

HAMPTON COURT PALACE, SPRING 1543

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He stands before me, as broad as an ancient oak, his face like a full moon caught high in the topmost branches, the rolls of creased flesh upturned with goodwill. He leans, and it is as if the tree might topple on me. I stand my ground but I think—surely he’s not going to kneel, as another man knelt at my feet, just yesterday, and covered my hands with kisses? But if this mountain of a man ever got down, he would have to be hauled up with ropes, like an ox stuck in a ditch; and besides, he kneels to no one.

I think, he can’t kiss me on the mouth, not here in the long room with musicians at one end and everyone passing by. Surely that can’t happen in this mannered court, surely this big moon face will not come down on mine. I stare up at the man who my mother and all her friends once adored as the handsomest in England, the king who every girl dreamed of, and I whisper a prayer that he did not say the words he just said. Absurdly, I pray that I misheard him.

In confident silence, he waits for my assent.

I realize: this is how it will be from now until death us do part; he will wait for my assent or continue without it. I will have to marry this man who looms larger and stands higher than anyone else. He is above mortals, a heavenly body just below angels: the King of England.

“I am so surprised by the honor,” I stammer.

The pursed pout of his little mouth widens into a smile. I can see the yellowing teeth and smell his old-dog breath.

“I don’t deserve it.”

“I will show you how to deserve it,” he assures me.

A coy smile on his wet lips reminds me, horribly, that he is a sensualist trapped in a rotting body and that I will be his wife in every sense of the word; he will bed me while I am aching for another man.

“May I pray and think on this great proposal?” I ask, stumbling for courtly words. “I’m taken aback, I really am. And so recently widowed . . .”

His sprouting sandy eyebrows twitch together; this displeases him. “You want time? Weren’t you hoping for this?”

“Every woman hopes for it,” I assure him swiftly. “There is not one lady at court who does not hope for it, not one in the country who does not dream of it. I among all the others. But I am unworthy!”

This is better, he is soothed.

“I can’t believe that my dreams have come true,” I embellish. “I need time to realize my good fortune. It’s like a fairy story!”

He nods. He loves fairy stories, disguising and playacting, and any sort of fanciful pretense.

“I have rescued you,” he declares. “I will raise you from nothing to the greatest place in the world.” His voice, rich and confident, lubricated for all his life with the finest of wines and the fattest of cuts, is indulgent; but the sharp little gaze is interrogating me.

I force myself to meet his gimlet eyes, hooded under his fat eyelids. He doesn’t raise me from nothing, I don’t come from nowhere: I was born a Parr of Kendal, my late husband was a Neville, these are great families in the far North of England, not that he has ever been there. “I need a little time,” I bargain. “To accustom myself to joy.”

He makes a little gesture with his pudgy hand to say that I can take all the time I like. I curtsy and walk backwards from the

card table where he suddenly demanded the greatest stake that a woman can wager: a gamble with her life. It is against the law to turn a back to him: some people secretly joke that it is safer to keep an eye on him. Six paces backwards down the long gallery, the spring sunshine beating through the tall windows onto my modestly bowed head, and then I curtsy again, lowering my eyes. When I come up, he is still beaming at me, and everyone is still watching. I make myself smile and step backwards to the closed doors that lead to his presence chamber. Behind me, the guards swing them open for me to pass, I hear the murmur as the people outside, excluded from the honor of the royal presence, watch me curtsy again on the threshold, the great king watching me leave. I continue backwards as the guards close the double doors to hide me from his sight, and I hear the thud as they ground their halberds.

I stand for a moment, facing the carved wooden panels, quite unable to turn and face the curious stares in the crowded room. Now the thick doors are between us, I find I am shaking—not just my hands, not just trembling in my knees, but shuddering in every sinew of my body as if I have a fever, shivering like a leveret tucked down in a wheat field hearing the swish of the blades of the reaping gang coming closer and closer.



It is long past midnight before everyone is asleep, and I put a blue cloak over my night robe of black satin and dark as a shadow in the colors of the night sky, go quietly out of the women's rooms and down the great stairs. No one sees me pass, I have the hood pulled over my face, and, anyway, this is a court that has bought and sold love for years. No one has much curiosity in a woman going to the wrong room after midnight.

There are no sentries posted at my lover's door; it is unlocked as he promised. I turn the handle and slip in, and he is there, waiting for me at the fireside, the room empty, lit only by a few

candles. He is tall and lean, dark-haired, dark-eyed. When he hears me, he turns, and desire illuminates his grave face. He grabs me, my head against his hard chest, his arms tightening around my back. Without saying a word, I am rubbing my forehead against him as if I would drive myself under his skin, into his very body. We sway together for a moment, our bodies craving the scent, the touch of the other. His hands clutch at my buttocks, he lifts me up and I wrap my legs around him. I am desperate for him. He kicks open the door of his bedroom with his booted foot, and carries me in, slamming it behind him as he turns and lays me down on his bed. He strips off his breeches, he throws his shirt to the floor as I open my cloak and robe and he presses down upon me and enters me without a single word said, with only a deep sigh, as if he has been holding his breath all day for this moment.

Only then do I gasp against his naked shoulder: “Thomas, swive me all night; I don’t want to think.”

He rears above me so that he can see my pale face and my auburn hair spilling over the pillow. “Christ, I am desperate for you,” he exclaims, and then his face grows intent and his dark eyes widen and are blinded by desire as he starts to move inside me. I open my legs wider and hear my breath coming short, and know that I am with the only lover who has ever given me pleasure, in the only place in the world where I want to be, the only place that I feel safe—in Thomas Seymour’s warm bed.



Sometime before dawn, he pours wine for me from a flagon on the sideboard and offers me dried plums and some little cakes. I take a glass of wine and nibble on a pastry, catching the crumbs in my cupped hand.

“He’s proposed marriage,” I say shortly.

Briefly, he puts his hand over his eyes, as if he cannot bear to see me, sitting in his bed, my hair tumbled around my shoulders,

his sheets wrapped around my breasts, my neck rubbed red with his biting kisses, my mouth a little swollen.

“God save us. Oh, God spare us this.”

“I couldn’t believe it.”

“He spoke to your brother? To your uncle?”

“No, to me, yesterday.”

“Have you told anyone else?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. I’d tell no one before you.”

“So what will you do?”

“What can I do? I’ll obey,” I say grimly.

“You can’t,” he says with sudden impatience. He reaches for me and snatches my hands, crumbling the pastry. He kneels on the bed and kisses my fingertips, as he did when he first told me that he loved me, that he would be my lover, that he would be my husband, that no one should ever part us, that I was the only woman he had ever desired—ever!—in a long life of lovers and whores and servant girls and so many wenches that he cannot even remember. “Kateryn, I swear that you can’t. I can’t bear it. I won’t allow it.”

“I don’t see how to refuse.”

“What have you said?”

“That I need time. That I have to pray and think.”

He puts my hand on his flat belly. I can feel the warm damp sweat, and the soft curls of his dark hair, the wall of hard muscle beneath the firm skin. “Is this what you’ve been doing, tonight? Praying?”

“I’ve been worshipping,” I whisper.

He bends and kisses the top of my head. “Heretic. What if you told him you’re already promised? That you were already secretly married?”

“To you?” I say bluntly.

He takes the challenge because he is a daredevil; any risk, any danger, and Thomas runs towards it as if it were a May game, as if he is only truly alive at a sword’s length from death.

“Yes, to me,” he says boldly. “Of course, to me. Of course we must marry. We can say that we are already married!”

I wanted to hear him say it, but I don’t dare. “I can’t defy him.” I lose my voice at the thought of leaving Thomas. I feel hot tears on my cheek. I lift the sheet and mop my face. “Oh, God help me, I won’t be able to even see you.”

He looks aghast. He sits back on his heels, the ropes of the bed creaking under his weight. “This can’t be happening. You’re only just free—we’ve been together no more than half a dozen times—I was going to ask his permission to marry you! I only waited out of respect to your widowhood!”

“I should have read the signs. He sent me those beautiful sleeves, he insisted I break my mourning and come to court. He’s always coming to find me in Lady Mary’s rooms, and he’s always watching me.”

“I thought he was just flirting. You’re not the only one. There’s you, and Catherine Brandon, and Mary Howard . . . I never thought he was serious.”

“He has favored my brother far beyond his deserts. God knows William wasn’t appointed Warden of the Marches on his ability.”

“He’s old enough to be your father!”

I smile bitterly. “What man objects to a younger bride? You know, I think he had me in mind even before the death of my husband, God rest his soul.”

“I knew it!” He slams his palm against the carved post of the bed. “I knew it! I’ve seen the way his eyes follow you around the room. I’ve seen him send you a little dish of this or a little piece of that at dinner, and lick his own spoon with his big fat tongue when you taste it. I can’t bear the thought of you in his bed and his old hands pulling you this way and that.”

I strain my throat and swallow down my fear. “I know. I know. The marriage will be far worse than the courting, and the courting is like a play with mismatched actors and I don’t know my lines. I’m so afraid. Dear God, Thomas, I cannot tell you how very afraid I am. The last queen . . .” I lose my voice; I cannot say

her name. Katherine Howard died, beheaded for adultery, just a year ago.

“Don’t be afraid of that,” Thomas reassures me. “You weren’t here, you don’t know what she was like. Kitty Howard ruined herself. He would never have hurt her but for her own fault. She was a complete whore.”

“And what d’you think he’d call me, if he saw me like this?”

There is a bleak silence. He looks at my hands, clutched around my knees. I have started to tremble. He puts his hands on my shoulders, and feels me shudder. He looks aghast, as if we have just heard our death sentences.

“He must never ever suspect you of this,” he says, gesturing to the warm fire, the candlelit room, the rumpled sheets, the heady, betraying smell of lovemaking. “If he ever asks you—deny it. I will always deny it, I swear. He must never hear even a whisper. I swear that he will never hear one word from me. We must agree it together. We will never ever speak of it. Not to anyone. We will never give him cause to suspect, and we will swear an oath of secrecy.”

“I swear it. They could rack me and I wouldn’t betray you.”

His smile is warm. “They don’t rack gentry,” he says, and gathers me into his arms, with a deep gentle tenderness. He lays me down and wraps the fur rug around me, and he stretches out beside me, leaning over me, his head resting on his hand so that he can see me. He runs his hand from my wet cheek down my neck, over the curve of my breasts, my belly, my hips as if he is learning the shape of my body, as if he would read my skin with his fingers, the paragraphs, the punctuation, and remember it forever. Then he buries his face against my neck and inhales the perfume of my hair.

“This is good-bye, isn’t it?” he says, his lips against my warm skin. “You’ve decided already, you tough little northerner. You made up your mind, all on your own, and you came to say good-bye to me.”

Of course it is good-bye.

“I think I will die if you leave me,” he warns me.

“For sure, we will both die if I don’t,” I say dryly.

“Always straight to the point, Kat.”

“I don’t want to lie to you tonight. I’m going to spend the rest of my life telling lies.”

He scrutinizes my face. “You’re beautiful when you cry,” he remarks. “Especially when you cry.”

I put my hands against his chest. I feel the curve of his muscle and his dark hair under my palms. He has an old scar on one shoulder from a sword cut. I touch it gently, thinking I must remember this, I must remember every moment of this.

“Don’t ever let him see you cry,” he says. “He would like it.”

I trace the line of his collarbone, map the sinew of his shoulder. His warm skin under my hands and the scent of our lovemaking distracts me from sorrow.

“I’ve got to leave before dawn,” I say, glancing at the shuttered window. “We don’t have long.”

He knows exactly what I am thinking. “Is this the way you want to say good-bye?” Gently he presses his thigh between mine so that the hard muscle rests against the folds of soft flesh and pleasure rises slowly through my body like a blush. “Like this?”

“Country ways,” I whisper to make him laugh.

He rolls us both over so that he is on his back and I am lying along the warm lean length of him, on top of him so that I command this last act of love. I stretch out and feel him shudder with desire, I sit astride him, my hands against his chest, so that I can look into his dark eyes as I lower myself gently down to the entrancing point where he will enter me and then I hesitate until he pleads: “Kateryn.” Only then do I ease onward. He gasps and closes his eyes, stretching out his arms, as if he were crucified on pleasure. I move, slowly at first, thinking of his delight, wanting to make this last for a long time, but then I feel the heat growing in me, and the wonderful familiar impatience rising, until I cannot hesitate or stop but I have to go on, thinking of nothing at all, until I call on him in pleasure, calling his name in joy and at the

end weeping and weeping for lust, for love, and for the terrible loss that will come with the morning.



At chapel for Prime, I kneel beside my sister, Nan, the ladies of the king's daughter, Lady Mary, all around us. Lady Mary herself, silently praying at her own richly furnished prie-dieu, is out of earshot.

"Nan, I have to tell you something," I mutter.

"Has the king spoken?" is all she says.

"Yes."

She gives a little gasp and then puts her hand over mine and squeezes it. Her eyes close in a prayer. We kneel side by side, just as we used to do when we were little girls at home in Kendal in Westmorland and our mother read the prayers in Latin and we gabbled the responses. When the long service ends, Lady Mary rises to her feet, and we follow her from the chapel.

It is a fine spring day. If I were at home we would start plowing on a day like this and the sound of the curlews would ring out as loud as the plowboy's whistle.

"Let's walk in the garden before breakfast," Lady Mary proposes, and we follow her down the stairs to the privy garden and past the yeomen of the guard, who present arms and then stand back. My sister, Nan, raised at court, sees the opportunity to take my arm and slide us behind the backs of the ladies who are walking with our mistress. Discreetly, we sidestep to another path and when we are alone and cannot be overheard, she turns to look at me. Her pale tense face is like my own: auburn hair swept back under a hood, gray eyes like mine, and—just now—her cheeks are flushed red with excitement.

"God bless you, my sister. God bless us all. This is a great day for the Parrs. What did you say?"

"I asked for time to realize my joy," I say dryly.

"How long d'you think you've got?"

“Weeks?”

“He’s always impatient,” she warns me.

“I know.”

“Better accept at once.”

I shrug. “I will. I know I’ve got to marry him. I know there’s no choice.”

“As his wife, you’ll be Queen of England; you’ll command a fortune!” she crows. “We’ll all get our fortunes.”

“Yes—the family’s prize heifer is on the market once again. This is the third sale.”

“Oh Kat! This isn’t just any old marriage arranged for you; this is the greatest chance you’ll have in your life! It’s the greatest marriage in England, probably in the world!”

“For as long as it lasts.”

She looks behind her, then puts her arm through mine so that we can walk, head to head, and speak in whispers. “You’re anxious; but it might not last so very long. He’s very sick. He’s very old. And then you have the title and the inheritance but not the husband.”

The husband I have just buried was forty-nine, the king is fifty-one, an old man, but he could last till sixty. He has the best of physicians and the finest apothecaries, and he guards himself against disease as if he were a precious babe. He sends his armies to war without him, he gave up jousting years ago. He has buried four wives—why not another?

“I might outlive him,” I concede, my mouth to her ear. “But how long did Katherine Howard last?”

Nan shakes her head at the comparison. “That slut! She betrayed him, and was foolish enough to be caught. You won’t do that.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, suddenly weary of these calculations. “Because I’ve no choice anyway. It’s the wheel of fortune.”

“Don’t say that; it’s God’s will,” she says with sudden enthusiasm. “Think of what you might do as Queen of England. Think of what you could do for us!”

My sister is a passionate advocate for the reform of the Church in England from the state it is in—a popeless papacy—to a true communion based on the Bible. Like many in the country—who knows how many?—she wants the king’s reform of the church to go further and further until we are free from all superstition.

“Oh, Nan, you know I have no convictions . . . and anyway, why would he listen to me?”

“Because he always listens to his wives at first. And we need someone to speak for us. The court is terrified of Bishop Gardiner, he’s even questioned Lady Mary’s household. I’ve had to hide my own books. We need a queen who will defend the reformers.”

“Not me,” I say flatly. “I’ve no interest and I won’t pretend to it. I was cured of faith when the papists threatened to burn down my castle.”

“Yes, that’s what they’re like. They threw hot coals on Richard Champion’s coffin to show that they thought he should have been burned. They keep the people in ignorance and fear. That’s why we think the Bible should be in English, everyone should understand it for themselves and not be misled by priests.”

“Oh, you’re all as bad as each other,” I say roundly. “I don’t know anything about the new learning—not many books came my way in Richmondshire, and I didn’t have any time to sit around reading. Lord Latimer wouldn’t have had them in the house. So I don’t know what all the fuss is about, and I certainly don’t have any influence with the king.”

“But Kat, there are four men, who only wanted to read the Bible in English, accused of heresy in Windsor prison right now. You must save them.”

“Not if they are heretics, I won’t! If they’re heretics, they’ll have to burn. That’s the law. Who am I to say it’s wrong?”

“But you will learn,” Nan persists. “Of course you were cut off from all the new thinking when you were married to old Latimer and buried alive in the North, but when you hear the London preachers and listen to the scholars explaining the Bible in English, you’ll understand why I think as I do. There is nothing

in the world more important than bringing God's Word to the people and pushing back the power of the old church."

"I do think that everyone should be allowed to read the Bible in English," I concede.

"That's all you need to believe for now. The rest follows. You'll see. And I will be with you," she says. "Always. Whither thou goest, I will go. God bless me, I'll be sister to the Queen of England!"

I forget the gravity of my position and I laugh. "You'll puff up like a cock sparrow! And wouldn't Mother have been pleased! Can you imagine?"

Nan laughs out loud and claps her hand over her mouth. "Lord! Lord! Can you imagine it? After marrying you off and setting me to work so hard, and all for brother William's benefit? After teaching us that he must come first and we had to serve the family and never think of ourselves? Teaching us all our lives that the only person who mattered was William and the only country in the world was England, and the only place was court, and the only king was Henry?"

"And the heirloom!" I crow. "The precious heirloom that she left me! Her greatest treasure was her portrait of the king."

"Oh, she adored him. He was always the handsomest prince in Christendom to her."

"She would think me honored to marry what remains."

"Well, you are," Nan points out. "He will make you the wealthiest woman in England; nobody will come near you for power. You'll be able to do exactly as you please, you'll like that. Everyone—even Edward Seymour's wife—will have to curtsy to you. I'll enjoy seeing that, the woman is unbearable."

At the mention of Thomas's brother I lose my smile. "You know, I was thinking of Thomas Seymour, for my next husband."

"But you haven't said anything directly to him? You never mentioned him to anyone? You've not spoken to him?"

Bright as a portrait I can see Thomas naked in the candlelight, his knowing smile, my hand on his warm belly, tracing the line of

dark hair downward. I can smell the scent of him as I kneel before him and put my forehead against his belly, as my lips part. “I’ve said nothing. I’ve done nothing.”

“He doesn’t know that you were considering him?” Nan presses. “You were thinking of marriage for the good of the family, not for desire, Kat?”

I think of him lying on the bed, arching his back to thrust inside me, his outflung arms, the dark lashes on his brown cheeks as his eyes close in abandonment. “He has no idea. I only thought his fortune and kin would suit us.”

She nods. “He would have been a very good match. They’re a family on the rise. But we must never mention him again. Nobody can ever say that you were thinking of him.”

“I wasn’t. I would have had to marry someone who would benefit the family, him as well as any other.”

“It has to be as if he is dead to you,” she insists.

“I’ve put aside all thought of him. I never even spoke to him, I never asked our brother to speak to him. I never mentioned him to anyone, not to our uncle. Forget him; I have.”

“This is important, Kat.”

“I’m not a fool.”

She nods. “We’ll never speak of him again.”

“Never.”



That night I dream of Tryphine. I dream that I am the saint, married against my will to my father’s enemy, climbing a darkened stair in his castle. There is a bad smell coming from the chamber at the head of the stairs. It catches me in the back of my throat and makes me cough as I climb upwards, one hand on the damp curving stone wall, one hand holding my candle, the light bobbing and guttering in the pestilential breeze that blows down from the chamber. It is the smell of death, the scent of something dead and rotting coming from beyond the locked

door, and I have to enter the door and face my greatest fear, for I am Tryphine, married against my will to my father's enemy, and climbing a darkened stair in his castle. There is a bad smell coming from the chamber at the head of the stairs. It catches me in the back of my throat and makes me cough as I climb upwards, one hand on the damp curving stone wall, one hand holding my candle, the light bobbing and guttering in the pestilential breeze that blows down from the chamber. It is the smell of death, the scent of something dead and rotting coming from beyond the locked door, and I have to enter the door and face my greatest fear, for I am Tryphine, married against my will to my father's enemy, and climbing a darkened stair in his castle . . . And so the dream repeats itself, over and over again, as I climb up and up the stair, which grows into another stair, which grows into another stair, up and up while the candlelight glitters on the dark wall and the smell from the locked room becomes stronger and stronger until finally I choke so hard on the stench that the bed shakes and Mary-Clare, another lady-in-waiting, who shares the bed with me, wakes me and says: "God bless you, Kateryn, you were dreaming and coughing and crying out! What's the matter with you?"

I say, "It's nothing. God bless me, I was so afraid! I had a dream, a bad dream."



The king comes to Lady Mary's rooms every day, leaning heavily on the arm of one of his friends, trying to hide that his bad leg is rotting away beneath him. Edward Seymour his brother-in-law supports him, talking pleasantly, charming as any Seymour. Often Thomas Howard, the old Duke of Norfolk, is holding up the other arm, his face locked in a wary courtier's smile, and broad-faced, broad-shouldered Stephen Gardiner, the Bishop of Winchester, trails behind them, quick to step forward and intervene. They all laugh loudly at the king's jokes and praise the

insight of his statements; nobody ever contradicts him. I doubt anyone has argued with him since Anne Boleyn.

“Gardiner again,” Nan remarks, and Catherine Brandon leans towards her and whispers urgently. I see Nan go pale as Catherine nods her pretty head.

“What’s the matter?” I ask her. “Why shouldn’t Stephen Gardiner attend the king?”

“The papists are hoping to entrap Thomas Cranmer, the finest, most Christian archbishop the court has ever had,” Nan mutters in a rapid gabble. “Catherine’s husband has told her that they plan to accuse Cranmer of heresy today, this afternoon. They think they have enough on him to send him to the stake.”

I am so shocked I can hardly respond. “You can’t kill a bishop!” I exclaim.

“You can,” Catherine says sharply. “This king did: Bishop Fisher.”

“That was years ago! What has Thomas Cranmer done?”

“He has offended against the king’s Six Articles of Faith,” Catherine Brandon explains rapidly. “The king has named six things that every Christian must believe, or face a charge of heresy.”

“But how can he offend? He can’t be against the teaching of the church; he’s the archbishop: he is the church!”

The king is coming towards us.

“Beg for the archbishop’s pardon!” Nan says to me urgently. “Save him, Kat.”

“How can I?” I demand and then break off to smile as the king limps towards me, merely nodding to his daughter.

I catch Lady Mary’s quizzical glance; but if she thinks my behavior is unsuitable for a thirty-year-old widow, there is nothing she can say. Lady Mary is only three years younger than me but she learned caution in a cruelly painful childhood. She saw her friends, her tutor, even her lady governess, disappear from her service into the Tower of London and from there to the scaffold. They warned her that her father would have her beheaded for her

stubborn faith. Sometimes when she is praying in silence her eyes fill with tears, and I think she is sick with grief for those she lost and could not save. I imagine that she wakes every day to guilt, knowing that she denied her faith to save her life; and her friends did not.

Now she stands as the king lowers himself into his chair placed beside mine, and sits only when he waves his hand. She does not speak until he addresses her, but remains silent, her head obediently bowed. She is never going to complain that he flirts with her ladies-in-waiting. She will swallow her sorrow until it poisons her.

The king gestures that we may all sit down, leans towards me, and in an intimate whisper asks what I am reading. I show him the title page at once. It is a book of French stories, nothing that might be forbidden.

“You read French?”

“I speak it too. Not as fluently as Your Majesty, of course.”

“Do you read other languages?”

“A little Latin, and I plan to study, now that I have more time,” I say. “Now that I live at a learned court.”

He smiles. “I have been a scholar all my life; I’m afraid you’ll never catch up, but you should learn enough to read to me.”

“Your Majesty’s poetry in English is equal to anything in Latin,” one of the courtiers says enthusiastically.

“All poetry is better in Latin,” Stephen Gardiner contradicts him. “English is the language of the market. Latin is the language of the Bible.”

Henry smiles and waves a fat hand, the great rings sparkling as he dismisses the argument. “I shall write a poem for you in Latin and you shall translate it,” he promises me. “You can judge which is the best language for words of love. A woman’s mind can be her greatest ornament. You shall show me the beauty of your intelligence as well as the beauty of your face.”

His little eyes drift down from my face to the neck of my gown and rest on the curves of my breasts pressed against the tight

stomacher. He licks his pursed lips. “Isn’t she the fairest lady at court?” he asks the Duke of Norfolk.

The old man produces a thin smile, his dark eyes weighing me up as if I were sirloin. “She is indeed the fairest of many blooms,” he says, glancing around for his daughter, Mary.

I see Nan looking urgently at me, and I remark: “You seem a little weary. Is there anything that troubles Your Majesty?”

He shakes his head as the Duke of Norfolk leans in to listen. “Nothing that need trouble you.” He takes my hand and draws me a little closer. “You’re a good Christian, aren’t you, my dear?”

“Of course,” I say.

“Read your Bible, pray to the saints and so on?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, every day.”

“Then you know that I gave the Bible in English to my people and that I am the head of the church in England?”

“Of course, Your Majesty. I took the oath myself. I called in every one of my household at Snape Castle and made them swear that you are the head of the church and the pope is just the Bishop of Rome, and has no command in England.”

“There are some who would have the English Church turn to Lutheran ways, changing everything. And there are some who think quite the opposite and would turn everything back to how it was before, restoring the power of the pope. Which do you think?”

I am very sure that I don’t want to express an opinion either way. “I think I should be guided by Your Majesty.”

He laughs out loud and so everyone has to laugh with him. He chucks me under the chin. “You are very right,” he says. “As a subject and as a sweetheart. I tell you, I am publishing my ruling on this, calling it *The King’s Book* so that people can know what to think. I will tell them. I am finding a middle way between Stephen Gardiner here—who would like all the rituals and the powers of the church to be restored once again—and my friend Thomas Cranmer—who is *not* here—who would like it pared back to the bone of the Bible. Cranmer would have

no monasteries, no abbeys, no chantries, no priests even—just preachers and the Word of God.”

“But why is your friend Thomas Cranmer not here?” I ask nervously. It is one thing to promise to save a man, but quite another to set about doing it. I don’t know how I am supposed to prompt the king to mercy.

Henry’s little eyes twinkle. “I expect he is fearfully awaiting to hear if he is to be charged with heresy and treason.” He chuckles. “I expect he is listening for the tramp of soldiers coming to take him to the Tower.”

“But if he is your friend?”

“Then his terror will be tempered by hope of mercy.”

“But Your Majesty is so gracious—you will forgive him?” I prompt.

Gardiner steps forward and lifts a gentle hand as if he would silence me.

“It is for God to forgive,” the king rules. “It is for me to impose justice.”



Henry does not give me a week to come to terms with my great joy. He speaks to me again only two days later, on Sunday evening, after chapel. I am surprised that he combines piety with business, but since his will is God’s will, the Sabbath can be holy and satisfactory, both at once. The court is processing from chapel to the great hall for dinner, the bright sunshine pouring in the great windows, when the king halts everyone and nods to summon me from the middle of the ladies to the head of them all. His velvet cap is pulled low over his thinning hair and the bobbing pearls encrusting the brim wink at me. He smiles as if he is joyful but his eyes are as blank as his jewels.

He takes my hand in greeting and folds it under the great heft of his arm. “Do you have an answer ready for me, Lady Latimer?”

“I have,” I say. Now that there is no escape for me I find that

my voice is clear and my hand, crushed between the bulge of his great belly and the thick padding of his sleeve, is steady. I'm not a girl, afraid of the unknown, I am a woman; I can face fear, I can walk towards it. "I have prayed for guidance, and I have my answer." I glance around. "Shall I speak it here and now?"

He nods; he has no sense of privacy. This is a man who is attended every moment of the day. Even when he strains in constipated agony on the closestool, there are men standing beside him ready to hand him linen to wipe, water to wash, a hand to grip when the pain is too great for him. He sleeps with a page at the foot of his bed; he urinates beside his favorites, when he vomits from overeating someone holds the bowl. Of course he has no hesitation in speaking of his marriage while everyone tries to hear—there is no risk of humiliation for him: he knows that he cannot be refused.

"I know I am blessed above all other women." I curtsy very low. "I shall be deeply honored to be your wife."

He takes my hand and brings it to his lips. He never had any doubts, but he is pleased to hear me describe myself as blessed. "You shall sit beside me at dinner," he promises. "And the herald shall announce it."

He walks with my hand squeezed under his arm, and so we lead everyone through the double doors to the great hall. Lady Mary walks on the other side of him. I cannot see her beyond the spread of his great chest, and she does not try to peep round at me. I imagine her face frozen and expressionless, and know that I must look the same. We must look like two pale sisters marched in to dinner by an enormous father.

I see the high table with the throne and a chair on either side, the head of the servery must have ordered the chairs to be set in place. Even he knew that the king would demand my answer as we walked in to dinner, and that I would have to say yes.

The three of us mount the dais and take our places. The great canopy of state covers the king's throne but stops short of my chair. Only when I am queen will I dine under cloth of gold. I

look down the hall at the hundreds of people staring up at me. They nudge and point as they realize that I am to be their new queen, the trumpets scream and the herald steps forward.

I see Edward Seymour's carefully composed expression as he notes the arrival of a new wife who will bring her own advisors, a new royal family, new royal friends, new royal servants. He will be measuring the threat that I pose to his position as the king's brother-in-law, brother to the queen who tragically died in childbirth. I don't see his brother, Thomas, and I don't look to see if he is here, watching me. I gaze blindly down the long hall and hope that he is dining somewhere else tonight. I don't look for him. I must never look for him again as long as I live.



I pray for guidance, for God's will, not my own, for the bending of my own obstinate desires to His purpose and not mine. I don't know where God is to be found—in the old church of rituals and saints' images, miracles, and pilgrimages, or in the new ways of prayers in English and Bible readings—but I have to find Him. I have to find Him to crush my passion, to rein in my own ambitions. If I am to stand before His altar and swear myself to yet another loveless marriage, He has to bear me up. I cannot—I know I cannot—marry the king without the help of God. I cannot give up Thomas unless I believe it is for a great cause. I cannot give up my my first love, my only love, my tender yearning passionate love for him—this unique, irresistible man—unless I have God's love overwhelming me in its place.

I pray like a novice, ardently. I pray kneeling beside Archbishop Cranmer, who has returned to court without a word said against him, almost as if a charge of heresy was a step in a dance, forwards and backwards and turn around. It is incomprehensible to me but it seems that the king tricked his own council into charging the archbishop, and then turned on them and commanded the archbishop to inquire into those who brought the charges. So

Stephen Gardiner's affinity are now the ones filled with fear and Thomas Cranmer returns confidently to court, secure in the king's favor, and kneels beside me, his old lined face turned upwards as I silently pray, trying to hammer my desire for Thomas into a love of God. But even now—fool that I am—even in the most fervent prayer, when I think of the crucifixion, it is Thomas's dark face that I see: eyes closed, exalted in his climax. Then I have to squeeze my eyes shut and pray some more.

I pray kneeling beside Lady Mary, who says not one word about my elevation other than a quiet commendation to me and formal congratulations to her father. There have been too many stepmothers between the martyrdom of her mother and my arrival for her to resent me aspiring to Katherine of Aragon's place, too many for her to greet me with any hope. The last stepmother lasted less than two years, the one before that, six months. I could swear that Lady Mary kneels beside me in silent prayer and secretly thinks that I will need God's help to rise to her mother's position, and God's help to stay there. The way she bows her head and crosses herself at the end of her prayers and glances at me with brief pity tells me that she does not think God's help will be enough. She looks at me as if I were a woman walking into darkness with only the light of one small candle against the damp shadows—and then she gives a little shrug and turns away.

I pray like a nun, constantly, on the hour, every hour, anguished on my knees in my bedchamber, silently in chapel, or even desperately whenever I am alone for a moment. In the dark hours before the early summer dawn, when I am feverish and sleepless, I think that I have conquered my desire for Thomas, but when I wake in the morning I am aching for his touch. I never pray that he will come for me. I know that he cannot. I know that he must not. But still, every time the door of the chapel opens behind me, my heart leaps because I think it is him. I can almost see him, standing in the bright doorway, I can almost hear him saying: "Come, Kateryn, come away!" That's when I twist the beads of

the rosary in my hands and pray that God will send me some accident, some terrible catastrophe, to stop my wedding day.

“But what could that be but the death of the king?” Nan demands.

I look blankly at her.

“It’s treason to think of it,” she reminds me, her voice low under the hum of the liturgy from the choir stalls. “And treason to say it. You cannot pray for his death, Kateryn. He has asked you to be his wife and you have consented. It’s disloyal as a subject and as a wife.”

I bow my head against her reproach; but she is right. It must be a sin to pray for the death of another, even of your worst enemy. An army going into battle should pray for as few deaths as possible even while they prepare themselves to do their duty. Like them, I must prepare myself to do my duty, risking myself. And besides, he is not my worst enemy. He is constantly kind and indulgent, he tells me that he is in love with me, that I will be everything to him. He is my king, the greatest king that England has ever had. I used to dream about him when I was a girl and my mother would tell me of the handsome young king and his horses and his suits of cloth of gold, and his daring. I cannot wish him ill. I should be praying for his health, for his happiness, for a long life for him. I should be praying for many years of married life with him, I should be praying that I can make him happy.

“You look terrible,” Nan says bluntly. “Can’t you sleep?”

“No.” I have been getting up all through the night to pray that I shall be spared.

“You have to sleep,” she rules. “And eat. You’re the most beautiful woman at court, there’s nobody even comes near you. Mary Howard and Catherine Brandon are nothing beside you. God gave you the gift of great beauty: don’t throw it away. And don’t think that if you lose your looks, he’ll desert you. Once he decides on something he never changes his mind, even when half of England is against him . . .” She breaks off and corrects herself with a little laugh, “Unless of course—suddenly—he does, and

everything is upside down and he is determined on the opposite course and no one can persuade him otherwise.”

“But when does he change his mind?” I ask her. “Why?”

“In a moment,” she says. “In a heartbeat. But never that you could predict.”

I shake my head. “But how does anyone manage? With a changeable king? With a slippery king?”

“Some don’t,” she says shortly.

“If I can’t pray to be spared, what can I pray for?” I ask. “Resignation?”

She shakes her head. “I was talking to my husband, Herbert. He said to me that he thinks that you have been sent by God.”

At once I giggle. Nan’s husband, William, has never troubled much about me before. I measure my growing importance in the world if now he realizes that I am a heavenly messenger.

But Nan is not laughing. “Truly he does. You have come at the very moment that we need a devout queen. You will save the king from sliding back to Rome. The old churchmen have the king’s ear. They warn him that the country is not just demanding reform but becoming Lutheran, completely heretical. They are frightening him back to Rome, and turning him against his own people. They are taking the Bible from the churches of England so that people cannot read the Word of God for themselves. Now they have arrested half a dozen men at Windsor, the choirmaster among them, and they will burn them in the marshland below the castle. For nothing more than wanting to read a Bible in English!”

“Nan, I can’t save them! I was not sent by God to save them.”

“You have to save the reformed church, and save the king, and save us all. This is godly work that we think you can do. The reformers want you to advise the king in his private moments. Only you can do it. You have to rise to it, Kat. God will guide you.”

“It’s easy for you to say. Doesn’t your husband understand that I don’t know what people are talking about? I don’t know

who's on which side? I am not the person for this. I know nothing about it, and I have little interest."

"God has chosen you. And it's easy enough to understand. The court is divided into two parties, each of them convinced that they are in the right, guided by God. On the one hand are those who would have the king make an agreement with Rome and restore the monasteries, the abbeys, and all the ritual of the papist church. Bishop Stephen Gardiner and the men who work with him: Bishop Bonner, Sir Richard Rich, Sir Thomas Wriothesley, men like that. The Howards are papists and would have the church restored if they could, but they'll always do the king's bidding, whatever it is. Then there's us, who would see the church go onwards with reform, leave the superstition of the Roman practices, read the Bible in English, pray in English, worship in English, and never take another penny from a poor man for promising him remission of his sin, never cheat another poor man with a statue that bleeds on command, never order another poor man on a costly pilgrimage. We're for the truth in the Word of God—nothing else."

"Of course you think you're in the right," I remark. "You always did. And who speaks for you?"

"Nobody. That's the problem. There are more and more people in the country, more and more people at court who think as we do. Almost all of London. But we have no one of importance on our side but Thomas Cranmer. None of us has the king's ear. That's why it has to be you."

"To hold the king to reform?"

"Only that. Nothing more. Just to hold him to the reforms that he himself started. Our brother, William, is sure of it too. This is the greatest work that could be done, not just in England but in the world. This is a great opportunity for you, Kat. It is your chance to be a great woman, a leader."

"I don't want it. I want to be rich and comfortable and safe. Like any woman of any sense. All the rest is too much for me. It's beyond me."

“It’s too much for you unless God holds you up,” she says. “Then you will be triumphant. I will pray for that. We’re all praying for that.”



The king comes to Lady Mary’s rooms and greets her first, as he will do until our wedding day, when I shall become the first lady of the kingdom and have my own rooms. Then he will greet me first, and she and every woman in the kingdom will follow in my train. When I review the ladies who looked down their noses at mere Kateryn Parr but will have to bow to the floor to Queen Kateryn, I have to hide my smug delight. He takes a seat between the two of us, which creaks under his weight as two squires lower him down. They bring him a footstool, and a page bends over and gently lifts the heavy leg onto it. The king wipes the grimace of pain from his face and turns to me with a smile.

“Sir Thomas Seymour has left us. He would not stay even a day, not even for the wedding. Why d’you think that is?”

I raise my eyebrows in calm surprise. “I don’t know, Your Majesty. Where has he gone?”

“Don’t you know? Have you not heard?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“Why, he’s gone to do my bidding,” he says. “He is my brother-in-law and my servant. He does just what I command him, whatever I command him. He is my dog and my slave.” He bursts out in a sudden wheezy laugh and Edward Seymour, the other royal brother-in-law, laughs loudly too, as if he would have no objection to being described as a dog and a slave.

“His Majesty has trusted my brother with a great mission,” Edward tells me. He appears to be pleased, but all courtiers are liars. “My brother, Thomas, has gone as ambassador to Queen Mary Regent of Flanders.”

“We’ll make an alliance,” the king says. “Against France. And

this time it will be unbreakable, and this time we will destroy France and win back our English lands, and more, eh, Seymour?"

"My brother will get an alliance for you and for England that will last forever," Edward promises rashly. "That's why he left in haste, to start the work at once."

I turn my head from one man to the other, like one of the little automata that the clockmakers forge. Ticktock: one man speaks and then the other. Tocktick: it goes the other way. So I am startled when the king turns to me sharply, out of order, and says: "Shall you miss Sir Thomas? Shall you miss him, Lady Latimer? He's a great favorite with you ladies, is he not?"

Hotly, I am about to deny it, but then I see the trap. "I am sure we shall all miss him," I say indifferently. "He's merry company for the younger ones. I am glad that his wit can do good service to Your Majesty, even though it was wasted on me."

"You don't like a courtly suitor?" He is watching me narrowly.

"I am a straightforward northern woman," I say. "I don't like a lot of lipwash."

"Enchanting!" Edward Seymour loudly proclaims as the king laughs at my country speech and snaps his fingers for the page, who lifts his leg off the stool, and then two of them haul him to his feet and steady him when he staggers. "We'll go in to dinner," he rules. "I am so hungry I could eat an ox! And you must get your strength up, Lady Latimer. You will have service to do also! I want a bonny bride!"

I curtsy as he hobbles past, his great weight bearing down on his frail legs, one calf bulked large with the thick bandage that is wrapped around the oozing wound. I rise up and walk beside Lady Mary. She gives me a cool little smile and says nothing.



I am to choose a motto. Nan and I are in my bedroom with the door barred to everyone, sprawled on my bed, the candles burning low.

“D’you remember them all?” I ask her curiously.

“Course I do. I saw each one’s initials carved on every wooden beam and every stone boss in every palace. And then I saw them chipped off stone and adzed off wood and new initials put on again. I sewed every motto into flags for their weddings. I saw every emblem freshly painted. I saw their shields carved on and then burned off the royal barge. Of course I remember each one. Why wouldn’t I? I was there when each one was announced, I was there when she was taken away. Mother put me into service to the Queen of England, Katherine of Aragon, and made me promise to always be loyal to the queen. She never dreamed there would be six of them. She never dreamed one of them would be you. Ask me any one’s motto. I know them all!”

“Anne Boleyn,” I say at random.

“*The Most Happy*,” Nan says with a harsh laugh.

“Anne of Cleves?”

“*God Send Me Well to Keep*.”

“Katherine Howard?”

Nan makes a face as if the memory is a bitter one: “*No Other Will but His*, poor little liar,” she says.

“Katherine of Aragon?” We both know this one. Katherine was my mother’s beloved friend, a martyr to her faith and to her husband’s terrible infidelity.

“*Humble and Loyal*, God bless her. Never was a woman more humbled. Never was one more loyal.”

“What was Jane’s?” Jane Seymour will always be the favorite wife, whatever I say or do. She gave him his son and she died before he tired of her. Now he remembers a perfect woman, more saint than wife, and even manages to squeeze out a few hot little tears for her. But my sister, Nan, remembers that Jane died terrified and alone, asking for her husband, and nobody had the courage to tell her that he had ridden away.

“*Bound to Obey and Serve*,” Nan says. “Bound hand and foot, if the truth be told.”

“Bound? Who bound her?”

“Like a dog, like a slave. Those brothers of hers sold her to him as if she were a trussed chicken. Drove her to market, put her on sale right under Queen Anne’s nose. Trussed her and stuffed her and put her into the oven heat of the queen’s rooms, certain that the king would want a taste.”

“Don’t.”

Both of my former husbands lived far from court, far from the gossip of London. When I got any London news, it was weeks late and through the rosy glow of distance, as told by the traveling pedlars, or in a rare hurried note from Nan. The rumors of royal wives who came and went over the years were like fairy stories told of imaginary beings: the pretty young whore, the fat German duchess, the angelic mother dead in childbirth. I don’t have Nan’s clear-eyed cynicism about the king and his court, I don’t know half what she knows. Nobody knows all the secrets that she has heard. I came to court only in the last months of my husband Latimer’s life to find a complete wall of silence around any mention of the last queen, and no happy recollections of any of them.

“Your motto had better be a promise of loyalty and humility,” Nan says. “He is raising you to a great position. You have to declare publicly that you’re grateful, that you will serve him.”

“I’m not naturally a humble woman,” I say with a little smile.

“You have to be grateful.”

“I want something about grace,” I agree. “Knowing that this is the will of God is the only thing that will carry me through.”

“No, you can’t say anything like that,” she cautions me. “It has to be God in your husband, God in the king.”

“I want God to use me. He has to help me. I want something like *All that I Do Is for God*.”

“*All that I Do Is for Him?*” she suggests. “Then it sounds as if you’re thinking only of the king.”

“But it’s a lie,” I say flatly. “I don’t want to use clever words to mean two things at once, like a courtier or a crooked priest. I want my motto to be something clear and truthful.”

“Oh, don’t be all blunt and northern!”

“Just honest, Nan. I just want to be true.”

“What about: *To Be Useful in All that I Do*? It doesn’t say useful to who—you know that it’s for God and for the reformed religion, but you don’t have to say that.”

“*To Be Useful in All That I Do*,” I repeat without much enthusiasm. “It’s not very inspiring.”

“*The Most Happy* was dead in three and a half years,” Nan says harshly. “*No Other Will but His* had her lover in the jakes. These are mottoes: they aren’t predictions.”



Lady Elizabeth, the daughter of Anne Boleyn, is brought from her little court at Hatfield to be presented to me, her new stepmother—her fourth in seven years—and the king decides that this meeting shall be formal and public, so the nine-year-old child has to walk into the huge presence chamber at Hampton Court, the place crowded with hundreds of people, her back like a poker, her face as white as the muslin at the top of her gown. She looks like a player’s brat, born to walk on a stage made from carts, lonely in a crowd, all show and no solid ground. Anxiety makes her plain, poor little thing, her copper hair scraped back under her hood, mouth pinched, her dark eyes goggling. She walks as her governess has taught her, back stiff, her head rigidly high. As soon as I see her I feel such pity for her, poor little child—her mother beheaded on her father’s orders before she was three years old, her own safety always uncertain as she tumbled overnight from royal heir to royal bastard. Her very name was changed from Princess Elizabeth to Lady Elizabeth, and nobody curtseyed anymore when they served her bread and milk.

I don’t see a threat in this little mite. I see instead a little girl who never knew her mother, who was not even sure of her name, who rarely saw her father, and who has been loved only by servants who cling to their posts by luck and work for nothing when the royal exchequer forgets to pay them.

She hides her terror behind a rigid formality—she has a veneer of royalty like a shell—but I am sure that inside, the soft little creature is cringing like a Whitstable oyster squirted with lemon juice. She curtsies low to her father and then she turns and curtsies to me. She speaks to us in French, expressing her gratitude that her father should allow her into his presence, and her joy in greeting her new honored mother. I find I am watching her almost as if she is a poor little beast from the menagerie at the Tower, ordered by the king to do tricks.

Then I see a swift glance between Elizabeth and Lady Mary and I realize that they are sisters indeed, both of them afraid of their father, completely dependent on his whim, uncertain of their position in the world and instructed never to put a foot wrong on a most uncertain path. Lady Mary was forced to wait on Elizabeth when she was a baby princess, but this failed to breed enmity. Lady Mary came to love her half sister, and now she nods encouragingly as the little voice trembles over the French words.

I rise from my seat and step quickly down from the dais. I take Elizabeth's cold hands and I kiss her forehead. "You're very welcome to court," I say to her in English—for who speaks a foreign language to their daughter? "And I shall be very glad to be your mother and care for you, Elizabeth. I hope you will see me as a mother indeed, and that we will be a family together. I hope that you will learn to love me and trust that I will love you as my own."

The color floods into her pale cheeks, up to her sandy eyebrows, her thin lips tremble. She has no words for a natural act of affection though she had speeches prepared in French.

I turn to the king. "Your Majesty, of all the treasures that you have given me, this—your daughter—is the one that gives me most delight." I glance at Lady Mary, who is blanched with shock at my sudden informality. "Lady Mary I love already," I say. "And now I will love Lady Elizabeth. When I meet your son, my joy will be complete."

The favorites, Anthony Denny and Edward Seymour, look

from me to the king to see if I have forgotten my place and embarrassed him—his commoner wife. But the king is beaming. It seems that this time he wants a wife who is as loving to his children as she is loving to him.

“You speak to her in English” is all he remarks, “but she is fluent in French and Latin. My daughter is a scholar like her father.”

“I speak from my heart,” I say, and I am rewarded by the warmth of his smile.