then marrying the king. I wouldn't do it myself, of course, but since Francis Dereham and I were not properly married, nor even properly betrothed, I do not consider it. I didn't have a proper gown, so clearly it wasn't a proper wedding or binding vows. All we did was the daydreaming of little children and a few innocent kisses. No more than that, really. But she could do worse, if she is sent home, than to marry her first love. I myself shall always think of Francis with affection. One's first love is always very sweet, probably sweeter than a very old husband. When I am queen I shall do something very kind for Francis.

Anne, Westminster Palace, 10 June 1540

Dear God, save me, dear God, save me, every one of my friends or allies is in the Tower and I do not doubt but they will soon come for me. Thomas Cromwell, the man given the credit for bringing me to England, is arrested, charged with treason. Treason! He has been the king's servant, he has been his dog. He is no more capable of treason than one of the king's greyhounds. Clearly, the man is no traitor. Clearly, he has been arrested to punish him for making my marriage. If this charge brings him to the block and the executioner's axe, then there can be little doubt that I will follow.

The man who first welcomed me into Calais, my dearest Lord Lisle, is charged with treason and also with being a secret Papist, party to a Papist plot. They are saying that he welcomed me as queen because he knew that I would prevent the king from conceiving a son. He is arrested and charged with treason for a plot that names me as one of the elements. It is no defence that he is innocent. It is no defence that the plot is absurd. In the cellars of the Tower are terrible rooms where wicked men go about cruel work. A man will say anything after he has been tortured by one of them. The human body cannot resist the pain that they can inflict. The king allows the prisoners to be torn, legs from body, arms from shoulders. Such barbarity is new to this country; but it is allowed now, as the king turns into a monster. Lord Lisle is gently born, quietly spoken. He cannot tolerate pain, surely he will tell them what they wish, whatever it is. Then he will go to the block a confessed traitor, and who knows what they will have made him confess about me?

The net is closing around me. It is so close now that I can almost see the cords. If Lord Lisle says that he knew I would make the king impotent, then I am a dead woman. If Thomas Cromwell says he knew that I was betrothed and that I married the king when I was not free to do so, then I am a dead woman. They have my friend Lord Lisle, they have my ally Thomas Cromwell. They will torture them until they have the evidence they need, and then come for me. In all of England, there is only one man who might help me. I don't have much hope but I have no other friend. I send for my ambassador, Carl Harst.

It is a hot day and the windows are all standing wide open to the air from the garden. From outside I can hear the sound of the court boating on the river. They are playing lutes and singing and I can hear the laughter. Even at this distance I can hear the sharp note of forced merriment. The room is cool and in shadow but we are both sweating.

‘I have hired horses,’ he says in our language, in a hiss of a whisper. ‘I had to go all over the city to find them and in the end I bought them from some Hanseatic merchants. I have borrowed money for the journey. I think we should go at once. As soon as I can find a guard to bribe.’

‘At once,’ I nod. ‘We must go at once. What do they say of Cromwell?’

‘It is barbaric. They are savages. He walked into the Privy Council with no idea that there was anything wrong. His old friends and fellow noblemen stripped him of his badges of office, of his Order of the Garter. They pecked at him like crows tear at a dead rabbit. He was marched away like a felon. He will not even stand trial, they need call no witnesses, they need prove no charges. He will be beheaded by a Bill of Attainder, it needs only the word of the king.’

‘Might the king not say the word? Will he not grant him mercy? He made him earl only weeks ago to show his favour.’

‘A feint, it was nothing but a feint. The king showed his favour only so that his spite falls more heavily now. Cromwell will beg for mercy, sure of forgiveness, he will find none. He is certain to die a traitor’s death.’

‘Did the king say farewell to him?’ I ask, as if it is an idle question.

‘No,’ the ambassador says. ‘There was nothing to warn the man. They parted as on any ordinary day, with no special words. Cromwell came into the meeting of the council as if nothing was out of the ordinary. He thought that he had come to command the meeting as Secretary of State, in his pomp and his power, and then, in moments, he found himself under arrest and his old enemies laughing at him.’

‘The king did not say goodbye,’ I say in a sort of quiet horror. ‘It is as they say. The king never says goodbye.’

Jane Boleyn, Westminster Palace, 24 June, 1540

We are seated in the queen's room in silence, sewing shirts for the poor. Katherine Howard is missing from her place, she has been staying with her grandmother at Norfolk House, Lambeth all this week. The king visits her almost every evening, he takes his dinner with them as if he were a private man, not king at all. He is rowed across the river in the royal barge, he goes openly, he takes no trouble to conceal his identity.

The whole of the city is buzzing with the belief that only six months into the marriage the king has taken a mistress in the Howard girl. The spectacularly ignorant claim that since the king has a lover, therefore the queen must be pregnant, and everything is well in this most blessed world: a Tudor son and heir in the queen's belly and the king taking his own amusement elsewhere as he always does. Those of us who know better do not even take the pleasure of correcting those who know nothing. We know that Katherine Howard is guarded like a vestal virgin now, against the king's feeble seductive powers. We know that the queen is still untouched. What we don't know, what we cannot know, is what is going to happen.

In the absence of the king, the court has become unruly and when Queen Anne and we ladies go to our dinner, the throne is empty at the head of the room and there is no rule. The hall is avid, like a buzzing hive, seething with gossip and rumour. Everyone wants to be on the winning side, but no-one knows which that will turn out to be. There are gaps at the great tables where some of the families have left court altogether, either from fear, or from distaste at the new terror. Anyone who is known for Papist sympathies is in danger, and has gone to his country estates. Anyone who is in favour of reform fears that the king has turned against it with a Howard girl favourite again and Stephen Gardiner composing the prayers, which are just as they were when they came from Rome, and the reforming Archbishop Cranmer is quite out of fashion. Left behind at court are the opportunist and the reckless. It is as if the whole world is becoming unravelled with the unravelling of order. The queen pushes her food around her plate with her golden fork, her head bowed low so as to avoid the bright, curious

stares of the people who have come to see a queen abandoned on her throne, deserted in her palace, who come in their hundreds to see her, avid to see a queen on her last night at court, perhaps her last night on earth.

We return to our rooms as soon as the board is cleared, there are no entertainments for the king after dinner because he is never here. It is almost as if there is no king, and in his absence no queen, and no court. Everything is changed, or waiting fearfully for more change. Nobody knows what will happen, and everyone is alert to any sign of danger.

And there is talk, all the time, of more arrests. Today, I heard that Lord Hungerford has been taken to the Tower, and when they told me of his crimes it was as if I had walked from the midday sun into an ice house. He is accused of unnatural behaviour, as my husband was: sodomy with another man. He is accused of forcing his daughter, as my husband George was accused of incest with his sister Anne. He is accused of treason and foretelling the king's death, just like George and Anne, charged together. Perhaps his wife will be invited to witness against him, just as they asked me to do. I shiver at the thought of this, it takes me all my willpower to sit quietly in the queen's room and make my stitches neat on the hems. I can hear a drumming in my ears, I can feel the blood heating my cheeks as if I am ill with a fever. It is happening again, King Henry is turning on his friends again.

This is a blood-letting again, a scatter of charges against those the king wants out of his sight. Last time Henry sought vengeance, the long days of his hatred took my husband, four others, and the Queen of England. Who can doubt but that Henry is about to do it again? But who can know who he will take?

The only sound in the queen's rooms is the little patter of a dozen needles piercing rough cloth, and the whisper of the thread being pulled through. All the laughter and music and gaming that used to fill the arched room has been silenced. None of us dares to speak. The queen was always guarded, careful in her speech. Now, in these fearful days, she is more than discreet, she is struck dumb, in a state of silent terror.

I have seen a queen in fear of her life before; I know what it is like to be at the queen's court when we are all waiting for something to happen. I know how the queen's ladies glance furtively, when they know in their hearts that the queen will be taken away, and who knows where else the blame will fall?

There are several empty seats in the queen's rooms. Katherine Howard has gone, and the rooms are a quieter, duller place without her. Lady Lisle is partly in hiding, partly seeking out the few friends who dare to acknowledge her, sick

with crying. Lady Southampton has made an excuse to go away. I think that she fears her husband will be caught in the trap that is being set to catch the queen. Southampton was another friend of the queen's when she first came to England. Anne Bassett has managed to be ill since the arrest of her father, and has gone to her kinswoman. Catherine Carey has been taken from court, without a word of notice, by her mother who knows all about the fall of queens. Mary Norris has been summoned away by her mother who will also find these events too familiar. All of those who promised the queen their unending, undying friendship are now terrified that she will claim it and they will go down with her fall. All her ladies are afraid that they may be caught in the trap that is being primed to catch the queen.

All of us, that is, except those who already know that they are not the victims but the trap itself. The king's agents at the court of the queen are Lady Rutland, Catherine Edgecombe, and me. When she is arrested we three will give evidence against her. Thus will we be safe. At least we three will be safe.

I have not yet been told what evidence I shall give, just that I will be required to swear to a written statement. I am beyond caring. I asked the duke my uncle if I might be spared and he says that on the contrary I should be glad that the king should put his faith in me again. I think I can say or do no more. I shall give myself up to these times, I shall bob along like a bit of driftwood on the tide of the king's whim. I shall try to keep my own head above the water and pity those that drown beside me. And, if I am honest, I may keep my own head up by pushing another down, and snatching at their air. In a shipwreck, it is every drowning man for himself.

There is a thunderous knock at the door and a girl screams. We all jump to our feet, certain the soldiers are at the door, we are waiting for the word of our arrest. I look quickly at the queen and she is white, whiter than salt, I have never seen a woman blanch so pale except in death. Her lips are actually blue with fear.

The door opens. It is my uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, looking long-faced and cadaverous with his black hat on his head like a hanging judge.

'Your Grace,' he says and comes in and bows low to her.

She sways like a silver birch tree. I go to her side and take her arm to keep her steady. I feel her shudder at my touch, and I realise that she thinks I am arresting her, holding her while my uncle pronounces sentence.

'It's all right,' I whisper; but of course I do not know that it is all right. For all I know there are half a dozen of the royal guard standing out of sight in the

corridor.

She holds her head high, and she raises herself up to her full height. 'Goot evening,' she says in her funny way. 'My lord duke.'

'I am come from the Privy Council,' he says, as smooth as funeral silk. 'I regret to say that the plague has broken out in the city.'

She frowns slightly, trying to follow the words, these are not what she was expecting. The ladies stir, we all know there is no plague.

'The king is anxious for your safety,' he says slowly. 'He commands you to move to Richmond Palace.'

I feel her sway. 'He comes also?'

'No.'

So everyone will know that she has been sent away. If there was plague in the city, then King Henry would be the last man in the world to be boating up and down on the Thames tra-la-la-ing with his lute and a new love song all the way to the Lambeth horse ferry. If there were sickness in the evening mists curling off the river then Henry would be away to the New Forest, or to Essex. He has an utter terror of illness. The prince would be despatched to Wales, the king would be long gone.

So anyone who knows the king knows that this report of plague is a lie, and that the truth must be that this is the start of the queen's ordeal. First, house arrest, while the inquiry goes on, then a charge, then a court hearing, then judgement, the sentence, and death. Thus it was for Queen Katherine, for Queen Anne Boleyn, so it will be for Queen Anne of Cleves.

'I will see him before I leave?' she asks, poor little thing, her voice is trembling.

'His Grace bade me come to tell you to leave tomorrow morning. He will visit you, without doubt, at Richmond Palace.'

She staggers and her legs buckle beneath her; if I were not holding her up she would fall. The duke nods at me, as if commending a job well done, then he steps back and bows, and takes himself from the room as if he were not Death himself, come for the bride.

I lower the queen into her chair and send one of the girls for a glass of water, and another running to the cellarer for a glass of brandy. When they come back I make her drink from one glass and then the other, and she lifts up her head and looks at me.

'I must see my ambassador,' she says huskily.

I nod, she can see him if she likes; but there will be nothing he can do to save

her. I send one of the pages to find Dr Harst. He will be dining in the hall, he finds his way in every mealtime to one of the tables at the back. The Duke of Cleves has not paid him enough to set up his own house like a proper ambassador; the poor man has to scrounge like a mouse at the royal board.

He comes in at a run, and recoils when he sees her, seated in her chair, doubled over, as if she has been knifed in the heart.

‘Leave us,’ she says.

I drift to the end of the room but I don’t go right outside. I stand as if I am guarding the door from the others coming in. I dare not leave her alone, even if I won’t understand what is being said. I cannot risk her giving him her jewels and the two of them slipping away through the private door to the garden and the path to the river, even though I know there are sentries on the piers.

They mutter in their own language, and I see him shake his head. She is crying, trying to tell him something, and he pats her hand, and pats her elbow, and does everything but pat her head like a whipper-in might soothe a fretting bitch. I lean back against the door. This is not the man who can overthrow our plans. This man is not going to rescue her; we need not fear him. This man will still be desperately worrying about what he can do to save her as she climbs the scaffold. If she is counting on him for help, then she is as good as dead already.

Anne, Richmond Palace, July 1540

I think the waiting is the worst; and now waiting is all I do. Waiting to hear what charge they will frame against me, waiting for my arrest, and racking my brains for what defence I can make. Dr Harst and I are agreed that I must leave the country, even if it means losing my claim to the throne, breaking the contract of marriage and wrecking the alliance with Cleves. Even if it means that England will join with France in a war against Spain. To my horror, my failure to succeed in this country may mean that England is free to go to war in Europe. The one thing I hoped to bring to this country was peace and safety but my failure with the king may send them to war. And I cannot prevent it.

Dr Harst believes that my friend Lord Lisle and my sponsor Thomas Cromwell are certain to die, and that I will be next. There is nothing now I can do to save England from this outbreak of tyranny. All I can do for myself is try to save my own skin. There is no predicting the charge and no guarding against it. There will be no formal accusation in a courtroom, there will be no judges and no jury. There will be no chance to defend myself from whatever charge they have invented. Lord Lisle and Lord Cromwell will die under a Bill of Attainder, all it requires is the signature of the king. The king, who believes he is guided by God, has become a god with the full power of life and death. There can be no doubt that he is planning my death too.

I hesitate, like a fool I wait for a few days, hoping that it is not as bad as it seems. I think that the king might be well-advised by men who can see reason. I pray that God might speak to him in words of common sense and not reassure him that his own desires should be paramount. I hope that I might hear from my mother, to tell me what I should do. I even hope against hope for a message from my brother saying that he will not let them try me, he will prevent my execution, that he is sending an escort to bring me home. Then, on the very day that Dr Harst said he would come with six horses and I should be ready to leave, he comes to me, without horses, his face very grave, and says that the ports are closed. The king is letting no-one in or out of the country. No ships are allowed to sail at all. Even if we could get to the coast – and to run away would be a

confession of guilt – we would not be able to sail. I am imprisoned in my new country. There is no way of getting home.

Like a fool I had thought that my difficulty would be getting past the guards at my door, getting horses, getting away from the palace without someone raising a hue and cry and coming after us. But no, the king is all-seeing, like the god he thinks he is. Getting away from the palace would have been hard enough, but now we cannot take a ship for home. I am marooned on this island. The king holds me captive.

Dr Harst thinks this means that they will come for me at once. The king has closed the whole country so that he can have me tried, found guilty, and beheaded, before my own family can even hear of my arrest. No-one in Europe can protest or cry shame! No-one in Europe will even know until it is over and I am dead. I believe this to be true. It must be within a few days, perhaps even tomorrow.

I cannot sleep. I spend the night at the window watching for the first light of dawn. I think this will be my last night on earth and I regret more than anything else that I have wasted my life. I spent all my time obeying my father and then my brother, I squandered these last months in trying to please the king, I did not treasure the little spark that is me, uniquely me. Instead I put my will and my thoughts beneath the will of the men who command me. If I had been the gyrfalcon that my father called me I would have flown high, and nested in lonely, cold places, and ridden the free wind. Instead I have been like a bird in a mews, always tied and sometimes hooded. Never free and sometimes blind.

As God is my witness, if I live through this night, through this week, I shall try to be true to myself in the future. If God spares me I shall try to honour him by being me, myself; not by being a sister or a daughter or a wife. This is an easy promise to make for I don't think I will be held to it. I don't think God will save me, I don't think Henry will spare me. I don't think I will have any life beyond next week.

As it grows light and then golden with the morning sun of summertime, I stay at my seat at the window, and they bring me a cup of small ale and a slice of bread and butter as I watch the river for the flutter of the standard and the steady dip and sweep of oars, for the coming of the royal barge to take me to the Tower. Any beat of a drum, drifting over the water to keep the rowers in time, and I can hear my heart echoing its thudding in my ears, thinking that it is them, come for me today. Funny then that when they finally come, not until mid-afternoon, it is not a troop but only a single man, Richard Beard, who arrives without warning

in a little wherry, when I am walking in the garden, my hands cold in my pockets and my feet clumsy with fear. He finds me in the privy garden when I am walking among the roses, bending my head down to the blooms but unable to smell the perfume of the full-blown flowers. From a distance I must look to him like a happy woman, a young queen in a garden of roses. Only as he comes close does he see the whiteness of my blank face.

‘Your Grace,’ he says and bows low, as if to a queen.

I nod.

‘I have brought a letter from the king.’ He offers me the letter. I take it but I do not break the seal. ‘What does it say?’ I ask.

He does not pretend that it is a private matter. ‘It is to tell you that after months of doubt the king has decided to examine his marriage to you. He fears that it is not valid because you were already contracted to marry. There is to be an inquiry.’

‘He says we are not married?’ I ask.

‘He fears that you were not married,’ he corrects me gently.

I shake my head. ‘I don’t understand,’ I say stupidly. ‘I don’t understand.’



They all come then: half the Privy Council arrive with their entourage and servants, they all come to tell me that I must agree to an inquiry. I don’t agree. I won’t agree. They are all to stay the night here with me at Richmond Palace. I won’t dine with them, I shall not agree. I shall never agree.

In the morning they tell me that three of my ladies are to be summoned to appear before the inquiry. They refuse to tell me what they will be asked, they will not even tell me who will be made to go and testify against me. I ask them for copies of the documents that are to be the evidence laid before the inquiry and they refuse to let me see anything. Dr Harst complains of this treatment, and writes to my brother; but we know that the letters will never get through until it is too late, the ports are sealed and there is no news leaving England at all. We are alone, I am alone. Dr Harst tells me that before her trial, there was an inquiry into Anne Boleyn’s conduct. An inquiry: just as they will make into my conduct. The ladies of her chamber were questioned as to what she had said and done, just as mine will be. The evidence from that inquiry was used at her trial. The sentence was passed against her, and the king married Jane Seymour, her maid in waiting, within the month. They will not even hold a trial for me, it will be

done on the king's signature: nothing more. Am I really going to die so that the king can marry little Kitty Howard? Can it really be possible, that I am to die so that this old man can marry a girl that he could bed for little more than the price of a gown?

Jane Boleyn, Westminster Palace, 7 July 1540

We come into the city of London by royal barge from Richmond, it is all done very fine for us, the king is sparing no trouble to make sure we are comfortable. There are three of us, Lady Rutland, Catherine Edgecombe and myself: three little Judases come to do our duty. With us, as escort, is Lord Southampton, who must feel he has some ground to regain with the king since he welcomed Anne of Cleves into England and said that she was pretty and merry and queenly. With him are Lord Audley and the Duke of Suffolk, eager to play their parts and curry favour. They will give their evidence against her to the inquiry after we have given ours.

Catherine Edgecombe is nervous, she says she does not know what she is to say, she is afraid of one of the churchmen cross-questioning her, and trapping her into saying the wrong thing, heavens, even the truth might slip out if she were to be harried – how dreadful would that be! But I am as much at ease as a bitter old fishwife gutting mackerel. ‘You won’t even see them,’ I predict. ‘You won’t be cross-questioned. Who would challenge your lies? It’s not as if there will be anyone wanting the truth, it’s not as if there will be anyone speaking in her defence. I imagine you won’t even have to speak. It will all be drawn up for us, we’ll just have to sign it.’

‘But what if it says ... what if they name her as a ...’ She breaks off and looks downriver. She is too afraid even to say the word ‘witch’.

‘Why would you even read it?’ I ask. ‘What does it matter what it says above your signature? You agreed to sign it, didn’t you? You didn’t agree to read it.’

‘But I would not have her harmed by my evidence,’ she says, the ninny.

I raise my eyebrows but I say nothing. I don’t need to. We all know that we have set out in the king’s barge, on a lovely summer day, to be rowed up the river to destroy a young woman who has done nothing wrong.

‘Did you just sign something? When you? Before?’ she asks tentatively.

‘No,’ I say. There is a salt taste of bile in my mouth so strong that I want to spit over the side into the green, swift water. ‘No. It was not done as well as this for Anne and my husband. See how we are improving in these ceremonies?’

Then, I had to go into court before them all and swear on the Bible and give my evidence. I had to face the court and say what I had to say against my own husband and his sister. I had to face him and say it.'

She gives a little shudder. 'That must have been dreadful.'

'It was,' I say shortly.

'You must have feared the worst.'

'I knew that my life would be saved,' I say crudely. 'And I imagine that is why you are here today, as I am, as is Lady Rutland. If Anne of Cleves is found guilty and dies, then at least we will not die with her.'

'But what will they say she has done?' Catherine asks.

'Oh, it will be us who say.' I give a harsh laugh. 'It will be us who accuse her. It will be us who make the accusation and swear to the evidence. It will be us who will say what she has done. They will just say that she will have to die for it. And we will find out her crime soon enough.'



Thank God, thank God, I have to sign nothing that blames her for the king's impotence. I don't have to give evidence that she cast a spell on him or bewitched him, or lay with half a dozen men, or gave birth in secret to a monster. This time, I have to say nothing like that. We all sign the same statement, which says only that she told us that she lay down with him every night as a maid and rose every morning as a maid, and that from what she said to us it was clear that she is such a fool that she never knew that there was anything wrong. We are supposed to have advised her that to be a wife required more than a kiss goodnight, and a blessing in the morning, we are supposed to have said that she wouldn't get a son this way; and she is supposed to have said that she was content to know no more. All this chatter is supposed to have taken place in her room between the four of us, conducted in fluent English without a moment's hesitation and no interpreter.

I seek out the duke before the barge takes us back to Richmond.

'They do realise that she doesn't talk like this?' I say. 'The conversation that we have all sworn took place could never have happened? Anyone who has been in the queen's rooms would know this at once for a lie. In real life we muddle along with the few words that she knows, and we repeat things half a dozen times before we all understand each other. And anyone who knows her would know that she would never ever speak of this with all of us together. She is far

too modest.'

'It doesn't matter,' he says grandly. 'They needed a statement to say that she is a virgin, as she ever was. Nothing more.'

For the first time in weeks, I think that they might spare her. 'Is he just putting her aside?' I ask. I hardly dare to hope. 'Is he not accusing her of unmanning him?'

'He will be rid of her,' he says. 'Your statement today will serve to show her as a most deceptive and cunning witch.'

I gasp. 'How have I incriminated her as a witch?'

'You have written that she knows he is unmanned, and even in her chamber with her own women she has pretended that she knows nothing about what passes between a man and wife. As you say yourself, who could believe her claim? Who ever speaks like that? What woman put into a king's bed would know so little? What woman in the world is that ignorant? Clearly she must be lying, so clearly she is hiding a conspiracy. Clearly she is a witch.'

'But ... but ... I thought this statement was supposed to show her as innocent?' I stammer. 'A virgin with no knowledge?'

'Exactly,' he says. The duke allows himself a dark gleam of a smile. 'That is the beauty of it. You, all three of you highly regarded ladies of her chamber, have sworn to a statement that shows her either as innocent as the Virgin Mary, or as deeply cunning as the witch Hecate. It can be used either way, exactly as the king requires. You have done a good day's work, Jane Boleyn. I am pleased with you.'

I go to the barge saying nothing more; there is nothing I can say. He guided me once before and perhaps I should have listened to my husband, George, and not to his uncle. If George were here with me now perhaps he would advise me to go quietly to the queen and tell her to run away. Perhaps he would say that love and loyalty are more important than making one's way at court. Perhaps he would say that it is more important to keep faith with those that one loves than please the king. But George is not with me now. He will never now tell me that he believes in love. I have to live without him; for the rest of my life I will have to live without him.

We go back to Richmond. The tide is with us and I wish the barge would go more slowly and not rush us home to the palace where she will be watching for the barge and looking so very pale.

'What have we done?' asks Catherine Edgecombe dolefully. She is looking towards the beautiful towers of Richmond Palace, knowing that we will have to

face Queen Anne, that her honest gaze will go from one of us to the other, and that she will know that we have been gone all day on our jaunt to London to give evidence against her.

‘We have done what we had to do. We may have saved her life,’ I say stubbornly.

‘Like you saved your sister-in-law? Like you saved your husband?’ she asks me, sharp with malice.

I turn my head away from her. ‘I never speak of it,’ I say. ‘I never even think of it.’

Anne, Richmond Palace, 8 July 1540

It is the second day of the inquiry to conclude whether my marriage to the king is legal or not. If I were not so low in my spirits I would laugh at them sitting down in solemn convocation to sift the evidence they have themselves fabricated. We must all know what the result will be. The king has not called the churchmen, who take his pay and serve in his own church, who are all that is left now the faithful are hanging on scaffolds all around the walls of York, for them to tell him that he is inspired by nothing but lust for a pretty face, and that he should go down on his knees for forgiveness of his sins and acknowledge his marriage to me. They will oblige their master and deliver a verdict that I was pre-contracted, that I was never free to marry, that our marriage is therefore annulled. I have to remember that this is an escape for me, it could have been so much worse. If he had decided to put me aside for misconduct, they would still have heard evidence, they would still have found against me.

I see an unmarked barge coming up to the great pier and I see the king's messenger, Richard Beard, leap ashore before the ropes are even tied. Lightly he comes up the pier, looks towards the palace and sees me. He raises his hand and comes briskly over the lawns towards me. He is a busy man, he has to hurry. Slowly, I go to meet him. I know that this is the end for my hopes of being a good queen for this country, a good stepmother to my children, a good wife to a bad husband.

Silently, I hold out my hand for the letter he carries for me. Silently he gives it to me. This is the end of my girlhood. This is the end of my ambitions. This is the end of my dream. This is the end of my reign. Perhaps it is the end of my life.

Jane Boleyn, Richmond Palace, 8 July 1540

Who would have thought she would take it so hard? She has been crying like a broken-hearted girl, her useless ambassador patting her hands, and muttering to her in German like some old dark-feathered hen, that ninny Richard Beard standing on his dignity but looking like a schoolboy, agonisingly embarrassed. They start on the terrace where Richard Beard gives her the letter, then they bring her into her room when her legs give way beneath her, and they send for me as she cries herself into a screaming fit.

I bathe her face with rosewater, and then give her a glass of brandy to sip. That steadies her for a moment and she looks up at me, her eyes as red-rimmed as those of a little white rabbit.

‘He denies the marriage,’ she says brokenly. ‘Oh, Jane, he denies me. He had me painted by Master Holbein himself, he chose me, he asked for me to come, he sent his councillors for me, he brought me to his court. He excused the dowry, he married me, he bedded me, now he denies me.’

‘What does he want you to do?’ I ask urgently. I want to know if Richard Beard has a guard of soldiers coming behind him, if they are going to take her away tonight.

‘He wants me to agree to the verdict,’ she says. ‘He promises me a ...’ She breaks into tears on the word ‘settlement’. These are hard words for a young wife to hear. ‘He promises fair terms if I cause no trouble.’

I look at the ambassador, who is puffed up like a cockerel at the insult, and then I look at Richard Beard.

‘What would you advise the queen?’ Beard asks me. He is no fool, he knows who pays my hire. I will sing to Henry’s tune, in four-part harmony if need be, he can be sure of that.

‘Your Grace,’ I say gently. ‘There is nothing that can be done except to accept the will of the king and the ruling of his council.’

She looks at me trustingly. ‘How can I?’ she asks. ‘He wants me to say that I was married before I married him, so we were not married. These are lies.’

‘Your Grace.’ I bend very low to her and I whisper, so that only she can

hear. 'The evidence about Queen Anne Boleyn went from an inquiry, just like this one, to the court room and then to the scaffold. The evidence about Queen Katherine of Aragon went from an inquiry just like this one, took six years to hear, and in the end she was alone and penniless and died in exile from her friends and from her daughter. The king is a hard enemy. If he offers you any terms, any terms at all, you should take them.'

'But ...'

'If you do not release him he will be rid of you anyway.'

'How can he?' she demands.

I look at her. 'You know.'

She dares me to say it. 'What will he do?'

'He will kill you,' I say simply.

Richard Beard moves away so that he can deny he ever heard this. The ambassador glares at me, uncomprehending.

'You know this,' I say.

In silence, she nods.

'Who is your friend in England?' I ask her. 'Who will defend you?'

I see the fight go out of her. 'I have none.'

'Can you get a message to your brother? Will he save you?' I know he will not.

'I am innocent,' she whispers.

'Even so.'

Katherine, Norfolk House, Lambeth, 9 July 1540

I cannot, I cannot believe it: but it is so. My grandmother has just told me, and she has just had it from my uncle Norfolk, and he was there, and so he knows. They have done it. They have examined all the evidence and announced that the king's marriage to Queen Anne of Cleves was never valid and they are both free to marry someone else, as if they had never been married to each other at all.

I am amazed. All that wedding, and the gown, and the beautiful jewels and gifts, and us all carrying the train and the wedding breakfast and the archbishop ... none of it counted. How can that be? The sables! They didn't count either. This is what it is to be king. He wakes up in the morning and decides he is to marry and he does. Then he wakes up the morning after and decides he doesn't like her, and *voilà!* (this is French, it means something like: gracious, look at that!), *voilà!* He is not married. The marriage was never valid and they are now to be seen as brother and sister. Brother and sister!

Only a king could do such a thing. If it were done by an ordinary person you would think him a madman. But since he is king nobody can say that this is madness, and not even the queen (or whatever she happens to be now) can say this is madness. We all say: 'Oh, yes, Your Majesty', and he comes to dinner with my grandmother and me tonight and he will propose to marry me and I will say: 'Oh, yes, Your Majesty, thank you very much', and never, never say that this is mad, and the work of a madman, and the world itself is mad that it does not turn on him.

For I am not mad. I may be very stupid, and I may be very ignorant (though I am learning French, *voilà!*) but at least I don't think that if you stand in front of the archbishop and say 'I do', then that doesn't count six months later. But I do see that I live in a world that is ruled by a madman and governed by his whims. Also, he is the king and head of the church, and God speaks to him directly, so if he says that something is the case then who is going to say no to him?

Not I, at any rate. I may have my thoughts (however stupid I am assured they are), I may have my stupid thoughts in – what did she say? – 'a head that can only hold one nonsensical idea at a time'; but I know that the king is mad, and

the world is mad. The queen is now to be his sister, and I am to be his wife and the new queen. I am to be queen of England. I, Kitty Howard, am to marry the King of England and to be his queen. *Voilà* indeed.

I cannot believe it is true. And, I wish someone had thought of this: what real gain is there in it for me? For I have thought about this now. What should prevent him waking up one morning and saying that I too was pre-contracted and that our royal marriage is not valid? Or that I am unfaithful, and he had better behead me? What should prevent him taking a fancy to a stupid, pretty maid in waiting of mine, and putting me to one side for her?

Exactly! I don't think this has occurred to anyone but me. Exactly. Nothing can prevent him. And those people like my grandmother, who are so free with their insults and their slaps, who say that it is a tremendous honour and a fine step up for a ninny like me, might well consider that a fool can be jumped up, but a fool can also be thrown down; and who is going to catch me then?

Anne, Richmond Palace, 12 July 1540

I have written to say that I agree with the findings of the inquiry, and they have all witnessed it, one after another, the great men who came here to argue with me, the ladies that I had called my friends when I was Queen of England and they were desperate to serve in my court. I have admitted that I was pre-contracted, and not free to marry, I have even apologised for this.

This is a dark night for me in England. The darkest night I have ever faced. I am not to be queen. I can stay in England at the king's unreliable favour, while he marries the little girl who was my maid in waiting, or I can go home penniless, to live with my brother whose spite and negligence has brought me to this. I am very much alone tonight.

This is the most beautiful palace in the kingdom, overlooking the river in its own great park. It was built by the king's father as a great show palace in a peaceful, beautiful country. This wonderful place is to be part of the payment the king offers to be rid of me. And I am to have the Boleyn inheritance, their family house: the pretty castle of Hever. No-one but me seems to find this amusing: that Henry should bribe me with the other Queen Anne's childhood home, which he owns only because he beheaded her. Also, I can have a generous allowance. I shall be the first lady of the kingdom, second only to the new queen, and regarded as the king's sister. We shall all be friends. How happy we shall be.

I don't know how I shall live here. To tell the truth, I cannot imagine how my life will be after tonight, this dark night. I cannot go home to my brother, I should be shamed as a whipped dog if I were to go home to him and say that the King of England has put me aside, calling in archbishops to get his freedom from me, preferring a pretty girl, my own maid in waiting, to me. I cannot go home and say this. I cannot go home and face this shame. What they would say to me, how I would live as spoiled goods at my brother's court, I cannot imagine. It is not possible.

So I shall have to stay here. There is no refuge for me anywhere else. I cannot go to France or to Spain or even to a house of my own somewhere in Germany. I have no money to buy such a place and if I leave England I will have

no rich allowance, they will pay me no rents. My lands will be given to someone else. The king insists that I live on his generosity in his kingdom. I cannot hope for another husband to offer me a home either. No man will marry me, knowing that I have laid under the king's heavy labourings for night after night and that he could not bring himself to do it. No man will find me desirable knowing that the king's manhood shrivelled at the sight of me. The king has volunteered to his friends that he was repelled by my fat belly and by my slack breasts and by the smell of me. I am shamed to the ground by this. Besides, since every churchman in England has agreed that I was bound to marry the son of the Duke of Lorraine, that will be an obstacle to any marriage I might want in the future. I will have to face a single life, without lover, or husband, or companion. I will have to face a lonely life, without family. I will never have a child of my own, I will never have a son to come after me, I will never have my own daughter to love. I will have to be a nun without a convent, a widow with no memories, a wife of six months and a virgin. I will have to face life in exile. I will never see Cleves again. I will never see my mother again.

This is a hard sentence for me. I am a young woman of only twenty-five. I have done nothing wrong. And yet I shall be alone forever: undesirable, lonely and in exile. Truly, when a King is a god to himself and follows his own desires, the suffering falls on others.

Katherine, Norfolk House, Lambeth, 12 July 1540

It is done. It took all of six days. Six days. The king has rid himself of his queen, his lawfully wedded queen, so that he can now marry me. My grandmother says I should prepare myself for the greatest position in the land and consider what ladies I shall choose to serve me, and who I shall favour with the places and fees at my disposal. Clearly, my Howard relations must come first. My uncle says that I must remember to take his advice in all things and not be a stupid jade like my cousin Anne. And I must remember what happened to her! As if I am likely to forget.

I have looked sideways under my eyelashes at the king, and smiled at him, curtsied bending forwards so that he can see my breasts, and worn my hood back so he can see my face. Now everything has gone faster than I could have imagined, everything is happening too fast. Everything is happening whether I want it or not.

I am to be married to King Henry of England. Queen Anne has been put aside. Nothing can save her, nothing can stop the king, nothing can save me – oh, I shouldn't have said that. I should have said: nothing can prevent my happiness. That is what I meant to say. Nothing can prevent my happiness. He calls me his rose. He calls me his rose without a thorn. Whenever he says it, I think it is just the sort of pet-name that a man might give to his daughter. Not a lover's name. Not a lover's name at all.

Anne, Richmond Palace, 13 July 1540

And so it is over. Unbelievably, it is over. I have put my name to the agreement that says I was pre-contracted and not free to marry. I have agreed that my marriage should be annulled and suddenly it is no more. Just like that. This is what it is to be married to the voice of God when He speaks against you. God warns Henry that I am pre-contracted. Henry warns his council. Then the marriage is no more, though he swore to be my husband and came to my bed and tried – how hard did he try! – to consummate the marriage. But it turns out it was God preventing his success (not witchcraft but the hand of God), and so Henry says it will not be.

I write to my brother at the king's command and tell him that I am no longer married and that I have consented to my change of state. Then, the king is not satisfied by my letter and I am ordered to write it again. If he wants, I will write it a dozen times. If my brother had protected me as he should have done, as my father would have wanted him to do, this could never have happened. But he is a spiteful man and a poor kinsman, he is a bad brother to me; and I have been unprotected since the death of my father. My brother's ambition made him use me, his spite let me fall. He would not have let his horse go to such a buyer as Henry of England, and be broken so.

The king has commanded me to return his wedding ring to him. I obey him in this as I do in all things. I write a letter to go with it. I tell him that here is the ring he gave to me and that I hope he will have it broken into pieces for it is a thing which has no force or value. He will not hear my anger and my disappointment in these words for he does not know me nor think of me. But I am both angry and disappointed and he can have his wedding ring, and his wedding vows, and he can have his belief that God speaks to him, for they are all part of the same thing: a chimera, a thing which has no force or value.

And so it is over.

And so it begins for little Kitty Howard.

I wish her joy of him. I wish him joy of her. A more ill-matched, ill-conceived, ill-starred marriage could hardly be imagined. I cannot envy her.

From the bottom of my heart, even tonight, when I have so much to complain of, when I have so much to blame her for: even now I do not envy her. I can only fear for her, poor child, poor, silly child.

I may have been alone, without friends, before the indifference of the king, but God knows the same will be true of her. I was poor and humble when he chose me and the same is true of her. I was part of a faction of his court (though I did not know it) and the same is even more true of her. When another pretty girl comes to court and takes his eye, how shall she make him cleave to her? (And be very sure they will send their pretty girls by the dozen.) When the king's health fails him and he cannot get a child on her, will he tell her that it is the failing of an old man, and ask her forgiveness? No, he will not. And when he blames her, who will defend her? When Lady Rochford asks her, who can she call on as a friend?, what will she answer? Who will be Katherine Howard's friend and protector when the king turns against her?

Queen Katherine, Oatlands Palace, 28 July 1540

Well, I must say that it is all well and good to be married but I have not had half the wedding that she had. There was no great reception for me at Greenwich, and no riding out on a beautiful horse and being greeted by him with all the nobles of England behind him. There was no sailing in barges down the river while the City of London went mad with joy either, so those who think that to marry the king is a very merry thing should note my wedding, which was – to be blunt – a hole-in-the corner business. There! I've said it, and anyone who thinks different can't have been here. And actually, that would be most people in the world – for next to no-one was here.

I said to Lady Rochford, the day before: 'Please find out from the groom of the chamber or the Lord Chamberlain or somebody what it is we are to do. Where I am to stand, and what I am to say and what to do.' I wanted to practise. I like to practise if I am going to appear before people and everyone will watch me. I should have been warned by her response.

'Nothing much to practise,' she said dourly. 'Your bridegroom is well-rehearsed at least. You will just have to repeat the vows. And there will be hardly any audience for you at all.'

And how right she was! There was the Bishop of London officiating (thank you so much, not even a real archbishop for me), there was the king, not even wearing a special waistcoat, in an old coat – isn't that next to insulting? – there was me in the finest gown that I could order; but what could I do in little more than a fortnight? And not even a crown on my head!

He gave me some very good jewels, I sent for the goldsmith to value them at once and they are indeed very fine, though some of them I know for a fact were brought by Katherine of Aragon from Spain, and who wants jewels that belonged to a friend of your grandmother? I have no doubt that there will be sables as good as Queen Anne's to follow, and already I have commanded the dressmakers to make me new gowns and there will be gifts from everyone in the world, as soon as everyone knows, as soon as everyone is told.

But there is no denying that it was not as great a wedding as I had expected,

and it was not a patch on hers. I thought we would have planned it for months, and there would be processions and my important entry to London, and I should have spent my first night in the Tower and then processed to Westminster Abbey through streets which were swathed in cloth of gold, with people singing songs about me. 'Fair Katherine', I thought they would sing. 'Rose of England.'

But no, instead there is a mere bishop, there is the king, there am I in a bewitching gown of grey-green silk which shifts colours as I move, and a new hood, and his pearls at least, and there is my uncle and grandmother as witnesses, and a couple of men from his court, and then we go to dine; and then ... And then! ... It is unbelievable! Nobody talks of anything but the beheading of Thomas Cromwell.

At a wedding breakfast! Is that what a bride wants to hear on her wedding day? There are no healths drunk and no speeches made to me, and scarcely any celebration. Nobody pays me any compliments at all, there is no dancing and no flirtation and no flattery. They can talk of nothing else but Thomas Cromwell because he has been beheaded today. On my wedding day! Is this how the king celebrates his wedding? With the death of his chief advisor and best friend? It's not a very nice gift for a girl on her wedding day, is it? It's not as if I am whoever she is in the Bible who wanted someone's head for a wedding gift. All I really wanted for a wedding gift were sables, not the news that the king's advisor has been beheaded, calling for mercy.

But it is all the old people talk about, no-one consults my feelings at all, they are utterly delighted with it, of course, and so they talk over the top of me, as if I were a child instead of the new Queen of England, and they talk about the alliance with France and say that King Francis will help us with the Pope. And nobody asks me for my opinion at all.

The king grips my hand beneath the shield of the table and leans towards me and whispers, 'I cannot wait for tonight, my rose, my finest jewel,' which is hardly very inspiring when I think that Thomas Culpepper had to help him to his seat, and will no doubt have to heave him into my bed.

In short, I am the happiest woman in the world, praise God. But just a little discontented tonight.

And I am out of my usual ways. At this time of night when I was in the queen's chamber we would all be getting ready to dine in the hall and we would be looking one another over and teasing each other if anyone had done their hair very well, or was dressed very fine. Someone would always accuse me of trying to attract one boy or another and I would always blush and say, 'No! Not at all!'

as if I were shocked at the thought of it. And the queen would come out of her bedroom and laugh at us all and then she would lead us into the hall and it would all be very merry. Half the time there would be a young man with an eye to me, in the last few weeks there has been Thomas Culpepper always smiling at me, and all the girls around me would nudge me and tell me to look for my honour. Of course he does not even look at me now, obviously there is no amusement for a queen, you would think I was as old as my husband.

It was more than merry; it was busy and gay and young. There was always a crowd of us, all together, all happy and sharing a jest. And if the jest wore a little sour from time to time, with jealousy or malice, then there was always another person to complain to, and a little group to form, and a little quarrel to run. I like being in a gang of girls, I like the maidens' chamber, I like being one of the queen's ladies and all of us being together.

It is all very well being Queen of England but I have no friends. It just seems to be me, and these old people: Grandmother, my uncle, the king and his old men of the Privy Council. The young men in the king's service don't even smile at me now, you would think they didn't even like me. Thomas Culpepper bows his head when I come near him and doesn't meet my eyes. And the old people talk among themselves about the things that interest old people: the weather, the bad end of Thomas Cromwell, his estates and money, the state of the church and the danger of Papists and heretics, the danger of the men of the North who still long for their monasteries. And I sit here like a well-behaved daughter, like a well-behaved granddaughter actually, and it is all I can do not to yawn.

I turn my head one way to appear as if I am listening to my uncle, and then I turn the other to the king. I don't hear any of them, to tell truth. It is all buzz, buzz above me, and there are no musicians and no dancing and nothing to amuse me but the conversation of my husband, and what bride ever wanted that?

Then Henry says, very soft and sweet, that it is time for us to retire, and thank God Lady Rochford comes in and takes me away from the rest of them, and she has a new and beautiful nightshift for me with a matching cape to go over the top, and I change my gown in the queen's own dressing room because I am queen now.

'God save you, Your Grace,' she says. 'But you have risen very high indeed.'

'I have, Lady Rochford,' I say, most solemnly. 'And I shall keep you by me if you advise me and help me in the future as you have done in the past.'

'Your uncle has commanded me to do just that,' she says. 'I am to be head of

your privy chamber.'

'I shall appoint my own ladies,' I say, very haughty.

'No, you won't,' she says pleasantly. 'Your uncle has already made the chief appointments.'

I check that the door is closed behind her. 'How is the queen?' I ask her. 'You have just come from Richmond, haven't you?'

'Don't call her queen.' She stops me at once. 'You're the queen now.'

I tut at my own stupidity. 'I forgot. How is she, anyway?'

'She was very sad when I left,' she says. 'Not for the loss of him, I don't think. But for the loss of all of us. She liked the life as Queen of England, she liked the rooms and being with us, and everything about it.'

'I liked it too,' I say wistfully. 'I miss it too. Lady Rochford, does she blame me very much, d'you think? Did she say anything against me?'

Lady Rochford ties my nightgown at the neck. There are little seed pearls embroidered on the ties, it is a most heartwarming gown, it will comfort me on my wedding night to know that I am wearing a gown that costs a small fortune in pearls. 'She doesn't blame you,' she says kindly. 'Silly girl. Everyone knows that this was not of your doing – except that you are young and pretty and no-one can blame you for that. Not even her. She knows that you did not plan her fall and her unhappiness, any more than you are responsible for the death of Thomas Cromwell. Everyone knows that you don't matter at all in this.'

'I am queen,' I say, rather nettled. 'I should think I matter more than anyone.'

'You are the fifth queen,' she points out, quite unmoved by my irritation. 'And to be honest, there has been none worth the name of queen since the first one.'

'Well, I am the queen now,' I say stoutly. 'And that is all that matters.'

'Queen of the day,' she says, going behind me to spread out the little train of my nightshift. It too is heavy with seed pearls, it is the most gorgeous of gowns. 'A mayfly queen, God save your little majesty.'

Jane Boleyn, Oatlands Palace, 30 July 1540

The king, having won his rose without a thorn, is determined to keep her close. Half the court don't even know that the wedding has taken place, left behind at Westminster, out of touch with everything that is happening here. This is the king's private circle, his new wife, her family, and only his most trusted friends and advisors; I am among them.

Once again I have proved my loyalty, once again I am the confidante who will tell everything. Once again I can be put into the queen's chamber, into her most secret heart, I can be put there and trusted to betray. I have been trusted friend to Queen Katherine, Queen Anne, Queen Jane and then Queen Anne; and I have seen all of them fall from favour or die during my service. If I were a superstitious woman I would think of myself as a plague wind that blows death warmly, with affection, like the breath of a whisper.

So I am not superstitious, and I don't trouble myself to think of the part I have played in these deaths and shames and disgraces. I have done my duty by the king and by my family. I have done my duty even when it cost me everything: my own true love and my honour. Why, my own husband ... but there is no point in thinking of George tonight. He would be pleased anyway: another Howard girl on the throne of England, a Boleyn in the most favoured place. He was the most ambitious of us all. He would be the first to say that it was worth any lie to get a place at court, to join the king's most favoured circle. He would be the first to understand that there are times when the truth is a luxury that a courtier cannot afford.

I think he would be surprised how far the king has gone, how easily he steps from power, to great power, into absolute power. George was not a fool; I think if he were here now he would be warning that the king without any bridle on his will is not a great king (as we assure him) but a monster. I think when George died he knew that the king had stretched to the limits of tyranny and would go further.

As seems to be the pattern for the king's weddings, this one is followed by a round of executions. The king settles his scores with old enemies, and those who

favoured the previous wife. The death of the Earl of Hungerford and his foolish soothsayer seems to put away the whisper of witchcraft. He was accused of all sorts of necromancy and wild sexual misdoings. A couple of Papists are to die for their part in the Lisle plot, the Princess Mary's tutor among them. That will sadden her, and serve as a warning for her too. The friendship of Anne of Cleves has given her no protection; she is friendless again, she is in danger again. All Papists and Papist sympathisers are in danger. She had better be warned. The Howards are back in power and they support the king, who is making a clean sweep of his old enemies to mark his happiness with the new Howard girl. He also kills a handful of Lutherans: a warning to Anne of Cleves and those who thought that she would lead him to reform. When she kneels to pray at her bedside at Richmond Palace tonight she will know that she has been spared by a hair's breadth. He will want her to live the rest of her life in fear.

Katherine, I notice, kneels to pray but does not close her eyes, I would swear she does not say so much as a Hail Mary. She clasps her long white fingers together and she kneels and draws breath but there is no thought of God in her mind. No thought of anything at all, would be my bet. There is never much in that pretty head. If she is praying for anything it is for sables like Queen Anne had for her betrothal.

Of course she is too young to be a good queen. She is too young to be anything but a silly girl. She knows nothing of charity to the poor, nothing of the duties of her great position, nothing about running a great household, let alone running a country. When I think that Queen Katherine was named regent and commanded England I could laugh out loud. This child could not command a pet dove. But she is pleasant and agreeable to the king. The duke her uncle has coached her pretty well in obedience and politeness, and it is my task to watch for the rest. She dances very prettily for the king, and she sits quietly beside him while he talks to men old enough to be her grandfather. She smiles when he addresses a remark to her, and she lets him pinch her cheek or hug her waist without grimace. At dinner the other night he could not keep his hands off her breasts and she blushed but did not pull away when he pawed at her before all the company. She has been raised in a hard school, the duchess is known for a heavy hand with her girls. The duke will have threatened her with the axe if she does not obey the king in thought and word and deed. And, to do her justice, she is a sweet thing anyway, she is glad of the king's presents, and glad to be queen. It is easy for her to be pretty and pleasing to him. He does not ask for much now. He does not want a wife of high intelligence and moral purpose like Queen

Katherine. Nor one with a wit of fire like Anne. He just wants to enjoy her slim young body and get a baby on her.

It is as well the court is not here, in these early days of their marriage. Her family and those who profit from the marriage can look away from him pulling her about, her little hand lost in his grip, her determined smile when he stumbles on his bad leg, her rosy blush of embarrassment when his hand wanders to her crotch under the dinner table. Anyone who was not profiting from this mismatch wedding would find it disturbing to see such a pretty child dished up for such an old man. Anyone speaking honestly would call it a sort of rape.

Fortunate then, that there is no-one here who would ever speak honestly.

Anne, Richmond Palace, 6 August 1540

He is to visit me for dinner. Why, I cannot think. The royal groom of the household came yesterday and told my steward that the king would have the pleasure of dining with me today. I asked those ladies who are still with me if anyone had any news from the court, and one of them said that she had heard that the king was at Oatlands Palace, all but alone, hunting to take his mind off the terrible betrayal of Thomas Cromwell.

One of them asked me if I thought the king was coming to beg my pardon and to ask me to come back to him.

‘Is it possible?’ I ask her.

‘If he was mistaken? If the inquiry was mistaken?’ she asks. ‘Why else would he come and see you, so soon after the end of the marriage? If he still wants to end the marriage, why would he dine with you?’

I go outside to the beautiful gardens and walk a little way, my head buzzing with thoughts. It does not seem possible that he should want to take me back, but there is no doubt that if he has changed his mind he can take me back, just as easily as he could put me aside.

I wonder if it would be possible for me to refuse to go back to him. I would want to return to the court and to be restored to my position, of course. But there is a freedom to being a single woman that I might learn to enjoy. I have never in my life before been Anne of Cleves, Anne by myself, not a sister, not a daughter, not a wife, but Anne: pleasing myself. I swore if I was spared death then I would live my life, my own life, not a life commanded by others. I order dresses in colours that I think suit me, I don’t have to observe my brother’s code of modesty, nor the court fashions. I order dinner at the time and with the food that I like; I don’t have to sit down in front of two hundred people who watch every single thing I do. When I want to ride out I can go as far and as fast as I like, I don’t have to consider my brother’s fears or my husband’s competitive spirit. If I call for musicians in the evening I can dance with my ladies or hear them sing, we don’t always have to follow the king’s tastes. We don’t have to marvel at his compositions. I can pray to a god of my own faith in the words that I choose. I

can become myself, I can be: me.

I had thought that my heart would leap at the chance to be queen again. My chance to do my duty by this country, by its people, by the children who I have come to love, and perhaps even to win my mother's approval and to fulfil my brother's ambitions. But I find, to my own amusement, as I examine my thoughts – and at last I have the privacy and peace to examine my thoughts – that it may be a better thing to be a single woman with a good income in one of the finest palaces in England than to be one of Henry's frightened queens.

The royal guards come first, and then his companions, handsome and overdressed as always. Then he comes in with a touch of awkwardness, limping slightly on his sore leg. I sink down in a low curtsy and I can smell the familiar stink of his wound as I come up. Never again will I have to wake with that smell on my sheets, I think, as I step forwards and he kisses me on the forehead.

He looks me up and down, frankly, as a man appraising a horse. I remember that he told the court that I smell and that my breasts are slack and I can feel my colour rising. 'You look well,' he says begrudgingly. I can hear the pique behind his praise. He was hoping I would pine with unrequited love, I am sure.

'I am well,' I say calmly. 'Glad to see you.'

He smiles at that. 'You must have known I would never treat you unfairly,' he says, happy at the thought of his own generosity. 'If you are a good sister to me then you will see I shall be kind to you.'

I nod and bow.

'Something's different about you.' He takes a chair and gestures that I may sit on the lower chair beside him. I sit and smooth the embroidered skirt of the blue gown over my knees. 'Tell me. I can judge a woman just by the look of her; I know that there is something different about you. What is it?'

'A new hood?' I suggest.

He nods. 'It becomes you. It becomes you very well.'

I say nothing. It is French-cut. If the Howard girl has returned to court he will be accustomed to the very height and folly of fashion. In any case, now I no longer wear the crown, I can wear what I please. It's funny, if I was of a mind to laugh, that he should prefer me dressed to my own taste, than when I tried to please his. But what he likes in a woman he would not like in a wife. Katherine Howard may discover this.

'I have some news.' He looks around at my small court of companions, his gentlemen standing about. 'Leave us.'

They go out as slowly as they dare. They are all longing to know what will

happen next. I am certain that it will not be an invitation to me to return to him. I am certain that it will not be; and yet I am breathless to know.

‘Some news that may distress you,’ he says to prepare me. At once I think that my mother has died, far away, and without a chance for me to explain how I failed her.

‘No need to cry,’ he says quickly.

I put my hand to my mouth and nip my knuckles. ‘I am not crying,’ I say steadily.

‘That’s good,’ he says. ‘And besides, you must have known it would happen.’

‘I didn’t expect it,’ I say foolishly. ‘I didn’t expect it so soon.’ Surely they should have sent for me if they knew she was gravely ill?

‘Well, it is my duty.’

‘Your duty?’ I want so much to know if my mother spoke of me in her last days that I hardly hear him.

‘I am married,’ he says. ‘Married. I thought I should tell you first, before you hear it from some gossip.’

‘I thought it was about my mother?’

‘Your mother? No. Why would it be about your mother? Why would I trouble myself about your mother? It is about me.’

‘You said bad news.’

‘What could be worse for you than to know that I have married another woman?’

Oh, a thousand things, a thousand things, I think, but I don’t say the thought aloud. The relief that my mother is alive rushes through me and I have to grip the arms of my chair to steady myself and to look as grave and as bereft as I know he will want me to look. ‘Married,’ I say flatly.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘I am sorry for your loss.’

So it is indeed done. He will not return to me. I will never again be Queen of England. I cannot care for little Elizabeth, I cannot love Prince Edward, I cannot please my mother. It is indeed over. I have failed in what I was sent to do and I am sorry for it. But, dear God, I am safe from him, I shall never be in his bed again. It is indeed utterly finished and over. I have to keep my eyes down and my face still so that he does not see my beam of joy at this freedom.

‘To a lady of a most noble house,’ he continues. ‘Of the Norfolk house.’

‘Katherine Howard?’ I ask, before his boasting makes him look more ridiculous than I already think him.

‘Yes,’ he says.

‘I wish you much happiness,’ I say steadily. ‘She is ...’ At that precise and dreadful moment I cannot find the English word. I want to say ‘charming’ but I cannot think of the word. ‘Young,’ I finish lamely.

He shoots me a quick, hard look. ‘That is no objection to me.’

‘None at all,’ I say quickly. ‘I meant to say, charming.’

He thaws. ‘She is charming,’ he agrees, smiling at me. ‘I know you liked her when she was in your rooms.’

‘I did,’ I say. ‘She was always pleasant company. She is a lovely girl.’ I nearly say ‘child’ but catch myself in time.

He nods. ‘She is my rose,’ he says. To my horror his eyes fill with the sentimental tears of an old bully. ‘She is my rose without a thorn,’ he says thickly. ‘I feel that I have found her at last, the woman I have waited for all my life.’

I sit in silence. This is an idea so bizarre that I cannot find any words, English or German, to reply. He has been waiting all his life? Well, he has not been waiting very patiently. During the time of his long vigil he has seen off three, no, four wives, me among them. And Katherine Howard is very far from a rose without a thorn. She is, if anything, a little daisy: delightful, sweet-faced, but ordinary. She must be the most common commoner ever to sit on a better woman’s throne.

‘I hope you will be very happy,’ I say again.

He leans towards me. ‘And I think we will have a child,’ he whispers. ‘Hush. It’s early days yet. But she is so very young, and she comes from fertile stock. She says she thinks it is so.’

I nod. His smug confiding to me, who was bought and put in his bed to endure him labouring hopelessly above me, pushing himself against me, patting my stomach and pulling at my breasts, repels me so much I can hardly congratulate him on achieving with a girl what he failed to do with me.

‘So let us dine,’ he says, releasing me from my embarrassment, and we rise and he takes my hand as if we were still married, and leads me into the great hall of Richmond Palace, which was his father’s favourite new-built palace and is now mine. He seats himself alone, on a throne raised higher than any other, and I am seated not at his side – as I was when I was queen – but down the hall at a little distance, as if to remind the world that everything has changed and that I will never sit at his side as queen again.

I don’t need reminding. I know this.

Katherine, Hampton Court, August 1540

Now let me see, what do I have?

I have eight new gowns ready made and another forty (forty! I can't believe it myself!) in the making and I am very displeased the dressmakers are so late with them, for it is my intention to wear a different gown to dinner every day of my life from now until the day I die, and to change my gown three times a day. That would be three new gowns a day which would be hundreds a year and since I may live till fifty years old that will be ... well, I can't work it out but it is very many indeed. Thousands.

I have a collar of diamonds with matching cuffs of diamonds and gold and a matching set of earrings.

I have sables, like she had for her present, and they are better than hers, thicker and of a glossier pelt. I asked Lady Rochford and she definitely confirmed that they are better than hers. So that is one worry gone from my mind.

I have my own barge (think of it!), my own barge with my own motto engraved on it. Yes, I have a motto too, and it is 'No other will but his', which my uncle devised and my grandmother said was laying it on by the bucket; but the king likes it and says it was just what he was thinking. I didn't quite understand it at first but it means that I have no other will than his – that is, the king's will. Once I understood that, I saw at once why any man would like it, if he were fool enough to believe that anyone would devote their entire body and soul to another.

I have my own rooms here at Hampton Court and these are the queen's rooms! Unbelievable! The very rooms where I used to be a maid in waiting are now my rooms and now there are people waiting on me. The very bed where I used to put the queen to sleep and wake her in the morning is now my big bed. And when the court is jousting, the very same curtains that were her curtains around the royal box are now mine and now they are embroidered with H and K, just as they were once embroidered for her with H and A. Anyway, I have ordered new. It feels like dead men's shoes to me and I don't see why I should

put up with it. Henry says I am an extravagant little kitten and that these curtains have been used in the queen's box since his first wife, and I say that is exactly why I might want a change. So, *voilà!* I will have new curtains too.

I have a court of ladies of my choosing; well, some of them I choose. At any rate, I have a court of ladies of my family. My greatest lady is the king's ward, Lady Margaret Douglas, practically a princess, to wait on me! Not that she does much waiting, I must say. Anybody would think I wasn't queen the way she looks down her nose. Then I have a handful of duchesses, my stepmother and my two sisters are my ladies in waiting, as well as dozens of other Howard women that my uncle has placed about me. I never knew I had so many cousins. The rest are my old room-mates and girlfriends from Norfolk House days who have popped up to sup from my bowl now that my portion is very rich, and who have to mind me now, though they did not mind me then. But I tell them that they can be my friends but they have to remember I am queen and I have to be on my dignity.

I have two lapdogs which I have called, for a private joke, Henry and Francis – by which I mean my two lapdog lovers from the old days, Henry Manox and Francis Dereham. When I named them, Agnes and Joan screamed with laughter, they were with me at Norfolk House and they knew exactly who I was thinking of. Even now, every time I call the two dogs to my side, the three of us laugh out loud to think of those two lads chasing me and now I am queen of England. What those men must think, when they remember they had their hands up my skirt and down my stomacher! It is too scandalous to dare to remember. I should think they laugh and laugh; I do at the very memory.

I have a stable full of my own horses and my own favourite mare who is called Bessy. She is very sweet and steady and the most adorable boy in the stable keeps her exercised for me so that she doesn't get fat or naughty. He is called Johnny and he flushes like a little poppy when he sees me, and when I let him help me down from riding I rest my hands on his shoulders and watch his face burn.

If I were a vain silly girl (as my uncle persists in thinking) which, thank God, I am not, I should have my head turned by the flattery of the court from everyone to Johnny in the yard to Archbishop Gardiner. Everyone tells me that I am the best wife that the king ever had, and the wonder of it all is that this is almost certainly true. Everyone tells me I am the most beautiful queen in the world – and this is probably true too – though no great claim when I cast my eye around Christendom. Everyone tells me that the king has never loved anyone as

much as he loves me; and this is true, for he tells me so himself. Everyone tells me that all the court is in love with me, and this is certainly true, for I walk everywhere in a small hail of love-notes and requests, and promises. The young noblemen that I used to eye when I was just a maid in waiting, and hope for assignations and flirtation, are now my own court; they have to adore me from a distance, which is really the most delicious thing. Thomas Culpepper is sent to me by the king himself in the morning and the evening to exchange greetings, and I know, I just know that he has fallen completely in love with me. I tease him and laugh at him and see his eyes follow me and it is all utterly delightful. Everywhere I go, I am attended by the finest young men in the land, they joust for my amusement, they dance with me, they dress up and entertain me, they hunt with me, they sail with me, they walk with me, they play games and sports for my praise, they do everything but sit up on their hind legs and beg for my favour. And the king, bless him, says to me, 'Run along, pretty girl, go and dance!' and then sits back and watches me as one handsome – oh, so handsome – young man after another dances with me and the king smiles and smiles like a kindly old uncle, and when I come back and sit at his side he whispers: 'Pretty girl, the fairest girl of the court, they all want you; but you are mine.'

It is like my dreams. I have never been happier in my life. I did not know I could be so happy. It is like the childhood I never had, to be surrounded by handsome playmates, my old friends from the days at Lambeth, with all the money in the world to spend, a circle of young men all desperate for my attention, and watched overall by a tender, loving man like a kindly father who never lets anyone say an unkind word to me and plans amusements and gifts for me every day of my life. I must be the happiest girl in England. I tell the king this and he smiles and chucks me under the chin and tells me that I deserve it, for without doubt, I am the best girl in England.

And it is true, I earn this pleasure, I am not idle; I have my duties to do, and I do them as well as I can. All the work of the queen's rooms I leave to others of course, my lord Chamberlain deals with all the requests for help and justice and petitions – I should not be bothered with such things, and anyway, I never know what I am supposed to do with all the paupers and homeless nuns and distressed priests. Lady Rochford takes care of the running of my rooms, and making sure that everything is done as well as Queen Anne had it done; but the servicing of the king falls to me alone. He is old and his appetite in the bedroom is strong but the execution is not easy for him at his great age and because he is so very fat. I have to use all my little tricks to help him along, poor old soul. I let him watch

me slip off my nightgown, I make sure the candles stay lit. I sigh in his ear as if I am swooning with desire, a thing that all men love to believe. I whisper to him that all the young men of the court are nothing compared to him, that I despise their silly, youthful faces and light desires, that I want a man, a real man. When he has taken too much to drink or is too weary to get himself above me I even do a trick that my dearest Francis taught me, and sit astride him. He loves that, he has only had whores do that for him before, it is a forbidden pleasure, that God doesn't allow for some reason. So it thrills him that a pretty wife with her hair let down over her shoulders should rear above him and torment him like a Smithfield harlot. I don't complain of having to do this, actually it is far nicer for me than being crushed beneath him with the smell of his breath and the stench of his rotting leg making me sick as I moan with pretend pleasure.

This is not easy. Being the wife of a king is not all dancing and parties in the rose garden. I work as hard as any dairymaid, but I work at night in secret and nobody must ever know what it costs me. Nobody must ever know that I am so disgusted that I could vomit, nobody must ever know that it almost breaks my heart that the things I learned to do for love are now done to excite a man who would be better off saying his prayers and going to sleep. Nobody knows how hard I earn my sables and my pearls. And I can never tell them. It can never be said. It is a deep, deep secret.

When he has finished at last, and is snoring, that is oddly the only time of the day that I feel dissatisfied with my great good fortune. Often then I get up, I feel restless and stirred up. Am I going to spend every night of my womanhood seducing a man old enough to be my father? Almost my grandfather? I am just fifteen years old; am I never going to taste a sweet kiss again from a clean mouth, or feel the smoothness of young skin, or have a hard, muscled chest bearing down on me? Shall I spend the rest of my life jiggling up and down on something helpless and limp and then crying out with pretended delight when it slowly, flaccidly stirs beneath me? When he farts in his sleep, a great royal trumpet which adds to the miasma under the bedclothes, I get up in a bad temper and go out to my private chamber.

And always, like my good angel, Lady Rochford is there, waiting for me. She understands how it is, she knows what I have to do and how, some nights, it leaves me feeling irritable and sore. She has a cup of hot mead and some little cakes ready for me, she seats me in a chair by the fire and puts the warm cup in my hand, and brushes my hair slowly and sweetly until the anger passes and I am calm again.

‘When you get a son you will be free of him,’ she whispers so quietly that I can hardly hear her. ‘When you are sure you have conceived a child he will leave you alone. No more false alarms. When you tell him you are with child you must be certain, and then you will have nearly a year at peace. And after you have had a second son your place will be assured and you can take your own pleasures and he will not know and not mind.’

‘I shall never have pleasure again,’ I say miserably. ‘My life is over before it has even begun. I am only fifteen and I am tired of everything.’

Her hands caress my shoulders. ‘Oh, you will,’ she says certainly. ‘Life is long, and if a woman survives she can take her pleasures one way or another.’

Jane Boleyn, Windsor Palace, October 1540

Supervising this privy chamber is no sinecure, I must say. Under my command I have girls who in any decent town would be whipped at the cart tail for whores. Katherine's chosen friends from Lambeth are without doubt the rowdiest sluts that ever came from a noble household where the lady of the house could not be troubled to mind them. Katherine has insisted that her friends from the old days should be invited to her privy chamber and I can hardly refuse, especially since the senior ladies of her privy chamber are no company for her, but are mostly old enough to be her mother and have been foisted on her by her uncle. She needs some friends of her own age but these chosen companions are not biddable girls from good families, they are women, lax women, the very companions who let her run wild and set her the worst example, and they will go on with their loose ways too if they can, even in the royal rooms. It is utterly unlike Queen Anne's rule, and soon everyone will notice. I cannot imagine what my lord duke is thinking, and the king will give his child-bride anything she asks. But a queen's chamber should be the finest, most elegant place in the land, not a tiltyard for rough girls with the language of the stables.

Her liking for Katherine Tylney and Margaret Morton I can understand, though they are equally loud-mouthed and bawdy; and Agnes Restwold was a confidante from the old days. But I don't believe she wanted Joan Bulmer to come into her service. She never mentioned her name once; but the woman wrote a secret letter and seems to have left her husband and wheedled her way in, and Katherine is either too kind-hearted, or too fearful of what secrets the woman might spill, to refuse her.

And what does that mean? That she allows a woman to come into her chamber, the privy chamber, the best place in the land, because she can tell secrets of Katherine's childhood? What can have taken place in the girl's childhood that she cannot risk it being spoken? And can we trust Joan Bulmer to keep it quiet? At court? At a court such as this? When all the gossip is always centred on the queen herself? How am I to rule over this chamber when one of the girls at least has a secret so powerful hanging over the queen's head that she

can claim admittance?

These are her friends and companions and there is really no way to improve them; but I had hoped that the senior ladies who have been appointed to wait on her might set a more dignified tone, and make a little headway against the childish chaos that Katherine enjoys. The most noble lady of the chamber is Lady Margaret Douglas, only twenty-one years old, the king's own niece; but she is barely ever here. She simply vanishes from the queen's rooms for hours at a time, and her great friend Mary, Duchess of Richmond, that was married to Henry Fitzroy, goes with her. God knows where. They are said to be great poets and great readers, which is no doubt to their credit. But who are they reading and rhyming with all the day? And why can I never find them? The rest of the queen's ladies are all Howard women: the queen's older sister, her aunt, her step-grandmother's daughter-in-law, a network of Howard kin including Catherine Carey, who has reappeared promptly enough to benefit from the rise of a Howard girl. These are women who care only for their own ambitions, and do nothing to help me manage the queen's rooms so that they at least appear as they should be.

But things are not as they should be. I am certain that Lady Margaret is meeting someone; she is a fool and a passionate fool. She has crossed her royal uncle once already, and been punished for a flirtation which could have been far worse. She was married to Thomas Howard, one of our kin. He died in the Tower for his attempt to marry a Tudor, and she was sent to live at the nunnery of Syon until she begged the king's pardon and said she would only marry at his bidding. But now she is wandering out of the queen's rooms in the middle of the morning and doesn't come back until she arrives with a rush to go into dinner with us, straightening her hood and giggling. I tell Katherine that she should watch her ladies and make sure that their conduct befits a royal court, but she is hunting or dancing or flirting herself with the young men of the court and her behaviour is as wild as anyone's, worse than most.

Perhaps I am over-anxious. Perhaps the king would indeed forgive her anything; this summer he has been like a young man besottedly in love. He has taken her all round his favourite houses on the summer progress and he has managed to hunt with her every day, up at dawn, dining in tented pavilions in the woods at midday, boating on the river in the afternoon, watching her shooting at the butts, or at a tennis tournament, or betting on the young men tilting at the quintain all the afternoon and then a late dinner and a long night of entertainment. Then he takes her to bed and the poor old man is up at dawn

again the next day. He has smiled on her as she has twirled and laughed and been embraced by the most handsome young men at his court. He has staggered after her, always beaming, always delighted with her, limping for pain and stuffing himself at dinner. But tonight he is not coming to dinner and they say he has a slight fever. I should think he is near to collapse from exhaustion. He has lived these last months like a young bridegroom when he is the age of a grandfather. Katherine gives him not a second thought and goes into dinner alone, arm-in-arm with Agnes, Lady Margaret arriving in the nick of time to slip in behind her; but I see my lord duke is absent. He is waiting on the king. He, at least, will be anxious for his health. There is no benefit to us if the king is sick and Katherine is not with child.

Katherine, Hampton Court, October 1540

The king won't see me, and it's as if I have offended him, which is tremendously unfair because I have been an absolutely charming wife for months and months without stopping, two months at least, and never a cross word from me though God knows I have reason. I know well enough that he has to come to my room at night and I endure it without saying a word, I even smile as if I desire him; but does he really have to stay? All night? And does he really have to smell so very badly? It is not just the stink of his leg but he trumps like a herald at a joust and though it makes me want to giggle, it's disgusting really. In the morning I throw my windows open to be rid of the stink of him, but it lingers in the bed linen and in the hangings. I can hardly bear it. Some days I think, I really think, I cannot bear another day of it.

But I have never complained of him and he can have no complaint of me. So why will he not see me? They say that he has a fever and he doesn't want me to see him when he is unmanned. But I can't help but be afraid that he is tired of me. And if he is tired of me, no doubt he will say that I was married to someone else and my wedding will be put aside. I feel very discouraged by this and though Agnes and Margaret say that he could never tire of me, that he adores me and anyone can see that, they weren't here when he put Queen Anne aside and that was done so easily and so smoothly that we hardly knew it was happening. Certainly, she didn't know it was happening. They don't realise how easy it is for the king to be rid of one his queens.

I send a message to his rooms every morning and they always send back and say that he is on the mend; and then I have a great fear that he is dying, which would not be surprising for he is so terribly old. And if he dies what will happen to me? And do I keep the jewels and the gowns? And am I still queen even if he is dead? So I wait until the end of dinner and I beckon the king's greatest favourite, Thomas Culpepper, to step up to the top table, and he comes to my side at once, so deferential and graceful, and I say very seriously, 'You may sit down, Master Culpepper,' and he takes a stool beside me and I say, 'Please tell me truly, how is the king?'

He looks at me with his honest blue eyes, he is desperately handsome it has to be said, and he says: 'The king has a fever, Your Grace, but it is from weariness, it is not the wound on his leg. You need not fear for him. He would be grieved if he caused you a moment's worry. He is overheated and exhausted, nothing more.'

This is so kind that I feel myself become quite sentimental. 'I have worried,' I say a little tearfully. 'I have been very anxious for him.'

'You need not be,' he says gently. 'I would tell you if there was anything wrong. He will be up and about within days. I promise it.'

'My position ...'

'Your position is impossible,' he exclaims suddenly. 'You should be courting your first sweetheart, not trying to rule a court and shape your life to please a man as old as your grandfather.'

This is so unexpected from Thomas Culpepper, the perfect courtier, that I give a little gasp of surprise and I make the mistake of telling the truth, as he has done.

'Actually, I can only blame myself. I wanted to be queen.'

'Before you knew what it meant.'

'Yes.'

There is a silence. I am suddenly aware that we are before the whole of the court and that everyone is looking at us. 'I may not talk to you like this,' I say awkwardly. 'Everyone watches me.'

'I would serve you in any way I can,' he says quietly. 'And the greatest service I can do for you now is to go right away from you. I don't want to make grist for the gossips.'

'I shall walk in the gardens at ten tomorrow,' I say. 'You could come to me then. In my privy gardens.'

'Ten,' he agrees and bows very low and goes back to his table, and I turn and talk to Lady Margaret as if nothing in particular had happened.

She gives me a little smile. 'He is a handsome young man,' she says. 'But nothing compared to your brother Charles.'

I look down the hall to where Charles is dining with his friends. I have never thought of him as handsome, but then I hardly ever saw him until I came to court. He was sent away for his upbringing when he was a boy, and then I was sent to my step-grandmother. 'What an odd thing to say,' I remark. 'You surely cannot like Charles.'

'Good gracious, no!' she says and she flushes up quite scarlet. 'Everyone

knows I'm not allowed even to think about a man. Ask anyone! The king would not allow it.'

'You do like him!' I say delightedly. 'Lady Margaret, you sly thing! You are in love with my brother.'

She hides her face in her hands and she peeps at me through the fingers. 'Don't say a word,' she begs me.

'Oh, all right. But has he promised marriage?'

She nods shyly. 'We are so much in love. I hope you will speak for us to the king? He is so strict! But we are so very much in love.'

I smile down the hall at my brother. 'Well, I think that's lovely,' I say kindly. I so like being gracious to the king's niece. 'And what a wonderful wedding we can plan.'

Anne, Richmond Palace, October 1540

I have had a letter from my brother, an utterly mad letter, it distresses me as much as it angers me. He complains of the king in the wildest of terms, and commands me either to return home, insist on my marriage, or never more be a sister to him. He offers me no advice as to how I am to insist on my marriage, clearly he does not even know that the king has re-married already, nor any help if I want to return home. I imagine, as he knew well enough when he gave me these impossible choices, that I am left with the single option of never more being a sister to him.

Little loss to me! When he left me here without a word, gave me an ambassador who was almost unpaid, failed to send adequate proof of the renunciation of the Lorraine betrothal, he was no good brother to me then. He is no good brother now. Least of all is he my good brother when the Duke of Norfolk and half the Privy Council come thundering down to Richmond in a rage, since they have, of course, picked up his letter almost from the moment it left his hand, copied it, translated it, and read it before it ever came to me, and now they want to know if I think my brother will incite the Holy Roman Emperor to war against England and Henry on my behalf?

As calmly as I can, I point out to them that the Holy Roman Emperor is not likely to make war at my brother's behest and that (emphatically) I do not ask my brother to make war at my behest.

'I warn the king that I cannot rule my brother,' I say, speaking slowly and directly to the Duke of Norfolk. 'William will do as he wishes. He does not take my advice.'

The duke looks doubtful. I turn to Richard Beard and speak in German. 'Please point out to His Grace that if I could make my brother obey me then I would have told him to send the document which showed that the betrothal to Lorraine was renounced,' I say.

He turns and translates and the duke's dark eyes gleam at my mistake. 'Except it was not renounced,' he reminds me.

I nod. 'I forgot.'

He shows me a wintry smile. 'I know you cannot command your brother,' he concedes.

I turn to Richard Beard again. 'Please point out to His Grace that this letter from my brother actually proves that I have honoured the king, since it makes clear that he has so little faith in me that he threatens me with being cut off from my family forever.' Richard Beard translates and the duke's cold smile widens slightly.

'What he thinks and what he does, how he blusters and threatens me, is clearly not of my choosing,' I conclude.

Thank God, they may be the king's council, but they do not share his unreasonable terrors, they do not see plots where there are none – except when it suits them, of course. Only when it suits them to be rid of an enemy like Thomas Cromwell, or a rival like poor Lord Lisle, do they exaggerate the king's fears and assure him that they are real. The king is in perpetual anxiety about one conspiracy or another and the council play on his fears like a master might tune a lute. Provided that I am neither threat nor rival to any one of them they will not alert any royal fears about me. So the frail peace between the king and I is not broken by my brother's intemperate speech. I wonder did he even stop for a moment to think if his letter would put me in such danger? Worse still, I wonder, did he intend to put me in such danger?

'Do you think your brother will make trouble for us?' Norfolk asks me simply.

I answer him in German. 'Not for my sake, sir. He would do nothing for me. He has never done anything for my benefit, except to let me go. He might use me as the excuse but I am not his cause. And even if he meant to make trouble, I doubt very much that the Holy Roman Emperor would go to war with the King of England over a fourth wife, when the king has already helped himself to his fifth.'

Richard Beard translates this and both he and Norfolk have to hide their amusement. 'I have your word then,' the duke says shortly.

I nod. 'You do. And I never break my word. I shall make no trouble for the king. I wish to live here alone, in peace.'

He looks around, he is something of a connoisseur of beautiful buildings. He has built his own great house and he has torn down some fine abbeys. 'You are happy here?'

'I am,' I say, and I am telling the truth. 'I am happy here.'

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, October 1540

I should have warned Lady Margaret Douglas not to meddle with a man who was certain to land her in trouble, but I was so absorbed with trying to keep Katherine Howard steady in her first days of marriage that I did not watch the ladies as I should have done. Besides, Lady Margaret is the king's own niece, daughter of his sister. Who would have thought that his hard, suspicious gaze would fall on her? In the first days of his marriage? When he told us all that for the first time in his long life he had found happiness? Why, in those honeymoon weeks, should I have thought that he would plot his own niece's arrest?

Because this is Henry – that is why. Because I have been in his court for long enough to know that things he may overlook when he is chasing a woman will be reckoned up the moment that he has her. Nothing distracts the king from his suspicious terrors for very long. As soon as he was up and out of bed from his fever he was looking around the court to see who had misbehaved in his absence. I was so desperate that he should not suspect the queen and her silly friends that I forgot to look to her ladies. In any case, Lady Margaret Douglas would never have listened to me, given her complete inability to see any sense at all. All the Tudors follow their hearts and make up their reasons after, and Lady Margaret is just like her mother before her, Queen Margaret of Scotland who fell in love with a man with nothing to recommend him, and now her daughter has done the same. Only a few years ago Lady Margaret married Thomas Howard, my kinsman, in secret and had the pleasure of enjoying him for no more than days before the king discovered the couple and sent the young man to the Tower for his impertinence. He was dead within months and she was in disgrace. Of course! Of course! Where is the surprise in this? You cannot have the king's niece marrying where she pleases and her fancy lighting on a Howard! You cannot have one of the greatest families in England, close to the throne on their own account, coming closer yet because a girl likes a dark glance and a merry smile and a certain devil-may-care approach to life. The king swore he would teach her the respect her position deserves and for months she was a widow with a broken heart.

Well, it's mended now.

I knew that something was going on, and within weeks everyone knew of it too. When the king took to his bed with his fever the young couple gave up all attempt to conceal their love affair. Anyone with eyes could see that the king's niece was wholly in love with the queen's brother Charles.

Another Howard, of course, and a favourite; a member of the Privy Council and high in the family command. What did he think he would gain from such a betrothal? The Howards are ambitious, but even he must have considered that he might be over-reaching himself. Good God, did he think he might get Scotland by this girl? Did he fancy himself as King Consort? And she? Why would she not see her own danger? And what is it about these Howards that is a magnet for the Tudors? You would think it was some kind of alchemy, like jam for wasps.

But I should have warned her that she would be discovered. It was a certainty. We live in a house of glass, as if the Venetian glass blowers of Murano had devised a special torment for us. In this court there is not a secret that can be kept, there is not a curtain that can conceal, there is not a wall that is not transparent. Everything is always discovered. Sooner or later, everyone knows everything. And as soon as it is known, everything splinters into a million jagged shards.

I went to my lord duke and found his barge ready to sail and he himself on the pier. 'May I see you?'

'Trouble?' he asked. 'I have to catch the tide.'

'It is Lady Margaret Douglas,' I say shortly. 'She is in love with Charles Howard.'

'I know,' he says. 'Are they married?'

Even I am shocked. 'He is a dead man if they are.'

The thought of the queen's brother, his own nephew, dead for treason does not disturb him. But then, it is a familiar thought. 'Unless the king, in honeymoon mood, is minded to forgive young love.'

'He might,' I concede.

'If Katherine were to put it to him?'

'He has refused her nothing so far; but all she has asked for has been jewels and ribbons,' I say. 'Should she ask him if another member of her family can marry another of his? Won't he suspect?'

'Suspect what?' he asks blandly.

I look around us. The boatmen are too far away to hear, the servants are all in Norfolk livery. Even so, I step closer. 'The king will suspect that we are

planning to take the throne,' I say. 'Look what happened to Henry Fitzroy when he was married to our Mary. Look what happened to our Thomas Howard when he was married to Lady Margaret. When these Tudor – Howard marriages take place a death follows thereafter.'

'But if he was in generous mood ...' the duke starts.

'You have planned this,' I suddenly see.

He smiles. 'Surely not; but I can see an advantage if it happens to come about. We hold so much of northern England, it would be such a pleasure to see a Howard on the throne of Scotland. A Howard heir to the Scots throne, a Howard grandson on the English throne. Worth a little risk, don't you think? Worth a little gamble to see if our girl can pull it off?'

I am silenced by his ambition. 'The king will see this,' is reluctantly forced out of me by my own fear. 'He is in love but he is not blinded with love. And he is a most dangerous enemy, sir. You know this. He is at his worst when he thinks his inheritance is threatened.'

The duke nods. 'Fortunately we have other Howard children if dear Charles is snatched from us; and Lady Margaret is a fool who can be locked up at Syon Abbey for another year or two. At the very worst we do not lose much.'

'Is Katherine to try to save them?' I ask.

'Yes. It's worth a try,' he says carelessly. 'It's a great gamble for a great prize,' and he steps up the gangplank into the waiting barge. I watch them cast off the ropes and I see the barge swing into the current. The rowers' oars are held upwards, like lances, and at the command they lower them in one smooth sweep into the green water. The Norfolk standard at the stern ripples out and the barge leaps forwards as the oars bite. In a moment the duke has gone.

Katherine, Hampton Court, October 1540

Like a fool I am in the privy garden at half past nine. I cannot trust anybody with the secret that I am meeting Thomas Culpepper, so I send my ladies to my rooms ahead of me as soon as I hear the clock strike ten. Within a minute of them leaving, the door in the wall opens and he comes in.

He walks like a young man. He does not drag his fat leg like the king. He walks on the balls of his feet like a dancer, as if he were ready to run or to fight at a moment's notice. I find I am smiling in silence, and he comes to my side and looks at me, saying nothing. We look at each other for a long time and for once I am not thinking what I should say, nor even how I look. I just drink in the sight of him.

'Thomas,' I breathe, and his name is so sweet that my voice comes out all dreamy.

'Your Grace,' he says back.

Gently he takes my hand and raises it to his lips. At the last moment, as he touches his lips to my fingers, he looks at me with those piercing blue eyes and I can feel my knees go quite weak, just at this slight touch.

'Are you well?' he asks.

'Yes,' I say. 'Oh, yes. Are you?'

He nods. We stand, as if the music has just stopped in a dance, facing each other, looking into each other's eyes.

'The king?' I ask. For a moment I had forgotten all about him.

'Better this morning,' he says. 'The physician came and purged him last night and he laboured painfully for some hours but now he has passed a great motion and is better for it.'

I turn my head away at the very thought of it and Thomas gives a little laugh. 'I am sorry. I am too accustomed; all of us in his rooms are accustomed to talk in much detail about his health. I did not mean ...'

'No,' I say. 'I have to know all about it too.'

'I suppose it is natural, once one reaches such a great age ...'

'My grandmama is his age and she does not talk about purges all the time,

nor does she smell of the privy.'

He laughs again. 'Well, I swear that if I ever get to forty I shall drown myself. I couldn't bear to grow old and flatulent.'

I laugh now, at the thought of this radiant young man growing old and flatulent. 'You will be as fat as the king,' I predict. 'And surrounded by adoring great-grandchildren and an old wife.'

'Oh I don't expect to marry.'

'Don't you?'

'I can't imagine it.'

'Why ever not?'

He looks at me intently. 'I am so much in love. I am too much in love. I can only think of one woman, and she is not free.'

I am breathless. 'Can you? Does she know?'

He smiles at me. 'I don't know. D'you think I should tell her?'

The door behind me opens and Lady Rochford is there. 'Your Grace?'

'Here is Thomas Culpepper come to tell me that the king has been purged and is better for it,' I say brightly, my voice high and thin. I turn back to him, I dare not meet his eyes. 'Will you ask His Grace if I may visit him today?'

He bows without looking at me. 'I will ask him at once,' he says, and goes quickly from the garden.

'What d'you know of Lady Margaret and your brother Charles?' Lady Rochford demands.

'Nothing,' I lie at once.

'Has she asked you to speak to the king for her?'

'Yes.'

'Are you going to?'

'Yes. I am hoping that he will be pleased.'

She shakes her head. 'Take care how you do it,' she warns me. 'It may be that he is not pleased.'

'Why should he not be pleased?' I ask. 'I think it is lovely. She is so pretty and a Tudor! It is such a high match for my brother!'

Lady Rochford looks at me. 'The king may think it a high match for your brother too,' she says. 'He may think it too high. You may need to use all your charm and all your skills to persuade him to allow them to marry. If you want to save your brother and advance your family, you had better manage him as well as you have ever done. You had better choose your time and be very persuasive. You must do this, your uncle would like it.'

I make a little face at her. 'I can do it,' I say confidently. 'I shall tell the king that it is my wish that they be happy and he will grant my wish. *Voilà!*'

'*Voilà* perhaps,' she says sourly, the old cat.



But then it all goes wrong. I think I shall tell the king when I see him that night, and Lady Margaret agrees to follow me in and beg for his forgiveness. Actually, we are both quite excited, certain that it will go well. I am going to plead and she is going to cry. But before dinner Thomas Culpepper comes to my rooms with a message to say that the king will see me on the morrow. I agree and go to my dinner – why should I care? The king has missed dinner so many times I don't think that it matters. Certainly he's not going to fade away in a hurry. But poor me! It does matter, for while I am at dinner, and dancing actually, someone pours poison in the king's ear about his niece and even about me and poor management of my rooms, and *voilà!*

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, October 1540

The king marches into her private rooms and jerks his head at the three of us ladies in waiting, and says, 'Outside', as if we were dogs for his ordering. We scuttle from the rooms like whipped hounds and linger at the half-closed door and hear the terrifying rumble of royal rage. The king, out of bed for only half a day, knows everything and is most displeased.

Perhaps Lady Margaret thought that Katherine would intercede for them before they were caught and that she could be persuasive enough. Perhaps the lovers thought that the king, rising out of his sickbed, returning to wallow in his own uxorious joy, would be forgiving to other lovers, to other Howard lovers. They are sadly mistaken. The king speaks his mind briefly and to the point and then strides out of her room. Katherine comes running after, white as her collar, flooded with tears, and says that the king is scenting plots and conspiracies and lush unchastity at the court of his rose, and he is blaming her.

'What shall I do?' she demands. 'He asks if I cannot keep control of my ladies. How should I know how to keep control of my ladies? How should I command his own niece? She is the daughter of the Queen of Scotland, she is royal and six years older than me. Why would she ever listen to me? What can I do? He says he is disappointed in me and that he will punish her, he says the two of them will face his extreme displeasure. What can I do?'

'Nothing,' I tell her. 'You can do nothing to save her.' What can be easier to understand than this?

'I cannot let my own brother be sent to the Tower!'

She says this, unthinking, to the woman, me, who saw her own husband go to the Tower. 'I've seen worse happen,' I say dryly.

'Oh then, yes.' She flaps her hand dismissively and twenty diamonds catch the light and dazzle away the ghosts of them, Anne and George, going to the Tower without a word to save them. 'Never mind then! What about now? This is Lady Margaret, my friend, and Charles, my own brother. They will expect me to save them.'

'If you so much as admit that you knew they were meddling with each other

then it could be you in the Tower as well as them,' I warn her. 'He is against it now, you had better pretend you knew nothing of it. Why can you not understand this? Why should Lady Margaret be such a fool? The king's ward cannot bestow her favours where she wishes. And the king's wife cannot put her own brother into bed with a royal. We all know this. It was a gamble, a great and reckless gamble, and it has failed. Lady Margaret must be mad to risk her life for this. You would be mad to condone it.'

'But if she is in love?'

'Is love worth dying for?'

That stops her romantic little ballad. She gives a little shudder. 'No, never. Of course not. But the king cannot behead her for falling in love with a man of good family and marrying him?'

'No,' I say harshly. 'He will behead her lover; so you had better say farewell to your brother and make sure that you never speak with him again unless you want the king to think you are in a plot to supplant him with Howards.'

She blanches white at that. 'He would never send me to the Tower,' she whispers. 'You always think of that. You always harp on about that. It happened only once, to one wife. It will never happen again. He adores me.'

'He loves his niece and yet he will send her to Syon to imprisonment and heartbreak, and her lover to the Tower and death,' I predict. 'The king may love you, but he hates to think of others doing their own will. The king may love you, but he wants you like a little queen of ice. If there is any unchastity in your rooms he will blame you and punish you for it. The king may love you, but he would see you dead at his feet rather than set up a rival royal family. Think of the Pole family – in the Tower for life. Think of Margaret Pole spending year after year in there, innocent as a saint and as old as your grandmother, yet imprisoned for life. Would you see the Howards go that way too?'

'This is a nightmare for me!' she bursts out; poor little girl, white-faced in her diamonds. 'This is my own brother. I am queen. I must be able to save him. All he has done is fall in love. My uncle shall hear of this. He will save Charles.'

'Your uncle is away from court,' I say dryly. 'Surprisingly he has gone to Kenninghall. You can't reach him in time.'

'What does he know of this?'

'Nothing,' I say. 'You will find that he knows nothing about it. You will find that if the king asks him he will be shocked to his soul at the presumption. You will have to give up your brother. You cannot save him. If the king has turned his face away, then Charles is a dead man. I know this. Of all the people in the

world: I know this.'

'You didn't let your own husband go to his death without a word. You didn't let the king order his death without praying for mercy for him!' she swears, knowing nothing, knowing nothing at all.

I do not say: 'Oh, but I did. I was so afraid then. I was so afraid for myself.' I do not say: 'Oh, but I did; and for darker reasons than you will ever be able to imagine.' Instead, I say: 'Never mind what I did or didn't do. You will have to say goodbye to your brother and hope that something distracts the king from the sentence of death, and if not, you will have to remember him only in your prayers.'

'What good is that?' she demands heretically. 'If God is always on the king's side? If the king's will is God's will? What good is praying to God when the king is God in England?'

'Hush,' I say instantly. 'You will have to learn to live without your brother, as I had to learn to live without my sister-in-law, without my husband. The king turned his face away and George went into the Tower and came out headless. And I had to learn to bear it. As you will have to do.'

'It isn't right,' she says mutinously.

I take her wrists and I hold her as I would a maid that I was about to beat for stupidity. 'Learn this,' I say harshly. 'It is the will of the king. And there is no man strong enough to stand against him. Not even your uncle, not the archbishop, not the Pope himself. The king will do what he wants to do. Your job is to make sure that he never turns his face from you, from us.'

Anne, Richmond Palace, November 1540

So: I am to go to court for the Christmas feast. He holds true to his word that I shall be second only to little Kitty Howard (I must learn to say Queen Katherine before I get there). I have a letter from the Lord Chamberlain today, bidding my attendance and telling me I will be housed in the queen's rooms. No doubt I shall have one of the best bedrooms and the Princess Mary another, and I shall learn to see Kitty Howard (Queen Katherine) go to bed in my bed, and change her clothes in my rooms and receive my visitors in my chair.

If I am to do this at all, it has to be done gracefully. And I have no choice but to do this.

I can be sure that Kitty Howard will play her part. She will be rehearsing now, if I know her. She likes to practise her moves and her smiles. I imagine she will have a new, gracious smile prepared for my reception, and I must be gracious too.

I must buy gifts. The king loves gifts and of course little Kitty Howard (Queen Katherine) is an utter magpie. If I take some very fine things I will be able to attend with some confidence. I so need confidence. I have been a duchess and the Queen of England and now I am some sort of princess. I must learn courage to be myself, Anne of Cleves, and enter the court, and my new position in it, with grace. It will be Christmas. My first Christmas in England. I could laugh to think that I had thought that I would be merry, with a merry court, at the Christmas feast. I had thought I would be queen of that court; but, as it turns out, I shall only be a favoured guest. So it goes. So it goes in a woman's life. I am quite without fault and yet I am not in the position that I was called to. I am quite without fault and yet I am thrown down. What I must see if I can do, is to be a good Princess of England where once I planned to be a good queen.

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, Christmas 1540

The king has turned against his wife's family, against his own niece, and everyone stays quiet, keeps their heads low and hopes that his disfavour will not turn on them. Charles Howard, warned in advance by someone braver than the rest of us, has skipped downriver in a little fishing boat, begged a place on a coaster, and sailed for France. He will join the growing number of exiles who cannot live in Henry's England: Papists, reformers, men and women caught in the new treason laws, and men and women whose crime is nothing more than to be kin to someone the king has named as a traitor. The greater their numbers grow, the more suspicious and fearful is this king. His own father took England with a handful of disaffected men, in exile from King Richard. He knows, none better, that tyranny is hated, and that enough exiles, enough pretenders, can overthrow the throne.

So Charles is safe away in France, waiting for the king to die. In some ways his life is better than ours. He is exiled from his home and his family but he is free; we are here, but scarcely dare to breathe. Lady Margaret is back in her old prison of Syon Abbey. She cried very bitterly when she knew the king was imprisoning her again. She says she has three rooms to walk in, and a corner view of the river. She says she is only twenty-one and the days are dreary for her. She says the days pass very slowly and the nights go on forever. She says all she wants is to be allowed to love a good man, to marry him, and to be happy.

We all know that the king will never allow this. Happiness has become the scarcest commodity of all in the kingdom this winter. No-one shall be happy but him.

Katherine, Hampton Court, Christmas 1540

Now, let me see, what do I have now?

I have the Seymour inheritance, yes, all of it. All the castles, lordships and manors that were given to Jane Seymour are now given to me. Imagine how furious the Seymours are? One moment the greatest landholders in England; next, up jump I; and all of Jane's lands are mine.

I have most of the lands that belonged to Thomas Cromwell, now executed for treason, which is good riddance to bad rubbish, my uncle tells me. My uncle tells me that although he was a commoner, Thomas Cromwell kept his lands in very good heart and I can expect a handsome revenue from them. Me! A handsome revenue! As though I ever knew what a plough was for! I even have tenants, think of that!

I am to have the lands from Lord Hungerford who was condemned to death for witchcraft and buggery, and the lands of Lord Hugh, the Abbot of Reading. As usual with the king, it is not very pleasant to have lands that were owned by people now dead, and some of them dead to oblige me. But as Lady Rochford pointed out, and I do remember (though some people say that nothing stays in my head for longer than a moment), everything comes from dead people and there is no point in being too squeamish.

This is no doubt true, and yet I cannot help but think that she, for one, seems to inherit the goods of dead men with good cheer. She relishes her Boleyn inheritance of a title and wishes she had the house to go with it. I am sure if I were a widow I would be much more sad and reflective than she is; but she hardly mentions her husband at all. Not once. If ever I say to her, 'Is it not odd being in my rooms that were your sister-in-law's?' she looks at me almost sternly and says, 'Hush'. Now, is it likely that I would chatter all over the court that I am the second Howard girl to wear the crown? Of course not. But I would have thought that a widow would welcome a little thoughtful reflection on those she had lost. Especially if it is done sensitively, as I do it.

Not me, obviously, should I ever be widowed, for my case would be very different. No-one could expect me to be very sad. Since my husband is so very

much older than me, it is only natural for him to die soon and then I shall be free to make my own life. Obviously, I should never be so impolite as to remark upon this, for one of the things I quickly learned as a courtier is that the king never needs a true portrait of himself, however he might demand true likenesses of others, like poor Queen Anne. He never wants to be reminded that he is old and he never wants to be told that he looks tired or that his limp is worse or his wound is stinking. Part of my task as his wife is to pretend that he is the same age as me, and is only not up and dancing with the rest of us because he prefers to sit and watch me. I never ever do anything, not by word or deed, to suggest that I am aware that he is old enough to be my father, and an injured, fat, weak, costive old father at that.

And I cannot help it if his daughter is older than me, and stricter than me, and better educated than me. She has arrived at court for the Christmas feast like an old ghost reminding everyone of her mother. I don't even complain of her; because I don't have to. Her very presence beside me, so serious, so much more grown-up, more like a mother to me than I could ever be to her, is enough to irritate the king. And he takes his irritation out on her, I am glad to say. It's enough to make a cat laugh. I have to do nothing. She makes him feel old and I make him feel young. So he dislikes her, and he adores me.

And though it is a certainty that he will die soon, I should be very sad for him if it were to be at once, say this year. But when it does happen, say next year, I would be Queen Regent and care for my stepson, Prince Edward. It would be very merry, I think. To be Queen Regent would be the best thing in all the world. For I would have all the pleasures and wealth of a queen but no old king to worry about. Indeed, everyone would have to worry about me and the greatest joke would be that in fifty years from now I could insist that they all behave as if I was not old and not tired but, on the contrary, as beautiful every morning as I am today.

The thought of him dying is something I never mention, not even in my prayers, for, amazingly, it is treason even to suggest that the king might die. Isn't he ridiculous? Fancy making it illegal to say something that is so obviously true! In any case, I take no chances with treason, and so never wish for his death and never even pray for it. But sometimes, when I am dancing with Thomas Culpepper and his hand is on my waist and I can feel his warm breath on my neck, I think that if the king were to die here and now I might have a young husband, I might know the touch of a young man again, the scent of fresh sweat in bed, the feel of a hard young body, the thrill of a kiss from a clean mouth.

Sometimes, when Thomas catches me in a move in the dance and I feel him grip my waist, I ache for the touch of him. Whenever I think like this I whisper to him that I am tired, and I turn away from him and ignore the slight pressure of his fingers, and I go and sit down beside the king. Lady Margaret is a prisoner in Syon Abbey for loving a man against the king's will. There is no point in thinking like this. It is not very merry to think like this.

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, Christmas 1540

This is to be Katherine's Christmas, the happiest Christmas she has ever had. Her household is reformed around her, she is served by the greatest ladies of the land and befriended by the worst girls that ever romped in a dormitory. She has her lands in her own right, she has retainers by the thousand, she has jewels that would be the envy of the Moors, now she has to have the happiest Christmas of her life and we are ordered to make it so.

The king is rested and revived, excited at the thought of a dazzling celebration to show the world that he is the ardent husband of a young and pretty wife. The brief scandal of his niece's love affair is forgotten, she is locked up in Syon Abbey and her lover is run away. Kitty Howard has blamed everybody but herself for the laxity of her rooms and all is forgiven. Nothing shall spoil this first Christmas for the newly-weds.

But straight away there is a little pout on the pretty face. Princess Mary comes to court as she is bidden, and bends the knee to her new stepmother, but does not come up smiling. Princess Mary is clearly not impressed by a girl nine years her junior, and cannot seem to form her mouth to say the word 'Mother' to a silly, vain child, when that beloved title once belonged to the finest queen in Europe. Princess Mary, who has always been a girl of high scholarly ability and seriousness, a child of the church, a child of Spain, cannot stomach a girl younger than her, perched on her mother's throne like a tiny cuckoo chick and jumping down to dance the moment anyone asks her. Princess Mary first met Kitty Howard last spring when she was the vainest, silliest girl in service to the queen. How to believe that this little imp is now the queen herself? If it were the Feast of Misrule, Princess Mary would laugh. But this stunted version of royalty is not funny when it is played out every day. She does not laugh.

The court is grown merry, as some say, or wild, as others say. I say that if you put a young fool in command of her own household and bid her to please herself you will see an explosion of flirtation, adultery, posturing, misbehaviour, drunkenness, dishonesty and downright lechery. And so we see. Princess Mary walks among us like a woman of judgement through a market of fools. She sees

nothing that she can like.

The little pout tells the king that his child-bride is discontented and so he takes his daughter to one side and tells her to mind her manners if she wants a place at court at all. Princess Mary, who has endured worse than this, bites her tongue and bides her time. She says nothing against the girl-queen, she merely watches her, as a thoughtful young woman would watch a dirty babbling stream. There is something about Mary's dark gaze that makes Katherine as insubstantial as a little laughing ghost.

Little Kitty Howard, alas, does not improve as a result of great position. But nobody, except her adoring husband, ever thought she would. Her uncle the duke keeps a strict eye on her public behaviour, and relies on me to watch her in private. More than once he has summoned her to his rooms for a fierce lecture on propriety and the behaviour expected of a queen. She breaks down into the penitent tears that are so easy for her. And he, relieved that – unlike Anne – she does not argue, or throw his own behaviour back at him, or cite the polite manners of the French court, or laugh in his face, thinks the deed is done. But the very next week there is a romp in the queen's rooms when the young courtiers chase the girls all around the queen's chambers, her own bedroom as well, smacking them with pillows and the queen is in the midst of it all, screaming and dancing on the bed and awarding points in the joust of the pillows. So what is to be done?

No power on earth can make a sensible woman out of Katherine Howard because there is nothing to work on. She is lacking in education or training or even common sense. God knows what the duchess thought she was doing with the young people in her house. She sent Katherine to music lessons – where she was kissed by the music master – but she never taught her to read or write or to reckon accounts. The child has no languages, she cannot read a score – despite the attentions of Henry Manox – she can sing with a thin little voice, she can dance like a whore, she is learning to ride. What else? No, nothing else. That is all.

She has wit enough to please a man, and some of her late-night foolery in Norfolk House has taught her a handful of whorish tricks. Thank God, she sets herself to please the king, and she succeeds beyond belief. He has taken it into his head that she is a perfect girl. In his eyes she has replaced the daughter he never loved, the virgin bride that his brother had first, the wife he was never sure of. For a man who has two daughters of his own, and wedded and bedded four women, he certainly has a lot of dreams unfulfilled. Katherine is to be the one

who finally makes him happy, and he does everything to convince himself that she is the girl who can do it.

The duke summons me to his rooms every week, he leaves nothing to chance with this Howard girl, having lost control of the previous two Boleyns.

‘Is she behaving herself?’ he asks curtly.

I nod. ‘She is wild with the girls of her chamber, but she says nothing and does nothing to which you could seriously object in public.’

He sniffs. ‘Never mind if I object. Is there anything to which the king could object?’

I pause. Who knows what the king could object to? ‘She has done nothing to dishonour herself or her high calling,’ I say cautiously.

He glares at me under his fierce eyebrows. ‘Don’t mince words with me,’ he says coldly. ‘I don’t keep you here for you to tell me riddles. Is she doing anything that would cause me concern?’

‘She has a fancy for one of the king’s chamber,’ I say. ‘Nothing has happened beyond them making cow’s eyes at each other.’

He scowls. ‘Has the king seen?’

‘No. It’s Thomas Culpepper, one of his favourites. He is blinded by his affection for them both. He orders them to dance together, he says they make a perfect pair.’

‘I’ve seen them.’ He nods. ‘It’s bound to happen. Watch her, and make sure she is never alone with him. But a girl of fifteen is going to fall in love, and never with a husband of forty-nine. We will have to watch her for years. Anything else?’

I hesitate. ‘She is greedy,’ I say frankly. ‘Every time the king comes to dinner she asks him for something. He hates that. Everyone knows he hates that. He doesn’t hate it in her, yet. But how long can she go on asking him for a place for this or that cousin, or this or that friend? Or asking for a gift?’

The duke makes a minute mark on the paper before him. ‘I agree,’ he says. ‘She shall get the ambassadorship to France for William and then I shall tell her to ask for no more. Anything else?’

‘The girls she has put in her chamber,’ I say. ‘The girls from Norfolk House and Horsham.’

‘Yes?’

‘They misbehave with her,’ I say bluntly. ‘And I cannot manage them. They are silly girls, there is always an affair going on with one young man or another, there is always one of them sneaking out or trying to sneak him in.’

‘Sneak him in?’ he demands, suddenly alert.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘No harm can be done to the queen’s reputation when the king sleeps in her bed. But say that he is weary or sick and he misses a night, and her enemies find that a young man is creeping up the back stairs. Who is to say that he is coming to see Agnes Restwold and not the queen herself?’

‘She has her enemies,’ he says thoughtfully. ‘There is not a reformist nor a Lutheran in the kingdom who would not be glad to see her disgraced. Already they are whispering against her.’

‘You would know more than I.’

‘And there are all our enemies. Every family in England would be glad to see her fall and us dragged down with her. It was ever thus. I would have given anything to see Jane Seymour shamed by a scandal. The king always fills his household with the friends of his wives. Now we are in the ascendancy again, and our enemies are gathering.’

‘If we did not insist on having everything ...’

‘I shall have the Lord Lieutenancy of the North, cost me what it will,’ he growls irritably.

‘Yes, but after that?’

‘Do you not see?’ He suddenly rounds on me. ‘The king is a man for favourites and for adversaries. When he has a Spanish wife we go to war with France. When he is married to a Boleyn he destroys the monasteries and the Pope with them. When he is married to a Seymour we Howards have to creep about and snatch up the crumbs under the table. When he has the Cleves woman we are all in thrall to Thomas Cromwell who made the match. Now it is our time again. Our girl is on the throne of England, everything that can be lifted is ours to carry away.’

‘But if everyone is our enemy?’ I suggest. ‘If our greed makes us enemies of everyone else?’

He bares his yellow teeth in a smile at me. ‘Everyone is always our enemy,’ he says. ‘But right now, we are winning.’

Anne, Hampton Court, Christmas 1540

‘If it is to be done at all, it must be done with grace.’ This has become my motto, and as the barge comes upriver from Richmond, with the men on the wherries and the fishermen in their little boats doffing their caps when they see my standard and shouting out, ‘God bless Queen Anne!’ and sometimes other less polite encouragements, such as, ‘I’d have kept yer, dearie!’ and, ‘Try a Thamesman, why don’t yer?’ and worse than that, I smile and wave, repeating to myself again: ‘If it is to be done at all, it must be done with grace.’

The king cannot behave with grace; his selfishness and folly in this matter are too plain for everyone to see. The ambassadors of Spain and France must have laughed until they were sick over the excess of his wild vanity. Little Kitty Howard (Queen Katherine, I must, I will, remember to call her queen) cannot be expected to behave with grace. I might as well ask a puppy to be graceful. If he does not put her aside within the year, if she does not die in childbirth, then she may learn the grace of a queen ... perhaps. But she doesn’t have it now. In truth, she wasn’t even a very good maid in waiting. Her manners were not fit for the queen’s rooms then; how will she ever suit the throne?

It has to be me who shows a little grace, if the three of us are not to become a laughing stock of the entire country. I will have to enter my old rooms at this, my favourite palace, as an honoured guest. I will have to bend the knee to the girl who now sits in my chair, I will have to address her as Queen Katherine without laughing, or crying, either. I will have to be, as the king has said I may be: his sister and his dearest friend.

That this gives me no protection from arrest and accusation at the whim of the king is as obvious to me as anyone else. He has arrested his own niece and imprisoned her in the old abbey of Syon. Clearly, kinship with the king gives no immunity from fear, friendship with the king gives no safety; as the man who built this very palace, Thomas Wolsey, could prove. But I, rowed steadily upriver, dressed in my best, looking a hundred times happier since the denial of my marriage, can perhaps survive these dangerous times, endure this dangerous proximity, and make a life for myself as a single woman in Henry’s kingdom

which I plainly could not do as a wife.

It is strange, this journey in my own barge with the pennant of Cleves over my head. Travelling alone, without the court following behind in their barges, and without a great reception ahead of me, reminds me, as every day reminds me, that the king has indeed done what he wanted to do – and I can still hardly believe it is possible. I was his wife; and now I am his sister. Is there another king in Christendom who could perform such a transmutation such as that? I was Queen of England and now there is another queen, and she was my maid in waiting and now I am to be hers. This is the philosopher's stone, turning base metal to gold in the twinkling of an eye. The king has done what a thousand alchemists cannot do: turn base to gold. He has made that basest of maids, Katherine Howard, into a golden queen.

We are coming ashore. The rowers ship their oars in one practised motion and shoulder them, so the oars stand upright in rows like an avenue for me to walk through, down the barge from my warm seat, huddled in furs at the stern, to where the pages and servants are running out the gangplank and lining the sides.

And here's an honour! The Duke of Norfolk himself is on the bank to greet me, and two or three from the Privy Council, most of them, I see, kinsmen or allies of the Howards. I am favoured by this reception, and I see by his ironic smile that he is as amused as me.

Just as I foretold, the Howards are everywhere; the kingdom will be out of balance by the summer. The duke is not a man to let an opportunity slip by him; he will take advantage, as any battle-hardened veteran would do. Now he has occupied the heights, soon he will win the war. Then we shall see how long it is before tempers fray in the Seymour camp, in the Percy camp, among the Parrs and Culpeppers and Nevilles, among the reformist churchmen around Cranmer who were accustomed to power and influence and wealth and will not tolerate being excluded for long.

I am handed ashore and the duke bows to me and says, 'Welcome to Hampton Court, Your Grace,' just as if I were still queen.

'I thank you,' I say. 'I am glad to be here.' Both of us will know that this is true for, God knows, there was a day, several days, when I never expected to see Hampton Court again. The watergate of the Tower of London where they bring in traitors by night – yes. But Hampton Court for the Christmas feast? No.

'You must have had a cold journey,' he remarks.

I take his arm and we walk together up the great path to the river frontage of the palace as if we were dear friends.

‘I don’t mind the cold,’ I say.

‘Queen Katherine is expecting you in her rooms.’

‘Her Majesty is generous,’ I say. There; the words are said. I have called the silliest of all my maids in waiting ‘Her Majesty’ as if she were a goddess; and that to her uncle.

‘The queen is eager to see you,’ he says. ‘We have all missed you.’

I smile and look down. This is not modesty, it is to prevent me from laughing out loud. This man missed me so much that he was gathering evidence to prove that I had emasculated the king through witchcraft, an accusation that would have taken me to the scaffold before anyone could have saved me.

I look up. ‘I am very grateful for your friendship,’ I say dryly.

We go in through the garden door and there are half a dozen pages and young lords who used to be in my household loitering between the door and the queen’s rooms to bow and greet me. I am more moved than I dare to show, but when one young page dashes up to me, kneels and kisses my hand, I have to swallow down the tears and keep my head up. I was their mistress for such a short time, just six months, it is touching to me to think that they care for me still, even though another girl lives in my rooms and takes their service.

The duke grimaces but says nothing. I am far too cautious to comment, so the two of us behave as if all the people on the stairs and in the halls and the whispered blessings are absolutely normal. He leads the way to the queen’s rooms and the soldiers at the double doors throw them open at his nod and bellow, ‘Her Grace, the Duchess of Cleves,’ and I go in.

The throne is empty. This is my first bemused impression and I almost think, for one mad moment, that it has all been a joke, one of the famous English jokes, and the duke is about to turn to me and say, ‘Of course you are queen, take your place again!’ and we will all laugh and everything will be as it was.

But then I see that the throne is empty because the queen is on the floor playing with a ball of wool and a kitten, and her ladies are rising to their feet, very dignified and bowing, with immaculate care to the right depth for royalty, but only minor royalty, and at last that child Kitty Howard looks up and sees me and cries out, ‘Your Grace!’ and dashes towards me.

One glance from her uncle tells me how unwelcome would be any sign of intimacy or affection. Down I go into a curtsy as deep as I would show to the king himself.

‘Queen Katherine,’ I say firmly.

My tone steadies her, and my curtsy reminds her that we have to play this

out before many spies, and she halts in her run and wavers into a small curtsy to me. ‘Duchess,’ she says faintly.

I rise up. I so want to tell her that it is all right, that we can be as we were, something like sisters, something like friends, but we have to wait until the chamber door is shut. It must be secret.

‘I am honoured by your invitation, Your Grace,’ I say solemnly. ‘And I am very glad to share the Christmas feast with you and your husband, His Majesty the king, God bless him.’

She gives a little uncertain laugh and then, when I look promptly at her, she glances at her uncle and replies: ‘We are delighted to have you at our court. My husband the king embraces you as his sister and so do I.’

Then she steps towards me, as clearly she has been told to do only it had flown out of her head the moment she saw me, and offers me her royal cheek to kiss.

The duke observes this and announces: ‘His Majesty the king tells me that he will dine here with you two ladies this evening.’

‘Then we must make him welcome,’ Katherine says. She turns to Lady Rochford and says: ‘The duchess and I will sit in my privy chamber while the room is being readied for dinner. We will sit alone,’ and then she sails towards my – her – privy chamber as if she had owned it all her life and I find myself following in her wake.

As soon as the door is shut behind us she rounds on me. ‘I think that was all right, wasn’t it?’ she demands. ‘Your curtsy was lovely, thank you.’

I smile. ‘I think it was all right.’

‘Sit down, sit down,’ she urges me. ‘You can sit in your chair, you’ll feel more at home.’

I hesitate. ‘No,’ I say. ‘It is not right so. You sit in the chair and I will sit beside you. In case someone comes in.’

‘What if they do?’

‘We will always be watched,’ I say, finding the words. ‘You will always be watched. You have to take care. All the time.’

She shakes her head. ‘You don’t know what he is like with me,’ she assures me. ‘You have never seen him like this. I can ask for anything, I can have anything I want. Anything in the world I think I could ask for and have. He will allow me anything, he will forgive me anything.’

‘Good,’ I say, smiling at her.

But her little face is not radiant as it was when she was playing with the

kitten.

‘I know it is good,’ she says hesitantly. ‘I should be the happiest woman in the world. Like Jane Seymour, you know? Her motto was: “the most happy”.’

‘You will have to become accustomed to life as a wife and Queen of England,’ I say firmly. I really do not want to hear Katherine Howard’s regrets.

‘I will,’ she says earnestly. She is such a child, she still tries to please anyone who scolds her. ‘I really do try, Your Gr – er, Anne.’

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, New Year 1541

This is the court with two queens: nothing like it has ever been seen before. Those who had served Queen Anne, the now-duchess, were glad to see her again, and glad to serve her. The warmth of her welcome surprised everyone, even me. But she always had a charm about her that made her servants glad to do any little thing for her, she was ready with her thanks and quick to reward. Madame Kitty, on the other hand, is quick to order and quick to complain, and she has an endless number of demands. In short, we have put a child in charge of the nursery and she is making enemies of her little playmates as fast as she dishes out her favours.

The court was glad to see Queen Anne in her old place, and scandalised but fascinated that she should dance so merrily with Queen Katherine, that they should walk arm in arm, that they should ride out to hunt together, and dine with their husband in common. The king smiled on them as if they were two favourite daughters, his pleasure was so indulgent, his satisfaction in this happy resolution so apparent. The duchess who had been queen had prepared her own way with some skill, she had brought great gifts for the new husband and wife, beautiful matching horses dressed in purple velvet: a kingly gift. She has, as it turns out now, exquisite manners: queenly manners. Under the strain of being the former wife at the first Christmas of the new wife's court, Anne of Cleves is a model of tact and elegance. There is not a woman in the world that could have played the part with more discretion. And she is more remarkable for being the only woman, in the history of mankind, ever to do such a thing. Other women in the past may have stepped aside, or been forced out, the first queen of this very court for one – but no-one has ever stepped graciously to one side as if it were a choreographed move in a masque, and gone on to dance her part in another place.

There was more than one man who said that if the king were not utterly besotted by a precocious child, he would be regretting his choice to put a silly girl in the place of this thoughtful, charming woman. And there was more than one prediction which said that she would be well-married before the year was

out; for who could resist a woman who could fall from being queen to commoner and yet still carry herself as if greatness was within?

I was not one of those, because I think ahead. She has signed an agreement which says that she was legally contracted to marry another man. Her marriage to the king was invalid, so would be her marriage to anyone else. He has tied her to spinsterhood for as long as the son of the Duke of Lorraine shall live. The king has cursed her with spinsterhood and infertility and I doubt he has even considered this. But she is no fool. She will have considered this. She must have considered it a bargain worth making. In which case she is a stranger woman than any we have ever seen at court. She is a charming and graceful woman of only twenty-five years old, in possession of a large personal fortune, of unstained reputation, in her fertile years, and she has determined never to marry again. What a curious queen this one from Cleves has turned out to be!

She is in good looks. We now see that the plainness in her face and the pallor in her cheeks when she was queen were caused by the draining anxiety of being the fourth wife. Now that the fifth has taken her place we can see the young woman bloom, freed of the danger of privilege. She has used the time of her exile to improve herself. Her command of the language is much greater and her voice, now she is not struggling with the words, is mellow and clear. She is merrier, now that she can understand a witty remark, and now that she is lighter of heart. She has learned to play cards and to dance. She has outgrown her Cleves Lutheran strictness both in behaviour and appearance. Her dress is beyond recognition! When I think how she came to this country dressed like a German peasant girl in layer after layer of heavy cloth, with a hood squashing her head and her body wrapped like a barrel of gunpowder, and now I see this fashionable beauty, I see a woman who has taken the freedom to re-make herself. She rides with the king and talks seriously and interestingly with him about the courts of Europe and what the future holds for England, and she laughs with Katherine like another silly girl. She plays cards with the courtiers and dances with the queen. She is Princess Mary's only true friend at court and they read and pray together for a private hour every morning. She is the Lady Elizabeth's only advocate and she keeps a touching correspondence with her former step-daughter and has been promised the role of guardian and beloved aunt. She is a regular visitor to Prince Edward's nursery and his little face lights up to see her. In short, Anne of Cleves behaves in every way as a beautiful and highly regarded royal sister should do, and everyone has to say that she is fit for the part. Indeed, many people say that she is most fit to be queen – but that is so

much empty regret. At any rate, we are all now very glad that our evidence did not send her to the scaffold; though everyone praising her now would have sworn king's evidence against her just as eagerly, had they been asked, as I was asked.

The duke summons me to his rooms on New Year's Eve as if we should toast the past and make new resolutions together. He talks firstly of Queen Anne and how pleasantly she behaves herself at court. He asks me how Catherine Carey, my niece, Mary's child, is serving as a maid in waiting to her cousin.

'She does her duty,' I say shortly. 'Her mother has taught her well, I have very little to do with her.'

He allows himself a smirk. 'And you and Mary Boleyn were never the best of friends.'

'We know each other well enough,' I say of my self-regarding sister-in-law.

'Of course she has the Boleyn inheritance,' he says as if to remind me, as if I ever forget. 'We could not save everything.'

I nod. Rochford Hall, my house, went to George's parents at his death and from them to Mary. They should have left it to me, he should have left it to me; but no. I faced all the danger and the horror of what had to be done and ended up saving only my title and earning only my pension.

'And little Catherine Carey? Is she another queen in the making?' he asks, just to tease me. 'Shall we have her schooled to please Prince Edward? Do you think we can put her in a king's bed?'

'I think you will find her mother has already forbidden it,' I say coldly. 'She will want a good marriage and a quiet life for her daughter. She has had enough of courts.'

The duke laughs, and lets it go. 'So what of our present passport to greatness, our queen: Katherine?'

'She is happy enough.'

'I don't really care if she is happy or not. Does she show any sign of being with child?'

'No, none,' I say.

'How did she mistake before, in the first month of marriage? She had us all in hopes.'

'She can barely count,' I say irritably. 'And she has no sense of how important it is. I watch her courses now, there will be no mistake again.'

He raises an eyebrow at me. 'Is the king even capable?' he asks very quietly.

I do not need to glance towards the door, I know it must be secure or we

would not be having this most dangerous conversation. 'He can do the act in the end, though he labours overlong on it, and it exhausts him.'

'Then is she fertile?' he demands.

'She has regular courses. And she seems healthy and strong.'

'If she does not get with child then he will look for a reason,' he warns me, as if there is anything I can do about the whims of a king. 'If she is not with child by Easter at the latest, he will be asking why.'

I shrug my shoulders. 'Sometimes these things take time.'

'The last wife who took time died on the scaffold,' he says sharply.

'You need not remind me.' I am fired into defiance. 'I do remember all of that, and what she did, and what she attempted, and the price she paid. And then the price we paid. And the price I had to pay.'

My outburst shocks him. I have shocked myself. I had promised myself I would never complain. I did my best. And so, in their terms, did they.

'All I am saying is that we should prevent the question coming into his mind,' he soothes me. 'Clearly, it would be better for us all, for the family, Jane, for us Howards, if Katherine were to conceive a child before he has to wonder. Before a question even enters his head. This would be the safest course for us.'

'Bricks without straw,' I say coldly. I am still irritated. 'If the king has no power to give her a child, then what can we do? He is an old man, he is a sick man. He has never been a fertile man and what potency he has must be soured by his rotting leg and his locked-up bowels. What can any of us do?'

'We can assist him,' he suggests.

'How can we do more?' I demand. 'Our girl already does every trick that a Smithfield whore might do. She works him as if he were a drunken captain in a brothel. She does everything a woman can do, and all he can do is lie on his back and moan: "Oh, Katherine, oh my rose!" There is no vigour left in him. I am not surprised there is no baby coming from him. What are we to do?'

'We could hire some,' he says, as sly as any pander.

'What?'

'We could hire some vigour,' he suggests.

'You mean?'

'I mean that if there were a young man, perhaps someone we know that we can trust, who would be glad of a discreet affair, we might allow him to meet her, we might encourage her to treat him kindly, they might give each other a little pleasure, and we might have a child to put into the Tudor cradle and no man any the wiser.'

I am horrified. 'You would never do this again,' I say flatly.

His look is as cold as winter. 'I have never done it before,' he specifies carefully. 'Not I.'

'It is to put her head on the block.'

'Not if it is carefully done.'

'She would never be safe.'

'If she were carefully guided, and chaperoned. If you were to be with her, every step of the way, if you were ready to swear to her honour. Who would disbelieve you, who have been such a reliable witness for the king so many times?'

'Exactly. I have always borne witness for the king,' I say, my throat dry with fear. 'I give evidence for the hangman. I am always on the winning side. I have never offered evidence for the defence.'

'You have always borne witness for our side,' he corrects me. 'And you would still be on the winning side, in safety. And you would be kinswoman to the next King of England. A Howard-Tudor boy.'

'But the man?' I am almost panting with fear. 'There is no-one we could trust with such a secret.'

He nods. 'Ah yes, the man. I think we would have to ensure that he was gone when he had done his duty, don't you? An accident of some sort, or a sword fight? Or set upon by thieves? Certainly he would have to be removed. We could not risk another ...' The duke pauses for the word. 'Scandal.'

I close my eyes at the thought of it. For a moment, against the darkness of my eyelids I can see my husband's face turned towards me, his expression quite incredulous as he saw me come into court and take my seat before the panel of judges. A moment of hope as he thought I was coming to save him. Then slowly, his dawning horror at what I was prepared to say.

I shake my head. 'These are terrible thoughts,' I say. 'And terrible thoughts to be shared by you with me. We, who have already seen such things and done such things ...' I break off. I cannot speak for terror at what he will bring me to do.

'It is because you have looked at horror without flinching that I talk with you,' he says, and for the first time this evening there is a warmth in his voice, I almost think I hear affection. 'Who would I trust better than you, with my ambitions for the family? Your courage and skill have brought us here. I don't doubt but that you will take us forwards. You must know a young man who would be glad of a chance at the queen. A young man who could easily meet

with her, a dispensable young man who would be no loss later on. Perhaps one of the king's favourites that he encourages to hang around her.'

I am almost gagging with fear. 'You don't understand,' I say. 'Please, my lord, hear me. You don't understand. What I did then ... I have put from my mind ... I never speak of it, I never think of it. If anyone makes me think of it I shall go mad. I loved George ... Truly, don't make me think of it, don't make me remember it.'

He rises to his feet. He comes round from his side of the table and he puts his hands on my shoulders. It would almost be a gentle gesture except that it feels as if he is holding me down in his chair. 'You shall decide, my dear Lady Jane. You shall think about these matters and tell me what you think, on reflection. I trust you implicitly. I am certain that you will want to do what is best for our family. I have faith that you will always do what is best for yourself.'

Anne, Richmond Palace, February 1541

I am home, and it is such relief to be here, I could laugh at myself for being a dull old spinster, shying away from society. But it is not just the pleasure of coming home to my own rooms and my own view from my windows and my own cook – it is the pleasure of escaping from the court, that court of darkness. Good God, it is a poisonous place that they are making for themselves, I wonder that anyone can bear to be there. The king's mood is more unreliable than ever. In one moment he is passionate to Kitty Howard, fondling her like a lecher before everyone so that she blushes red and he laughs to see her embarrassment, then half an hour later he is raging against one of his councillors, flinging his cap to the ground, lashing out at a page, or silent and withdrawn, in a mood of quiet hatred and suspicion, his eyes darting round, seeking someone to blame for his unhappiness. His temper, always indulged, has become a danger. He cannot control it himself, he cannot control his own fears. He sees plots in every corner and assassins at every turn. The court is becoming adept at diverting him and confusing him, everyone fears the sudden turning of his moods into darkness.

Katherine runs to him when he wants her and she shies away when his temper is bad as if she were one of his pretty greyhounds; but the strain must tell on her in time. And she has surrounded herself with the silliest and most vulgar girls that were ever allowed in a gentleman's house. Their dress is incredibly ostentatious with as much bare flesh and jewels as they can afford; their manners are bad. They are sober enough when the king is awake and in the court, they parade before him and bow to him as if he were a brooding idol; but the moment he is gone they run wild like schoolgirls. Kitty does nothing to control them, indeed, when the doors of her rooms are shut, she is the ringleader. They have pages and young men of the court running in and out of her rooms all day, musicians playing, gambling, drinking, flirting. She herself is little more than a child and it is a great joy to her to have a water fight in a priceless gown and then change into another. But the people about her are older and less innocent and the court is becoming lax, perhaps worse. There is a great scurry into decorum when someone dashes in and says the king is coming, which Kitty

adores, the schoolchild that she is; but this is now a court without discipline. It is becoming a court without morals.

It is hard to predict what will happen. She said she was with child in the first month of marriage, but she was mistaken; she seems to have no idea how grave a mistake this can be, and there have been no hopes since. As I came away the wound on the king's leg was giving him terrible pain and he had taken to his bed again, seeing nobody. Kitty tells me that she thinks he cannot give her a child, that he is with her as he was with me, incapable. She tells me that she works such tricks on him that he has some pleasure, and she assures him that he is potent and strong, but the reality of the matter is that he rarely manages the act.

'We pretend,' she told me miserably. 'I sigh and groan and say it is such bliss for me, and he tries to thrust, but, truth be told, he cannot move, it is a pathetic mime he does, not the real thing.'

I told her that she should not speak of this to me. But she asked me, very trustingly, who should advise her? I shook my head. 'You can trust no-one,' I said. 'They would have had me hanged for a witch if I had said half what you have told me. If you say the king is impotent, or you predict his death, that is treason, Kitty. The sentence for treason is death. You must never speak of this to anyone, and if anyone asks me did you speak to me, I shall lie for you and say you did not.'

Her little face was white. 'But what shall I do?' she asked me. 'If I cannot ask for help, and I don't know what to do? If it is a crime even to tell someone what is wrong? What can I do? Who can I go to?'

I gave her no answer for I had none. When I was in the same trouble and danger, I never found anyone who would help me.

Poor child, perhaps my lord duke has a plan for her, perhaps Lady Rochford knows what can be done. But when the king is tired of her – and he must tire of her, for what can she do to create a lasting love? – when he is tired of her, if she does not have a child, then why would he keep her? And if he has a mind to be rid of her, will he make as generous a settlement on her as he did for me, given that I was a duchess with powerful friends and she is a light, slight-witted girl with no defence? Or will he find some easier, quicker and cheaper way to be rid of her?

Katherine, Hampton Court, March 1541

Let me see, what do I have?

My winter gowns are all completed, though I have some more for spring in the making but they are of no use, for the season of Lent is coming and I cannot wear them.

I have my Christmas and New Year gifts from the king, that is, amongst other things that I have already forgotten or given away to my women, I have two pendants made of twenty-six table diamonds and twenty-seven ordinary diamonds, so heavy that I can hardly hold up my head when they are round my neck. I have a rope of pearls with two hundred pearls as big as strawberries. I have the lovely horse from my dear Anne. I call her Anne now and she still calls me Kitty when we are alone. But the jewels make no difference for those too have to be put aside for Lent.

I have a choir of new singers and musicians but they cannot play merry music for me to dance when Lent comes. Also, I will not be allowed to eat anything worth having during Lent. I may not play cards or hunt, I may not dance or play games, it is too cold to go out on the river and even if it were not, it will be Lent soon. I will not even play jokes with my ladies or run around the apartments or play catch or bowls or bat and ball as soon as it is dreary, dreary Lent.

And the king, for some reason, is making Lent come early this year. Out of sheer ill humour he has taken to his rooms since February and now he doesn't even come out to dine, and never sees me, and is never kind to me, and has not given me anything nor called me pretty rose since Twelfth Night. They say he is ill, but since he is always lame and always costive and since his leg constantly rots from the wound, I can't see what difference it makes. And besides, he is so cross with everyone, and there is no pleasing him. He has all but closed up the court and everyone tiptoes around as if they were frightened to breathe. Indeed, half the families have gone home to their houses since the king is not here, and no business is being done by the Privy Council, and the king won't see anyone, so a lot of the young men have gone away and there is no amusement at all.

‘He’s missing Queen Anne,’ Agnes Restwold says, because she is a spiteful cat.

‘He is not,’ I say flatly. ‘Why should he? He put her aside by his own choice.’

‘He is,’ she insists. ‘For see? As soon as she went away he went quiet, and then he became ill and now see, he has withdrawn from court to think about what he can do, and how he might get her back.’

‘It’s a lie,’ I say. It is a terrible thing to say to me. Who should know better than me that you can love someone and then wake up and scarcely be troubled with them? I thought that was just me and my shallow heart, as my grandmother says. But what if the king has a shallow heart too? What if he thought – actually as I did, as obviously everyone did – that she had never looked better or appeared better? Everything about her that had been so foreign and stupid was somehow smoothed away and she was – I don’t know the word – gracious. She was like a real queen and I was, like I always am, the prettiest girl in the room. I always am the prettiest girl in the room. But I am only that. I am never more than that. What if he now wants a woman with grace?

‘Agnes, you do wrong to presume on your long friendship with Her Grace to distress her,’ Lady Rochford says. I adore how she can say things like that. The words are as good as a play and her tone is like a shower of February rain down your neck. ‘This is idle gossip about the king’s ill health for which we should be praying.’

‘I do pray,’ I say quickly, for everyone says I go into chapel and spend all my time craning my head over the edge of the queen’s box to see Thomas Culpepper, who glances up at me and smiles. His smile is the best thing in church, it lights up the chapel like a miracle. ‘I do pray. And when it is Lent, God knows, I will have nothing to do but pray.’

Lady Rochford nods. ‘Indeed, we shall all pray for the king’s health.’

‘But why? Is he so very ill?’ I ask her quietly, so that Agnes and the rest of them can’t hear. Sometimes I wish indeed that I had never allowed them all to join me. They were good enough for the maids’ chamber at Lambeth but really, I don’t think they always behave as proper ladies at the queen’s court. I am sure Queen Anne never had a rowdy ladies’ room like mine. Her ladies were better behaved by far. We would never have dared to speak to her as my ladies speak to me.

‘The wound on his leg has closed up again,’ Lady Rochford says. ‘Surely you were listening when the physician explained it?’

‘I didn’t understand,’ I say. ‘I started listening; but then I didn’t understand. I just stopped hearing the words.’

She frowns. ‘Years ago the king took a dreadful injury in his leg. The wound has never healed. You know that much, at least.’

‘Yes,’ I say sulkily. ‘Everyone knows that much.’

‘The wound has gone bad and has to be drained, every day the pus from the flesh has to be drained away.’

‘I know that,’ I say. ‘Don’t talk about it.’

‘Well, the wound has closed,’ she says.

‘That’s a good thing, isn’t it? It has healed? He is better.’

‘The wound closes over the top, but it is still bad underneath,’ she explains. ‘The poison cannot get away, it mounts to his belly, to his heart.’

‘No!’ I am quite shocked.

‘Last time this happened we feared that we might lose him,’ she says most seriously. ‘His face went black as a poisoned corpse, he lay like a dead man until they opened the wound again and drained off the poison.’

‘How do they open it?’ I ask. ‘You know, this is really disgusting.’

‘They cut into it and then they hold it open,’ she says. ‘They wedge it open with little chips of gold. They have to push the chips into the wound to keep it raw, otherwise it will close over. He has to bear the pain of an open wound all the time, and they will have to do it again. Cut into his leg and then cut again.’

‘Then he will be well again?’ I ask brightly, I really want her to stop telling me these things.

‘No,’ she says. ‘Then he will be as he was, lame and in pain, and being poisoned by it. The pain makes him angry and, worse than that, it makes him feel old and weary. The lameness means he cannot be the man he was. You helped him to feel young again, but now the wound reminds him that he is an old man.’

‘He can’t really have thought he was young. He can’t have thought he was young and handsome. Not even he can have thought that.’

She looks at me seriously. ‘Oh, Katherine, he did think he was young and in love. He has to be made to think that again.’

‘But what can I do?’ I can feel myself pouting. ‘I cannot put ideas in his head. Besides, he does not come to my bed while he is ill.’

‘You will have to go to him,’ she says. ‘Go to him and make something up that will make him feel young and in love again. Make him feel like a young man, filled with lust.’

I frown. 'I don't know how.'

'What would you do if he were a young man?'

'I could tell him that one of the young men of the court is in love with me,' I suggest. 'I could make him jealous. There are young men here,' I am thinking of Thomas Culpepper, 'that I know I could really, truly desire.'

'Never,' she says urgently. 'Never do that. You don't know how dangerous it is to do that.'

'Yes, but you said ...'

'Can you not think of a way that would make him feel in love again without putting your neck on the block?' she demands irritably.

'Really!' I exclaim. 'I only thought ...'

'Think again,' she says, quite rudely.

I say nothing. I am not thinking, I am purposely not speaking to show her that she has been rude and I will not have it.

'Tell him that you are afraid he wants to go back to the Duchess of Cleves,' she says.

This is so surprising that I forget to sulk and I look at her in astonishment. 'But that is just what Agnes was saying and you told her not to distress me.'

'Exactly,' she says. 'That is why it is such a clever lie. Because it is all but true. Half the court is saying it behind their hands, Agnes Restwold says it to your face. If you ever thought for a moment about anything but yourself and your looks and your jewels, you would indeed be anxious and distressed. And, best of all, if you go to him and you behave anxiously and distressed then he will feel that two women have been fighting over him and he will feel filled with confidence in his own charm again. If you do it well it might get him back into your bed before Lent.'

I hesitate. 'I want him to be happy, of course,' I say carefully. 'But if he does not come to my bed before Lent then it does not much matter ...'

'It does matter. This is not about your pleasure or even his,' she says gravely. 'He has to get a son on you. You seem to keep forgetting it is not about dancing or music or even jewels or land. You do not earn your place as queen by being the woman he dotes on, you earn your place as queen by being the mother of his son. Until you give him a son I don't think he will even have you crowned.'

'I must be crowned,' I protest.

'Then you must get him into your bed to give you a child,' she says. 'Anything else is too dangerous even to think about.'

'I'll go.' I sigh a great hard-done-by sigh, so she can see that I am not

frightened by her threats, but on the contrary I am wearily going to do my duty. 'I'll go and tell him I am unhappy.'

By luck, when I get there the outer presence chamber is unusually empty, so many people have gone home. So Thomas Culpepper is almost alone, playing at dice, right hand against left, in the window-seat.

'Are you winning?' I ask him, trying to speak lightly.

He leaps to his feet as he sees me, and bows.

'I always win, Your Grace,' he says. His smile makes my heart skip a beat. It really does, it truly does, when he tosses his head like that and smiles I can hear my heart go: thud-thud.

'That is not a great skill if you are playing alone,' I say aloud, and to myself I say: and that's not very witty.

'I win at dice and I win at cards but I am hopeless at love,' he says very quietly.

I glance behind me, Katherine Tylney has stopped to talk to the Duke of Hertford's kinsman and is not listening, for once. Catherine Carey is at a discreet distance, looking out of the window.

'You are in love?' I ask.

'You must know it,' he says in a whisper.

I hardly dare think. He must mean me, he must be about to declare his love for me. But I swear if he is talking about someone else I shall just die. I can't bear him to want someone else. But I keep my voice light.

'Why should I know it?'

'You must know who I love,' he says. 'You, of all people in the world.'

This conversation is so delicious I can feel my toes curling up inside my new slippers. I feel hot, I am certain I am blushing and he will be able to see.

'Must I?'

'The king will see you now,' announces the idiot Dr Butt and I jump and start away from Thomas Culpepper, for I had utterly forgotten that I was there to see the king and to make him love me again. 'I'll come in a minute,' I say over my shoulder.

Thomas gives a little snort of laughter, and I have to clap my hand over my mouth to stop myself giggling too. 'No, you must go,' he reminds me quietly. 'You can't keep the king waiting. I'll be here when you come out.'

'Of course I am going at once,' I say, remembering that I have to seem upset at the king's neglect, and I turn away from him in a hurry and dash into the king's room, where he is lying on his bed like a great ship stranded in dry dock,

his leg stuck up into the air on embroidered cushions and his big round face all wan and self-pitiful; and I walk slowly towards his big bed and try to look anxious for his love.

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, March 1541

The king is sliding into some kind of melancholy, he insists on being alone, shut away like some old dying smelly dog, and Katherine's attempts to make him turn to her are doomed since she cannot sustain an interest in anyone but herself for more than half a day. She has gone to his room again but this time he would not even let her in, and instead of showing concern, she tossed her pretty head and said that if he would not let her in she would not visit again.

But she lingered long enough to meet Thomas Culpepper and he took her walking in the garden. I sent Catherine Carey after her with a shawl and another well-behaved maid to give them the appearance of decorum, but from the way the queen was holding his arm, and chattering and laughing, anybody could see that she was happy in his company and had forgotten all about her husband lying in silence in a darkened room.

My lord duke gives me a long, hard look at dinner but says nothing, and I know that he expects me to get our little bitch serviced and in pup. A son would raise the king from his melancholy, and secure the crown for the Howard family forever. We have to do it this time. We have to manage it. No other family in the world has had two attempts at such a prize. We cannot fail twice.

In her pique Katherine summons musicians to the ladies' chamber and dances with her women and the people of her household. It isn't very merry and two of the wilder girls, Joan and Agnes, run down to the dining hall and invite some men from the court. When I see they have done this I send a page for Thomas Culpepper to see if he will be fool enough to come. He is.

I see her face as he comes into the room, the rise of her colour, and then how quickly she turns away and speaks to little Catherine Carey at her side. Plainly, she is quite besotted with him and for a moment I remember that she is not just a pawn in our game, but a girl, a young girl, and she is falling in love for the first time in her life. To see little Kitty Howard at a loss, stumbling in her speech, blushing like a rose, thinking of someone else and not herself is to see a girl become a woman. It would be very endearing if she were not Queen of England and a Howard with work to do.

Thomas Culpepper joins the set of dancers and places himself so that he will partner the queen when the couples pair off. She looks down at the ground to hide her smile of pleasure and to affect modesty, but when the dance brings them together and she takes his hand her eyes come up to him and they gaze at each other with absolute longing.

I glance round, nobody else seems to have noticed, and indeed half the queen's ladies are making sheep's eyes at one young man or another. I glance across at Lady Rutland and raise my eyebrows, she nods and goes to the queen and speaks quietly in her ear. Katherine scowls like a disappointed child, and then turns to the musicians. 'This must be the last dance,' she says sulkily. But she turns and her hand goes out, almost without her volition, to Thomas Culpepper.

Katherine, Hampton Court, March 1541

Every day I see him and every day we are a little bolder with each other. The king still has not come out from his rooms, and his circle of physicians and doctors and the old men who advise him hardly ever come to my rooms so it is as if we are free in these days – just us young people together. The court is quiet with no dancing and no entertainment, since it is Lent. I cannot even have dancing privately in my rooms any more. We cannot hunt, nor boat on the river, nor play games, nor anything amusing. But we are allowed to walk in the gardens, or by the river after Mass, and when I am walking Thomas Culpepper walks beside me, and I would rather walk with him than dance dressed in my best with a prince.

‘Are you cold?’ he says.

Hardly, I am buried in my sables, but I look up at him and say: ‘A little.’

‘Let me warm your hand,’ he says, and tucks it under his arm so that it is pressed against his jacket. I have such a longing to open the front of his jacket and put both my hands inside. His belly would be smooth and hard, I think. His chest may be covered with light hair. I don’t know, it is so thrilling that I don’t know. I know the scent of him, at least, I can recognise it now. He has a warm smell, like good-quality candles. It burns me up.

‘Is that better?’ he asks, pressing my hand to his side.

‘Much better,’ I say.

We are walking beside the river and a boatman goes past and shouts something at the two of us. With only a handful of ladies and courtiers before and behind us, nobody knows that I am the queen.

‘I wish we were just a boy and a girl walking out together.’

‘Do you wish you were not queen?’

‘No, I like being queen – and of course I love His Majesty the king with all my heart and soul – but if we were just a girl and a boy we could be strolling to an inn for some dinner and dancing, and that would be fun.’

‘If we were a girl and a boy I would take you to a special house I know,’ he says.

‘Would you? Why?’ I can hear the entranced giggle in my own voice, but I cannot help myself.

‘It has a private dining room and a very good cook. I would give you the finest of dinners and then I would court you,’ he says.

I give a little gasp of pretend shock. ‘Master Culpepper!’

‘I would not stop till I had a kiss,’ he says outrageously. ‘And then I would go on.’

‘My grandmother would box your ears,’ I threaten him.

‘It would be worth it.’ He smiles and I can feel my heart thudding. I want to laugh out loud for the sheer joy of him.

‘Perhaps I would kiss you back,’ I whisper.

‘I am quite sure you would,’ he says, and ignores my delighted gasp. ‘I have never in all my life kissed a girl and not had her kiss me back. I am quite sure you would kiss me and I think you would say, “Oh, Thomas!”’

‘Then you are very sure of yourself indeed, Master Culpepper.’

‘Call me Thomas.’

‘I will not!’

‘Call me Thomas when we are alone like this.’

‘Oh, Thomas!’

‘There you are, you said it, and I have not even kissed you yet.’

‘You must not talk to me of kissing when anyone else is near.’

‘I know that. I should never let any danger come to you. I shall guard you as my life itself.’

‘The king knows everything,’ I warn him. ‘Everything we say, perhaps even everything we think. He has spies everywhere and he knows what is in people’s very hearts.’

‘My love is hidden deep,’ he says.

‘Your love?’ I can hardly breathe for this.

‘My love,’ he repeats.

Lady Rochford comes up beside me. ‘We have to go in,’ she says. ‘It is going to rain.’

At once Thomas Culpepper turns around and leads me back towards the palace. ‘I don’t want to go in,’ I say stubbornly.

‘Go in, and then say you want to change your gown, and slip down the garden stairs from your privy chamber and I will wait for you in the doorway,’ he says very quietly.

‘You didn’t meet me last time we agreed.’

He chuckles. 'You must forgive me for that, it was months ago. I shall meet you without fail this time. There is something very special that I want to do.'

'And what is that?'

'I want to see if I can make you say, "Oh, Thomas," again.'

Anne, Richmond Palace, March 1541

Ambassador Harst has come to tell me the news from court. He has placed a young man as a servant in the king's rooms and the boy says that the physicians attend the king every day and are struggling to keep the wound open so that the poison can drain from his leg. They are putting pellets of gold into the wound so that it cannot close, and tying the edges back with string, they are pulling at the poor man's living flesh as if they were making a pudding.

'He must be in agony,' I say.

Dr Harst nods. 'And he is in despair,' he says. 'He thinks he will never recover, he thinks his time is done, and he is sick with fear at leaving Prince Edward without a safe guardian. The Privy Council are thinking that they will have to form a regency.'

'Who will he trust to guard the prince in his minority?'

'He trusts nobody, and the prince's family, the Seymours, are declared enemies of the queen's family, the Howards. There is no doubt that they will tear the country apart between them. The Tudor peace will end as it began, in a war for the kingdom between the great families. The king fears for the people's faith as well. The Howards are determined on the old religion and will take the country back to Rome; but Cranmer has the church behind him and will fight for reform.'

I nibble my finger, thinking. 'Does the king still fear there is a plot to overthrow him?'

'There is news of a new uprising in the North, in support of the old religion. The king fears that the men will come out again, that it will spread, he believes there are Papists everywhere calling for a rebellion against him.'

'None of this endangers me? He will not turn against me?'

His tired face folds downwards into a grimace. 'He might. He fears the Lutherans as well.'

'But everybody knows I am a practising member of the king's church!' I protest. 'I do everything to show that I conform to the king's instructions.'

'You were brought in as a Protestant princess,' he says. 'And the man who

brought you in paid with his life. I am fearful.'

'What can we do?' I ask.

'I shall keep watch on the king,' he says. 'While he acts against the Papists we are safe enough, but if he turns against the reformers we should make sure that we can get home, if we need to.'

I give a little shudder, thinking of the mad tyranny of my brother as opposed to the mad tyranny of this king. 'I have no home there.'

'You may have no home here.'

'The king has promised me my safety,' I say.

'He promised you the throne,' the ambassador says wryly. 'And who sits there now?'

'I don't envy her.' I am thinking of her husband brooding on his wrongs, trapped in his bed by his suppurating wound, counting his enemies and allocating blame, while his fever burns and his sense of injustice grows more mad.

'I should think no woman in the world would envy her,' the ambassador replies.

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, April 1541

‘What actually happened to Anne Boleyn?’ the child-queen horrifies me by asking as we walk back from Mass early one morning in April. The king was, as usual, absent from the royal box and for once she was not peering over the edge of the box to see Culpepper. She even closed her eyes during the prayers as if praying, and she seemed thoughtful. Now this.

‘She was accused of treason,’ I say coolly. ‘Surely, you know that?’

‘Yes, but why? Exactly why? What happened?’

‘You should ask your grandmother, or the duke,’ I say.

‘Weren’t you there?’

Was I not there? Was I not there for every agonising second of it all? ‘Yes, I was at court,’ I say.

‘Don’t you remember?’

As if it were engraved on my skin with a knife. ‘Oh, I remember. But I don’t like to talk of it. Why would you seek to know of the past? It means nothing now.’

‘But it’s not as if it were a secret,’ she presses me. ‘There is nothing to be ashamed of, is there?’

I swallow on a dry throat. ‘No, nothing. But it cost me my sister-in-law and my husband and our good name.’

‘Why did they execute your husband?’

‘He was accused of treason with her, and the other men.’

‘I thought that the other men were accused of adultery?’

‘It’s the same thing,’ I say tersely. ‘If the queen takes a lover that is treason to the king. D’you see? Now can we speak of something else?’

‘Then why did they execute her brother, your husband?’

I grit my teeth. ‘They were accused of being lovers,’ I say grimly. ‘Now do you see why I don’t want to speak of it? Why no-one wants to speak of it? So can we say no more of it?’

She does not even hear my tone, she is so shocked. ‘They accused her of taking her brother as a lover?’ she demanded. ‘How could they think she would

do such a thing? How could they have evidence of such a thing?’

‘Spies and liars,’ I say bitterly. ‘Be warned. Don’t trust those stupid girls you have gathered around you.’

‘Who accused them?’ she asks, still puzzled. ‘Who could give such evidence?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say, I am desperate to get away from her, from her determined hunt after these old truths. ‘It is too long ago, and I cannot remember, and if I could, I would not discuss it.’

I stride away from her, ignoring royal protocol, I cannot stand the dawning suspicion in her face. ‘Who could know?’ she repeats. But I have gone.

Katherine, Hampton Court, April 1541

I am much reassured by all that I am learning, and I wish I had thought to ask before. I had always believed that my cousin Queen Anne had been caught with a lover and beheaded for that. Now I find that it was far more complicated than that, she was at the centre of a treasonous plot, too long ago for me to understand. I was afraid in case she and I were treading the same road to the same destination, I was afraid that I had inherited her wickedness. But it turns out that there was a great plot and even my Lady Rochford and her husband were tied up in it somehow. It will have been about religion, I daresay, for Anne was a furious Sacramentary, I think, whereas now everyone with any sense is for the old ways. So I think as long as I am very clever and very discreet that I can at least be friends with Thomas Culpepper, I can see him often, he can be my companion and my comforter, and nobody need know or think anything of it. And while he is a loyal servant of the king and while I am a good wife, then no harm will be done.

Cleverly, I call my cousin Catherine Carey to my side and tell her to sort embroidery silks into shades of colour for me, as if I am about to start sewing. If she had been longer at court she would know at once that this is a ruse since I have not touched a needle since I became queen, but she brings a stool and sits at my feet and puts one pink silk beside another, and we look at them together.

‘Has your mother ever told you what happened to her sister, Queen Anne?’ I ask quietly.

She looks up at me. She has hazel eyes, not as dark as the Boleyn shade. ‘Oh, I was there,’ she says simply.

‘You were there!’ I exclaim. ‘But I didn’t know anything about it!’

She smiles. ‘You were in the country, weren’t you? We are about the same age. But I was a child at court. My mother was lady in waiting to her sister Anne Boleyn, and I was maid in waiting.’

‘So what happened?’ I am almost choking with curiosity. ‘Lady Rochford will never tell me a thing! And she gets so cross when I ask.’

‘It is a bad story and not worth the telling,’ she says.

‘Not you as well! I will be told, Catherine. She is my aunt too, you know. I have a right to know.’

‘Oh, I’ll tell you. But it still won’t make it a good story. The queen was accused of adultery with her own brother, my uncle.’ Catherine speaks quietly, as if it is an everyday event. ‘Also with other men. She was found guilty, he was found guilty, the men were found guilty. The queen and her brother George were both sentenced to death. I went into the Tower with her. I was her maid in the Tower. I was with her when they came for her, and she went out to die.’

I look at this girl, this cousin of mine, my own age, my own family. ‘You were in the Tower?’ I whisper.

She nods. ‘As soon as it was over my stepfather came and took me away. My mother swore we would never go back to court.’ She smiles, and shrugs. ‘But here I am,’ she says cheerfully. ‘As my stepfather says: where else can a girl go?’

‘You were in the Tower?’ I cannot get rid of the thought of it.

‘I heard them build her scaffold,’ she says seriously. ‘I prayed with her. I saw her go out for the last time. It was terrible. It was truly terrible. I don’t like to think of it, even now.’ She turns her face away and briefly closes her eyes. ‘It was terrible,’ she repeats. ‘It is a terrible death to die.’

‘She was guilty of treason,’ I whisper.

‘She was found guilty by the king’s court of treason,’ she corrects me, but I don’t quite see the difference.

‘So she was guilty.’

She looks at me again. ‘Well, anyway, it is a long time ago, and whether she was guilty or not, she was executed at the king’s command, and she died in her faith, and she is dead now.’

‘Then she must have been guilty of treason. The king would not execute an innocent woman.’

She bows her head to hide her face. ‘As you say, the king is not capable of making a mistake.’

‘Do you think she was innocent?’ I whisper.

‘I know she was not a witch, I know she was not guilty of treason, I am sure she was innocent of adultery with all those men,’ she says firmly. ‘But I do not argue with the king. His Grace must know best.’

‘Was she very afraid?’ I whisper.

‘Yes.’

There seems nothing more to say. Lady Rochford comes into the room and

takes in the sight of the two of us, head to head. 'What are you doing, Catherine?' she asks irritably.

Catherine looks up. 'Sorting embroidery silks for Her Grace.'

Lady Rochford gives me a long, hard look. She knows I am hardly likely to start sewing if there is no-one watching. 'Put them in the box carefully when you have finished,' she says, and goes out again.

'But she was not charged,' I whisper, nodding to the door where her ladyship has gone. 'And your mother was not charged. Just George.'

'My mother was newly come to court.' Catherine starts to gather up the silks. 'And an old favourite of the king. Lady Rochford was not charged for she gave evidence against her husband and the queen. They would not accuse her, she was their chief witness.'

'What?' I am so astounded I give a little scream, and Catherine glances at the door behind us as if she fears someone hearing us. 'She betrayed her own husband and sister-in-law?'

She nods. 'It was a long time ago,' she repeats. 'My mother says that there is no value in thinking of old scores and old wrongs.'

'How could she?' I am stammering with shock. 'How could she do such a thing? Send her husband to his death? Accuse him – of that? How can Lady Rochford be so trusted by my uncle? If she betrayed her own husband and her queen?'

My cousin Catherine rises from the floor and puts the silks in the box, as she was ordered. 'My mother commanded me to trust nobody at court,' she observes. 'She said, especially Lady Rochford.'

All this leaves me with something to think about. I cannot imagine what it was like, all that long time ago. I cannot imagine what the king must have been like when he was a young man, a healthy young man, perhaps as handsome and desirable as Thomas Culpepper is now. And what must it have been like for Queen Anne my cousin, admired as I am admired, surrounded by courtiers as I am surrounded, confiding in Jane Boleyn, just as I do.

I cannot think what this means. I cannot think what it means to me. As Catherine says, it was a long time ago, and everyone is different now. I cannot be haunted by these old, sad stories. Anne Boleyn has been a shameful secret in our family for so long it hardly matters whether she was innocent or not, since she died a traitor's death in the end. Surely, it does not matter to me? It is not as if I have to follow her footsteps, it is not as if there is a Boleyn inheritance of the scaffold and I am her heir. It is not as if any of this makes any difference to me.

It is not as if I should learn from her.

I am the queen now, and I shall have to live my life as I please. I shall have to manage as well as I can with a king who is no husband to me at all. He has hardly been out of his rooms for a month, and he will not admit me even when I go to his door for a visit. And since he never sees me, he is never pleased with me and I have had nothing from him for months: not even a trinket. It is so rude of him and so selfish that I think it would quite serve him right if I were to fall in love with another man.

I would not do so, nor would I take a lover, not for anything. But it would undoubtedly be his fault if I did so. He is a poor husband to me, and it is all very well everyone wanting to know if I am in good health and if there is any sign of an heir, but if he will not let me into his rooms, how am I to get a child?

Tonight I am resolved to be a good wife and try again, and I have sent my pageboy with a request that I might dine with the king in his chamber. Thomas Culpepper sends back a message to say that the king is a little better today, and more cheerful. He has risen from his bed and sat in the window to hear the birds in the garden. Thomas comes to my rooms himself to tell me that the king looked down from the window and saw me playing with my little dog and that he smiled at the sight of me.

‘Did he?’ I ask. I was wearing one of my new gowns, it is a very pale rose pink to celebrate the end of Lent, at last, and I wore it with my Christmas pearls. To be honest, I must have looked quite enchanting, playing in the garden. If I had only known he was watching! ‘Did you see me?’

He turns his head away as if he does not dare to confess. ‘If I had been the king I would have run down the stairs to be with you, pain or no pain. If I were your husband I don’t think I’d ever let you out of my sight.’

Two of my maids in waiting come in and glance curiously at us. I know that we are turned towards each other, almost as if we would kiss.

‘Tell His Majesty that I shall dine with him this evening, if he will allow it, and I shall do my best to cheer him,’ I say clearly, and Thomas bows and goes out.

‘Cheer him?’ Agnes remarks. ‘How? Give him a new enema?’ They all laugh together as if this is great wit.

‘I shall try to cheer him if he is not determined to be miserable,’ I say. ‘And mind your manners.’

Nobody can say that I don’t do every duty as a wife, even if he is disagreeable. And at least tonight I shall see Thomas, who will fetch me to and

from the king's rooms, so we shall have moments together. If we can get somewhere where we cannot be seen he will kiss me, I know he will, and I melt like sugar in a sauce pot at the thought of it.

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, April 1541

‘Very good,’ says my uncle Howard to me. ‘The king’s wound is no better, but at least he is on speaking terms with the queen again. He has been to her bed?’

‘Last night. She had to take the man’s part on him, astride him, above him, working him up, she does not like it.’

‘No matter. As long as the deed is done. And he likes it?’

‘For certainty. What man does not?’

He nods with a grim smile.

‘And she played your play to perfection? He is convinced that when he withdraws from court she breaks her heart at his absence and that she is always afraid that he will go back to the Cleves woman?’

‘I think so.’

He gives a short laugh. ‘Jane, my Jane, what a wonderful duke you would have made. You should have been head of our house, you are wasted as a woman. Your talents are all twisted and crushed into a woman’s compass. If you had a kingdom to defend you would have been a great man.’

I cannot stop myself smiling. I have come a long, long way from disgrace when the head of the family tells me I should have been a duke like him.

‘I have a request,’ I say, while I am in such high favour.

‘Oh, yes? I would almost say: “anything”.’

‘I know you cannot give me a dukedom,’ I begin.

‘You are Lady Rochford,’ he reminds me. ‘Our battle to keep your title was successful, you have that part of your Boleyn inheritance, whatever else we lost.’

I don’t remark that the title is not much since the hall which carries my name is occupied by my husband’s sister and her brats, rather than me. ‘I was thinking I might seek another title,’ I suggest.

‘What title?’

‘I was thinking I might marry again,’ I say boldly now. ‘Not to leave this family, but to make an alliance for us with another great house. To increase our greatness and our connections, to improve my own fortune, and to get a higher title.’ I pause. ‘For us, my lord. To advance us all. You like to position your

women to their advantage, and I should like to be married again.'

The duke turns to the window so I cannot see his face. He pauses for a long while and then when he turns back there is nothing to see; his expression is like a painting, it is so still and unrevealing. 'Do you have a man in mind?' he asks. 'A favourite?'

I shake my head. 'I would not dream of it,' I say cleverly. 'I have merely brought the suggestion to you, so that you might think what alliance might suit us: us Howards.'

'And what rank would suit you?' he asks silkily.

'I should like to be a duchess,' I say honestly. 'I should like to wear ermine. I should like to be called Your Grace. And I should like lands to be settled on me, in my own right, not held for me by my husband.'

'And why should we consider such a great alliance for you?' he asks me, as if he already knows the answer.

'Because I am going to be the kinswoman to the next King of England,' I whisper.

'One way or another?' he asks, thinking of the sick king on his back with our slight girl working her hardest above him.

'One way or another,' I reply, thinking of young Culpepper, slowly making his way towards the queen's bed, thinking he is following his desires, not knowing he is following our plan.

'I will think about it,' he says.

'I should like to marry again,' I repeat. 'I should like a man in my bed.'

'You feel desire?' he asks, almost surprised to learn that I am not some kind of cold-blooded snake.

'Like any woman,' I say. 'I should like a husband and I should like to have another child.'

'But unlike most women, you would only want that husband if he is a duke,' he says with a small smile. 'And presumably wealthy.'

I smile back. 'Well, yes, my lord,' I say. 'I am not a fool to marry for love like some we know.'

Anne, Richmond Palace, April 1541

Calculation and, to tell truth, a grain of vanity took me to court for Christmas, and I think it was wise to be there to remind the king that I am his new sister. But fear brought me home again swiftly enough to Richmond. Long after the festivities and the presents are forgotten, the fear remains. The king was merry at Christmas but was in a dark mood for Lent, and I was glad to be here, and happy to be forgotten by the court. I decided not to go to court for Easter; nor shall I go with them on the summer progress. I am afraid of the king, I see in him both my brother's tyranny and my father's madness. I look at his darting, suspicious eyes and think that I have seen this before. He is not a safe man, and I think the rest of the court will come to realise that their handsome boy has turned into a strong man, and now the man is slowly becoming beyond control.

The king speaks wildly against reformers, Protestants and Lutherans, and both my conscience and my sense of safety encourage me to attend the old church and observe the old ways. Princess Mary's faith is an example to me, but even without her I would be bending my knee to the sacrament and believing that wine is blood and bread is flesh. It is too dangerous to think otherwise in Henry's England, not even thoughts are safe.

Why should he, who has indulged his own desire in his power and prosperity, look round like some savage animal for others that he can threaten? If he were not the king, people would say that this must be a madman, who marries a young wife and, within months of the wedding, is hunting out martyrs to burn. A man who chose the very day of his wedding for the execution day of his greatest friend and advisor. This is a mad and dangerous man, and slowly everyone is coming to see it.

He has taken it into his head that there is a plot by reformers and Protestants to overthrow him. The Duke of Norfolk and Archbishop Gardiner are determined to keep the church as it is now, stripped of its wealth but basically Catholic. They want the reform to freeze where it is now. Little Kitty can say nothing to contradict them, for she knows nothing; in all truth, I doubt she knows what prayers are in her book. Obedient to their hints, the king has ordered the

bishops and even the parish priests to hunt down men and women in the churches all over England who do not show proper respect at the raising of the host, charge them with heresy, and have them burned.

The butchers' market at Smithfield has become a place for human grief as well as beasts', it has become a great centre for burning martyrs, and there is a store of faggots and stakes kept for the men and women that Henry's churchmen can find to satisfy him. It is not yet called the Inquisition, but it is an Inquisition. Young people, ignorant people, stupid people and the very few with a passionate conviction are questioned and cross-questioned on little points of theology till they contradict themselves in their fear and confusion, and are declared guilty, and then the king, the man who should be father to his people, has them dragged out and burned to death.

People are still talking of Robert Barnes who asked the very sheriff who was tying him to the stake, what was the reason for his death? The sheriff himself did not know and could not name his crime. Nor could the watching crowd. Barnes himself did not know as they lit the flames around his feet. He had done nothing against the law, he had said nothing against the church. He was innocent of any crime. How can such things be? How can a king who was once the handsomest prince in Christendom, the Defender of the Faith, the light of his nation, have become such a – dare I name it? – such a monster?

It makes me shiver as if I were cold, even here in my warm privy chamber at Richmond. Why should the king have grown so spiteful in his happiness? How can he be so cruel to his people? Why is he so whimsical in his sudden rages? How does anyone dare to live at court?

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, April 1541

We have our candidate for the queen's favour and I have done next to nothing to hasten the courtship. Without any prompting but a girl's desire, she has fallen head over heels in love with Thomas Culpepper, and by all I can see, he with her. The king's leg is giving him less pain and he has come out from his private rooms since Easter and the court is back to normal again; but there are still many chances for the young couple to meet and, indeed, the king throws them together, telling Culpepper to dance with the queen, or advising her on her gambling when Culpepper is dealing. The king loves Culpepper as his favourite groom of the bedchamber, and takes him everywhere he goes, delighting in his charm and his wit and his good looks. Whenever he visits the queen, Culpepper is always in his train and the king likes to see the two young people together. If he were not blinded by his monstrous vanity he would see that he is throwing them into each other's arms; but instead he sees the three of them as a merry trio, and swears that Culpepper reminds him of his boyhood.

The girl-queen and the boy-courtier are playing pairs together, with the king overlooking both of their cards like an indulgent father with two handsome children, when the Duke of Norfolk makes his way around the room to talk to me.

'He is back in her rooms? She is bedding the king as she should?'

'Yes,' I say, hardly moving my lips, my face turned towards the handsome young pair and their doting elder. 'But to what effect, no-one can know.'

He nods. 'And Culpepper is willing to service her?'

I smile and glance up at him. 'As you see, she is hot for him, and he longs for her.'

He nods. 'I thought as much. And he is a great favourite with the king, that's to our advantage, the king likes to see her dance with his favourites. And he is a conscienceless bastard, that's to our advantage too. D'you think he is reckless enough to risk it?'

I take a moment to admire the way the duke can plot with his eyes on his victim, and anyone would think he was talking of nothing but the weather.

‘I think he is in love with her, I think he would risk his life for her right now.’

‘Sweet,’ he says sourly. ‘We’ll have to watch him. He has a temper. There was some incident, wasn’t there? He raped some gamekeeper’s wife?’

I shake my head and turn away. ‘I hadn’t heard.’

He offers me his arm and together we stroll down the gallery. ‘Raped her and killed her husband when he tried to defend her. The king issued him with a pardon for both offences.’

I am too old to be shocked. ‘A favourite indeed,’ I say dryly. ‘What else might the king forgive him?’

‘But why would Katherine fancy him, above all the others? There’s no merit in him at all except youth and good looks and arrogance.’

I laugh. ‘For a girl married to an ugly man old enough to be her grandfather, that is probably enough.’

‘Well, she can have him, if she wishes, and I may find another youth to throw in her way as well. I have my eye on a former favourite of hers, just returned from Ireland and still carrying a torch. Can you encourage her, while we are on progress perhaps? She will be less watched, and if she were to conceive this summer she could be crowned before Christmas. I would feel safer if she had the crown on her head and a baby in her belly, especially if the king falls sick again. His doctor says his bowels are bound up tight.’

‘I can help the two of them,’ I say. ‘I can make it easy for them to meet. But I can hardly do more than that.’

The duke smiles. ‘Culpepper is such a blackguard, and she is such a flirt, that I doubt you need do more than that, my dear Lady Rochford.’

He is so warm and so confiding that I dare to put my hand on his arm as he moves to go back to the inner circle. ‘And my own affairs,’ I remind him.

His smile does not waver for a moment. ‘Ah, your hopes for marriage,’ he says. ‘I am pursuing something. I will tell you later.’

‘Who is it?’ I ask. Foolish, but I find I have caught my breath, like a girl. If I were to be married soon, it is not impossible but that I could have another child. If I were to be married to some great man I could lay down the foundation of a great family, build a big house, amass a fortune to hand down to my own heirs. I could do better than the Boleyns did. I could see my family rise. I could leave a fortune; and the shame and distress of my first marriage would be forgotten in the glamour of my second.

‘You will have to be patient,’ he says. ‘Let’s get this business with Katherine

settled first.'

Katherine, Hampton Court, April 1541

It is springtime. I have never noticed a season so much in my life before; but this year the sun is so bright and the birdsong so loud that I wake at dawn and I lie awake with every inch of my skin like silk, and my lips moist, and my heart thudding with desire. I want to laugh without cause, I want to give my ladies little gifts to make them happy. I want to dance, I want to run down the long allées of the garden and twirl around at the bottom and fall on the grass and smell the pale scent of the primroses. I want to ride all day and dance all night and gamble the king's fortune away. I have an enormous appetite, I taste all the dishes that come to the royal table and then I send the best, the very best, to one table or another; but never, never to his.

I have a secret, it is a secret so great that some days I think I can hardly breathe for the way it burns on my tongue, hot for telling. Some days it is like a tickle that makes me want to laugh. Every day, every night and day, it is like the warm, insistent pulse of lust.

One person knows it, only one. He looks at me during Mass when I peer over the balcony of the queen's box and see him down below. Slowly, slowly his head turns as if he can feel my gaze on him, he looks up, he gives me that smile, the one that starts at his blue eyes and then moves to his kissable mouth, and then he gives me the cheekiest, quickest flash of a wink. Because he knows the secret.

When we are riding, his horse comes alongside mine in the hunt and his bare hand brushes my glove and it is as if I am scalded by his touch. I dare not even look at him then, he does no more than this, the gentlest touch, just to tell me that he knows the secret; he knows the secret too.

And when we are dancing and the steps bring us together and we are handclasped and we should, according to the rules of the dance, lock gazes as we go round, then we drop our eyes, or look away, or seem quite indifferent. Because we dare not be too close, I dare not have my face near his, I dare not look at his eyes, his warm mouth, the temptation of his smile.

When he kisses my hand to leave my rooms he does not touch my fingers

with his lips, he breathes on them. It is the most extraordinary sensation, the most overwhelming feeling. All I can feel is the warmth of his breath. In his gentle grasp he must feel my fingers stir like a sweet meadow beneath a breeze, under that slightest touch.

And what is this secret, that wakes me at dawn and keeps me quivering like a hare until darkness when my fingers tremble at the warmth of his breath? It is such a secret that I never even name it to myself. It is a secret. It is a secret. I hug it to myself in the darkness of the night when King Henry is at last asleep and I can find a little patch of the bed that is not heated by his bulk nor stinking of his wound, then I form the words in my head but I do not even whisper them to myself: 'I have a secret.'

I pull my pillow down towards me, I stroke back a lock of hair from my face, I smooth my cheek against the pillow, I am ready for sleep, I close my eyes: 'I have a secret.'

Anne, Richmond Palace, May 1541

My ambassador Dr Harst brings me the most shocking, the most pitiful news that I think I shall ever hear. As he told me I started to shake at the very words. How could the king do such a thing? How could any man do such a thing? The king has executed Margaret Pole, the Countess of Salisbury. The king has ordered the death of an innocent, nearly seventy-year-old woman, for no reason in the world. Or at the very least, if he has a reason it is the one that governs so many of his actions: nothing but his own insane spite.

Good God, he is becoming a terrifying man. In my little court here at Richmond I hug my cloak around me, tell my ladies that they need not come, and that the ambassador and I are going to walk in the garden. I want to make sure that no-one can see the fear in my face. Now I know for sure how lucky I have been to escape so lightly, to escape so well. Thank God in his mercy that I was spared. There was every reason to fear the king as a murderous madman. They all warned me and although I was afraid, I did not know how vicious he could be. This wickedness, this mad malice against a woman old enough to be his own mother, the ward of his grandmother, the dearest friend of his wife, the godmother of his own daughter, a saintly woman, innocent of any crime – this proves to me once and for all that he is a most dangerous man.

That he should have a woman of nearly seventy years old dragged from her bed and beheaded – and for no reason! No reason at all except to break the heart of her son, her family, and those that love them. This king is a monster, for all that he smiles so sweetly on his little bride, for all that he is now so kind and generous to me, let me remember this: Henry of England is a monster and a tyrant, and no-one is safe in his realm. There can be no safety in the country when there is a man like this on the throne. He must be mad to behave so. That can be the only answer. He must be mad and I am living in a country ruled by a mad king and dependent on his favour for my safety.

Dr Harst lengthens his pace to keep up with me, I am striding along as if I could get away from this kingdom on foot. ‘You are distressed,’ he says.

‘Who would not be?’ I glance around, we are speaking in German and

cannot be understood, my pageboy has fallen behind us. 'Why should the king have Lady Pole executed now? He has held her in the Tower for years. She could hardly be plotting against him! She has seen no-one but her jailers for years, he has already killed half her family and taken the rest into the Tower.'

'He does not think she was plotting,' he says quietly. 'But this new uprising in the North is to restore the old religion, they are calling for the Pole family to be kings again. The family are faithful Papists and much loved, they come from the North, they are the royal family of York, the Plantagenets. They are of the old faith. The king will not tolerate any rival. Even an innocent rival.'

I shudder. 'Then why does he not take a mission against the North?' I demand. 'He could lead an army to defeat the rebels. Why behead an old lady in London for their rebellion?'

'They say that he has hated her since she took Queen Katherine of Aragon's side against him,' he says quietly. 'When he was a young man he admired her and respected her, and she was the last Plantagenet princess, more royal than he is himself. But when he put the queen aside, Lady Pole took her side and declared for her.'

'That was years ago.'

'He does not forget an enemy.'

'Why not fight the rebels as he did before?'

He lowers his voice. 'They say he is afraid. Just as he was afraid before. He never fought them, he sent the duke, Thomas Howard, before. He will not go himself.'

I stride out and the ambassador keeps pace with me, my pageboy falls behind even more. 'I shall never be really safe,' I say, almost to myself. 'Not while he lives.'

He nods. 'You cannot trust his word,' he says shortly. 'And if you offend him, he never forgets it.'

'D'you think all this –' my gesture takes in the beautiful park, the river, the wonderful palace – all this is just a sop? Something to keep me quiet, to keep my brother quiet, while the king makes his son on Katherine? And when she gives birth, and he crowns her queen, and he knows the deed is done, then he arrests me for treason or heresy or whatever offence he chooses to invent, and murders me too?'

The ambassador goes grey with fear at my suggestion. 'God knows, I pray not. But we cannot know for sure,' he says. 'At the time I thought he wanted a lasting settlement, and a lasting friendship with you. But we cannot know. With

this king one can know nothing. Indeed, he could have intended friendship then, and he could change tomorrow. That is what they all say about him. That he is fearful and changeable, they never know who he will see as his enemy. We cannot trust him.'

'He is a nightmare!' I burst out. 'He will do anything he wishes, he can do anything he wishes. He is a danger. He is a terror.'

The sober ambassador does not correct me for exaggeration. Chillingly he nods. 'He is a terror,' he agrees. 'This man is the terror of his people. Thank God you are away from him. God help his young wife.'

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, June 1541

The king, though he looks older and drawn, is at least returned to court and lives like a king instead of a sickly patient once more. His temper is a curse to his servants, and his rages can shake the court. The poison in his leg and in his bowels spills over into his nature. His Privy Council tiptoe in fear of offending him, as in the morning he will say one thing, and in the evening be a passionate advocate of the opposite course. He acts as if he cannot remember the morning and nobody dares to remind him. Whoever disagrees with him is disloyal, and the accusation of treason hangs in the air like the stink from his wound. This is a court of habitual change-coats but I have never before seen men fling away their opinions with such speed. The king contradicts himself every day and they fall into agreement with him, whatever he thinks.

His execution of the Countess of Salisbury has shaken us all, even the most hard-hearted. All of us knew her, all of us were proud to be her friend when she was the great friend and ally of Queen Katherine, and the last of our royal family of York. Easy enough to forget her when she fell from favour and was out of sight in the country. Harder to ignore her silent presence when she was in the Tower and everyone knew that she was ill-housed, and cold, and underfed, mourning her family, as even her little grandsons disappeared into the locked rooms of the Tower. Unbearable, when the king moves without warning against her, has her dragged from her bed without notice, and butchered on the block.

They say she ran from the axe, she did not make a dignified speech and lie down for him. She confessed nothing but insisted on her innocence. She fell on the scaffold and crawled to get away and the axeman had to run after her, raining down blows on her neck. It makes me shudder to hear it, it makes me sick to my soul to hear it. She crawled away from the same block that they brought out for Anne. How many women's heads will he put on it? Who will be next?

Katherine copes with this new irritable Henry better than one might hope. She has no interest in either religion or power so he does not speak to her of his policy and she does not know that his morning decisions are overturned by nightfall. Without an idea in her head she never argues with him. He treats her

like a little pet, a lapdog, there for his caress, that can be sent away when it annoys him. She responds well to this and has the sense to hide her feelings for Culpepper under a veil of wifely devotion. Besides, what master would bother to ask a lapdog if she dreams of something better?

He pulls her about before the whole court, he is without embarrassment in his treatment of her. When they are at dinner, before everyone, he will reach over and tweak at her breast and watch the colour rise to her face. He asks her for a kiss and when she offers him her cheek he will suck on her mouth, and we can see his sly hand pat her rump. She never pulls away from him, she never steps back. When I look very carefully I can see her stiffen at his touch; but she never does anything that could enrage him. For a fifteen-year-old girl she does very well. For a girl passionately in love with another man she does very well indeed.

Whatever secret moments she manages to snatch with Culpepper between dinner and dancing, midnight finds her always in her bed, her gorgeous nightgown loosely tied, her white nightcap making her eyes look large and luminous: a sleepy angel, waiting for the king. If he is late coming to her bed she sometimes falls asleep. She sleeps like a child, and has a habit of smoothing her cheek across the pillow as she lies down her head, it is very endearing. He comes in his nightshirt with his thick robe around his broad shoulders, his bad leg heavily bandaged but the stain of the pus seeping through the white dressing. Most nights Thomas Culpepper is at his side, the heavy royal hand leaning heavily on the young man's shoulder for support. Culpepper and Katherine never exchange so much as one look when he brings her old husband to her bed. He gazes up at the bedhead behind her, where the king's initials are carved, entwined with hers, and she looks down at the silky embroidered sheets. He takes the king's cape from his fat shoulders, while a groom of the bedchamber raises the sheets. Two pages haul the king upwards to the bed and steady him as he balances on his only good leg. The stench of the suppurating wound fills the bedchamber and Katherine never flinches. Her smile is steady and welcoming and the king's groan as he gets into bed, and they gently thrust his legs under the covers, does not shake her composure. We all leave, reverently stepping backwards, and only when we have closed the door on them do I glance across to Thomas Culpepper and I see that his young face is twisted with a scowl.

'You want her,' I say quietly to him.

He glances at me with a denial on his lips, but then he shrugs and says nothing.

‘She wants you,’ I volunteer.

At once he snatches me by the elbow and draws me so that we are in the window bay, almost wrapped up in the thick curtain. ‘She says this to you? She has told you this in so many words?’

‘She has.’

‘When has she said such a thing to you? What did she say?’

‘She comes out of her bedroom when the king has fallen asleep most nights. I take off her nightcap, I brush her hair, sometimes she is almost crying.’

‘He hurts her?’ he asks, shocked.

‘No,’ I say. ‘She is crying with lust. Night after night she labours over him to give him pleasure, and all she can do for herself is to wind herself up tighter and tighter, like a bowstring ready to snap.’

Culpepper’s face is a picture, if I were not doing my work for my lord duke I would not be able to contain my laughter. ‘She cries with lust?’

‘She could scream with it,’ I say. ‘Some nights I give her a sleeping powder, other nights she takes mulled wine and spices. But even so, some nights she cannot sleep for hours. She paces round the chamber pulling at the ribbons of her nightgown, saying that she is burning up.’

‘She always comes out after the king is asleep?’

‘If you were to come back in an hour she would be coming out then,’ I whisper.

He hesitates for a moment. ‘I dare not,’ he says.

‘You could see her,’ I tempt him. ‘When she comes from his bed with her desire unslaked, longing for you.’

His face is a portrait of hunger.

‘She wants you,’ I remind him. ‘I stroke her hair and she drops back her head and whispers, “Oh, Thomas”.’

‘She whispers my name?’

‘She is mad for you.’

‘If I were to be caught with her it would be her death, and mine,’ he says.

‘You could just come and talk to her,’ I say. ‘Soothe her. It would be a service to the king to keep her steady. How long can she go on like this? The king pulling her about every night, stripping her naked, running his eyes and then his hands all over her, touching every inch of her, and yet never giving her a moment of peace? She is wound up tight, I tell you, Master Culpepper, tight like a lute string overstrung.’

His throat contracts as he swallows at the picture. ‘If I could just talk to her

...'

'Come back in an hour and I will let you in,' I say. I am almost as breathless as him, as excited by my words as he is. 'You can talk to her in her privy chamber, the king will be asleep in the bedroom. I can be here with the two of you, all the time. What complaint could anyone make if I am there, with the two of you, all the time?'

Oddly, he is not reassured by my friendship; he pulls back and stares at me suspiciously. 'Why would you so serve me?' he demands. 'What benefit for you?'

'I serve the queen,' I say quickly. 'I always serve the queen. She wants your friendship, she wants to see you. All I do is make that safe for her.'

He must be mad with love if he thinks that anyone could make their meeting safe. 'In an hour,' he says.



I wait by the fire as it dies down. I am doing my duty for the duke but I find my mind straying all the time to my husband George, and to Anne. He used to wait for her to come from the king's bed, just as I am waiting now, just as Culpepper will wait for the queen. I shake my head, I have sworn not to think of them any more, I have sworn to put the thought of them away from me. I drove myself quite mad thinking about them before, now they are gone, I need not torment myself about them any more.

After a little while, the door to the bedchamber opens and Katherine comes out. There are dark shadows under her eyes, and her face is pale. 'Lady Rochford,' she says in a little whisper as she sees me. 'Do you have my wine ready?'

I am recalled to the present. 'It's ready.' I seat her in the chair nearest the fire.

She puts her bare feet up on the fender. She shudders. 'He disgusts me,' she says inconsequentially. 'Dear God, I disgust myself.'

'It is your duty.'

'I can't do it,' she says. She closes her eyes and tips back her head. A tear creeps out from under her closed eyelids and runs down her pale cheek. 'Not even for the jewels. I can't go on doing it.'

I pause for a moment and then I whisper: 'You will have a visitor tonight.'

At once she sits up, alert. 'Who?'

‘Someone you will want to see,’ I say. ‘Someone you have longed for, for months, perhaps even years. Who would you most want to see?’

The colour floods into her cheeks. ‘You cannot mean ...’ she starts. ‘Is he coming?’

‘Thomas Culpepper.’

She gives a little gasp at his name and she leaps up. ‘I have to dress,’ she says. ‘You must do my hair.’

‘You cannot,’ I say. ‘Let me turn the key in the bedroom door.’

‘And lock the king inside?’

‘Better that, than he wakes and comes out. We can always find an excuse.’

‘I want my perfume!’

‘Leave it.’

‘I can’t see him like this.’

‘Shall I stop him at the door and tell him to go away again?’

‘No!’

There is a little tap on the door, so soft that I could not have heard it if I had not the ears of a spy. ‘There he is now.’

‘Don’t let him in!’ She puts a hand on my arm. ‘It’s too dangerous. Dear God, I shan’t lead him into danger.’

‘He only wants to talk,’ I soothe her. ‘There can be no harm in that.’ Quietly, I open the door to him. ‘It is all right,’ I say to the sentry. ‘The king wants Master Culpepper.’ I open the door wide and Culpepper steps into the room.

At the fireside, Katherine rises to her feet. The glow of the fire illuminates her face, gilds her gown. Her hair, tumbled about her face, glints in the light, her lips part to whisper his name, her colour rises. The ribbons of her gown tremble at her throat where her pulse thuds.

Culpepper walks towards her like a man in a dream. He stretches out a hand to her and she takes it and puts his palm at once to her cheek. He holds a handful of her hair, his other hand blindly finds her waist, they slide towards each other as if they have been waiting for months to touch like this; indeed they have. Her hands go to his shoulders, he draws her closer, without a word being said, she gives him her mouth, and he bows his head and takes her.

I turn the key on the outer door so the sentry cannot come in. Then I go back to the bedroom door, I stand with my back to it, my ears pricked for any noise from the king. I can hear the stertorous sound of his wheezy breath, and a loud wet belch. In the firelight before me, Thomas Culpepper slides his hand inside the throat of her gown, I see her head drop back, resistless, as he touches her

breast, she lets him caress her, and she runs her fingers through his curly brown hair, pulling his face down to her bared neck.

I cannot tear my gaze away. It is as I always imagined it, when I used to think of George with his mistress. A pleasure like a knife, desire as pain. He sits on the high-backed chair, and draws her to him. I can see little more than the back of the chair and their silhouettes, dark against the glow of the fire. It is like a dance of desire as he takes her hips and pulls her astride him. I see her fumble with his hose, as he pulls at the ribbons at the front of her gown. They are about to do it as I watch them. They are shameless: me in the same room, and her husband behind the door. They are so wanton and so helpless with their desire that they are about to do it here and now, in front of me.

I hardly dare breathe; I must see everything. The sleeping king's heavy breathing is matched by their quiet panting, they are moving together, then I see the gleam of her pale thigh as she pulls her nightgown aside, and I hear him groan and I know that she has straddled him and taken him in. I hear a little sigh of desire and it is me, aroused with stolen lust. The chair creaks as she clings to the back and rocks forwards and back on him, her breath is coming fast, he is thrusting up inside her, I hear her start to moan as her pleasure mounts and I am afraid that they will wake the king, but nothing could stop them, not even if he were to wake and shout, not even if he were to try the door and come out; they are tied together by lust, they cannot break free. I feel my own legs weaken with mirrored desire as Katherine's little cries mount, and I slide down to the floor, to my knees, watching them but seeing George's desirous face, and his mistress astride him, until Katherine suddenly lets out a gasp and falls to Thomas' shoulder, at the same moment he groans and grips her, then they both subside.

It feels like a long time before she gives a little murmur and stirs. Culpepper lets her go and she rises from the seat, dropping the hem of her nightgown and smiling back at him as she goes to the fire. He rises from the chair and ties his laces again, then he reaches for her, wraps his arms around her from behind, nuzzles at her neck, her hair. Like a young girl in love for the first time, she turns in his arms and gives him her mouth, she kisses him as if she adores him, she kisses him as if this is a love that will last forever.



In the morning I go to find my lord duke. The court is preparing to go hunting and the queen is being lifted into the saddle by one of the king's friends. The

king himself, hauled to the back of his hunter, is in a merry mood, laughing at Culpepper's new bridle of red leather, and calling up his hounds. The duke is not riding today, he stands at the doorway, watching the horses and the hounds in the cool of the morning. I pause beside him as I go to my horse.

'It is done,' I say. 'Last night.'

He nods as if I am telling him of the cost of the blacksmith. 'Culpepper?' he asks.

'Yes.'

'Will she have him again?'

'As often as she can. She is besotted.'

'Keep her discreet,' he says. 'And tell me the moment she is with child.'

I nod. 'And my own affair?' I ask boldly.

'Your affair?' he repeats, pretending he has forgotten.

'My marriage,' I say. 'I ... I need to be married.'

He raises his eyebrow. 'Better to be married than to burn, my dear Lady Rochford?' he asks. 'But your marriage to George did not prevent you from burning up.'

'That was not my fault,' I say quickly. 'It was her.'

He smiles, he does not have to ask whose shadow fell on my marriage and set the fire that burned us all up.

'What news of my new marriage?' I press him.

'I am exchanging letters now,' he says. 'When you tell me that the queen is with child, I shall confirm it.'

'And the nobleman?' I ask urgently. 'Who is he?'

'Monsignor le Compte?' he asks. 'Wait and see, my dear Lady Rochford. But believe me, he is wealthy, and he is young, handsome and – let me think – no more than three, perhaps four, steps from the throne of France. Will that satisfy you?'

'Completely.' I can hardly speak for excitement. 'I shall not fail you, my lord.'

Anne, Richmond Palace, June 1541

I have a letter from the Lord Chamberlain to invite me to go on progress with the court this summer. The king is to go to his northern lands, which were so recently in revolt against him for his attack on the old religion. He is going to punish and reward, he has sent the hangman ahead of him and he will follow safely behind. I sit for a long time with this letter in my hand.

I am trying to weigh up the dangers. If I am at court with the king and he enjoys my company and I am high in his favour then I secure my safety for perhaps another year. But equally, the hard-faced men of his court will see that he likes me again and they will put their minds to how to keep me from him. Katherine's uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, will be anxious to keep his niece in high favour, and he will not like any comparison that is made between her and me. He will have kept the documents that prove that I was part of a Papist plot to destroy the king. He may have created evidence of worse: adultery or witchcraft, heresy or treason. Who knows what solemnly sworn statements he gathered when they thought they would put me to death? He will not have thrown them away when the king decided to divorce me. He will have kept them. He will keep them forever in case one day he wants to destroy me.

But if I do not go, then I am not there to defend myself. If anyone says anything against me, links me with the northern conspirators, or with poor Margaret Pole the countess, with the disgraced Thomas Cromwell, with anything my brother may do or say, then there is no-one to speak in my favour.

I tuck the letter in the pocket of my gown and walk to the window to look out at the bobbing branches in the orchards beyond the garden. I like it here, I like being my own mistress, I like being in command of my own fortune. The thought of going into the bear pit which is the English court and having to face the monstrous old terror which is the king is too much for me to dare. I think, pray God I am right, that I shall not go on progress with the king, I shall stay here and take the risk that they may speak against me. Better that, than travel with him in constant danger of attracting envy. Better anything than travel with him and see those piggy eyes turn on me and realise that by some act – nothing I

even know that I have done – I have fired his enmity and I am in danger.

He is a danger, he is a danger, he is a danger to everyone who is near him. I shall stay at Richmond and hope that the danger that is Henry passes me by and that I can live here in safety and peace.

I shall stay free of the frightened flock that is the court, I shall be alone like a gyrfalcon, solitary in the arching silence of the sky. I have reason to be fearful but I will not live in fear. I shall take my chance. I shall have this summer to myself.

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, July 1541

The duke has come to pay a visit to his niece before the start of the summer progress, and realises, very quickly, that he could not have chosen a worse time. The queen's rooms are in chaos. Not even the most experienced servants, not even the queen's sister and stepmother, can make any sense of the orders, as Katherine swears she cannot go without her new gowns, and then remembers that she has had them packed and sent ahead, demands to see her jewel box, accuses a maid of stealing a silver ring, and then finds it again, almost bursts into tears at the quandary of whether or not to take her sables to York, and then finally pitches face down on her bed and swears she will not go at all since the king hardly pays any attention to her anyway, and what pleasure will she have at York when her life is hardly worth living?

‘What the devil is going on?’ the duke hisses at me, as if it were my fault.

‘It has been like this all day,’ I say wearily. ‘But yesterday was worse.’

‘Why do her servants not take care of all this?’

‘Because she interrupts them, and orders one thing and then another. We have had her chest of gowns packed and corded and ready for the wagon twice already. Her wardrobe mistress cannot be blamed, it is Katherine who pulls everything out for a pair of gloves that she cannot do without.’

‘It is impossible that the queen's rooms should be so disorderly,’ he exclaims, and I see that for once he is genuinely disturbed. ‘These are the queen's rooms,’ he repeats. ‘They should be gracious. She should have dignity. Queen Katherine of Aragon would never –’

‘She was born and bred a queen, but these are a girl's rooms,’ I say. ‘And a spoiled, wilful girl at that. She doesn't behave like a queen, she behaves like a girl. And if she wants to turn the place upside down for a ribbon, she will do so, and no-one can tell her to behave.’

‘You should command her.’

I raise my eyebrows. ‘Your Grace, she is the queen. You made this child Queen of England. Between her upbringing in your houses and the king's indulgence she has been taught no sense whatsoever. I shall wait until she goes

to dinner and then I shall have everything set to rights, and tomorrow all this will be forgotten and she will go on progress and everything she needs will be packed, and anything she has left behind she will buy new.'

The duke shrugs and turns from the room. 'Anyway, it's you I wanted to see,' he says. 'Come out into the hall. I cannot stand this women's noise.'

He takes my hand and leads me out of the room. The sentry stands to one side of the door and we move away so he cannot listen.

'She is discreet with Culpepper at least,' he says bluntly. 'No-one has any idea. How many times has he bedded her?'

'Half a dozen,' I say. 'And I am glad that there is no talk of her in the court. But here in her rooms at least two of her women know that she loves him. She looks for him, her face lights up when she sees him. She has gone missing at least once in the last week. But the king comes to her rooms at night and in the day there is someone always with her. Nobody could prove anything against them.'

'You will have to find a way for them when they are on progress,' he says. 'Travelling from one house to another, there must be opportunities. It is no good for us if they can meet only seldom. We need a son from this girl, she has to be serviced until she is in pup.'

I raise my eyebrows at his vulgarity but I nod in agreement. 'I will help her,' I say. 'She can plan no better than a kitten.'

'Let her plan like a bitch in heat,' he says. 'As long as he beds her.'

'And my affair?' I remind him. 'You said that you were thinking of a husband for me?'

The duke smiles. 'I have written to the French count. How would you like to be Madame la Comtesse?'

'Oh,' I breathe. 'He has replied?'

'He has indicated an interest. There will be your dowry to be considered and any settlement on your children. But I can promise you this, if you can get that girl with child by the end of the summer then I shall kiss your hand as Madame la Comtesse by winter.'

I am almost panting in my eagerness. 'And is he a young man?'

'He is about your age, and with a good fortune. But he would not insist on you living in France, I have already asked. He would be happy that you remain as lady in waiting to the queen and would only ask that you have a house in both England and France.'

'He has a chateau?'

‘All but a palace.’

‘Have I met him? Do I know him? Oh, who is he?’

He pats my hand. ‘Be patient, my most useful of all the Boleyn girls. Do your work and you shall have your reward. We have an agreement, do we not?’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘We do. I shall keep my side of the bargain.’ I look at him expectantly.

‘And I shall keep mine, of course.’

Katherine, Lincoln Castle, August 1541

I had feared it would be terribly dull, travelling round the country while people turn out to stare and offer us loyal addresses at every market cross, and the king sits in state in every town hall in the country and I grit my teeth to stop myself yawning while fat aldermen in gowns address him in Latin – at least I suppose it's Latin, Thomas is very naughty and swears it is Ethiopian because we have got lost and are in Africa – but actually, it's tremendous fun. The speeches are very dull indeed, but as soon as they are over there's a masque or a dance or an entertainment or a picnic or something of the sort, and it is much more fun being the queen on progress than being the queen at court because every few days we move to another castle or house, and I have no time to get bored.

Here at Lincoln the king commanded that I and all my ladies should dress in Lincoln green and it was like a masque when we entered the town. The king himself was in dark green with a bow and quiver of arrows over his shoulder and a rakish bonnet with a feather.

'Is he Robin Hood, or is he Sherwood Forest?' Thomas Culpepper whispered to me and I had to put my gloves to my mouth to smother a laugh.

Everywhere we have gone there has been Tom Culpepper, catching my eye and making me giggle so even the most tedious loyal address is a moment when I can feel his eyes on me. And the king is much better in both health and temper, which is a relief for all of us. He was very irritated by the rebellion in the North, but that seems to be defeated now, and of course he beheaded the poor Countess of Salisbury, which upset me very much at the time, but now all the wicked people are defeated or dead and we can sleep easily in our beds again, he tells me. He has made an alliance with the emperor against the King of France that will defend us from France, he tells me – they are our enemies now, *voilà!* – and this is a good thing too.

I should not waste my time grieving for the countess for she was very old, after all, as old as my grandmother. But best of all, when we get to York we are going to meet with the Scots court and with the king's nephew King James of Scotland. The king is looking forward to this, and I am too, for there will be a

great meeting of the two countries and jousting and tournaments and the English knights are certain to win for we have the bravest men and the best fighters. Tom Culpepper will wear his new suit of armour and I will be Queen of the Joust, with my new curtains on the royal box, and I cannot wait to see it.

I have practised everything. I have practised walking down the steps into the box and looking round to smile. I have practised sitting in the box and I have practised my gracious queen face, one that I shall put on when people cheer for me. And I have practised how I shall lean over the box and hand out the prizes.

‘You might as well practise how to breathe,’ Joan Bulmer says rudely.

‘I like to get things right,’ I say. ‘Everyone will be looking at me. I like to do it right.’

There will be more than a hundred English knights jousting and I believe every single one of them has asked to carry my favour. Thomas Culpepper took the opportunity to come to my presence chamber at Lincoln Castle, and kneel to me and ask if he could be my knight.

‘Has the king ordered you to ask me?’ I say, knowing very well that he has not.

He has the grace to look down, as if embarrassed. ‘This is my own suit from my own beating heart,’ he says.

‘You are not always so humble,’ I say. I am thinking of a very hard kiss and his hand clutching at my buttocks as if he would lift me on to his cock then and there in the gallery before we left Hampton Court.

He glances up at me, one quick, dark glance, and I know that he is thinking of that too. ‘Sometimes I dare to hope.’

‘You certainly act like a hopeful man,’ I say.

He giggles and ducks his head. I put my gloves to my lips to bite them so I don’t laugh aloud.

‘I know my mistress and my queen,’ he says seriously. ‘My heart beats faster when she just walks past me.’

‘Oh, Thomas,’ I whisper.

This is so delightful that I wish it could go on all day. One of my ladies comes towards us and I think she is going to interrupt but Lady Rochford says something to her and she is distracted, and pauses.

‘I always have to walk past,’ I say. ‘I can never pause for as long as I would wish.’

‘I know,’ he says, and under the caressing, flirtatious tone there is real regret. I can hear it. ‘I know. But I have to see you tonight, I have to touch you.’

I really don't dare to reply to this, it is too passionate, and though there are only the ladies of my chamber around us, I know that my desire for him must just blaze out of my face.

'Ask Lady Rochford,' I whisper. 'She will find a way.' Aloud, I say: 'Anyway, I cannot give you my favour. I shall have to ask the king who he favours.'

'You can keep your favour if you will only give me a smile as I ride out,' he says. 'They say the Scots are formidable fighters, big men with strong horses. Say you will be watching me and hoping that I don't fall beneath a Scots lance.'

This is so poignant I could almost cry. 'I always watch you, you know I do. I have always watched you joust, and I have always prayed for your safety.'

'And I watch you,' he says, so quietly that I can hardly hear him. 'I watch you with such desire, Katherine, my love.'

I can see that they are all looking at me. I rise, a little unsteadily, to my feet and he gets to his. 'You can ride with me tomorrow,' I say, as if I don't much care either way. 'We are going hunting in the morning before Mass.'

He bows and steps back, and as he turns away I give a little gasp of shock for there in the doorway, like a ghost, so like a ghost that for a moment I almost think he is a ghost – is Francis Dereham. My Francis, my first love, turned up on my doorstep in a smart cloak and a good jacket and a handsome hat, as if he were doing very well indeed, and as handsome as he was all those days ago when we played at husband and wife in my bed at Lambeth.

'Mr Dereham,' I say very clearly, so that he shall make no mistake that we are not on first name terms any more.

He understands it well enough for he drops to one knee. 'Your Grace,' he says. He has a letter in his hand and he holds it out. 'Your respected grandmother, the duchess, bid me to come to you and bring you this letter.'

I nod to my page and I let Francis see that I don't bestir myself to go three paces for my own letters. The lad takes it from Francis and hands it to me, for I am far too important to lean. Without looking towards him I can see Thomas Culpepper, as stiff as a heron, standing by and glaring at Francis.

I open the duchess's letter. It is a terrible scrawl for she can hardly write, and since I can barely read we are very poor correspondents. I look for Lady Rochford and she is at my side in a moment. 'What does she say?' I pass it over.

She reads it quickly and since I am watching her face and not the page I see an expression flicker across her eyes. It is as if she is playing cards and she has just seen a very good suit come up in her partner's hand, she is almost amused.

‘She writes to remind you of this gentleman, Francis Dereham, who served in her household when you were there.’

I have to admire the mask of her face, which is now absolutely without expression, given that she knows what Francis was to me and I to him, for I told her all about him when I was nothing more than a maid in waiting and she a far grander lady in waiting to Queen Anne. And, now I come to think of it, since half my ladies in waiting were my friends and companions in those days too they all know that Francis and I, facing each other so politely, used to be naked bedmates on every night he could sneak into the girls’ bedchamber. Agnes Restwold gives a smothered little giggle and I shoot her a look which tells her to keep her stupid mouth shut. Joan Bulmer, who had him before I did, is utterly transfixed.

‘Oh, yes,’ I say, taking my cue from Lady Rochford, and I turn and smile at Francis as if we were long-standing acquaintances. I can feel Thomas Culpepper’s eyes flicking on me and around at the others and I think that I’m going to have to explain this to him later, and he won’t like it.

‘She recommends him to your service and asks you to take him as a private secretary.’

‘Yes,’ I say, I can’t think what to do. ‘Of course.’

I turn to Francis. ‘My lady grandmother recommends you to me.’ I really cannot think why she would interest herself in putting him into my household. And I can’t understand why she would put him in a position so close to me, when she herself boxed my ears and called me a lustful slut for letting him into the bedchamber when I was a girl in her household. ‘You are indebted to her.’

‘I am,’ he says.

I lean towards Lady Rochford. ‘Appoint him,’ she says briefly in my ear. ‘Your grandmother says so.’

‘So to oblige my grandmother, I am pleased to welcome you to my court,’ I finish.

He rises to his feet. He is such a handsome young man. I really cannot blame myself for loving him when I was a girl. He turns his head and smiles at me as if he were shy of me now. ‘I thank you, Your Grace,’ he says. ‘I will serve you loyally. Heart and soul.’

I give him my hand to kiss and when he comes close I can smell the scent of his skin, that familiar, sexy smell that I once knew so well. That was the scent of my first lover, he meant everything to me. Why, I kept his shirt under my pillow so that I could bury my face in it when I went to sleep and dream of him. I

adored Francis Dereham then, I only wish to God I didn't have to meet him again now.

He bends over my hand and his lips on my fingertips are as soft and as yielding as I remember them on my mouth. I lean forwards. 'You will have to be very discreet in my service,' I say. 'I am the queen now and there must be no gossip about me, not about now, and not about the old days.'

'I am yours heart and soul,' he says, and I feel that disloyal, betraying, irresistible flicker of desire. He loves me still, he must love me still, otherwise why would he come to serve me? And though we parted on bad terms, I remember his touch and the utter breathtaking excitement of his kisses, and the slide of his naked thigh between mine when he first came to my bed, and the insistent pressing of his lust, which was never resisted.

'Take heed what words you speak,' I say, and he smiles at me as if he knows as well as I do what I am thinking.

'Take heed what you remember,' he says.

Jane Boleyn, Pontefract Castle, August 1541

The two young men, and half a dozen others, each of them with good reason to believe that they are the queen's favourites, circle her every day and the court has all the tension of a whorehouse before a brawl. The queen, excited by the attention she gets at every corner, at every hunt and breakfast and masque, is like a child who has stayed up too late; she is feverish with arousal. On the one hand she has Thomas Culpepper, holding her when she dismounts from her horse, at her side for dancing, whispering in her ear when she plays cards, first to greet her in the morning, and last to leave her rooms at night. On the other she has young Dereham, appointed to wait for her orders, at her right hand with his little writing desk, as if she ever dictated a letter to anyone, constantly whispering to her, stepping forwards to advise, ever present where he need not be. And then, how many others? A dozen? Twenty? Not even Anne Boleyn at her most capricious had so many young men circling her, like dogs slavering at a butcher's door. But Anne, even at her most flirtatious, never appeared to be a girl who might bestow her favours for a smile, who might be seduced by a song, by a poem, by a word. The whole court begins to see that the queen's joy, which has made the king so happy, is not that of an innocent girl whom he so fondly believes adores only him, it is that of a flirt who revels in constant male attention.

Of course there is trouble, there is almost a fight. One of the senior men at court tells Dereham that he should have risen from the dinner table and gone, since he is not of the queen's council and only they are sitting over their wine. Dereham, loose-mouthed, says that he was in the queen's counsels long before the rest of us knew her, and will be familiar with her long after the rest of us are dismissed. Of course: uproar. The terror is that it might get to the king's ears and so Dereham is summoned to the queen's rooms and she sees him, with me standing by.

'I cannot have you causing trouble in my household,' she says stiffly to him.

He bows but his eyes are bright with confidence. 'I meant to cause no trouble, I am yours: heart and soul.'

‘It is all very well to say that,’ she says irritably. ‘But I don’t want people asking what I was to you, and you were to me.’

‘We were in love,’ he maintains staunchly.

‘This should never be said,’ I interpose. ‘She is the queen. Her previous life must be as if it had never been.’

He looks at her, ignoring me. ‘I will never deny it.’

‘It is over,’ she says determinedly, I am proud of her. ‘And I will not have gossip about the past, Francis. I cannot have people talking about me. I shall have to send you away if you cannot keep silent.’

He pauses for a moment. ‘We were husband and wife before God,’ he says quietly. ‘You cannot deny that.’

She makes a little gesture with her hand. ‘I don’t know,’ she says helplessly. ‘At any rate, it is over now. You can have a place at court only if you never speak of it. Can’t he, Lady Rochford?’

‘Can you keep your mouth shut?’ I ask. ‘Never mind all this never denying it nonsense. You can stay if you can keep your mouth shut. If you are a braggart you will have to go.’

He looks at me without warmth, there is no love between us. ‘I can keep my mouth shut,’ he says.

Anne, Richmond Palace, September 1541

It has been a good summer for me, my first as a free woman in England. The farms attached to my palace are in good heart and I have ridden out and watched the crops ripen, and in the fruit orchards the trees are growing heavy with fruit. This is a rich country, we have built great stacks of hay to feed the animals through the winter, and in the barns we are piling up great mountains of grain to go to the miller for flour. If the country was ruled by a man who wanted peace, and who would share the wealth, then it would be a peaceful and prosperous land.

The king's hatred of both Papists and Protestants sours the life of his country. In the church when they raise the Host even the smallest children are trained to keep their eyes on it, and bob their heads and cross themselves by rote, and are threatened by their parents that if they do not do as the king demands, then they will be taken away and burned. There is no understanding of the sanctity of the act among the poor people, they just know that it is the king's desire now that they should bob and bow and bless themselves, just as before they had to hear the Mass in English, not Latin, and they had a Bible put in the church for anyone to read, and now it has been taken away again. The king commands the church just as the king commands more and more unjust taxation: because he can, because no-one can dare to stop him, because now it is treason even to question him.

There are quiet murmurs that the rebellion in the North was led by brave men, courageous men who thought that they could fight for their God against the king. But the older men of the little town point out that they are all dead now, and the king's progress to the North this year is to march over their graves and insult their widows.

I don't interfere with anything that anyone says, if there is anything spoken in my hearing which could amount to treason I go quickly away, and make sure that I tell one of my ladies or one of my household that something was said, but I did not understand it. I hide in my stupidity, I think it will be my salvation. I put on my dull, uncomprehending face and trust that my reputation for ugliness and

stolidity will save me. In general, people say nothing before me but treat me with a sort of puzzled kindness, as if I have survived some terrible illness and should still be treated with care. In a way, I have. I am the first woman to survive marriage with the king. That is a more remarkable feat than surviving the plague. The plague will go through a town and in the worst summer, in the poorest areas, perhaps one in ten women will die. But of the king's four wives only one has emerged with her health intact: me.

Dr Harst's spy reports that the king's spirits are much improved and his temper lifted by his travels north. The man was not ordered to go with the court but has stayed behind to clean the king's rooms in the general sweetening of Hampton Court Palace. So I cannot know how their progress is going. I had a brief letter from Lady Rochford and she told me that the king's health is better and that he and Katherine are merry. If that poor child does not conceive a baby soon, I do not think she will be merry for much longer.

I write also to the Princess Mary. She is much relieved that the question of her marriage to a French prince has been utterly put to one side as Spain and France are to go to war and King Henry will side with Spain. His great fear is of an invasion from France and some of the hated taxation is being well spent on forts all along the south coast. From Princess Mary's point of view, only one thing matters: if her father is aligned with Spain then she will not be married off to a French prince. She is such a passionate daughter of her Spanish mother that I think she would rather live and die a virgin than be married to a Frenchman. She hopes the king will allow me to visit her before autumn. When he returns from his progress I shall write to the king and ask him if I may invite the Princess Mary to stay with me. I should like to spend time with her. She laughs at me and calls us the royal spinsters, and so we are. Two women who are of no use. Nobody knows whether I am a duchess or a queen or a nothing. Nobody knows if she is a princess or a bastard. The royal spinsters. I wonder what will become of us?

Katherine, King's Manor, York, September 1541

Well, it is as I could have predicted, an utter disappointment. King James of Scotland is not coming and there is to be no jousting and no rival courts, and I am queen only of the little English court and nothing special is happening at all. I shall not see my darling Thomas joust, and he will not see me in the royal box with my new curtains. The king swears that James is too afraid to show his face this far south of the border, and if that is true, then it can only be because he does not trust the king's own honourable word of truce. And, though nobody dare say it, he is quite right to be cautious. For the king promised a truce to the leaders of the northern revolt and his friendship, and all manner of changes that they wanted, he swore it on his royal name; and then, when they trusted him, he caught them and hanged them. Their dead heads are still stuck on the walls all around York, and I must say it is most disagreeable. I remark to Henry that perhaps James fears being hanged too and he laughs a lot and says that I am a clever little kitten and that James might well be afraid. But actually, I don't think it's very good if people can't trust you. Because if James had been able to trust the king's word then he would have come and we would all have had a merry time.

Also, this is a very fine house and newly done for us, and yet I can't help but notice that it was a beautiful abbey before it was the King's Manor, and I should think that since the people of York are great sympathisers for the old faith (if not secret Papists) that they would very much resent us dancing about where the monks used to pray. I don't say this of course, I am not quite an idiot. But I can imagine how I might feel if I had come here for help and prayer and now find the place quite changed and a great fat greedy king sitting in the middle of it all, and calling for his dinner.

Anyway, what matters most is that the king is happy, and even I, amazingly enough, don't mind about missing the joust nearly as much as I should. I am a little disappointed by the lack of handsome Scotsmen, and being so far from the London goldsmiths; but I cannot really be troubled about it. Astoundingly, it doesn't even seem that important. For I am in love. For the first time in my life,

utterly and completely, I have fallen in love, and I cannot believe it myself.

Thomas Culpepper is my lover, he is my heart's desire, he is the only man I have ever loved, he is the only man I ever will love. I am his and he is mine, heart and soul. All the complaints I have ever made about having to bed a man old enough to be my father are now forgotten. I do my duty by the king as a form of tax, a fine I have to pay; and then the moment he is asleep I am free to be with my love. Better even than that, and far less risky, is that the king is so wearied by the celebrations on this progress that he often does not come to my rooms at all. I wait until the court is quiet and then Lady Rochford creeps down the stairs, or opens the side door, or unlocks a hidden door to the gallery and in steps my Thomas and we can have hours together.

We have to be careful, we have to be as careful as if our very lives depended on it. But every time we move to a new place Lady Rochford finds a private way to my rooms, and tells Thomas how it is to be done. Without fail he comes to me, he loves me as I love him. We go to my room and Lady Rochford guards the door for us, and all night I lie in his arms and we kiss and whisper and make promises of love that will last forever. At dawn she makes a little scratch on the door and I get up and we kiss, and he slips away like a ghost. Nobody sees him. Nobody sees him come, and nobody sees him go, it is a wonderful secret.

Of course the girls talk, this is a most unruly crowd. I cannot believe that they would dare to chatter such gossip and scandal if Queen Anne were still on the throne. But because it is only me and most of them are older than me, and so many are from the old days at Lambeth, they have no respect at all, and they laugh at me, and they tease me about Francis Dereham, and I am afraid that they watch what time I go to bed and wonder that my only companion is Lady Rochford, and that the door to my bedroom is locked and no-one can come in.

'They know nothing,' she assures me. 'And they would tell nobody, anyway.'

'They should not be gossiping at all,' I say. 'Can you not tell them to keep their tongues off my business?'

'How can I, when it was you laughing about Francis Dereham with Joan Bulmer, yourself?'

'Well, I never laugh about Thomas,' I say. 'I never mention his name. I don't even say his name in the confessional. I don't even say his name to myself.'

'That is wise,' she says. 'Keep it a secret. Keep it a complete secret.'

She is brushing my hair and she gives a little pause and looks at me in the mirror. 'When is your course due?' she asks.

‘I can’t remember.’ I never keep count. ‘Was it last week? Anyway, it hasn’t come.’

There is a sort of bright alertness in her face. ‘It has not come?’

‘No. Brush at the back, Jane, Thomas likes it smooth at the back.’

Her hand moves but she does not do it very carefully. ‘Do you feel at all sick?’ she asks. ‘Are your breasts any bigger?’

‘No,’ I say. Then I realise what is in her mind. ‘Oh! Are you thinking I might be with child?’

‘Yes,’ she whispers. ‘Please God.’

‘But that would be dreadful!’ I exclaim. ‘Because, don’t you see? Don’t you think? Lady Rochford, it might not be the king’s child!’

She puts down the brush and shakes her head. ‘It is God’s will,’ she says slowly, as if she wants me to learn something. ‘If you are married to the king and you conceive a child then that is God’s will. It is God’s will that the king has a child. So it is the king’s child, as far as you are concerned, it is the king’s own child, whatever has happened between you and another.’

I feel a little muddled by this. ‘But what if it is Thomas’s child?’ At once I have a picture of Thomas’s little son, a brown-haired, blue-eyed rascal like his father, a strong boy from a young father.

She sees my face and she guesses what I am thinking. ‘You are the queen,’ she says firmly. ‘Any child you bear will be the king’s child, as God wishes. You cannot think for one moment anything different.’

‘But ...’

‘No,’ she says. ‘And you should tell the king that you have hopes of being with his child.’

‘Is it not too early?’

‘It’s never too early to give him cause for hope,’ she says. ‘The last thing we want is to have him discontented.’

‘I will tell him,’ I say. ‘He is coming to my room tonight. You will have to fetch Thomas to me later. Then I will tell him too.’

‘No,’ she says. ‘You won’t tell Thomas Culpepper.’

‘But I want to!’

‘It would spoil everything.’ She speaks very fast, persuasively. ‘If he thinks you are with child he will not lie with you. He will find you disgusting. He wants a mistress, not a mother of his children. You say nothing to Thomas Culpepper, but you can give the king hope. That’s the way to handle this.’

‘He would be pleased ...’

‘No.’ She shakes her head. ‘He would be kind, I am sure, but he would not come to your bed again. He would take a mistress. I have seen him talking to Catherine Carey. He would take a mistress until your time was over.’

‘I couldn’t bear that!’

‘So tell him nothing. Tell the king you have hopes, but tell Thomas nothing.’

‘Thank you, Lady Rochford,’ I say humbly. If it were not for her advice I don’t know what I would do.

That night the king comes to my rooms and they help him into my bed. I stand by the fire while they labour to heave him in and they leave him tucked up with the sheets under his chin like an enormous baby.

‘Husband,’ I say sweetly.

‘Come to bed, my rose,’ he says. ‘Henry wants his rose.’

I grit my teeth on the stupidity of him calling himself Henry. ‘I want to tell you something,’ I say. ‘I have some happy news.’

He heaves himself up, so that his head with the nightcap askew bobs up a little.

‘Yes?’

‘I have missed my course,’ I say. ‘I may be with child.’

‘Oh, rose! My sweetest rose!’

‘It is early days,’ I warn him. ‘But I thought you would want to know at once.’

‘Before anything else!’ he assures me. ‘Dearest, as soon as you tell me it is true, I shall have you crowned queen.’

‘But Edward will still be your heir,’ I query.

‘Yes, yes, but it would be such a weight off my mind if I knew that Edward had a brother. A family cannot be safe with only one son: a dynasty needs boys. One small accident and everything is finished, but if you have two boys you are safe.’

‘And I will have a grand coronation,’ I specify, thinking of the crown and the jewels and the gown and the feasting and the thousands of people who will come out to cheer me, the new Queen of England.

‘You will have the greatest coronation that England has ever seen, for you are the greatest queen,’ he promises me. ‘And as soon as we get back to London I shall declare a day of national celebration for you.’

‘Oh?’ This sounds rather wonderful, a day to celebrate my existence! Kitty Howard: *voilà* indeed! ‘A whole day for me?’

‘A day when everyone will go to church and say prayers of thanksgiving that

God has given you to me.'

Just church, after all. I give a faint, disappointed smile.

'And the master of the revels will prepare a great feast and celebration at court,' he says. 'And everyone will give you presents.'

I beam. 'That sounds lovely,' I say with satisfaction.

'You are my sweetest rose,' he says. 'My rose without a thorn. Come to bed with me now, Katherine.'

'Yes.' I make sure I do not think of my Thomas as I go to the bloated figure in the big bed. I have a wide, happy smile on my face and I close my eyes so I need not look at him. I cannot avoid the smell of him or the feel of him, but I can make sure that I do not think of him at all while I do what I have to do, and then lie beside him and wait for the little snuffles of satisfaction to turn to wheezy snores as he goes to sleep.

Jane Boleyn, Ampthill, October 1541

Her course started something like a week late; but I was not too disheartened. The mere thought of it had been enough to make the king more in love with her than ever, and she had at least agreed that though the sun rises and shines only on Thomas Culpepper, he does not have to be privy to every little secret.

She has behaved very prettily with the people that she has met on this progress, even when she has been bored and inattentive she has kept a pleasant smile on her face, and she has learned to follow a little behind the king and to maintain an appearance of demure obedience. She serves him in bed like a paid whore, and she sits next to him at dinner and never shows by a flicker of expression that he has broken wind. She is a selfish, stupid girl but she might, given time, make quite a good queen. If she conceives a child and gives England a son she might live long enough to learn to be a queen that is admired.

The king, at any rate, is mad about her. His indulgence makes our task of getting Culpepper in and out of her bedchamber so much easier. We had a bad night in Pontefract when he sent Sir Anthony Denny to her room without announcement, and she was locked in with Culpepper. Denny tried the door and went away without saying anything. There was another night when the king stirred in her bed while they were at their business only on the other side of the door, and she had to go flying back in to the old man, still damp with sweat and kisses. If the air had not been heavy with the stink of his wind he would have smelled the scent of lust for certain. At Grafton Regis the lovers coupled in the jakes – Culpepper crept up the stairs to the stone-walled chamber which overhangs the moat, and she told her ladies that she was sick as a dog and spent the afternoon with him in there, frantically humping while the rest of us made possets. If it were not so dangerous it would be funny. As it is, it still makes me breathless with a mixture of fear and lust when I hear them together.

I never laugh. I think of my husband and his sister and any laughter dies in my mouth. I think of him promising to be her man through any trouble. I think of her, desperate to conceive a son, sure that Henry could not give her one. I think of the unholy pact they must have made. Then, with a little moan, I think that all

this is my fear, my fantasy, and perhaps it never happened. The worst thing about the two of them being dead is that now I will never know what happened. The only way I have borne the thought of what they did, and the part I played, in all these years has been to put the thought far from me. I never think of it, I never speak of it, and no-one ever speaks of them in my hearing. It is as if they never were. That is the only way I can bear the fact that I am alive and they are gone: to pretend that they never were.

‘So when Queen Anne Boleyn was accused of treason did they really mean adultery?’ Katherine asks me.

The question, so sharp on the point of my own thinking, is like a stab. ‘What d’you mean?’ I ask.

We are riding from Collyweston to Ampthill on a bright, cold morning in October. The king is ahead, galloping with the young men of his court, thinking he is winning a race as they hold their horses back, Thomas Culpepper among them. Katherine is ambling along on her grey mare, and I am at her side on one of the Howard hunters. Everyone else has dropped back to gossip and there is no-one to shield me from her curiosity.

‘You said earlier that she and the other men were accused of adultery,’ she pursues.

‘That was months ago.’

‘I know, I have been thinking about it.’

‘You think very slowly,’ I say nastily.

‘I know I do,’ she says, quite unabashed. ‘And I have been thinking that they accused Anne Boleyn, my cousin, of treason only because she was unfaithful to the king, and they beheaded her.’ She glances around her. ‘And I have been thinking that I am in the same situation,’ she says. ‘That if anyone knew – they would say that I am unfaithful to the king. Perhaps they would call it treason too. Then what would happen to me?’

‘That is why we never say anything,’ I reply. ‘That is why we take care. Remember? I have warned you from the beginning to take care.’

‘But why did you help me meet Thomas? Knowing as you do what a danger it is? After your own sister-in-law was killed for just the same thing?’

I am lost for an answer. I never thought that she would ask me this question. But her stupidity is such that she does, sometimes, go straight to the most obvious. I turn my head as if I am looking over the cold meadows where the river, swollen with the recent rains, shines like a sword, a French sword.

‘Because you asked me to help you,’ I say. ‘I am your friend.’

‘Did you help Anne Boleyn?’

‘No!’ I exclaim. ‘She would have no help of mine!’

‘You were not her friend?’

‘I was her sister-in-law.’

‘Did she not like you?’

‘I doubt she ever saw me from start to finish. She had no eyes for me.’

This does not halt her speculation, as I intended, but feeds it. I can almost hear the slow revolving of her thoughts.

‘She didn’t like you?’ Katherine asks. ‘She and her husband and her sister, they were always together. But they left you out.’

I laugh but it doesn’t come out well. ‘You make it sound like children in the schoolyard.’

She nods. ‘That is just how it is in a royal court. And did you hate them for not letting you join them?’

‘I was a Boleyn,’ I say. ‘I was a Boleyn as much as they. I was a Boleyn by marriage, their uncle the duke is my uncle. My interests are in the family as theirs were.’

‘So why did you give evidence against them?’ she asks.

I am so shocked at her directly accusing me, I can hardly speak. I look at her. ‘Where did you hear of this? Why would you speak of this?’

‘Catherine Carey told me,’ she says, as if it is unremarkable that the two girls, all but children, should share confidences about treason and incest and death. ‘She said that you bore witness against your husband and his sister. You gave evidence to show that they were lovers and traitors.’

‘I did not,’ I whisper. ‘I did not.’ I cannot bear her naming this, I never think of it. I will not think of it today. ‘It wasn’t like that,’ I say. ‘You don’t understand because you are only a girl. You were a child when all this happened. I tried to save him, I tried to save her. It was a great plan of your uncle’s devising. It failed, but it should have succeeded. I thought that I would save him if I gave evidence, but it all went wrong.’

‘Is that how it was?’

‘It was heartbreaking!’ I cry out in my pain. ‘I tried to save him, I loved him, I would have done anything for him.’

Her pretty young face is filled with sympathy. ‘You meant to save him?’

I dash the tears from my eyes with the back of my glove. ‘I would have died for him,’ I say. ‘I thought I would save him. I was going to save him. I would have done anything to save him.’

‘Why did it go wrong?’ she whispers.

‘Your uncle and I thought that if they pleaded guilty that she would be divorced and would be sent away, to a convent. We thought that he would be stripped of his title and his honours and banished. The men who were named with her were never guilty, everyone knew that. They were George’s friends and her courtiers, not lovers. We thought they would all be forgiven, as Thomas Wyatt was forgiven.’

‘So what happened?’

It is like a dream, this re-telling. It is the dream that comes to me often, that wakes me in the night like sickness, that sends me from my bed to walk and walk in the dark room until the first grey light comes into the sky and I know my ordeal is over.

‘They denied their guilt. That was not part of the plan. They should have confessed but they denied everything except saying some words against the king, George had said that the king was impotent.’ Even on this bright autumn day, five years after the trial, I still lower my voice and glance around me to make sure that no-one can hear. ‘Their courage failed them, they denied their guilt and did not ask for mercy. I stayed with the plan, as your uncle said I should. I saved the title, I saved the lands, I saved the Boleyn inheritance, I saved their fortune.’

Katherine is waiting for more. She does not understand that this is the end of the story. This is my great act and my triumph: I saved the title and the lands. She even looks puzzled.

‘I did what I had to do to save the Boleyn inheritance,’ I repeat. ‘My father-in-law, George and Anne’s father, had built a fortune over his lifetime. George had added to it. Anne’s wealth had gone into it. I saved it. I saved Rochford Hall for us, I kept the title. I am Lady Rochford still.’

‘You saved the inheritance, but they didn’t inherit it,’ Katherine says, uncomprehending. ‘Your husband died, and he must have thought you were giving evidence against him. He must have thought that while he was pleading not guilty, you were accusing him. You were a witness for his prosecution.’ Slowly she thinks, slowly she speaks, slowly she says the worst thing of all. ‘He must have thought that you let him go to his death so that you could keep the title and the lands, even though you had killed him.’

I could scream at her for saying this, for putting words to this nightmare. I rub my face with the back of my glove as if I would scrub my scowl away. ‘No. Not so! Not so! He won’t have thought that,’ I say desperately. ‘He knew that I loved him, that I was trying to save him. As he went to his death he would have

known that I was on my knees before the king, asking him to spare my husband. When she went to her death she will have known that at the very last moment I was before the king, asking him to spare her.'

She nods. 'Well, I hope you never bear witness to save me,' she says. It is a miserable attempt at humour; I do not even accord it a smile.

'It was the end of my life,' I say simply. 'It was not just the end of their lives, it was death to me too.'

We ride in silence for a while, and then two or three of Katherine's friends kick their horses forward to ride beside her and chatter to her about Ampthill and the greeting we are certain to have, and whether Katherine has finished with her yellow gown and will give it to Katherine Tylney. In a moment there is a quarrel breaking out because Katherine had promised it to Joan but Margaret is insisting that it should go to her.

'You can both hold your peace,' I rule, dragging myself back to the present moment. 'For the queen has worn that gown not more than three times and it will stay in her wardrobe until she has had more use out of it.'

'I don't care,' Katherine says. 'I can always order another.'

Anne, Richmond Palace, November 1541

At church I enter, cross myself, curtsey to the altar, and take my place in my high-walled pew. Thank God that no-one can see me in here; the high door closes behind me, the walls guarantee my privacy, and even the front of the pew is panelled with a lattice so I can see but not be observed. Only the priest, if he is standing high up in the choir stalls, can look down on me. If I glance away from the Host, or fail to cross myself at the right time, or use the wrong hand or do it the wrong way round, I will not be reported for heresy. There are thousands in this country who now guard their every movement because they do not have my privacy. There are hundreds who will die because they got it wrong.

I stand, and bow, and kneel, and sit, as I am bidden by the order of the service; but I can take little pleasure today from the liturgy. This is the king's order of service, and in every rolling phrase I hear the power of Henry, not the power of God. In the past I have known God in many places; in small Lutheran chapels at home, in the great soaring majesty of St Paul's in London, and in the quiet of the royal chapel at Hampton Court when I once knelt beside the Princess Mary and felt the peace of heaven descend around us; but it seems that the king has soured his church for me and for so many others. I find God now in silence: when I walk in the park, or beside the river, when I hear a blackbird calling at midday, when I see a flight of geese arrowing overhead, when the falconer releases a bird and I see her mount up high and soar. God no longer speaks to me when Henry allows it, in the words that Henry prefers. I am in hiding from the king and I am deaf to his God.

We are on our knees praying for the health and safety of the royal family when to my surprise there is a new prayer inserted without warning into the familiar words. Without a flicker of shame, the priest bids my court, my ladies and myself to give thanks for the king's wife Katherine.

'We render thanks to thee, oh Lord, that after so many strange accidents that have befallen the king's marriages, that Thou hast been pleased to give him a wife so entirely conformed to his inclinations as her, he now has.'

I cannot help myself, my head bobs up from reverent submission and I meet

the surprised gaze of the Richmond priest in the choir stalls. He is reading the celebration of the king's wife from an official document, he has been ordered to read this as he might be ordered to read a new law. Henry, in his madness, has commanded every church in England to thank God that after the many 'strange accidents' of his previous marriages, he now has a wife who conforms to his inclinations. I am so outraged by the language of this, by the sentiment of it, and by the fact that I have to be on my knees listening to this insult, that I half-rise to my feet in protest.

At once an insistent hand grabs the back of my gown and pulls me down, I stumble for a moment and fall back to my knees again. Lotte, my translator, gives me a small smile, puts her hands together in a portrait of devotion and closes her eyes. Her gesture steadies me. This is indeed an insult, most gross and thoughtless; but to respond to it is to charge into danger. If the king requires me to go on my knees and describe myself to the kingdom as a strange accident, then it is not for me to point out that our marriage was no accident but a well-planned and thoughtfully considered contract which he broke for the simple and sufficient reason that he preferred someone else. It is not my place to point out that since our marriage was real and valid he is now either an adulterer, or a bigamist, living in sin with a second wife. It is not my place to point out that if little Kitty Howard, a light-hearted, light-mannered child, is the only woman he has ever found who conforms to his inclinations then either she must be the greatest actor that ever lived, or he must be the most deluded fool that ever married a girl young enough to be his own daughter.

Henry is a madman now, doting on a girl like a senile fool, and he has just ordered the whole of his country to thank God for his folly. In churches up and down the land people will be biting their lips to contain their smiles, honest men will be cursing the luck that puts them in Henry's church with this nonsense included in their prayers. 'Amen,' I say loudly, and when we rise to our feet for the blessing I show the priest a serene and devout face. My only thought, as we leave the church, is that poor Princess Mary at Hunsden will be choking with indignation at the insult to her mother, at the blasphemy of having to pray for Kitty Howard, and the idiocy of her father. Please God she has the sense to say nothing. It seems whatever the king likes to do, we must all say nothing.



On Tuesday, one of my ladies gazing out of the window remarks: 'Here is the

ambassador, running up the garden from a river boat. What can have happened?’

I rise to my feet. Dr Harst never visits me without first sending notice that he is coming. Something must have happened at court. My first thought is for Elizabeth or Mary, my first fear is that something has happened to them. If only Mary has not been driven by her father to defy him! ‘Stay here,’ I say shortly to my women, and I throw a shawl around my shoulders, and go down to greet him.

He is entering the hall as I come down the stairs and at once I know that something serious has happened.

‘What is it?’ I ask him in German.

He shakes his head at me, and I have to wait until the servants have come and gone, served him with wine and biscuits, and I can send them all from the room. ‘What is it?’

‘I came at once, without the full story, because I want you to be forewarned,’ he says.

‘Forewarned of what? It is not the Princess Mary?’

‘No. It is the queen.’

‘She is with child?’

He shakes his head. ‘I don’t know exactly. But she has been confined to her chambers since yesterday. And the king will not see her.’

‘She is ill? He is terrified of taking the plague.’

‘No. There are no physicians called.’

‘She is not accused of plotting against him?’ I name the greatest fear.

‘I will tell you all I know, and it is mostly gathered from the servant we have in the king’s rooms. The king and queen attended Mass on the Sunday, and the priest gave thanks for the king’s marriage, as you know.’

‘I know.’

‘Sunday evening the king was quiet and dined alone, as if he was sinking into his old illness. He didn’t go to her rooms. Monday he locked himself in his rooms and the queen was locked in hers. Today Archbishop Cranmer went in to talk with her, and came out in silence.’

I look at him. ‘She was locked in? And the king locked himself away?’

Silently he nods.

‘What d’you think it means?’

‘I think the queen has been accused. But we cannot yet know the accusation. What we must consider is whether she will implicate you.’

‘Me?’

‘If she is accused of a Papist plot, or of bewitching the king into impotence,

people will remember that you were accused of a Papist plot, and that he was impotent with you. People will remember your friendship with her. People will remember that you danced with her at court at Christmas and he was ill by Lent, as soon as you left. People may think that the two of you have made a plot against him. They may even say the two of you have ill-wished him.'

I put out my hand as if I would stop him. 'No, no.'

'I know it is not true. But we have to consider the worst that could be said. And try to guard against it. Shall I write to your brother?'

'He won't help me,' I say sullenly. 'I am alone.'

'Then we must prepare,' he says. 'You have good horses in your stables?'

I nod.

'Then give me some money and I shall have other horses ready all the way down the road to Dover,' he says decisively. 'The moment I think that it is going against you, we can leave the country.'

'He will close the ports,' I warn. 'He did the last time.'

'We won't be trapped again. I shall hire a fishing boat to serve us,' he says. 'We know now what he can do. We know what lengths he will go to. We will get away before they have even decided to arrest you.'

I look at the closed door. 'There will be someone in my service who will know that you have come to warn me,' I say. 'Just as we have a man in his service, he will have put a spy here. I am watched.'

'I know the man,' Dr Harst says with quiet pleasure. 'And he will report my visit today but he will say nothing more. He is my man now. I think we are safe.'

'Safe as mice under the scaffold,' I say bitterly.

He nods. 'As long as the axe falls on others.'

I shudder. 'Who deserves it? Not me, but not little Kitty Howard either! What did she and I ever do but marry where we were bid?'

'As long as you escape it, my job is done,' he says. 'The queen must look to her own friends for help.'

Katherine, Hampton Court, November 1541

Now, let me see, what do I have now?

Surprise, surprise! I have no friends and I thought I had dozens.

I have no lovers, and I thought I was pestered by them.

I don't even have a family, as it turns out, they are all gone.

I have no husband for he won't see me, and I don't even have a confessor for the archbishop himself has become my inquisitor. Everyone is so mean to me and it is so unfair, I don't know what to think or say. They came to me when I was dancing with my ladies, and said that it was the king's orders that I was not to leave my rooms.

For a moment – I am such a fool, grandmother was right when she said that there never was a greater fool than me – I thought it was a masque and that someone would come in costume and capture me, and then someone would come in costume and rescue me and there would be a joust or a mock battle on the river or something amusing. The whole country had said prayers on the Sunday to thank God for me, so I was expecting some kind of celebration on the day after. So I waited in my room, behind the locked doors, looking forward to a knight errant coming, perhaps even a tower coming to my window, or a mock siege, perhaps a cavalcade riding into the garden, and I said to my ladies: 'Here's a good joke, I expect!' But we waited all day in my room and even though I rushed and changed my dress to be ready, no-one came and I called for music and to make merry and then Archbishop Cranmer came and said that the time for dancing was over.

Oh, he can be so unkind! He looks so serious, as if there is something very wrong. And then he asks me about Francis Dereham! Francis Dereham of all people, only in my service at the request of my own respectable grandmother! As if it is my fault! And all because some pathetic tittle-tattle tale-bearer has told the archbishop that there was a flirtation at Lambeth, as though anyone should care about that now! And I must say, if I were archbishop I would try to be a better person than one who listens to such gossip.

So I say that all this is most untrue, and if I can see the king I will easily

persuade him not to hear a word against me. And then my lord Cranmer gives me a real fright for he says in a most awful voice: 'That, Madam, is why you will not see His Grace until your name has been utterly cleared. We will inquire into every circumstance until we have utterly scotched every slur against you.'

Well, I don't reply because I know that my slur cannot be utterly scotched, or anything like it; but surely, all that at Lambeth was a matter between a maid and a young man, and now I am married to the king, who should trouble themselves about what happened all that long time ago? Why, it is a lifetime ago, it is all of two years ago! Who should care one way or another now?

Perhaps it will all blow over in the morning. The king has his funny whims sometimes, he takes against one man or another and has them beheaded and often he is sorry afterwards. He took against poor Queen Anne of Cleves, and she got away with Richmond Palace and being his best sister. So we go to bed quite cheerful, and I ask Lady Rochford what she thinks, and she looks rather queer and says that she thinks I may get through it if I keep my nerve and deny everything. This is rather cold comfort from her, who saw her own husband go to the gallows denying everything. But I don't tell her so, for fear of making her angry.

Katherine Tylney sleeps with me, and she laughs as she gets into bed and says that she bets I wish she were Tom Culpepper. I say nothing, for I do wish it. I wish it so much that I could cry for him. Long after she is snoring I lie awake and wish that everything had been different for me, and Tom had come to the house at Lambeth and perhaps fought with Francis and perhaps killed him, and then taken me away and married me. If he had come for me then I would never have been queen and never had my necklace of table diamonds. But I should have slept the whole night in his arms and sometimes that seems a better choice. It seems a better choice tonight, for sure.

I sleep so badly that I am awake at dawn, and I lie in the quiet with the grey light shining through the shutters and I think that I would give all my jewels to see Tom Culpepper and hear his laugh. I would give my fortune to be in his arms. Please God he knows that I am kept in my rooms and does not think that I am keeping away from him. It would be too awful, if, when I come out, he has taken offence at my neglect, and is courting someone else. I would die if he were to take a fancy to another girl. I really think my heart would break.

I would send him a note if I dared, but no-one is to leave my rooms and I dare not trust one of the servants with a message. They come with breakfast to my rooms, I am not even allowed to go out to eat. I am not even to go to chapel,

a confessor is to come to my rooms to pray with me before the archbishop comes to talk with me again.

I really do begin to think this is not right, I should perhaps protest against it. I am Queen of England, I cannot be kept in my rooms as if I were a naughty girl. I am fully grown, I am a lady, I am a Howard. I am wife to the king. Who do they think I am? I am Queen of England, after all. I think I shall speak to the archbishop and tell him that he cannot treat me so. I think about this until I become quite indignant and resolve that I shall insist to the archbishop that he treats me with proper respect.

And then he doesn't come! We spent the whole morning sitting around, trying to sew things, trying to appear seriously employed in case the door suddenly opens and my lord the archbishop walks in. But no! It is not till the end of the afternoon, and a dreary afternoon at that, that the door opens and he enters, his kindly face all grave.

My ladies all flutter up as if they were themselves as innocent as a flock of butterflies, imprisoned with a mouldy slug. I remain seated, after all, I am queen. I just wish I could look like Queen Anne did when they came for her. She really did look innocent, she really did look unjustly accused. I am sorry now that I signed a piece of paper to bear witness against her. I realise now how very unpleasant it is to be doubted. But how was I to know that one day I would be in the same case?

The archbishop walks up to me as if he were terribly sorry for something. He has his sad face on, as if he were struggling with an argument inside his own head. For a moment I am certain that he is going to apologise for being so unkind to me yesterday, and beg my pardon and release me.

'Your Grace,' he says very quietly. 'I am so much grieved to discover that you have employed the man Francis Dereham in your household.'

For a moment I am so amazed that I don't say anything. Everyone knows this. Good God, Francis has caused enough trouble at court for everyone to know it. He has hardly been discreet. How should the archbishop discover it? As well as claim to discover Hull! 'Well, yes,' I say. 'As everyone knows.'

Down go his eyes again, clasp go his hands together over his cassocked tummy. 'We know that you had relations with Dereham when you were at your grandmother's house,' he says. 'He has confessed it.'

Oh! The fool. Now I cannot deny it. Why would he say such a thing? Why would he be such a slack-mouthed braggart?

'What are we to suppose, but that you put your paramour in a position close

to you for a bad purpose?' he asks. 'Where you could meet every day? Where he could come to you without your ladies being present? Even unannounced?'

'Well, suppose nothing,' I say pertly enough. 'And he isn't my paramour anyway. Where is the king? I want to see him.'

'You were Dereham's lover at Lambeth, you were not a virgin when you married the king, and you were his lover after your marriage,' he says. 'You are an adulteress.'

'No!' I say again. The truth is all muddled up with a lie, and besides, I don't know what they know for sure. If only Francis had been born with the sense to shut up. 'Where is the king? I insist that I see him!'

'It is the king himself who has ordered me to inquire into your conduct,' he says. 'You cannot see him until you have answered my questions and your name is cleared without blemish.'

'I shall see him!' I jump to my feet. 'You shan't keep me from my husband. It has to be against the law!'

'Anyway, he has gone.'

'Gone?' For a moment it feels as if the floor has rocked under my quick feet as if I were dancing on a barge. 'Gone? Where has he gone? He can't have gone. We're staying here until we go to Whitehall for Christmas. There is nowhere else to go to, he wouldn't just leave me here. Where has he gone?'

'He has gone to Oatlands Palace.'

'To Oatlands?' This is the house where we were married. He would never go there without me. 'That is a lie! When did he go? This cannot be true!'

'I had to tell him, it was the greatest sadness of my life, that you had been Dereham's lover and that I fear you are his lover still,' Cranmer says. 'God knows I would have spared him that news. I thought he would lose his mind for grief, you have broken his heart, I think. He left for Oatlands at once, taking only the smallest household. He will see no-one, you have broken his heart and ruined yourself.'

'Gracious no,' I say feebly. 'Oh, gracious, no.' This is very bad indeed but if he has taken Thomas with him then at least my dearest love is safe, and we are not suspected. 'He will be lonely without me,' I say, hoping that the archbishop will name his companions.

'He is like to go mad of grief,' he says flatly.

'Oh, dear.' Well, what can I say? The king was mad as a March hare before any of this, and that in fairness cannot be laid at my door.

'Has he no companions?' I ask cleverly. Pray God that Thomas is safe.

‘The groom of his chamber,’ he replies. So thank God Thomas is in no danger. ‘All you can do now is confess.’

‘But I have done nothing!’ I exclaim.

‘You took Dereham into your household.’

‘At my grandmother’s request. And he has not been alone with me, nor so much as touched my hand.’ I draw a little strength from my true innocence. ‘Archbishop, you have done very wrong to upset the king. You don’t know what he’s like when he is upset.’

‘All you can do is confess. All you can do is confess.’

This is so like being some poor soul trudging towards Smithfield with a faggot of wood to be burned to death that I stop, and giggle, from sheer terror. ‘Really, Archbishop, I have done nothing. And I confess every day, you know I do, and I have never done anything.’

‘You laugh?’ he says, horrified.

‘Oh, only from the shock!’ I say impatiently. ‘You must let me go to Oatlands, Archbishop. Indeed you must. I have to see the king and explain.’

‘No, you have to explain to me, my child,’ he says earnestly. ‘You have to tell me what you did at Lambeth, and what you did thereafter. You have to make a full and honest confession and perhaps then I can save you from the scaffold.’

‘The scaffold?’ I shriek the word as if I have never heard it before. ‘What do you mean, the scaffold?’

‘If you have betrayed the king then this is an act of treason,’ he says slowly and clearly, as if I am a child. ‘The punishment for treason is death. You must know that.’

‘But I have not betrayed him,’ I gabble at him. ‘The scaffold! I could swear it on the Bible. I could swear it on my life. I’ve never committed treason, I’ve never committed anything! Ask anyone! Ask anyone! I am a good girl, you know I am, the king calls me his rose, his rose without a thorn. I have no other will than his ...’

‘Indeed, you will have to swear to all of this on the Bible. And so you should make very sure that there is not a word of a lie. Now, tell me about what took place between you and the young man at Lambeth. And remember, God hears every word you say, and besides, we already have his confession, he has told us everything.’

‘What has he confessed?’ I ask.

‘Never you mind. You tell me. What did you do?’

‘I was very young,’ I say. I peep up at him in case he is disposed to be sorry

for me. He is! He is! His eyes are actually filled with tears. This is such a good sign that I feel much more confident. 'I was very young and all the girls in the ladies' chamber were badly behaved, I am afraid. They were not good friends and advisors to me.'

He nods. 'They allowed the young men of the household to come in to the girls' chamber?'

'They did. And Francis came in at night to court another girl; but then he took a fancy to me.' I pause. 'She wasn't half as pretty as me, and I didn't even have my lovely clothes then.'

The archbishop sighs for some reason. 'This is vanity. You are supposed to be confessing your sin with the young man.'

'I am! I am confessing. I am very distressed. He was very pressing. He insisted. He swore he was in love with me, and I believed him. I was very young. He promised me marriage, I thought we were married. He insisted.'

'He came to your bed?'

I want to say, 'No.' But if that fool Dereham has told them everything, then all I can do is make it seem better. 'He did. I did not invite him, but he insisted. He forced me.'

'He raped you?'

'Yes, almost.'

'Did you not cry out? You were in the room with all the other young ladies? They would have heard you.'

'I let him do it. But I did not want it.'

'So he lay with you.'

'Yes. But he was never naked.'

'He was fully dressed?'

'I mean he was never naked except for when he took his hose down. And then he was.'

'He was, what?'

'He was naked then.' Even to me this sounds weak.

'And he took your virginity.'

I cannot see a way to avoid this. 'Er ...'

'He was your lover.'

'I don't think ...'

He rises from his feet as if he would go. 'This does you no good at all. I cannot save you if you lie to me.'

I am so afraid of him walking away that I cry out, and run after him and

catch his arm. 'Please, Archbishop. I will tell you. I am just so ashamed, and so sorry ...' I am sobbing now, he looks so stern and if he does not take my side then how shall I explain all this to the king? And I am afraid of the archbishop; but I am utterly terrified of the king.

'Tell me. You lay with him. You were as husband and wife to each other.'

'Yes,' I say, driven to honesty. 'Yes, we were.'

He lifts my hand from his arm as if I have some infection of the skin and he does not want to touch me. As if I am a leper. I, who only two days ago was so precious that the whole country thanked God that the king had found me! It is not possible. It is not possible that everything could have gone so wrong so quickly.

'I shall consider your confession,' he says. 'I shall take it to God in prayer. I have to tell the king. We will consider what charges you will have to face.'

'Can't we just forget that it all happened?' I whisper, my hands twisting together, the rings heavy on my fingers. 'It was so long ago. It was years ago. Nobody can even remember it. The king doesn't need to know, you said yourself, it will break his heart. Just tell him that nothing important happened, and can't everything be as it was?'

He looks at me as if I am quite mad. 'Queen Katherine,' he says gently. 'You have betrayed the King of England. The punishment is death. Can you not understand that?'

'But this was all long before I was married,' I whimper. 'It wasn't betraying the king. I hadn't even met him. Surely the king will forgive me for my errors as a girl?' I can feel the sobs coming up into my throat, and I can't hold them back. 'Surely he won't cruelly judge me for my childhood errors when I was nothing but a little girl with poor guardians?' I gulp. 'Surely, His Grace will be kind to me? He has loved me and I have made him so happy. He thanked God for me, and this, this is nothing.' The tears are pouring down my face, I am not pretending to be sorry, I am absolutely appalled to be here, facing this awful man, having to twist myself up in lies to make things look better. 'Please, sir, please forgive me. Please tell the king that I have done nothing that matters.'

The archbishop pulls away from me. 'Calm yourself. Calm yourself. We will say no more now.'

'Say you will forgive me, say that the king will forgive me.'

'I hope he will, I hope he can. I hope you can be saved.'

I grab on to him, sobbing without control. 'You cannot go until you promise me I will be safe.'

He drags himself to the door though I am clinging to him like a wailing child. 'Madam, you must be calm.'

'How can I be calm when you tell me that the king is angry with me? When you tell me that the punishment is death? How can I be calm? How can I be calm? I'm only sixteen, I can't be accused, I can't be ...'

'Let me go, madam, this behaviour does not serve you.'

'You shan't go without blessing me.'

He pushes me from him and then crosses the air rapidly above my head. 'There. There you are, *in nomine ... filii ...* there, now be quiet.'

I throw myself down on the floor to sob but I hear the door close behind him, and even though he is not there to see me, I cannot stop crying. Even when the inner door opens and my ladies come in, I am still crying. Even when they flutter round me and pat me on the head I do not sit up and cheer up. I am so afraid now, I am so afraid.

Jane Boleyn, Hampton Court, November 1541

That devil the archbishop has terrified the girl half out of her wits and now she does not know whether to lie or confess. My lord the duke has come with him for another visit and while they try to pull the sobbing queen from her bed he pauses beside me. 'Will she confess to Culpepper?' he whispers, so low that I have to lean against him to hear it.

'If you let the archbishop work on her she will confess to anything,' I warn him in a hurried whisper. 'I cannot keep her quiet. He torments her with hope and then he threatens her with damnation. She is only a silly girl, and he seems determined to break her. He will drive her mad if he keeps threatening her.'

He gives a short laugh, almost like a groan. 'She had better pray for madness, it could be the only thing that saves her,' he says. 'Good God. Two nieces as Queens of England and both of them end on the scaffold!'

'What could save her?'

'They can't execute her if she is mad,' he says absently. 'You can't stand trial for treason if you are mad. They would have to send her away to a convent. Good God, is that her screaming now?'

The eerie cries of Kitty Howard begging to be spared are echoing through her rooms as the women try to pull her in to face the archbishop.

'What will you do?' I demand. 'This can't go on.'

'I'll try to keep clear of this,' he says bleakly. 'I hoped to see her with her wits about her today. I was going to advise her to plead guilty to Dereham and deny Culpepper, then she has done nothing worse than marry with a pre-contract in place, as Anne of Cleves. She might have got away with that. He might even have taken her back. But at this rate she will kill herself before the axeman gets her.'

'Keep clear?' I demand. 'And what about me?'

His face is like a flint. 'What about you?'

'I'll take the French count,' I say to him rapidly. 'Whatever the contract is, I'll take him. I'll live with him in France for a few years, wherever he likes. I'll lie low until the king has recovered from this, I can't go back into exile, I can't

go back to Blickling. I can't stand it. I can't go through it all again. I really can't. I'll take the French count even without a good settlement. Even if he is old and ugly, even if he's deformed. I'll take the French count.'

The duke shouts with sudden laughter like a baited bear, bellowing in my face. I recoil; but his amusement is horribly sincere. In these terrible rooms filled with women crying to Katherine to compose herself and her awful, high-pitched wailing, and the archbishop praying loudly over the noise, the duke roars out his merriment. 'A French count!' he bellows. 'A French count! Are you mad? Are you run as mad as my niece?'

'What?' I demand, quite baffled. 'What are you laughing at? Hush, my lord. Hush. There's nothing to laugh at.'

'Nothing to laugh at?' He cannot contain himself. 'There never was a French count. There never could have been a French count. There never would be a French count or an English earl or an English baron. There would never be a Spanish don, or an Italian prince. No man in the world would ever have you. Are you such a fool that you don't know that?'

'But you said ...'

'I said anything to keep you at work for me, as you would say anything to suit your own cause. But I never thought you really believed me. Don't you know what men think of you?'

I can feel my legs starting to tremble, it is like the time before, when I knew that I would have to betray them. When I knew that I would have to hide my falseness from my own face. 'I don't know,' I say. 'I don't want to know.'

His hard hands come down on my shoulders and he drags me to one of the queen's expensive gilt-edged looking-glasses. In the soft silver reflection I see my own wide eyes looking back at me, and his face as hard as the face of Death himself. 'Look,' he says. 'Look at yourself and know what you are: you liar, you false wife. There is not a man in the world who would marry you. You are known the length and breadth of Europe as the woman who sent her husband and her sister-in-law to the axeman. You are known in every court in Europe as a woman so vile that she sent her husband to be hanged ...' he gives me a shake '... to be cut down while still living, in his piss-wet breeches,' he shakes me again, 'to be slit from cock to throat, to see his belly and his liver and his lights pulled out and shown to him, to bleed to death while they burned his liver and his heart and his belly and his lungs before his face,' he shakes me again, 'and then finally to be sliced up like a beast on the butcher's block, the head, the arms, the legs.'

‘They didn’t do that to him,’ I whisper, but my lips barely move in the reflection.

‘No thanks to you,’ he says. ‘That’s what people remember. The king, his worst enemy, spared him the torture that you had sent him to. The king let him be beheaded, but you sent him to be disembowelled. You, on the witness stand, swearing that he and Anne had been lovers, that he had mounted his own sister, that he was a sodomite, a bugger, with half the court, swearing that they had plotted the king’s death, swearing his life away, sending him to a death that you would not give to a dog.’

‘It was your plan.’ In the mirror my face is green with sickness at the truth being spoken out loud at last, my dark eyes bulging with horror. ‘It was your plan, not mine. I shall not be blamed for it. You said that we would save them. They would be pardoned if we gave evidence and they pleaded guilty.’

‘You knew that was a lie.’ He shakes me like a terrier shakes a rat. ‘You knew, you liar. You never took the stand to save him. You took the stand to save your title and your fortune, you called it your inheritance, the Boleyn inheritance. You knew that if you turned evidence against your own husband then the king would leave you with your title and your lands. That’s all you wanted in the end. That’s all you cared for. You sent that young man and that beauty, his sister, to the gallows so that you could save your own yellow skin and your paltry title. You sent them to their deaths, a savage death, for being beautiful and merry and happy in each other’s company and for excluding you. You are a byword for malice, jealousy and twisted lust. D’you think any man would trust you with a title again? D’you think any man would risk calling you wife? After that?’

‘I was going to save him.’ I bare my teeth at the two of us in the mirror. ‘I accused him so that he could confess and be pardoned. I would have saved him.’

‘You are a killer worse than the king,’ he says brutally, and throws me to one side. I rebound off the wall and grab at the tapestry to steady myself. ‘You testified against your own sister-in-law and husband, you stood by the sickbed while Jane Seymour died, you testified against Anne of Cleves and would have seen her beheaded, and now, without a doubt, you will see another cousin go to the gallows, and I confidently expect you to bear witness against her.’

‘I loved him,’ I say stubbornly, going to the only charge that I cannot bear to hear. ‘You shall not deny that I loved George. I loved him with all my heart.’

‘Then you are worse than a liar and a false friend,’ he says coldly. ‘For your love brought the man you love to a most pitiable death. Your love is worse than

hatred. Dozens hated George Boleyn but it was your loving word that took him to his death. Don't you see how evil you are?'

'If he had stood by me, if he had cleaved to me, I would have saved him,' I cry out from my own pain. 'If he had loved me as he loved her, if he had let me into his life, if I had been as dear to him as she was ...'

'He would never have stood by you,' the duke says with contempt like poison in his voice. 'He would never have loved you. Your father bought him for you with a fortune, but nobody and no fortune could make you lovable. George despised you, and Anne and Mary laughed at you. That's why you accused them, none of this high-flying, self-sacrificing lie has a shred of truth. You accused them, because if you could not have George you would rather have seen him dead than loving his sister.'

'She came between us,' I gasp.

'His hounds came between you. His horses. He loved the horses in his stable, he loved his hawks in his mews more than he loved you. And you would have killed every one of them, horse, hound and hawk, from sheer jealousy. You are an evil woman, Jane, and I have used you as I would use a piece of filth. But now I am finished with that foolish girl Katherine and I am finished with you. You can advise her to save herself as best she can. You can bear witness for her, you can bear witness against her. I don't care for either of you.'

I feel the wall behind me and I push myself forwards to glare into his face. 'You will not treat me so,' I say. 'I am no piece of filth, I am your ally. If you turn against me you will regret it. I know all the secrets. Enough to send her to the gallows, enough to send you there too. I will destroy her, and you with her.' I am panting now, flushed with rage. 'I will bring her to the scaffold and every Howard with her. Even if I die myself this time!'

He laughs again but now he is quiet, his anger spent. 'She is a lost cause,' he says. 'The king has finished with her. I have finished with her. I can save myself and I will. You will go down with the slut. You cannot get off twice.'

'I shall tell the archbishop about Culpepper,' I threaten. 'I shall tell him that you meant them to be lovers. That you told me to throw them together.'

'You can say what you like,' he replies easily. 'You will have no proof. There is only one person who was seen carrying messages and letting him into her rooms. That would be you. Everything you say to incriminate me will point to your guilt. You will die for it, and God knows, I don't care one way or another.'

I scream then, I scream and fall to my knees and clasp him around the legs.

‘Don’t say that, I have served you, I have served you for years, I have been your most faithful servant and I have had next to no reward. Get me out of here and she can die and Culpepper can die but I shall be safe with you.’

Slowly the duke leans down and detaches my hands as if I were some kind of sticky weed that has tangled unpleasantly around his legs. ‘No, no,’ he says, as if he has lost all interest in the conversation. ‘No. She cannot be saved and I wouldn’t lift a finger to save you. The world will be a better place when you are dead, Jane Boleyn. You will not be missed.’

‘I am yours.’ I look up at him, but I dare not grab him again, and so he walks away from me, to tap on the door to the outside world, where the sentries, who used to stand on the outside to keep everyone out, are now keeping us locked in. ‘I am yours,’ I shout. ‘Heart and soul. I love you.’

‘I don’t want you,’ he remarks. ‘Nobody wants you. And the last man you promised to love died because of your testament. You are a foul thing, Jane Boleyn, the axeman can finish what the devil has started for all I care.’ He pauses with his hand on the door, as a thought strikes him. ‘I should think you will be beheaded on Tower Green, where they killed Anne,’ he says. ‘There’s an irony for you. I should think she and her brother are laughing in hell, waiting for you.’

Anne, Richmond Palace, November 1541

They have moved Kitty Howard to Syon Abbey and she is kept as a prisoner, with only a few of her ladies. They have arrested two young men from her grandmother's household and they will be tortured until they confess what they know, and then they will be tortured until they confess what they are required to say. Her ladies who were in her confidence are taken to the Tower for questioning too. His Grace the king has returned from his private musing at Oatlands Palace and has come back to Hampton Court. He is said to be very quiet, very grieved, but not angry. We must thank God that he is not angry. If he does not fly into one of his vindictive rages then he might sink into self-pity and banish her. He is going to annul his marriage to the queen on the grounds of her abominable behaviour – those are the very words he has put to parliament. Please God that they will agree with him that she is not fit to be queen, and the poor child can be released, and her friends go home.

She could go to France, she would be a delight to that court, who would find her vanity and her prettiness a pleasure to watch. Or perhaps she could be persuaded to live in the country as I do, and call herself another sister to the king. She might even come and live with me and we could be friends as we used to be in the old days when I was the queen he did not want, and she was the maid that he did. She could be sent away to a thousand different places where she could do the king no harm and where her folly might make people laugh, and where she might grow into a sensible woman. Surely, everyone agrees that she cannot be executed. She is simply too young to be executed. This is not an Anne Boleyn, who schemed and contrived her way to the throne over six years of striving, and was then thrown down by her own ambition. This is a girl with no more judgement than one of her kittens. Nobody could be so harsh as to send a child like this to the block. Thank God, the king is sad and not angry. Please God, the parliament will advise him that the marriage can be annulled, and pray heaven that Archbishop Cranmer is satisfied with the disgrace of the queen on the basis of her childhood amours, and does not start to investigate her follies since her marriage.

I don't know what goes on at court these days, but I saw her at Christmas and the New Year, and I thought then that she was ready for a lover, and hoping for love. And how could she stop herself? She is a girl coming into womanhood with a man old enough to be her father as her husband, a sickly man, an impotent man, perhaps even a madman. Even a sensible young woman in those circumstances would turn for friendship and comfort to one of the young men who gather round her. And Katherine is a flirt.

Dr Harst comes riding out from London to see me, and the moment that he arrives, he sends my ladies away so that we can talk alone. I know from this that it is grave news from the court.

'What news of the queen?' I ask him as soon as they have gone from the room and we are seated, side by side, like conspirators before the fire.

'She is still being questioned,' he says. 'If there is any more to be had they will get it out of her. She is kept close in her apartments at Syon, she is allowed to see no-one. She is not even allowed out to walk in the garden. Her uncle has abandoned her and she has no friends. Four of her ladies are locked up with her, they would leave if they could. Her closest friends are under arrest and being questioned in the Tower. They say she cries all the time and begs them to forgive her. She is too distressed to eat or sleep. She is said to be starving herself to death.'

'God help her, poor little Kitty,' I say. 'God help her. But surely they have evidence for the annulment of her marriage to the king? He has enough to divorce her and let her go?'

'No, now they are seeking evidence for worse,' he says shortly.

We are both silent. We both know what he means by that, and we both fear that there may be worse to discover.

'I have come to see you for something even more grave than this,' he says.

'Good God, what worse could there be?'

'I hear that the king is thinking of taking you back as his wife.'

For a moment I am so stunned that I cannot say anything, then I grip the carved arms of my chair and watch my fingertips go white. 'You cannot mean this.'

'I do. King Francis of France is keen that the two of you shall remarry and that your brother and the king join with him in a war against Spain.'

'The king wants another alliance with my brother?'

'Against Spain.'

'They can do that without me! They can make an alliance without me!'

‘The King of France and your brother want you restored and the king wants to rid himself of the memory of Katherine. It is to be just as it was. It is to be as if she never existed. As if you have just arrived in England, and everything can go as planned.’

‘He is Henry of England; but not even he can turn back the clock!’ I cry out and I push myself up from my chair and stride across the room. ‘I won’t do it. I daren’t do it. He will have me killed within a year. He is a wife-killer. He takes a woman and destroys her. It has become his habit. This will be my death!’

‘If he were to deal with you honourably ...’

‘Dr Harst, I have escaped him once, I am the only wife of his to come out from the marriage alive! I can’t go back to put my head on the block.’

‘I am advised that he would offer you guarantees ...’

‘This is Henry of England!’ I round on the ambassador. ‘This is a man who has been the death of three wives and is now building the scaffold for his fourth! There are no guarantees. He is a murderer. If you put me in his bed I am a dead woman.’

‘He will divorce Queen Katherine, I am certain of it. He has laid it before parliament. They know that she was no virgin when she married him. The news of her scandalous behaviour has been released to the ambassadors at the European courts for them to announce. She is publicly named as a whore. He will put her aside. He will not kill her.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘There is no reason for him to kill her,’ he says gently. ‘You are overwrought, you are not thinking clearly. She married him under false pretences, that is a sin and she is wrong. He has announced that. But since they were not married, she has not cuckolded him, he has no reason to do anything other than let her go.’

‘Then why is he seeking more evidence against her?’ I ask. ‘Since he has enough against her to name her as a whore, since he has enough against her to bring her into shame and divorce her? Why does he need more evidence?’

‘To punish the men,’ he replies.

Our eyes meet, neither of us knows what we dare to believe.

‘I fear him,’ I say miserably.

‘And so you should, he is a fearsome king. But he divorced you, and he kept his word to you. He made a fair settlement on you and he has kept you in peace and prosperity. Perhaps he will divorce her and make a settlement on her, perhaps this is his way now. Then he may want to marry you again.’

‘I cannot,’ I say quietly. ‘Believe me, Dr Harst, even if you are right and he treats Katherine with forgiveness, even with generosity, I would not dare to marry him. I cannot bear to be married to him again. I still thank God on my knees every morning for my good fortune in escaping last time. When the councillors ask you, or my brother asks you, or the French ambassador asks you, then you must tell them that I am settled to the single state, I believe myself to be pre-contracted as the king himself said. Just as he said: I am not free to marry. Persuade them that it cannot be done. I swear I cannot do it. I will not put my head back on the block and wait to hear the whistle of the falling axe.’

Katherine, Syon Abbey, November 1541

Now, let me see, what do I have now?

I have to say, I'm not doing very well at all.

I have six French hoods edged with gold. I have six pairs of sleeves, I have six plain kirtles, I have six gowns, they are in navy blue, black, dark green and grey. I have no jewels, I have no toys. I don't even have my kitten. Everything that the king gave me has been taken from my rooms by Sir Thomas Seymour – a Seymour! taking a Howard's goods! Think how we shall resent that! – to be returned to the king. So, as it turns out, all the things I counted before were never really mine. They were loans and not gifts at all.

I have three rooms with very poor tapestries. My servants live in one and I live in the other two with my half-sister Isabel, Lady Baynton and two other ladies. None of them speaks to me for resentment at the position they find themselves in through my wickedness, except Isabel, who has been told to bring me to a sense of my sin. I have to say that this makes for very poor company in a confined space. My confessor is ready for my call should I be such a fool as to wish to hang myself by confessing to him what I have denied to everyone else and twice a day Isabel scolds me as if I were her servant. I have some books of prayers and the Bible. I have some sewing to do, shirts for the poor; but surely they must have enough shirts by now? I have no pageboys, or courtiers, or jesters or musicians or singers. Even my little dogs have been taken away and I know they will pine for me.

My friends are all gone. My uncle has disappeared like the mist in the morning, and they tell me that most of my household, Lady Rochford, and Francis Dereham, Katherine Tylney, and Joan Bulmer, Margaret Morton and Agnes Restwold, are in the Tower being questioned about me.

But even worse than all of this, I heard today that they have taken Thomas Culpepper to the Tower also. My poor, beautiful Thomas! The thought of him being arrested by some ugly man at arms is a horror, but the thought of my Thomas being questioned makes me fall to my knees and lie my face against the rough cloth of my bed and weep. If only we had run away when we first knew

that we were in love. If only he had come for me before I even went to court, when I was still a girl at Lambeth. If only I had told him that I was his, only his when I first came to court, before all of this went wrong.

‘Do you want your confessor?’ Lady Baynton says coldly as she finds me weeping. They will have told her to say this, they are eager for me to break down and tell everything.

‘No,’ I say quickly. ‘I have nothing to confess.’

And what is so horrid is that these rooms are Lady Margaret Douglas’s rooms, where she was kept on her own in silence for the crime of falling in love. Fancy that! She was here, just like me, wandering from one room to the other and back again, under arrest for loving a man, not knowing what the charge could be, nor what the sentence could be, nor when the blow would fall. She was here all on her own, in disgrace for thirteen months, hoping that the king would forgive her, wondering what was going to happen. She was taken away just a few days ago to make room for me – I can’t believe it! – they took her to Kenninghall, where she will be imprisoned again until the king forgives her, if he ever forgives her.

I think of her, a young woman only a little older than me, locked up and alone just like me, imprisoned for the crime of loving a man who loved her back, and I wish now that I had gone down on my knees to the king and begged him to be kind to her. But how was I to know that one day I should be in just the same state? In the very same rooms? Suspected of being a young woman in love, just as she is? I wish I had told him that she is only young and perhaps silly and she should be guided; not arrested and punished. But I didn’t speak up for her, nor did I speak for poor Margaret Pole, nor for all the men and women at Smithfield. I didn’t speak up for the men of the North who rose up against him. I didn’t say a word for Thomas Cromwell but I got married on the day he died without even a moment of pity. I didn’t speak up for the king’s daughter Princess Mary, but worse: I complained of her. I didn’t even speak up for my own mistress and queen, Anne, who I loved. I promised her my loyalty and friendship and yet when they asked me I signed a paper against her without bothering to read it. And now there is nobody who will go down on their knees and ask for mercy for me.

Of course, I don’t know what is going on. If they have arrested Henry Manox along with Francis Dereham then he will tell them whatever they want to hear. We did not part on good terms and he has no love for Francis. He will tell them that he and I were all but lovers, and then he is certain to tell them that I dropped

him and went on to Francis Dereham. My name will be quite sullied, and my grandmother will be furious.

I suppose they will ask the Lambeth girls all about me. Agnes Restwold and Joan Bulmer are no great friends of mine in their hearts. They liked me well enough when I was queen with favours to give but they won't defend me or lie for me. And if they dig up half a dozen of the others from whatever little lives they are living, they will say anything for a trip to London. If they ask Joan Bulmer anything about Francis she will tell them everything, I don't doubt. Every single one of the girls at Norfolk House knows that Francis called me wife, and I answered to it. That he bedded me as if we were husband and wife, and I didn't know – to be honest – whether we were married or not. I never really thought about it. Katherine Tylney will tell them all about Lambeth, quick enough; I just hope that they don't ask her about Lincoln, or Pontefract, or Hull. If she starts telling them about the nights I was missing from my room then that will lead them to Thomas. Oh, God, if only I had never laid eyes on him. He would be safe now and so would I.

If they talk to Margaret Morton she will tell them that I had words with her when she tried the door of my bedroom and found it locked. I had Thomas, darling Thomas, in bed with me, and I had to fly across the room and shout at her to show more respect, with the door half-closed to keep him hidden. She laughed in my face, she knew that someone was inside. Oh, God, if only I had not quarrelled with them all so often. If I had kept them sweet with bribes and dresses then perhaps now they would be lying for me.

And, now I think of it, Margaret was outside in the presence chamber when Thomas was with me in my privy chamber, one day at Hampton Court. We spent the whole afternoon by the fire, kissing and touching, laughing at the courtiers just outside the door. I was excited by our daring then; now I pinch my own palms till my skin is red and swollen at the thought of what a fool I was. But even now, I can't regret it. Even if I were to die for that afternoon, I would not regret having had his mouth on mine and his touch on me. Thank God we had that time, at least. I won't wish it away.

They will bring me another tray of food in a moment. I shan't touch it. I can't eat, I can't sleep, I can't do anything but walk around these two rooms and think that Lady Margaret Douglas walked here too, missing the man she loved. She didn't have half her friends telling the world about her. She didn't have every enemy of the Howards turning the king against her. She is the most unfortunate woman I know and she is lucky compared to me.

I know Lady Rochford will stay my friend, I know she will. She knows what Thomas is to me, and I to him. She will keep her head, she's been in danger before, she knows how to answer questions. She is an older woman, a person of experience. Before we parted she said to me, 'Deny everything', and I shall. She knows what should be done. I know she will keep herself safe, and me with her.

She knows everything, of course, that's the worst of it. She knows when I fell in love with Thomas and she managed all the secret meetings and the letters and the times we could steal together. She hid him for me behind wall hangings, and once in the shadows on the stairs at York. She smuggled me to him down winding corridors in strange houses. He had a room of his own at Pontefract and we met there after hunting one afternoon. She told me where we might meet and one night when the king himself tried the outer door, thinking he would come to my bed, she kept her nerve and called out that I was ill and was asleep and sent him away. She did that! She sent the King of England away and her voice did not quaver for one second. She has such courage, she will not be crying and confessing. I daresay even if they rack her she will just look at them with her cold face and say nothing. I am not afraid of her betraying me. I can trust her to deny everything they ask. I know I can trust her to defend me.

Except ... except I keep wondering now that she could not save her husband when he was accused. She never likes to talk about him and that makes me wonder too. I always thought it was because she was so very sad about him, but now I wonder if it was something worse than that. Catherine Carey was certain that she had not given evidence for them but against them. How could that be? And she said that she had saved their inheritance, and not them. Yet how could they die and she get off scot-free if she had not made some kind of agreement with the king? And if she betrayed one queen – and that her own sister-in-law – and condemned her own husband, why should she save me?

Oh, I get these fearful thoughts because of the situation I am in, which is not an easy one. I know that. Poor Margaret Douglas must have gone half-mad walking from one room to another and not knowing what would become of her. Fancy spending a year here, walking from one room to another and not knowing if you will ever be released. I can't bear the waiting, and at least, unlike her, I am sure to be released soon. I am sure everything will come out right but I do worry about things, about everything really. And one of the things I worry about is how come Anne Boleyn was killed, and George Boleyn was killed, and Jane his wife just walked away? And how come nobody ever said anything about it? And how come she could save his inheritance; but her evidence couldn't save him?

Now I must stop this, for I start to think that she might give evidence for me and it might take me to the same place as Anne Boleyn, and that is ridiculous for Lady Anne was an adulteress and a witch and guilty of treason. And all I have done is go a bit too far with Henry Manox and Francis Dereham when I was a girl. And since then, nobody knows what I have done, and I will deny everything.

Dear God, if they take Thomas for questioning I know he will lie to protect me, but if they rack him ...

This is no good. The thought of Thomas on the rack makes me howl out like a baited bear as it goes down before the dogs. Thomas in pain! Thomas crying out as I am crying out! But I won't think of it. It cannot happen. He is the king's beloved boy, the king calls him that: the beloved boy. The king would never hurt Thomas, and he would never hurt me. He has no reason to suspect him. And I daresay, if he did know that Thomas loves me and I him, he would understand. If you love someone, you understand how they feel. He might even laugh and say that after my marriage to him is ended we can be married. He may give us his blessing. He does forgive people, especially his favourites. It's not as if I were Margaret Douglas and married without his permission. It's not as if I defied him. I would never do that.

Dear God, she must have thought she would die in here. It has only been a few days and already I feel like carving my name on the stone walls. The rooms face down over the long gardens, I can see the sunlight on the pale grass. This was an abbey and the nuns who lived here were the pride of England for the strictness of their order and the beauty of their singing. Or so Lady Baynton says. But the king drove the nuns away and took the building into his own keeping so now it is like trying to live in a church, and I swear the place is haunted with their sadness. It is not a fit place for me, at all. After all I am Queen of England, and if not Queen of England then I am Katherine Howard, and a member of one of the greatest families in the kingdom. To be a Howard is to be one of the first, after all.

Now, let me see, I must cheer myself somehow. So, what do I have? But, oh, it's not very cheering. Really, not very cheering at all. Six gowns, which is not much, and in very dull colours, old lady colours. Two rooms for my own use and a small household to serve me. So to see the best of it, I am really in a better case than when I was little Mistress Katherine Howard at Lambeth. I have a man who loves me and who I love with my whole heart, and a very good chance of being released to marry him, I should think. I have a faithful friend in Lady Rochford

who will give evidence in my favour, Tom would die to save me so all I have to do when the archbishop comes again is go on confessing to Francis Dereham and Henry Manox and never say a word about Tom. I can do that. Even a fool like me can do that. And then everything will come out right and when I next count I shall have many lovely things again. I don't doubt it. I don't doubt it at all.

But all the while I am reassuring myself of this, the tears are just pouring out of my eyes and I am sobbing and sobbing. I can't seem to stop crying though I know I am in a most hopeful state. Really, things are quite all right for me, I have always been lucky; I just can't seem to stop crying.

Jane Boleyn, the Tower of London, November 1541

I am in such terror I think I shall go mad in truth. They keep asking me about Katherine and that fool Dereham, and I thought at first that I could deny everything. I was not there at Lambeth when they were lovers, and for sure they were never lovers after that. I could tell them all I know and with a clear conscience. But when that great wooden gate banged shut behind me, and the shadow of the Tower fell cold on me, I felt a terror that I had never known before.

The ghosts that have haunted me since that day in May will take me for their own now. I am where they walked, I feel the chill of the same walls, I know the same terror, I am living their deaths.

Dear God, it must have been like this for him, for George, my beloved George. He must have heard that gate bang, he must have seen the stone bulk of the Tower block out the sky, he must have known that his friends and his enemies were somewhere inside these walls, lying their heads off to save themselves and to condemn him. And now I am here walking where he walked, and now I know what he felt, and now I know fear, as he knew it.

If Cranmer and his inquisitors look no further than Katherine's life when she was a girl, before she came to court, they have enough to destroy her; and what more do they need than that? If they rest on her affairs with Manox and Dereham, then they need nothing from me. I did not even know her then. It is nothing to do with me. So I should have nothing to fear. But if that is the case, then why am I here?

The room is cramped, with stone-paved floors and damp stone walls. The walls are pocked with the carved initials of people who have been held here before me. I will not look for GB, 'George Boleyn'; I think I should go mad if I saw his name. I will sit quietly by the window, and look out to the courtyard below. I will not go over the walls for his name, fingering the cold stone looking for 'Boleyn', and touch where he carved. I will sit quietly here and look out of the window.

No, this is no good. The window looks out on to Tower Green, my prison

chamber looks down on the very spot where Anne was beheaded on my evidence. I cannot look at that place, I cannot look at the bright greenness of the grass – surely it is more verdant than any autumn grass should be? – if I look at the green I will surely lose my mind. It must have been like this for her when she was waiting, and she would have known that I knew enough to have her beheaded. And she must have known that I would choose to have her beheaded. She knew that she had tormented me and teased me and laughed at me until I was beside myself with jealousy, she must have wondered how far I would follow my evil rage, even to seek her death? Then she knew. She knew I gave witness against the two of them, that I spoke out in a clear voice and condemned them without remorse. Well, I feel remorse now; God knows that I do.

I feel as if I have been hiding myself from the truth for all these years, but it took that hard man the Duke of Norfolk to spell it out to me, and it took these cold walls to make it real for me. I was jealous of Anne and her love for George and his devotion to her, and I bore witness not from what I knew to be a fact, but from what would harm them the most. God forgive me. I took his tenderness and his care and his kindness for his sister and I made it into something dirty and dark and bad because I could not bear that he was not tender nor careful nor kind to me. I brought him to his death to punish him for neglecting me. And now, like some old play in which the gods are furious, I am still neglected. I have never been more alone. I have committed the greatest sin a wife could do, and still I have no satisfaction.

The duke has withdrawn to the country, neither Katherine nor I will ever see him again. I know him well enough to know that his sole care will be to protect his own old skin and guard his well-loved fortune. And the king needs a Howard to march and fight and execute for him. The king may hate him for this second adultery but he will not make the mistake of losing a commander as well as a wife. Katherine's step-grandmother, the duchess, may lose her life for this. If they can prove that she knew that Katherine, in her care, was little more than a slut, then they will accuse her of treason: for failing to warn the king. She will be tearing open documents, and swearing servants to secrecy, sacking old retainers, and cleaning out her rooms, if I know her. She may be able to hide enough to save herself.

But what about me?

My way is clear. I shall say nothing of Thomas Culpepper and the evidence I can give of Francis Dereham is that he was secretary to the queen at the request of her step-grandmother, and nothing passed between them under my eye. If they

discover about Thomas Culpepper (and if they look only a little, they are certain to discover all about Thomas Culpepper), then they will see it all. If they see it all I shall tell them that she lay with him at Hampton Court, when the king first was ill, all through the royal progress when she thought she was with child, till the very day that we all went down on our knees and thanked God for her. That I knew she was a slut from that first day, but that she ordered me, and the duke ordered me, and I was not free to do what I thought right.

This is what I shall say. She shall die for it, and the duke may die for it; but I will not.

This is all I should consider.

My room faces east, the sun rises in the morning at seven, and I am always awake to see it rise. The Tower throws a long shadow across the bright grass of the green where she died, as if it is pointing a dark finger to my window. If I think of Anne, in her beauty and her allure, in her cleverness and her wit, then I think I shall go mad. She was in these rooms, and she went down those stairs, and she went out to that piece of grass (which I could see if I went to the window; but I never go to the window) and put her head down on the block and died a brave death, knowing that she was betrayed by everyone who had benefited from her rise. Knowing that her brother and his friends, the little circle who loved her so well, had died the day before, knowing that I gave the fatal evidence, her uncle gave the death sentence and the king celebrated it. I cannot think of this. I must take good care of myself and not think of this.

Dear God, she knew that I betrayed her. Dear God, he went to a traitor's death on the scaffold knowing that I betrayed him. He perhaps did not realise that it was from love. That's the worst thing. He will never have known that it was from love. It was such a murderous thing to do, it was such a gesture from hatred that he will never have known that I loved him and I couldn't bear that he should look at another woman. Let alone Anne. Let alone what he was to her.

I sit and face the wall. I cannot bear to look out of the window, I cannot bear to trace the writings on the walls of the cell for fear of finding his initials. I sit and fold my hands in my lap. To anyone watching me I am composed. I am an innocent woman. I am as innocent and composed as – say – Lady Margaret Pole, who was also beheaded outside my window. I never said one word for her, either. Dear God, how can I even breathe the air of this place?

I can hear the shuffle of many feet on the stairs. How many do they think they need? The key grates in the lock, the door swings open. I am irritated by the slowness. Do they think they can frighten me with this theatre of threat? Then

they come in. Two men and the guards. I recognise Sir Thomas Wriothsley, but not the clerk. They fuss about, setting up the table, putting out a chair for me. I stand and try to look unmoved, my hands clasped. Then I realise I am wringing my hands and I make myself be still.

‘We wish to ask you about the queen’s behaviour at Lambeth when she was a girl,’ he says. He nods at the clerk to indicate that he should write.

‘I know nothing about it,’ I say. ‘As you will see from your own records I was in the country, at Blickling Hall, and then in service with Queen Anne, to whom I gave good and honourable service. I did not know Katherine Howard until she came to serve Queen Anne.’

The clerk makes one mark, only one. I see it. It is a tick. This means that they knew what I would say, it is not worth writing down. They have prepared for this interview, I should not trust a word they say. They know what they want to say and what they want me to reply. I have to be ready. I have to be armed against them. I wish I could think clearly, I wish my thoughts were not such a whirl. I must be calm, I must be clever.

‘When the queen took on Francis Dereham as her secretary, did you know that he was her old friend and previous lover?’

‘No, I knew nothing of her life before,’ I say.

The clerk puts down a tick. This too is expected.

‘When the queen asked you to fetch Thomas Culpepper to her room, did you know what were her intentions?’

I am stunned. How do we go from Francis Dereham to Thomas Culpepper in one leap? How do they know of Thomas Culpepper? What do they know of Thomas Culpepper? What has he told them? Is he on the rack vomiting in pain and sicking up the truth?

‘She never asked me,’ I say.

The clerk puts down a dash.

‘We know that she asked you to fetch him, and we know that he came. Now, to save your life, will you tell us what took place between Thomas Culpepper and Katherine Howard?’

The clerk’s pen is poised, I can feel the words in my dry mouth. It is over. She is ruined, he is a dead man, I am on the brink of betrayal: again.

Anne, Richmond Palace, December 1541

The Dowager Duchess of Norfolk has been questioned on her sickbed as to the behaviour of her granddaughter. She will be tried for letting the girl go to the king without warning him that she was no virgin. This is now called treason. She will be accused of treason because her granddaughter took a lover. If she is found guilty that will be another old lady's head on Henry's block.

Dereham is accused with Culpepper of presumptive treason. The cause is that they both had intercourse with the queen. Dereham is accused even though there is no evidence against him and most believe that he laid with her long before she was queen, before even I was queen. Nonetheless this is to be called treason. The king has named Katherine Howard as a 'common harlot' – oh, Kitty, that anyone should speak like that of you! Both young men plead guilty to presumptive treason in the hopes of forgiveness. Both deny having lain with the queen. Their judge – unbelievable though it is to anyone but a subject of King Henry's – is the Duke of Norfolk, who knows more of this than any man can say. His Grace the duke has returned from the country to hear the evidence of his niece Katherine promising to marry Dereham, admitting him to her bedroom and to her bed. He has heard the evidence of Dereham coming into her household when she was queen and that is apparently enough to prove the young couple guilty. For why, the inquisitors indignantly demand, would Dereham come to work for the queen if not to seduce her? The idea that he would hope to profit from her success as all the rest of them have done, her uncle among them, is not mentioned.

Culpepper started by denying everything, but once the queen's ladies had given their statements, Lady Rochford among them, he could see that he was finished and he is now pleading guilty. Both young men are to be half-hanged and then their bellies slit open, their guts pulled out, and then butchered as they bleed to death, for the crime of loving the pretty girl who married the king.

This foreshadows Katherine's fate. I know it and I am on my knees for her every day. If the men accused of loving her are to be killed in the cruellest way that England can devise, then the chances of her being forgiven and released are

slight indeed. I am afraid she will spend the rest of her life in the Tower. Dear God, she is only sixteen now. Do they not think that two years ago she was too young to judge? Did her own uncle not think that a girl of fourteen is not likely to resist temptation when she is constantly encouraged to indulge her whims in everything? I don't even consider what Henry thought, Henry is a madman. He thought of nothing but his own pleasure in her, and his own belief that she adored him. That is what she will pay for: for disappointing the vain dreams of a madman. As I did.

When I turned away from him in disgust at Rochester he hated me for it, and he punished me for it as soon as he could, calling me ugly and fat with slack breasts and belly, no virgin, full of noisome airs, stinking in fact. When Kitty chooses a young handsome man over his bloated, rotting body he calls her a scandal and a whore. He punishes me with shame and exile from the court, and then takes pleasure in showing his generosity. I don't think she will get off so lightly.

I am on my knees in my privy chamber at my prie-dieu when I hear the door behind me open quietly. I am so afraid of my shadow in these dangerous days that I spin around. It is Lotte, my lady secretary, and her face is white.

'What is it?' I am on my feet at once. Stumbling as my heel catches the hem of my gown, I nearly fall and have to catch on to the little altar to save myself. The cross wobbles and crashes down to the floor.

'They have arrested your maid Frances, and they have taken your squire Richard Taverner too.'

I gasp in terror, and then I wait until I can breathe out again. She mistakes my blank face for incomprehension and she repeats the awful thing she has just said in German: 'They have arrested your lady in waiting Frances, and they have taken Richard Taverner too.'

'On what charges?' I whisper.

'They don't say. The inquisitors are in the house now. We are all to be questioned.'

'They must have said something.'

'Just that we are all to be questioned. Even you.'

I am icy with fear. 'Quick,' I say. 'Go to the stables at once and get a boy to take a boat downriver to Dr Harst in London. Tell him that I am in grave danger. Go at once. Go by the garden stairs and make sure no-one sees you.'

She nods and goes to the little private door to the garden as the other door to my presence chamber is thrown open and five men walk in.

‘Stop right there,’ one of them orders, seeing the open door. Lotte stops, she does not even look towards me.

‘I was just going to the garden,’ she says in English. ‘I need to take the air. I am unwell.’

‘You are under arrest,’ he replies.

I step forwards. ‘On what grounds? What is alleged against her?’

The senior man, one I don’t know, steps towards me and bows slightly. ‘Lady Anne,’ he says. ‘There are reports circulating in London that there has been grave wrongdoing in your household. The king has commanded that we investigate. Anyone attempting to hide anything or failing to assist our investigation will be regarded as an enemy to the king, and guilty of treason.’

‘We are all good subjects of our lord the king,’ I say quickly. I can hear the fear in my own voice. He will hear it too. ‘But there is no wrongdoing in my household, I am innocent of any wrongdoing.’

He nods. Presumably Kitty Howard said the same; as did Culpepper and Dereham.

‘These are trying times and we have to root out sin,’ he says simply. ‘If you please you will stay in this room, with this lady as companion if you wish, while we question your household. Then we will come to speak with you.’

‘My ambassador should be informed,’ I say. ‘I am not to be treated as an ordinary woman. My ambassador will need to know of your inquiry.’

The man gives me a smile. ‘He is being questioned at his house right now,’ he says. ‘Or rather, I should say, at the inn where he stays. If I had not known that he was an ambassador for a great duke I should have thought him an unsuccessful merchant. He does not keep a great estate, does he?’

I flush with embarrassment. This again is my brother’s doing. Dr Harst has never had a proper fee, he has never had a proper establishment. Now I am being taunted for my brother’s meanness.

‘You may question who you like,’ I say as bravely as I can. ‘I have nothing to hide. I live as the king bid me when we made our agreement. I live on my own, I entertain no more than is right and proper, my rents are collected and my bills are paid. As far as I can tell my servants are under good and sober discipline and we attend church and pray according to the king’s rule.’

‘Then you have nothing to fear,’ he says. He looks at my white face and smiles. ‘Please, do not be fearful. Only the guilty should show fear.’

I crack my lips into a smile and I go to my chair and sit down. His eye turns to the fallen crucifix and the cloth pulled down from the prie-dieu and he raises

an eyebrow, shocked.

‘You have thrown down the cross of Our Lord?’ he whispers in horror.

‘I had an accident.’ Even to myself it sounds feeble. ‘Pick it up, Lotte.’

He exchanges a glance with one of the other men as if this is evidence to be noted; then he goes from the room.

Katherine, Syon Abbey, Christmas 1541

Let me see, what do I have now?

I have my six gowns still, and my six hoods. I have two rooms with a view over the garden, which runs down to the river where I can now walk if I wish; but I don't wish as it is freezing cold and rains all the time. I have a handsome fireplace of stone and a good store of wood is kept in for me as the walls are cold and when the wind blows from the east it is damp. I pity the nuns who had to live here for all their lives, and I pray God that I shall be released soon. I have a copy of the Bible and the prayer book. I have a crucifix (very plain, no jewels) and a kneeler. I have the reluctant attendance of a pair of maids to help me dress and Lady Baynton and two others to sit with me in the afternoon. None of them are very merry.

I think that is all I have now.

What makes it worse is that it is Christmastime, and I so love Christmas. Last year I was dancing with Queen Anne at court and the king was smiling at me and I had my pendant with the twenty-six table diamonds and my rope of pearls and Queen Anne brought me my horse with violet velvet trappings. I danced with Thomas every evening and Henry said we were the prettiest couple in all of the world. Thomas held my hand at midnight on Christmas Eve and when he gave me a kiss on the cheek he whispered in my ear: 'You are beautiful.'

I can still hear it, I can still hear his whisper: 'You are beautiful.' Now he is dead, they cut his sweet head from his body, and I may be still beautiful but I have not even a looking-glass to comfort me with that.

It may be a stupid thing to say, but more than anything else I am so surprised how much things have changed in such a short time. The Christmas feast when I was newly married and the most beautiful queen in the world was only last year, just this time last year, and now here am I in the worst state that I have ever known, and perhaps the worst state that anyone could be in. I think now that I am learning great wisdom that comes from suffering. I have been a very foolish girl but now I am grown to a woman. Indeed, I think I would be a good woman

if I had a chance to be queen again. I really think I would be a good queen this time. And since my love, Thomas, is dead, I expect I would be faithful to the king.

When I think of Thomas dying for my sake I can hardly bear it. When I think he is no longer here, he is just gone, I cannot understand it. I never thought of death before, I never realised that it is so very, very final. I cannot believe that I will never see him again in this world. It quite makes me believe in heaven and I hope I will meet him there, and we will be in love again; only this time I won't be married.

I am sure that when they release me everyone will see that I am a better person now. I have not been tried as poor Thomas was tried, nor tortured as they tortured him. But I have still suffered, in my own foolish way. I have suffered thinking about him, and about the love we had, which has cost him his life. I have suffered thinking of him trying to keep our secret and fearing for me. And I miss him. I am still in love with him even though he is not in the world and cannot be in love with me. I am still in love with him even if he is dead, and I miss him like any young woman would miss her lover in the first few months of their love affair. I keep hoping to see him and then remembering that I will never see him again. This is more painful than I had thought possible.

Anyway, the only good thing to come out of this is that now there is no-one to give evidence against me since Thomas and Francis are both dead. They were the only ones who knew what took place and they cannot bear witness against me. This must mean that the king intends to release me. Perhaps in the New Year he will release me and I shall have to go and live somewhere terribly dreary. Or perhaps the king will forgive me now that Thomas is dead and he will let me be his sister like Queen Anne, and then at least I could come to court for the summer and for the Christmas feast. Maybe next Christmas I shall be happy again. Maybe I shall have wonderful presents next year and I shall look back on this sorrowful Christmas and laugh at myself for being so silly as to think my life was over.

The days are terribly long, even though it gets light so late and dark so early. I am glad that I am being ennobled by suffering because otherwise it would seem such a waste of time. I am throwing away my youth in this dull place. I will be seventeen next birthday, practically an old woman. It is shocking that I should have to wait for week after week in this place, as my youth drags away. I have kept a little counter of the days on the wall by the window and when I look at the scratched marks they seem to march onwards forever. Some days I miss a day

and don't put it on, so that the time does not seem so long. But that makes the count wrong, which is a nuisance. It is so stupid not to be able even to keep count of the days. But I'm not sure that I really want to know. What if he keeps me here for years? No, that can't happen. I expect the king will spend Christmas at Whitehall and after Twelfth Night he will order them to release me. But I won't even know when that is, because I have muddled up my own counting. Sometimes I think my grandmother was right and I am a fool and that is very dispiriting.

I am afraid the king will still be very displeased with me, though I am sure he will not blame me for everything as Archbishop Cranmer seems to do. But when I see him, I am sure he will forgive me. He is like the duchess's old steward who would tell us all that we should be punished for some naughtiness like jumping in the hay or breaking the boughs of the apple trees, and he would beat one or two of the boys but when it came to me and I would look up at him with tears in my eyes, he would pat my cheek and tell me that I must not cry and it was all the fault of the older children. I expect the king will be like that when I actually get to see him. Surely, since he knows everything, he knows that I was always a silly girl and always very easily led astray? And surely, in his wisdom, he will understand that I fell in love and couldn't help myself? Someone as old as he is must understand that a girl can fall in love and quite forget right and wrong? A girl can fall in love and think of nothing but when she can next see the boy she loves. And now that poor Thomas has been taken from me and I will never see him again, surely I have been punished enough?

Jane Boleyn, the Tower of London, January 1542

And so we wait.

The king must be minded to forgive the whore his queen, since he waits for so long. And if he forgives her, he forgives me, and I escape the axe again.

Ha ha! What a joke my life has become that I should end up here in the Tower where my husband was kept, awaiting the fate that met him, when I could have walked away from court and the court life, when I could have been safe and snug in Norfolk. I had escaped once, escaped with my title and a pension. Why ever did I rush to come back?

I did truly think I would set him free. I did think that if I confessed everything on his behalf then they would see that she was a witch, as they called her, and an adulteress, as they called her, and they would see he was ensnared and enslaved and they would release him to be with me, and I should have taken him home to our house, Rochford Hall, and made him well again, and we could have had our children and we could have been happy.

That was my plan, that was what should have happened. I did think that she would go to the block and he would be spared. I did think I would see her lovely neck hacked in two but that I would have my husband safe in my own bed at last. I thought I would comfort him for the loss of her and that he would come to see that she was no great loss.

Not really.

No, not really.

I suppose sometimes I thought that she would be killed and it would be her deserts for the scheming whore she was, and that he would die too and it would be her fault, and he would realise on the gallows that he should have left her and loved me. That I had always been his true wife and she was always a bad sister. I suppose I thought that if it took him to get to the very steps of the gallows to see what a false friend she was, then it was worth doing. I never really believed that they would die and I would never see them again. I never really believed that they could disappear from my life, from this life, and I would never see them again. How could one think that? That there could be a day when they would

never stroll through the door, arm in arm, laughing at some private joke, her hood as high as his dark curly head, her hand on his arm, equally assured, equally beautiful, equally regal. The cleverest, wittiest, most glamorous couple at court. What woman, married to him, and looking at her, would not wish them both dead rather than walking forever, arm in arm, in their beauty and their pride?

Oh, God, I hope that spring comes early this year, the dark afternoons are like a nightmare that goes on forever in this little room. It is dark till eight in the morning and then dusk by three. Sometimes they forget to replace the candles and I have to sit by the fire for light. I am cold all the time. If spring comes early and I can see the morning light coming up golden over the stone windowsill then I will have lived through these dark days, and I can be sure that I will live to see others. By my reckoning – and who knows the king better than I? – if he does not have her beheaded by Easter, then he will not have it done at all.

If he does not have her beheaded by Easter then I will escape, because why would he spare her and kill me who is accused with her? If she keeps her wits about her and denies everything then she could live. I hope that someone has told her that if she denies Culpepper but says that she was married in the sight of God to Dereham then she can live. If she declares herself Dereham's wife then she has not then cuckolded the king but only Dereham; and since his head is on London Bridge he is in no position to complain. I could laugh, it is such an obvious escape for her, but if no-one tells her of it then she might die for the lack of wit.

Dear God, why would I, who was sister to Anne Boleyn, ever plot with such a half-wit as that slut Katherine?

I was wrong to put my faith in the Duke of Norfolk. I thought that we were working together, I thought that he would find me a husband and that I would have a great match. I know now that he is not to be trusted. I should have known that before. He used me to keep Katherine in check, and then he used me again to put her in the way of Culpepper. And now he has gone to the country and his own stepmother, her son, and his wife are here in the Tower somewhere, and they will all die for their parts in entrapping the king. He will not lift a finger to save his stepmother, he will not lift a finger to save his little niece; God knows, he will not lift a finger to save me.

If I survive this, if I am spared this, I shall find some way to report him for treason and I shall see him confined to one room, living in daily terror, waiting for the sound of them building the scaffold below the window, waiting for the

keeper of the Tower to come and say that tomorrow is the day, and tomorrow he will die. If I survive this I shall make him pay for what he said to me, for what he called me, for what he did to them. He will suffer in this little room as I am suffering now.

When I think of this happening to me, I could go mad with terror. My only comfort, my only safety, is that if I go mad with terror, they will not be able to execute me. A madman cannot be beheaded. I could laugh if I were not afraid of the sound of my laughter echoing off the walls. A madman cannot be executed, so at the very end of this, if it goes as badly as it might, I shall escape the block where Katherine dies. I shall pretend to be mad and they will send me back to Blickling with a keeper, and slowly I shall recover my wits.

Some days I rave a little so that they can see I have the tendency. Some days I cry out that it is raining, and I let them find me sobbing because the slates outside my window are shining with the wet. Some nights I cry out that the moon is whispering happy dreams to me. I frighten myself, to tell the truth. For some days, when I am not acting mad, I think that I must be mad, I must have been mad, quite mad, perhaps since my childhood. Mad to marry George who never loved me, mad to love and hate him with such a passion, mad to find such intense pleasure in thinking of him with a lover, mad to bear witness against him, maddest of all to love him with such jealousy that I could send him to the gallows ...

Stop, I must stop. I can't think about this now. I cannot have this before me now. I am to act mad. I am not to drive myself mad. I am to pretend to madness, not feel it. I shall remember that everything I could do to save George, I did do. Anything anyone says against that is a lie. I was a good and faithful wife and I tried to save my husband and my sister-in-law. And I tried to save Katherine too. I cannot be blamed if the three of them were all as bad as each other. Indeed I should be pitied for having such ill luck in my life.

Anne, Richmond Palace, February 1542

I am seated in a chair in my room, my hands clasped in my lap, three lords from the Privy Council before me, their faces grave. They have sent for Dr Harst at last, so this must be the moment of judgement after weeks of questioning my household, seeing my household accounts, and even talking to my stable boys about where I ride out, and who goes with me.

Clearly, they have been inquiring as to whether I have secret meetings but whether they suspect me of plotting with the emperor, with Spain, with France or the Pope, I cannot know. They may suspect me of taking a lover, they may accuse me of joining a coven of witches. They have asked everyone where I have been and who regularly visits me. It is the company I keep that is the focus of their inquiry but I cannot know what is their suspicion.

Since I am innocent of plotting, lust or witchcraft, I should be able to hold my head up and declare my conscience clear, but there is a girl far younger than me on trial for her life and there are men and women of absolute purity burned to death in this country merely for disagreeing with the king about the raising of the Host. Innocence is not enough any more.

I hold up my head anyway, for I know that when a power far greater comes against me, whether it be my brother in his wanton cruelty, or the King of England in his vain madness, it is always better to keep my head up and my courage high and wait for the worst that can come. Dr Harst, by contrast, is sweating, there are beads on his forehead and every now and then he mops his face with a grubby handkerchief.

‘There has been an allegation,’ says Wriothsley pompously.

I look at him coolly. I have never liked him nor he me, but by God, he serves Henry. Whatever Henry wants this man will deliver to him with a veneer of legality. We shall see what Henry wants now.

‘The king has heard that you have given birth to a child,’ he says. ‘We were told that a boy was born to you this summer and has been hidden away by your confederates.’

Dr Harst’s jaw drops almost to his chest. ‘What is this?’ he asks.

I keep my own face completely serene. 'It is a lie,' I say. 'I have known no man since I parted from His Grace the king. And as you yourself proved then: I did not know him. The king himself swore I was a virgin then, I am a virgin still. You may ask my maids that I have not borne a child.'

'We have asked your maids,' he replies, he is enjoying this. 'We have questioned every one of them and we have received very different answers. You have some enemies in your household.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' I say. 'And I am at fault for not keeping them in better order. Sometimes maids lie. But that is my only fault.'

'They tell us worse than this,' he says.

Dr Harst has flushed scarlet, he is gulping for air. He is wondering, as I am, what could be worse than a secret birth? If this is the preparation for a show trial and an accusation of treason then the case is being carefully built against me. I doubt that I can defend myself against sworn witnesses, and someone's newborn baby.

'What could be worse?' I ask.

'They say that there was no child, but that you pretended to give birth to a son, a boy, and that you have assured your confederates that this is the king's child and heir to the throne of England. You plan with treasonous Papists to put him on the throne of England and usurp the Tudors. What do you say to this, madam?'

My throat is very dry, I can feel myself searching for words, hunting for a persuasive reply, but nothing comes. If they want to, they can arrest me now, on this allegation alone. If they have a witness to say that I pretended to give birth, that I claimed it was the king's child, then they have a witness to prove that I am guilty of treason and I shall join Katherine at Syon and we will die together, two disgraced queens on one scaffold.

'I say it is untrue,' I reply simply. 'Whoever has told you this is a liar and a false witness. I know of no plot against the king, and I would be party to nothing against him. I am his sister and his faithful subject as he bid me to be.'

'You deny that you have horses waiting to take you to France?' he says in a sudden rush.

'I deny it.' As soon as the words are out of my mouth I realise this is a mistake, for they will know that we have horses waiting.

Sir Thomas smiles at me, he knows he has caught me. 'You deny it?' he asks again.

'They are waiting for me,' Dr Harst says, his voice trembling. 'I have debts,

as you know, I am ashamed to say that I have many debts. I thought if my debtors became too pressing that I should go quickly to Cleves and speak to my master for more money. I have had the horses waiting in case my debtors came for me.'

I look at him in absolute incredulity. I am amazed at the quickness of his lie; but they cannot know that. He bows. 'I beg your pardon, Lady Anne. I should have told you. But I was ashamed.'

Sir Thomas glances at the two other councillors, they nod to him. It is an explanation, if not the one they would have preferred.

'So,' he says briskly. 'Your two servants who made up this story against you have been arrested for slander and will be taken to the Tower. The king is determined that your reputation shall be unsullied.'

The shift is almost too much for me. It sounds as if I am to be released from suspicion, and at once I think it is a trick. 'I am grateful to His Majesty for his fraternal care,' I say carefully. 'I count myself his most loyal subject.'

He nods. 'Good. We will go now. The council will want to know that your name has been cleared.'

'You are leaving?' I ask. I know that they hope to catch me in a moment of relief. They do not know how deeply afraid I am. I don't think I will ever celebrate my escape, for I will never trust it.

In a dream I rise from my chair and walk with him from the room, we go down the great stairs to the front door where his escort is waiting, mounted with the royal standard before them. 'I trust the king is well,' I say.

'His heart is broken,' Sir Thomas says frankly. 'It is a bad business, a bad business indeed. His leg is giving him much pain and Katherine Howard's behaviour has caused him great unhappiness. The whole court has been in mourning this Christmastide, almost as if she were dead.'

'Will she be released?' I ask.

He shoots me a quick, guarded look. 'What do you think?'

I shake my head, I am not such a fool to speak my thoughts, especially not when I have just been on trial myself.

If I ever did tell the truth I would say that I have thought for some months that the king is out of his wits and that no-one has the courage to challenge him. He could release her and take her back as his wife, he could call her his sister or he could behead her, as the mood takes him. He could summon me for marriage or he could behead me for treason. He is a monstrous madman and nobody but me seems to know it.

‘The king will be judge,’ he says, confirming my silent thoughts. ‘He alone is guided by God.’

Jane Boleyn, the Tower of London, February 1542

I laugh, I skip about, sometimes I look out of the window and talk to the seagulls. There is to be no trial, no questioning, no chance to clear my name, so there is no advantage to having my wits about me. They do not dare put that idiot Katherine before a court, or she has refused to go, I don't know which and I don't care. All I know is what they tell me. They speak very loudly to me, as if I were deaf or old, rather than mad. They say that parliament has passed an act of attainder against Katherine and against me for treason and conspiracy. We have been judged and found guilty without trial, without judge or jury or defence. This is Henry's justice. I look blank and giggle, I sing a little song and ask when we shall go hunting. It can't be long now. In a few days I expect them to fetch Katherine from Syon and then they will behead her.

They send the king's own doctor, Dr Butt, to see me. He comes every day and sits in a chair in the centre of my room and watches me from under thick eyebrows as if I were one of the beasts. He is to judge if I am mad. This makes me laugh out loud without pretence. If this doctor knew when someone was mad he would have locked up the king six years ago, before he murdered my husband. I curtsy to the good doctor, and dance around him, and laugh at his questioning when he asks me for my name and for my family. I am absolutely convincing, I can see it in his pitying gaze. Undoubtedly he will report to the king that I am out of my wits and they will have to release me.

Listen! Listen! I hear it! The noise of saws and hammers. I peep out of the window and I clap my hands as if delighted to see the workmen building the scaffold: Katherine's scaffold. They will behead her under my window. If I dare, I can watch it all happen. I shall have the best view of everyone. When she is dead they will send me away, probably to my family at Blickling, and then I can quietly and secretly grow sane again. I shall take my time, I want no-one inquiring after me. I shall dance about for a year or two, singing songs and talking to clouds, and at the end of it, when the new king, King Edward, is on the throne and the old scores forgotten I shall return to court and serve the new queen as well as I can.

Oh! There's a plank gone down with a clatter and a young man cuffed for carelessness. I shall set up a cushion on the window-ledge and watch them all day, it is as good as a masque at court to see them measuring and sawing and building. What a fuss to make about building such a stage when the show will last for only a few minutes! When they bring me my dinner I clap my hands and point and the warders shake their heads and put down the dishes and go quietly away.

Katherine, Syon Abbey, February 1542

It is a morning like every other morning, quiet, nothing to do, no entertainment, no amusement, no company. I am so bored with everything and with myself that when I hear the tramp of feet on the path outside my window, I am absolutely delighted at the thought of something happening – I am beyond caring what. I run like a child to the tall window and I look out, and there is a royal escort marching up the path through the garden from the river. They have come by barge, and there is my uncle the duke's standard, and there are the men in his livery, and there he is himself, looking powerful and bad tempered as always, at the head of them, and half a dozen Privy Councillors with him.

At last! At last! I am so relieved that I could weep to see them. It is my uncle returned to me! My uncle come back to tell me what to do. At last I am to be freed. At last he has come for me and I am to be released. I should think I shall be taken by my uncle to one of his houses in the country, which will not be very amusing, but better than here. Or perhaps I shall have to go far away, perhaps France. France would be wonderful, except I cannot speak French or at any rate only '*voilà!*' but surely they must mostly all speak English? And if not, then they can learn?

The door opens and the warden of my household comes in. His eyes are filled with tears. 'Madam,' he says. 'They have come for you.'

'I know!' I say jubilantly. 'And you needn't pack my gowns either for I don't care if I ever see them again, I shall order new. Where am I going?'

The door opens a little wider and there is my uncle himself, looking stern as he must, for this is obviously to be a very solemn scene.

'Your Grace!' I say. I can hardly stop myself giving him a wink. So we have got through, have we? Here we are again. Him, looking stern; and me, waiting for my orders. He will have some plan to have me back on the throne and forgiven within a month. I thought I was in grave trouble and that he had deserted me; but here he is, and wherever he goes, prosperity always follows. I take a good look at his face as I come up smiling out of my curtsy and I see he is looking terribly solemn, so I look serious too. I cast my eyes down and I look

wonderfully penitent. I am quite pale from being indoors all the time and I really think that with my eyes down and my lips slightly pouting I must look utterly saintly.

‘Your Grace,’ I say in a soft, mournful tone.

‘I bring you news of your sentence,’ he says.

I wait.

‘The king’s parliament has consulted and has passed a Bill of Attainder against you.’

If I knew what this is, I would know better how to respond. As it is, I think it best just to widen my eyes and look agreeable. I suppose that a Bill of Attainder is some kind of official forgiveness.

‘The king has given his assent.’

Yes, yes, but so what? What does this mean for me?

‘You will be taken to the Tower and you will be executed in private on Tower Green as soon as may be. Your lands and goods are forfeit to the Crown.’

I really have no idea what he is talking about. Besides, thanks to his poor protection of my royal fortune, I now have no lands and goods to speak of anyway. I haven’t forgotten Thomas Seymour taking my own jewels away from me as if they were still belonging to his sister.

The duke looks a bit surprised at my silence. ‘Do you understand?’

I say nothing but still look saintly.

‘Katherine! Do you understand?’

‘I don’t know what attainted means,’ I confess. It sounds like a joint of meat that has gone off.

He looks at me as if I am a half-wit. ‘Attainder,’ he corrects me. ‘Not attainted. Attainder.’

I shrug. Who cares how it is said? Does it mean that I go back to court?

‘It means that parliament has sentenced you to death and the king has given his assent,’ he says quietly. ‘It is to be done without trial. You are to die, Katherine. You will be beheaded on the green in the Tower.’

‘Die?’

‘Yes.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes.’

I look at him. He must have a plan. ‘What should I do?’ I ask him in a whisper.

‘You should acknowledge your sins, and ask for forgiveness,’ he says

promptly.

I am so relieved I could almost weep. Of course I will be forgiven if I say I am sorry. 'What should I say?' I demand. 'Tell me exactly what I must say.'

He produces a rolled sheet of paper from the pocket of his jacket. He always has a plan. Thank God for him, he always has a plan. I unroll it and look at him. It is dreadfully long. He nods to me, apparently I have to read it all. I start to read out loud.

The first paragraph is me acknowledging my very great crime against the king, against the most high God and the whole English nation, which I think is rather an exaggeration since all I did was what hundreds of other young women do every day, especially when they are married to old, disagreeable men; and in my case I had been very unkindly treated. Anyway, I read the words on the paper and the duke nods and the councillors with him nod too, so it is obviously the right thing to say, and everyone is pleased with me, which is always the best way to be. I wish he had given me a copy of this earlier to practise with. I like to do things right when people are watching. I unroll the scroll to the next section and I say that I implore His Majesty not to impute my crime to my kindred and family but to extend his unbounded mercy and benevolence to them all so that they don't suffer for my faults.

I give my uncle a hard look at this, for it is clear to me that he is making sure that he does not suffer for my troubles. His expression is perfectly bland. Then I ask the king to give my clothing to my maids after my death as I have nothing else to give them. This is so sad that I find I can hardly read it aloud. Fancy that! Me, with all I have owned, with nothing to give! Fancy me giving my clothes away because I will never wear them again! And how ridiculous to think that I would care a groat about what happens to those vile six gowns, six pairs of sleeves, six kirtles and six French hoods without a single jewel, in the most miserable colours I can imagine. They can burn them on a bonfire for all I care.

But despite the gowns and my uncle saving his own skin, by the time I have finished my speech I am weeping at the sadness of it, and all of the councillors look very grieved and it is a poignant scene that they can report to the king, and I have no doubt but that he will be moved at the thought of me begging pardon for others and giving away my little wardrobe. It is so sad that it makes me cry, although I know that it's all make-believe. If I thought it was true I would break down altogether.

My uncle nods. I have done what he wants and now it is up to him to persuade the king that I am utterly penitent and ready for death. That should be

all anyone can ask for, I should think. They all troop off the way they came and I have to sit myself down in my one chair, in my dull gown, and wait for them to come back and tell me that since I am so very sorry I am quite forgiven.



I am waiting for the barge this time, I am up at the window from terribly early in the morning. Usually, with nothing to get up for and nothing to do, I try to sleep through breakfast all the way till dinner, but today I am certain that they will come with my royal pardon and I want to look my best. As soon as it is light I ring for my maid to come and lay out my dresses. Hmm, such a choice I have before me! I have a gown of black, two of very dark blue, almost black, a gown of dark green that it is almost black, a gown of grey, and just in case I need two, another gown of black. So what shall I wear? However shall I choose? I take the gown of black but I wear it with the dark green sleeves and a dark green hood that will symbolise my penitence and my love of Tudor green to those who take an interest in these things. It makes my eyes look beautiful as well, which is always a good thing.

I don't know how this will be done, and I always rather like to be prepared for these ceremonies. My master of the household always used to tell me where I should stand and how I should look, and I like to practise. It comes from being made queen while still quite young, and not really brought up to it. But as far as I know, no queen has ever been forgiven for adultery and treason and all the rest of it, so I suppose we shall just have to make it up as we go along. At any rate, that old wolf my uncle will no doubt guide me through it all.

I am dressed and waiting by nine in the morning but nobody comes. I hear Mass and take breakfast in sulky silence and still nothing. But then, just before noon, I hear the welcome tramp of feet on the stones of the path and I dash to the window, see my uncle's black square hat bobbing along, the staves of office in the hands of the other councillors, the royal standard before them, and I rush back to my seat and sit down, put my feet together, my hands in my lap, and cast down my eyes in great penitence.

They open the double doors and everyone comes trooping in, dressed in their best. I rise to my feet and curtsy to my uncle as I should, since he is head of my house, but he no longer bows to me as his queen. I stand and wait. I am surprised he doesn't look more relieved that this is all over.

'We have come to take you to the Tower,' he says.

I nod. I had thought we would go to Kenninghall but perhaps this is even better, the king often uses the Tower as his London palace, perhaps I am to meet him there. 'As you wish, my lord duke,' I say sweetly.

He looks a little surprised at my demure tone. I have to try very hard not to giggle.

'Katherine, you are to be executed,' he says. 'You will go to the Tower as a condemned traitor.'

'Traitor?' I repeat.

'I told you last time,' he says impatiently. 'You were convicted by a Bill of Attainder. I told you. You are not required to stand trial, you understood that. You confessed your sins. That confession has been entered against your name. Now the time has come for the sentence.'

'I confessed so that I would be forgiven,' I point out.

He looks at me quite exasperated. 'But you have not been forgiven,' he says. 'All that was left to agree was the sentence.'

'And?' I say a little pertly.

He takes a deep breath as if to dispel his irritation. 'His Grace has agreed that you shall be put to death.'

'He will forgive me when I get to the Tower?' I suggest.

To my increasing anxiety he shakes his head. 'For God's sake, girl, don't be such an idiot! You cannot hope for that. There is no reason to hope for it. When he first heard what you had done, he drew his sword and said he would kill you himself. It is over, Katherine. You must prepare yourself for death.'

'That can't happen,' I say. 'I'm only sixteen. Nobody could put me to death when I'm only sixteen.'

'They can,' he says bleakly. 'Believe me, they will.'

'The king will stop them.'

'It is his own wish.'

'You will stop them.'

His eyes are as cold as a fish on a marble slab. 'I will not.'

'Well, somebody must stop them!'

He turns his head. 'Take her,' he says.

Half a dozen men march into the room, the royal guard who used to parade so handsomely for me.

'I shan't go,' I say. I am really afraid now. I stand to my tallest height and I scowl at them. 'I shan't go. You can't make me.'

They hesitate a little, and look at my uncle. He makes a quick chopping

gesture with his hand. 'Take her,' he says again.

I turn and run into my privy chamber, swinging the door behind me, but it delays them for only a moment, they catch it before it bangs, they are after me so quickly. I lay hold of one of the posts of the bed and I latch my fingers around it. 'I shan't go!' I shout. 'You can't make me. You can't touch me! I am Queen of England! Nobody can touch me!'

One of the men grabs me around the waist. The other reaches forwards and unlaces my hands, as soon as my hands are free I slap the first one round the face as hard as I can and he lets me go, but a third man grabs me again and the second has my hands this time so though I struggle, he forces them behind my back and I hear one of the sleeves tear. 'Let me go!' I scream. 'You can't hold me. I am Katherine, Queen of England. You can't touch me, my person is sacred. Let me go!'

My uncle stands in the doorway, his face as dark as the devil. He nods to a man standing beside me, who bends down and grabs at my feet. I try to kick him but he takes me as if I were a little bucking foal and the three of them shuffle out of the room with me held between them. My ladies are in tears, the warden of my household is white with horror.

'Don't let them take me!' I scream. Mutely, he shakes his head. I see he is clinging to the door to support himself. 'Help me!' I scream. 'Send for –' I break off then, for there is no-one to send for. My uncle, guardian and mentor is standing by, this is being done under his orders. My grandmother and sisters and stepmother are all under arrest, the rest of the family are frantically insisting that they hardly knew me. There is no-one who will defend me, and no-one has ever loved me but Francis Dereham and Tom Culpepper and they are dead.

'I can't go to the Tower!' I am sobbing now, the breath shaken out of me by their big, bouncy strides with me slung between them like a sack. 'Don't take me to the Tower, I beg you. Take me to the king, let me plead with him. Please. If he is determined I'll go to the Tower then, I'll make a good death then, but I'm not ready yet. I'm only sixteen. I can't die yet.'

They don't say anything, they march up the gangplank to the barge and I give a little wriggle thinking I might throw myself into the water and get away, but they have huge hands and they hold me tightly. They sling me on to the dais at the back of the barge and they all but sit on me to keep me still. They have hold of my hands and my feet, and I am crying now and begging them to take me to the king, and they look away, out over the river, as if they are deaf.

My uncle and the councillors come on board, looking like men going to their

own funeral. 'My lord duke, hear me!' I shout, and he shakes his head at me and goes to the front of the barge where he can't hear or see me.

I am so afraid now that I can't stop crying, the tears are pouring down my face and my nose is running and that brute has hold of my hands and I can't even wipe my face. It is cold where my tears are wet on my cheeks and the disgusting taste of snot is on my lips, and they won't even let me wipe my nose. 'Please,' I say. 'Please.' But nobody listens at all.

The barge goes quickly downriver, they have caught the tide just right, and the oarsmen feather their blades so they catch the safest part of the current at London Bridge. I glance up, I wish I hadn't, at once I see the two new heads, two fresh severed heads, Tom Culpepper and Francis Dereham, like damp, soft gargoyles, their eyes wide open and their teeth bared, a seagull struggling to find its footing on Dereham's dark hair. They have set their heads on the spikes beside the horrible rotting shapes of so many others, and the birds will peck out their eyes and tongues, and poke sharp beaks in their ears to winkle out their brains.

'Please,' I whisper. I don't even know what I am begging for now. I just hope that this will stop. I just want it not to be happening. 'Please, good sirs ... please.'

We go in by the watergate, it rolls up silently as soon as the guards see us coming, and the oarsmen ship their oars and our boat glides into the dock inside the dark shadow of the wall. The Lieutenant of the Tower, Sir Edmund Walsingham, is standing at the steps, waiting to greet me as if I were arriving to stay in the royal apartments, as if I were still queen and a pretty new queen at that. The portcullis splashes down behind us as the chains roll it down, and they lift me out of the barge and take both my arms and heave me up the steps, my feet stumbling.

'Good day, Lady Katherine,' he says, as polite as ever. But I say nothing because I cannot stop sobbing, little gasping sobs that come and go with every breath. I look back and my uncle is standing on the barge, waiting to see me go. He will be out of the watergate like a wherry shooting the rapids the moment his duty is done. He will be desperate that the shadow of the Tower does not fall on him. He will be rushing back to the king to assure him that the Howard family has given up their bad girl. It is me who is going to pay the price for the Howard ambition; not him.

I scream, 'Uncle!' but he just gives a gesture of his hand as if to say, 'take her away', and they do. They lead me up the stairs, past the White Tower, and

across the green. The workmen are building a platform on the lawn, a little wooden stage standing about three foot high, with broad steps going up to it. Others are fencing off the paths. The men on either side of me walk a little faster and look away, and this makes me absolutely certain that this is my scaffold, and the fence is to hold back the crowd who will come to see me die.

‘How many people will come?’ I ask, the little coughing sobs make it hard for me to breathe.

‘A couple of hundred,’ the warden says uncomfortably. ‘It is not open to the public. Just to the court. As a favour to you. The king’s own orders.’

I nod, it is not much of a favour, I think. Ahead the door of the tower opens before us and I go up the narrow stone stairs with one man slightly ahead of me hauling me up and the other pushing from behind. ‘I can walk,’ I say and they let go of my arms but stay close beside me. My room is on the first floor, the large glazed window overlooks the green. There is a fire in the grate, there is a stool by the fire and a table with a Bible, and beyond that there is a bed.

The men let me go and stand by the door. The warden and I look at each other. ‘Shall you be wanting anything?’ he asks.

I laugh out loud at this most ridiculous question. ‘Like what?’ I ask.

He shrugs. ‘Some delicacy, or some spiritual comfort?’

I shake my head. I don’t even know if there is a God any more, for if Henry is special in the sight of God and he knows God’s will then I suppose God wants me to die, but in private as a special favour. ‘I should like to have the block,’ I say.

‘The block, my lady?’

‘Yes, the executioner’s block. Can I have it here in my room?’

‘If you wish ... but ... what do you want it for?’

‘To practise,’ I say impatiently. I go across to the window and I look down. The green will be filled with people who were proud to be at my court, people who were desperate to be my friend. Now they will be watching me die. If I am to do it, I had better do it properly.

He gulps. Of course he doesn’t understand what I mean, he is an old man, he will die in his bed with his friends watching his last breath. But I shall be watched by hundreds of critical eyes. I want to do it gracefully if I have to do it.

‘I shall have them bring it at once,’ he says. ‘And will you see your confessor now?’

I nod. Though if God knows everything already, and already has decided that I am so bad that I should die before my seventeenth birthday, it is hard to know

what the point of confession might be.

He bows and goes from the room. The soldiers bow and close the door. The key turns in the lock with a great clunk. I go and look out of the window at the workmen and the scaffold below. It looks as if they will be finished by tonight. Perhaps they will be ready tomorrow.

It takes two of them to bring in the block with much huffing and puffing as if it were heavy, and many sideways glances at me as if I am rather peculiar in needing to practise. Really, if they had been Queen of England like me, when I was still a girl, then they would know what a comfort it is to get the ceremonies right. There is nothing worse in the whole world than not knowing what you are supposed to do and looking foolish.

I kneel before the great thing and put my head down on it. I can't say it's very comfortable. I try it with my head turned one way and then the other. There's no vast improvement in either direction, and no change of view anyway as I will be blindfolded, and underneath the blindfold I shall have my eyes tight shut, hoping like a child that it isn't happening. The wood is smooth, cool under my hot cheek.

I suppose I really do have to do this.

I sit back on my heels and look at the damned thing. Really, if it were not so dreadful, I could laugh. All along I thought I had the Boleyn inheritance of grace and beauty and charm, and it turns out that all I have inherited is this: her block. This is the Boleyn inheritance for me. *Voilà*: the executioner's block.

Jane Boleyn, the Tower of London, 13 February 1542

She is to be beheaded today, already the crowd is gathering on the green. Looking from the window I can see so many faces I know. These are friends and rivals who go back years and years with me, we were children together when Henry VII was on the throne, and some of us were ladies at the court of Queen Katherine of Aragon. I wave merrily and a couple of them see me, and point, and stare.

Here comes the block now! They have had it tucked away somewhere and two of the workmen heave it up to the scaffold and spread the sawdust around it. That's to catch her blood. Beneath the scaffold is a basket filled with straw to catch her head. I know all of this, for I have seen it before, more than once. Henry has been a king who has used the headsman very often. I was there at the beheading of Anne Boleyn, I saw her walk up those shallow steps to the scaffold, and stand before the crowd, and confess her sins and pray for her soul. She looked over our heads to the Tower gate, as if she were waiting for the pardon that she had been promised. It never came and she had to kneel down and put her head on the block and stretch out her arms as a signal that the sword could come down. I've often wondered what it must be like, to fling your arms out as if you were flying, and the next moment hear that swish and feel the hair on the back of your neck lift with the wind of the passing blade and then ...

Well, Katherine will know soon enough. The door behind me opens and a priest comes in, very grave-looking in his vestments, with a Bible and a prayer book hugged to his chest.

'My child,' he says. 'Are you prepared for the hour of your death?'

I laugh out loud, and then it sounds so convincingly mad that I laugh again. I cannot tell him that he is mistaken and that I cannot be sentenced to die, because I am insane, but I point at him and say, 'Hello! Hello! Hello!' very loudly.

He sighs and kneels down on the floor before me, folds his hands together and closes his eyes. I skip away from him to the far side of the room and say, 'Hello?' But he starts the prayers of confession and penitence and pays no attention to me at all. Some fool has told him that I am to be prepared for death,

and I suppose I shall have to go along with it since I can hardly argue with him. I suppose at the last moment they will come and commute the sentence to imprisonment. 'Hello!' I say again and climb up to the window-ledge.

There is a stir in the crowd, and everyone is craning to look at the door at the foot of the tower. I stand up on my toes and push my face against the cold glass so that I can see what they are all looking at. It is her: little Kitty Howard, staggering to the scaffold. Her legs seem to have given way, she is being carried between a guard and a woman in waiting, and they half drag her to the steps and then her little wavering feet wander about and they have to bodily lift her and push her up to the stage. I laugh at the incongruity of this, then I catch myself at the horror of laughing at a girl, almost a child, on the way to her death. Then I realise it sounds as if I am mad, and I laugh again for the benefit of the priest, praying for my soul in the room behind me.

She looks as if she has fainted, they are slapping her face and pinching her cheeks, poor little mite. She stumbles to the front of the stage and clutches the rail and tries to speak. I can't hear what she says, I doubt anybody can hear much. I can see her lips, it looks as if she is saying: 'Please'.

She falls back and they catch her and push her into kneeling before the block, she clings to it, as if it might save her. Even from here I can see she is weeping. Then gently, just as she does at bedtime, as if she were a little girl settling down to sleep, she strokes a lock of her hair away from her face with her hand, and puts her head down on the smooth wood. She turns her little head and lays her cheek on the wood. Tentatively – as if she wishes she didn't have to do it – she stretches out her trembling hands and the headsman is in a hurry and his axe flashes down like a bolt of lightning.

I scream at the great gout of blood and the way her head bounces on the platform. The priest behind me falls silent, and I remember that I must not forget my part, not for a moment, and so I call out: 'Kitty, is that you? Is that you, Kitty? Is it a game?'

'Poor woman,' the priest says, and gets to his feet. 'Give me a sign that you have confessed your sins and die in faith, poor witless thing.'

I jump down from the windowsill for I hear the grate of the key in the lock and now they will come to take me home. They will take me out of the back door and hurry me to the watergate and then, I guess, by unmarked barge, probably to Greenwich and then perhaps by boat to Norwich. 'Time to go,' I say merrily.

'God bless her and forgive her,' the priest says. He holds out his Bible for

me to kiss.

‘Time to go,’ I say again. I kiss it, since he is so urgent that I should, and I laugh at his sad face.

The guards stand either side of me and we go quickly down the stairs. But when I expect them to turn away to the back of the tower they guide me to the front entrance, to the green. I check at once, I don’t want to see Katherine Howard’s body being wrapped up like old laundry, then I remember I have to appear mad, right up to the last moment when they put me on the boat, I have to appear so witless that I cannot be beheaded.

‘Quick, quick!’ I say. ‘Trot, trot!’

The guards in reply take my arms and the door is swung open. The court is still assembled, almost as if they are waiting for another show on the bloodstained stage. I don’t like to be taken through them, past my friends who were honoured to know me. In the front row I see my kinsman, the Earl of Surrey, looking a little queasy at the sawdust drenched in his cousin’s blood, but laughing it all off. I laugh too and look from one guard to the other. ‘Trot! Trot!’ I say.

They grimace as if this is disagreeable and they tighten their grip and we walk towards the scaffold. I hesitate. ‘Not me,’ I say.

‘Come along now, Lady Rochford,’ the man on my right says. ‘Come up the steps.’

‘No!’ I protest, I dig my heels in, but they are too strong for me. They move me on.

‘Come on now, there’s a good girl.’

‘You can’t execute me,’ I say. ‘I am a madwoman. You can’t execute a madwoman.’

‘We can,’ the man says.

I twist in their grip, when they march me to the steps I get my feet against the first tread and push off from it, and they have to wrestle to get me up one step. ‘You can’t,’ I say. ‘I am mad. The doctors say I am mad. The king sent his own doctors, his own doctors every day to see that I am mad.’

‘Had the law changed, didn’t he?’ one of the guards puffs. Another fellow joins them and is pushing me from behind. His hard hands in my back propel me up the steps to the stage. They are lifting the wrapped body of Katherine off at the front, and her head is in the basket, her beautiful golden-brown hair spilling over the side.

‘Not me!’ I insist. ‘I am mad.’

‘He changed the law,’ the guard shouts at me over the laughter of the crowd, which has cheered up at this battle to get me up the steps. ‘Changed the law so that anyone convicted of treason could be beheaded, whether mad or not.’

‘The doctor, the king’s own doctor, says I’m mad.’

‘Makes no difference, you’re still going to die.’

They hold me at the front of the stage. I look out at the laughing, avid faces. Nobody has ever loved me in this court, nobody will shed a tear for me. Nobody will protest against this new injustice.

‘I am not mad,’ I shout. ‘But I am completely innocent. Good people, I beg you to implore the king for mercy. I have done nothing wrong but one terrible thing, one terrible thing. And I was punished for that, you know I was punished for it. Nobody blamed me for it but it was the worst thing a wife could do ... I loved him ...’ There is a roll of drums which drowns out everything but my own crying. ‘I am sorry, I am sorry for it ...’

They drag me back from the rail at the front of the stage and they force me down into the stained sawdust. They force my hands on to the block, which is wet with her blood. When I look at my hands they are as red with blood as if I am a killer. I will die with innocent blood on my hands.

‘I am innocent,’ I shout. They wrestle the blindfold on me so I can see nothing. ‘I am innocent of everything. I have always been innocent of everything. The only thing I ever did, the only sin ever, was against George, for love of George, my husband George, God forgive me for that – I want to confess ...’

‘On the count of three,’ the guard says. ‘One-two-three.’

Five years later

Anne, Hever Castle, January 1547

So, he is dead at last, my husband who denied me, the man who failed the promise of his youth, the king who turned tyrant, the scholar who went mad, the beloved boy who became a monster. It was only his death that saved his last wife, Katherine Parr, who was to be arrested for treason and heresy; but death, which had been his ally, his partner and his pander for so long, finally came for him.

How many did the king kill? We can start to count now that death has stilled his murderous will. Thousands. No-one will ever know. Up and down the land the burnings in the market place for heresy, the hanging at the gallows for treason. Thousands and thousands of men and women whose only crime was that they disagreed with him. Papists who held to the religion of their fathers, reformers who wanted the new ways. Little Kitty Howard among the dead, whose only crime was that she loved a boy of her own age and not a man old enough to be her father, and rotting from the leg upwards. This is the man they call a great king, the greatest king that we have ever had in England. Does it not teach us that we should have no king? That a people should be free? That a tyrant is still a tyrant even when he has a handsome face under a crown?

I think of the Boleyn inheritance that meant so much to Lady Rochford. She was the heir, in the end. She inherited the death of her sister-in-law, of her husband. Her inheritance and poor Kitty's, was death on the scaffold, just like them. I have a share of the Boleyn inheritance too, this pretty little castle set in the Kent countryside, my favourite home.

So it is over. I shall wear mourning for the king, and then I shall attend the coronation of the prince, the little boy I loved, now to be King Edward. I have become what I promised myself I would be, if I was spared Henry's axe. I promised myself that I would live my own life, by my own lights, that I would play my part in the world as a woman in my own right; and I have done this.

I am a free woman now, free from him and finally free from fear. If there is a

knock on my door in the night I will not start up from my bed, my heart hammering, thinking that my luck has run out and that he has sent his soldiers for me. If a stranger comes to my house I will not suspect a spy. If someone asks me for news of the court I will not fear entrapment.

I will own a cat and not fear being called a witch, I will dance and not fear being named a whore. I shall ride my horse and go where I please. I shall soar like a gyrfalcon. I shall live my own life and please myself. I shall be a free woman.

It is no small thing, this, for a woman: freedom.

Author's Note

Anne of Cleves and Katherine Howard are the two wives of Henry VIII that we know least; as is so often the case, we think we know them well. In this fictional account of the real facts I have tried to get past the convention that one wife was ugly and the other stupid, to consider the lives and circumstances of these two very young women who were, so briefly, the most important women of England, successive wives to a man on the brink of madness.

The main historical facts of the characters are as I describe them here. I could discover little detail about Anne of Cleves' childhood; but I thought the illness of her father and the dominance of her brother were interesting in the light of her later decision to take her chance on staying in England. Her prettiness and her charm were widely reported at the time and are shown in the painting by Holbein. I believe it was the disastrous meeting at Rochester that caused Henry to reject her out of grievously wounded vanity. The conspiracy to accuse her of witchcraft, or treason, as an alternative to divorce is well documented, especially by the historian Retha Warnicke, and was clearly as much of a lie as other evidence about her marriage given to the inquiry.

Katherine Howard's childhood is better known, but drawn almost wholly from evidence given against her. My fictional account explores the historical facts and my bias is towards understanding Katherine as a young girl at a court of far older and more sophisticated people. Her surviving letter to Thomas Culpepper shows, I believe, a very young girl sincerely in love.

The character of Jane Boleyn, Lady Rochford, is drawn from history – few novelists would dare to invent such a horror as she seems to have been. She did indeed give the crucial evidence that led to the beheading of her husband and sister-in-law, and there seems to be no explanation for this but jealousy and a determination to preserve her inheritance. She was at the deathbed of Jane Seymour, and gave evidence that could have been used to send Anne of Cleves to the scaffold (as I describe). The evidence against her and her own confession clearly show that she encouraged Katherine Howard's adultery, fully understanding the fatal danger to the young queen. The suggestion that she did

this with the purpose of getting the queen pregnant is my own. I suggest that she pretended madness in the hope of escaping the scaffold, but I hope I show, both in this book and in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, that Jane Boleyn was never wholly sane.

On my website philippagregory.com there is a family tree and more background information about the writing of this novel.

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