There has been a late snowfall and the covered turrets of Whitehall Palace disappear against a tapioca sky. The courtyard is ankle deep in slush and, in spite of the sawdust that has been strewn in a makeshift path across the cobbles, Katherine can feel the wet chill soaking through her shoes, and the damp edges of her skirts flick bitterly at her ankles. She shivers, hugging her thick cloak tightly about her as the groom helps Meg dismount.

‘Here we are,’ she says brightly, though bright is the last thing she feels, holding out her hand for Meg to take.

Her stepdaughter’s cheeks are flushed. The colour sets off her brown eyes, making them look fresh and limpid. She has the sweet, slightly startled look of a woodland animal but Katherine can see the effort it is taking her to hold off more tears. She has taken her father’s death badly.

‘Come,’ says Katherine, ‘let’s get inside.’

Two grooms have unsaddled the horses and are brushing them down briskly with handfuls of straw, bantering between themselves. Katherine’s grey gelding Pewter throws his head about with a jingle of tack and snorts, billowing trails of steam like a dragon.

‘Easy, boy,’ says Katherine, taking his bridle and stroking his velvet nose, allowing him to snuffle at her neck. ‘He needs
a drink,’ she says to the groom, handing him the reins. ‘It’s Rafe, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, m’lady,’ he replies. ‘I remember Pewter, I gave him a poultice once.’ A hot blush rushes over his cheeks.

‘Yes, he was lame. You did a fine job with him.’

The boy’s face breaks into a grin. ‘Thank you, m’lady.’

‘It is I who should thank you,’ she says, turning as Rafe leads Pewter towards the stable block. She clasps her stepdaughter’s hand and makes for the great doors.

She has been numb with grief for weeks and would rather not have to come to court so soon after her husband’s death, but she has been summoned – Meg, too – and a summons from the King’s daughter is not something it is possible to refuse. Besides, Katherine likes Lady Mary, they knew one another as girls, even shared a tutor for a while when Katherine’s mother was serving Mary’s mother – Queen Catherine of Aragon – before the King cast her off. Things were simpler in those days, prior to the great schism when the whole world was turned on its head, the country rent in two. But she won’t be commanded to stay at court just yet. Mary will respect her period of mourning.

When she thinks of Latymer and what she did to aid his passing, turmoil rises within her like a pan of milk on the boil. She has to remember the horror of it all in order to reconcile herself to her actions: his anguished screams, the way his own body had turned on him, his desperate request. She has searched the Bible since for a precedent, but there is no story of merciful killing there, nothing to give hope for her blighted soul, and there’s no getting away from it. She killed her husband.

Katherine and Meg enter the Great Hall, still hand in hand. It smells of wet wool and woodsmoke and is teeming with people, as busy as a market square. They mill in the alcoves.
and strut in the galleries, showing off their fine clothes. Some sit in corners playing fox and goose or cards or dice, throwing down their bets. Occasionally a whoop goes up when someone has won or lost. Katherine watches Meg, wide-eyed at it all. She has never been to court, she’s barely been anywhere, and after the deathly quiet of Charterhouse, all cloaked in black, this must be a rude awakening. They make a sombre pair in their mourning garb among the flocks of bright-clad ladies floating by, bubbling with chatter, their fine gowns swinging as they move as if they are dancing, always looking around to see who has noticed how finely dressed they are, or to remark, with green eyes, on who is better garbed than they. There is a fashion for little dogs that are bundled in their arms like muffs or trot at their heels. Even Meg manages a laugh to see one that has hitched a ride on its mistress’s train.

Pages and ushers run back and forth and pairs of servant lads move through, burdened with baskets of logs, one between two, destined to stoke the fires in the public rooms. Long tables are being laid for dinner in the Great Hall by an army of kitchen boys, clattering and clanking by, each balancing an armful of dishes. A group of musicians tunes up, the dissonant chords eventually transforming into something like a melody. To hear music at last, thinks Katherine, imagining herself caught up in the sound, whirling and spinning until she can hardly breathe with joy. She stops that thought. She will not be dancing just yet.

They stop as a band of guards marches by and she wonders if they might be on their way to arrest someone, reminding her of how little she wants to be in this place. But a summons is a summons. She gasps as a pair of hands comes from nowhere, clapping themselves over her eyes and causing her heart to jump into her throat.
‘Will Parr,’ she exclaims laughing.  
‘How could you tell?’ asks Will, dropping his hands.
‘I would know your smell anywhere, brother,’ she quips, pinching her nose in mock disgust and turning to face him where he stands with a group of men, beaming like a small boy, his brassy hair sticking up where he has removed his cap, his odd-coloured eyes – one water pale, one caramel – flashing in their impish way.
‘Lady Latymer. I can hardly remember the last time I clapped eyes on you.’ A man steps forward. Everything about him is long: long nose, long face, long legs, and eyes that have something of the bloodhound about them. But somehow nature has conspired to make him quite becoming in spite of his oddness. Perhaps it has something to do with the unassailable confidence that comes with being the eldest of the Howard boys, and next Duke of Norfolk.
‘Surrey!’ A smile invades her face. Perhaps it will not be so bad at court with these familiar faces about. ‘You still scribbling verse?’
‘Indeed I am. You will be pleased to know I have improved greatly.’

He once penned her a sonnet, when they were little more than children, and they had often laughed about it since – ‘virtue’ rhymed with ‘hurt too’. The memory causes a laugh to bubble up in her. One of his ‘juvenile embarrassments’, as he had described it.

‘I am sorry to see you in mourning,’ he continues, serious now. ‘But I heard how your husband suffered. Perhaps it is a mercy that he has finally passed.’

She nods, her smile dropping away, unable to find words to reply, wondering if he suspects her, scrutinizing his face for signs of condemnation. Have the circumstances of Latymer’s
death been found out? Is it spreading through the corridors of the palace? Perhaps the embalmers saw something – her sin written into her dead husband’s guts. She dismisses the thought. What she gave him leaves no trace and there is no accusation in Surrey’s tone, she is sure of it. If it shows on her face, they will think her distraught with grief, but nevertheless her heart is hammering.

‘Let me present my stepdaughter, Margaret Neville,’ she says, pulling herself together.

Meg is hanging back and there is a barely disguised look of horror on her face at the idea of having to be introduced to these men, even if one is Will who is practically her uncle. Meg’s discomfort is scored through her. Since those cursed events at Snape Katherine has kept her away from the company of men as much as she can, but now there is no choice. Besides, she will have to marry eventually. Katherine will be expected to arrange it, but God knows, the girl is not yet ready.

‘Margaret,’ says Surrey, taking Meg’s hand. ‘I knew your father. He was a remarkable man.’

‘He was,’ she whispers with a wan smile.

‘Are you not going to present me to your sister?’ A man has stepped up, tall, almost as tall as Surrey. He waves a velvet cap adorned with an ostrich feather the size of a hearth brush that bobs and dances as he gives the thing an unnecessary flourish.

Katherine stifles a laugh that rises from nowhere. He is got up spectacularly, in a doublet of black velvet with crimson satin spilling out of its slashes and finished with a sable collar. He sees her notice the sable, and he brings a hand up to stroke it, as if to emphasize his rank. She racks her brains to remember the sumptuary laws and who is entitled
to wear sable, trying to place him. His hands are weighed down with rings, too many for good taste, but his fingers are fine and tapered and they wander from the sable to his mouth. He draws his middle finger over his bottom lip slowly and deliberately, not smiling. But his eyes, periwinkle blue – obscenely blue – and his disarmingly direct gaze are making her feel flushed. She meets his look only momentarily, catching the briefest flutter, before dropping her eyes to the floor.

Did he wink at her? The insolence. He winked at her. No, it must have been her imagination. But then why is she imagining this overdressed ninny winking at her?

‘Thomas Seymour, this is my sister Lady Latymer,’ announces Will, who seems amused by whatever it is that has just happened.

She should have known. Thomas Seymour is bearer of the dubious accolade of ‘comeliest man at court’, the object of incessant gossip, youthful crushes, broken hearts, marital discord. She concedes inwardly to his looks; he is a beauty, that is indisputable, but she will not be drawn under his spell, she has lived too much for that.

‘It is an honour, my lady,’ he says in a voice as smooth as churned butter, ‘to finally meet you at last.’

Surrey rolls his eyes. So there’s no love lost there, she thinks. ‘Finally and at last!’ It trips off her tongue before she can stop it; she can’t help herself wanting to put this man in his place. ‘Goodness!’ She places a hand to her breast affecting exaggerated surprise.

‘Indeed my lady, I have heard of your charms,’ he continues unprovoked, ‘and to be confronted with them makes me tongue-tied.’

By charms she wonders if he means her recently acquired wealth. News of her inheritance must have got out. Will for
one can’t keep his mouth shut. She feels a little surge of anger for her brother and his blabbering.

‘Tongue-tied?’ This is a smooth one, she’s thinking, searching for a witty retort. She keeps her look firmly directed at his mouth, not daring to meet his eyes again, but his wet pink tongue catches the light disturbingly. ‘Surrey, what think you? Seymour has got his tongue in a knot.’ Surrey and Will begin to laugh as she racks her brain for something more, finding it, chirping, ‘And it might be his undoing.’

The three men burst into laughter simultaneously. Katherine feels triumphant; her wit has not deserted her, even in the face of this unsettling creature.

Meg stares at her stepmother aghast. She has not had much opportunity to see this Katherine, the sharp-witted courtly one. Katherine throws her a reassuring smile while Will introduces her to Seymour, who looks at her as if she is edible.

Katherine takes her hand, saying, ‘Come, Meg, we will be late for Lady Mary.’

‘So brief but yet so sweet,’ simpers Seymour.

Katherine ignores him, placing a kiss on Surrey’s cheek and, as she begins to walk away, half turning back and dipping her head in the general direction of Seymour for the sake of politeness.

‘I shall walk with you,’ says Will, sliding between the two of them, slipping his arms through theirs.

‘I would prefer it, Will,’ Katherine hisses, when they are up the stairs and out of earshot, ‘if you would not discuss my inheritance with your friends.’

‘You’re too quick to accuse, sister; I’ve said nothing. It has got out, that was inevitable, but –’

She snaps over him, ‘So what was all that about my so-called charms then?’
‘Kit,’ he laughs, ‘I do believe he really was referring to your charms.’

She huffs.

‘Do you always have to be the disgruntled elder sister?’

‘I’m sorry, Will. You’re right, it’s not your fault that people talk.’

‘No, it is I who should apologize. Things have been hard for you.’ He pinches the black silk of her skirts between his fingers. ‘You are mourning. I should be more sensitive.’

They walk in silence down the long gallery towards Lady Mary’s rooms. Will seems to brood and Katherine suspects he might be wishing it were he in mourning for his wife. Those two loathed each other from the minute they met. Anne Bourchier, the sole heir of the elderly Earl of Essex, was the prize their mother had almost beggared herself to catch for her only son. With Anne Bourchier came great expectations, not least the Essex title to hitch the Parrs back up a notch or two. But the marriage had brought poor Will nothing, no children, no title, no happiness; nothing but disgrace, for the King had given Cromwell the earldom and Anne had eloped with some country cleric. Will couldn’t shake off the scandal, was ever beset by jests of ‘clerical errors’ and ‘priest’s holes’ and ‘parson’s noses’. He didn’t see the funny side and, try as he might, he couldn’t get the King to sanction a divorce.

‘Thinking of your wife?’ she asks.

‘How could you tell?’

‘I know you, Will Parr, better than you imagine.’

‘She has spawned another brat with that cursed cleric.’

‘Oh Will, the King will come round eventually and you will be able to make an honest woman of Lizzie Brooke.’

‘Lizzie’s running out of patience,’ Will whines. ‘When I
think of the hopes Mother had for my marriage, all she did to arrange it.’

‘Well, she never lived to see its failure. Perhaps that is as well.’

‘It was her greatest wish to see the Parrs on the rise again.’

‘Our blood is good enough, Will. Father served the old King and his father served Edward IV, mother served Queen Catherine.’ She counts them off on her fingers. ‘Do you want more?’

‘That’s ancient history,’ Will growls. ‘I don’t even remember Father.’

‘I have only the vaguest memories of him,’ she says, though she remembers clearly the day he was laid to rest; how indignant she’d felt at being deemed too young, at six years old, to attend the funeral. ‘Besides, Sister Anne has served all five Queens and now serves the King’s daughter. And it is likely I shall, too, once more.’ She’s irritated by her brother’s ambition, wants to tell him that if he cares so greatly to raise the Parrs, then he should start currying favour with the right people instead of that Seymour fellow. Seymour may be Prince Edward’s uncle but it is his elder brother Hertford who has the King’s ear.

Will begins his grumbling again but seems to think better of it and they fall into step once more, weaving through the crowd that’s milling about outside the King’s chambers.

Then he squeezes her arm, saying, ‘What think you of Seymour?’

‘Seymour?’

‘Yes, Seymour . . .’

‘Not much.’ Her voice is clipped.

‘Do you not find him splendid?’

‘Not particularly.’
‘I thought we might try to make a match for him with Meg.’
‘With Meg?’ she blurts. ‘Have you lost your mind?’
The colour has dropped from Meg’s face.
He would eat the poor girl alive, she thinks. ‘Meg will not
be marrying anyone just yet. Not while her father is barely
cold.’
‘It was only –’
‘A ridiculous idea,’ she snaps.
‘He is not what you think, Kit. He is one of us.’
By that she supposes he means he’s for the new religion.
She doesn’t like to be packaged up with the court reformers,
prefers to keep her thoughts on the matter close to her chest.
She has learned over the years that it’s safer to cultivate an
opaqueness at court.
‘Surrey doesn’t like him,’ she says.
‘Oh, that’s nothing but a family thing, not even about reli-
gion. The Howards think the Seymours upstarts. It has no
bearing on Thomas.’
Katherine huffs.
Will leaves them to admire the new painting of the King
that hangs in the gallery. It is so fresh she can smell the paint
and its colours are vivid, with all the detail picked out in
gold.
‘Is that the last Queen?’ asks Meg, pointing to the sombre
woman in a gable hood beside the King.
‘No, Meg,’ she whispers, pressing a finger to her lips, ‘best
not mention the last Queen here. That is Queen Jane, the
sister of Thomas Seymour whom you just met.’
‘But why Queen Jane, when there have been two Queens
since?’
‘Queen Jane is the one who gave him the heir.’ She omits
adding that Jane Seymour was the one who died before the King could tire of her.

‘So that is Prince Edward.’ Meg points to the boy, a pocket version of his father, mirroring his stance.

‘It is, and they,’ she indicates the two girls hovering about at the edges of the picture like a pair of butterflies with nowhere to alight, ‘are Ladies Mary and Elizabeth.’

‘I see you are admiring my portrait,’ comes a voice from behind.

The women turn.

‘Will Sommers!’ Katherine sings. ‘Your portrait?’

‘Do you not see me?’

She looks again, finding him in the back of the image.

‘There you are. I hadn’t noticed.’ She turns to her stepdaughter. ‘Meg, this is Will Sommers, the King’s fool, the most honest man at court.’

He stretches out a hand and pulls a copper coin from behind Meg’s ear, provoking a rare delighted laugh from her.

‘How did you do that?’ she squeaks.

‘Magic,’ he replies.

‘I don’t believe in magic,’ says Katherine. ‘But I know a good trick when I see it.’

They are still laughing when they arrive at Lady Mary’s apartments, where Mary’s favourite, Susan Clarencieux, in egg-yolk yellow, looms over the inner door shushing them like an adder.

‘She has one of her headaches,’ Susan hisses with a tight smile. ‘So keep the noise down.’ Looking her up and down, as if totting up the cost of her dress and finding it wanting, she adds, ‘So very dull and dark; Lady Mary will not approve.’ Then her hand swoops to cover her mouth. ‘Forgive me, I forgot you were in mourning.’
‘It is forgotten,’ replies Katherine.
‘Your sister is in the privy chamber. Excuse me, I must deal with . . .’ She doesn’t finish and slips back into the bed-chamber, closing the door silently behind her.

They move through into the room where a few ladies are scattered about with their needlework. Katherine nods at them in greeting before spotting Sister Anne in a window alcove.

‘Kit,’ says Sister Anne. ‘What a pleasure to see you at last.’ She stands and draws her sister into an embrace. ‘And Meg.’ She kisses Meg on both cheeks.

The girl has relaxed visibly now they are in the women’s rooms.

‘Meg, why don’t you go and look at the tapestries? I believe your father is depicted in one. See if you can find him.’

Meg wanders to the other end of the room and the two sisters seat themselves on a bench in the window.

‘So what’s the occasion? Why do you think I have been summoned?’ Katherine can hardly tear her gaze away from her sister, her easy smile, the translucent glow of her skin, the pale tendrils of hair escaping from her coif, the perfect oval of her face.

‘Lady Mary is to stand godmother. Quite a few have been asked to attend.’

‘Not just me then . . . I am glad of that. So who is to be baptized?’

‘It is a Wriothesley baby. A daughter called . . .’

‘Mary,’ they say simultaneously, laughing.

‘Oh Anne, how good it is to see you. My house is a gloomy one indeed.’

‘I shall visit you at Charterhouse when Prin–’ She cups both her hands over her mouth with a gasp. ‘When Lady Mary gives me leave.’ She leans right into Katherine’s ear and
whispers, ‘Lady Hussey was sent to the Tower for addressing her as Princess.’

‘I remember that,’ says Katherine. ‘But that was years ago and she was making a stand. It was different. A slip of the tongue wouldn’t be punished.’

‘Oh Kit, you have been long away from this place. Have you forgotten what it is like?’

‘Nest of snakes,’ she murmurs.

‘I hear the King sent Huicke to attend your husband,’ says Anne.

‘He did. I don’t know why.’

‘Latymer was certainly pardoned then.’

‘I suppose so.’

Katherine had never fully understood Latymer’s part in the uprising. The Pilgrimage of Grace, they’d called it, when the whole of the North, forty thousand Catholic men it was said, rose up against Cromwell’s reformation. Some of the leaders had come to Snape armed to the hilt. There had been heated discussions in the hall and a good deal of shouting but she couldn’t get the gist of what was being said. The next thing she knew Latymer was preparing to leave, reluctantly, he told her: they needed men like him to lead them. She wondered what kind of threats they’d made, for Latymer was not the sort to be easily coerced even though he thought their cause justified, with the monasteries razed, the monks strung from the trees and a way of life destroyed with them – not forgetting the beloved Queen cast aside and the Boleyn girl turning their great King about her finger like a toy. That was how Latymer described it. But to take arms up against his King; that was not the husband she knew.

‘You have never talked of it,’ says Anne. ‘The uprising, I mean. What happened at Snape.’
‘It is something I’d rather forget,’ Katherine says, closing the conversation.

A version of events had spread around the court at the time. It was common knowledge that when the King’s army had the rebels on the back foot, Latymer had left for Westminster to seek the King’s pardon and the rebels thought he’d turned coat, sending Murgatroyd and his men to hold Katherine and Meg hostage, ransacking Snape – it made a good story for the gossips. But even her sister knew nothing of the dead baby, Murgatroyd’s bastard son. Nor that she’d given herself to the brute in desperation, to save Meg and Dot from his clutches, the darkest secret of them all. She did save the girls but wonders what God thinks of that, for adultery is adultery according to the Church. Katherine has often wondered why it was that all the other leaders had swung, and Murgatroyd too – two and a half hundred put to death in the name of the King when the uprising failed – but not Latymer. Perhaps he had betrayed them. Murgatroyd had certainly assumed so. She prefers to believe that Latymer was loyal, as he’d maintained, otherwise what was it all for? But she will never know the truth.

‘Did you ever hear anything, Anne, about Latymer and why he was pardoned? Were there any rumours at court?’

‘Nothing reached my ears, sister,’ says Anne, touching Katherine’s sleeve, letting her hand rest there a moment. ‘Don’t dwell on it. The past is past.’

‘Yes.’ But she can’t help thinking of the way the past erodes the present like a canker in an apple.

She looks across the chamber at Meg, who’s intently searching the tapestry for her father’s likeness. At least his image has not been stitched over like some. She looks back to Anne – sweet, loyal, uncomplicated Anne. There is something about
her, a freshness, as if she has more life in her than she can possibly contain. It strikes Katherine suddenly why this is. Her heart gutters and, leaning forward, she puts a hand to Anne’s stomacher, asking, ‘Is there something you are keeping from me?’ She wonders if her smile hides the surge of jealousy that comes in the face of her sister’s fertility. It is written all over her, the flush and bloom of pregnancy that Katherine has wanted so very much for herself.

Anne reddens. ‘How is it you know everything, Kit?’

‘That is wonderful news.’ The words stick in her throat; her widowhood is a hard unassailable fact, with the possibility of a child nothing but a distant fantasy now at her age, with not a single living infant to her name, only the dead baby that is never spoken of.

Her thoughts must have seeped through the surface of her, for Anne places a comforting hand over hers with the words, ‘There is still a chance for you, sister. You will surely marry again.’

‘I think two husbands are enough,’ Katherine replies, firmly closing the subject, though continuing in a whisper, ‘but I am happy for you. I know this one won’t be a little Catholic with Lady Mary as its godmother.’

Sister Anne brings a finger to her lips with a ‘shhh’ and the sisters share a secret smile. She stretches out a hand to the cross that hangs from Katherine’s neck. ‘Mother’s diamond cross,’ she says, holding it up so it catches the light. ‘I remember it bigger than this.’

‘It is you who was smaller.’

‘It is a long time since Mother passed on.’

‘Yes,’ Katherine says, but all she can think of is the length of her mother’s widowhood.

‘And these pearls,’ Anne is still fingerling the cross, ‘they
are almost pink. I’d forgotten. Oh dear, one of the links is loose.’ She leans in closer. ‘Let me see if I can mend it.’ The tip of her tongue sticks out in concentration as she presses the open ends of the link between her thumb and forefinger.

Katherine enjoys her closeness. She can smell her scent; it is sweet and comforting, like ripe apples. She turns a little towards the panelling so Anne may better get to her throat. On the wood she can clearly see where the initials CH have been scraped away. Poor little Catherine Howard, the most recent Queen, these must have been her rooms. Of course they were, they are the best in the palace, save for those of the King.

‘There,’ says Anne, letting the cross drop back to Katherine’s dress. ‘You don’t want to lose one of Mother’s pearls.’

‘How was it, Anne, with the last Queen? You have been quite silent about it.’ Katherine’s voice has dropped to a whisper and her fingers absently stroke the scraped place on the panelling.

‘Catherine Howard?’ she mouths.

Katherine nods in reply.

‘Kit, she was so young, younger than Meg even.’

They both look over to Meg, seeming barely out of girlhood herself.

‘She hadn’t been raised to hold high position. Norfolk dredged her out of the further reaches of the Howard tribe to serve his own needs. Her manners, Kit, you can’t imagine how crude she was or how shallow. But she was a pretty little thing and the King was utterly unmanned in the face of her . . .’ She pauses, searching for the right word, ‘. . . her attractions. It was her appetite that was her undoing.’

‘For men?’ asks Katherine, further dropping her whisper.

The sisters’ heads are close together now and their faces
are half turned towards the window so as not to be overheard.

‘A compulsion almost.’

‘Did you like her, Anne?’

‘No . . . I suppose not. She was insufferably vain. But I wouldn’t have wished that fate on anyone. To go to the block like that and so young. Kit, it was dreadful. Her ladies were questioned one by one. I had no idea what was happening. Some must have known what she’d been up to, carrying on like that with Culpepper, under the King’s nose.’

‘She was just a girl. She should never have been put in the bed of such an old man, King or not.’

They sit in silence for a while. Through the diamond panes Katherine watches a skein of geese fly over the lake in the distance. ‘Who questioned you?’ she asks eventually.

‘It was Bishop Gardiner.’

‘Were you frightened?’

‘Petrified, Kit. He’s a nasty piece of work. Not a man to cross. I once saw him dislocate a choirboy’s finger for missing a note. I knew nothing, so there was little he could do with me. But we all had the Boleyn business in our minds.’

‘Of course, Anne Boleyn. It turned out the same.’

‘Just the same. The King withdrew, refused to see Catherine, as he had with Anne. The poor girl was mad with fear. Ran howling down the long gallery in just her kirtle. Her screams stay with me still. The gallery was teeming with people but no one so much as looked at her, not even her uncle Norfolk. Can you imagine?’ She worries at her gown, pulling a loose thread. ‘Thank heavens I wasn’t chosen to serve her in the Tower. I couldn’t have borne it, Kit. Standing by to watch her step up to the scaffold. Untie her hood for her. Bare her neck.’ She shudders visibly.
‘Poor child,’ murmurs Katherine.
‘And rumour has it the King seeks a sixth wife.’
‘Who do they talk of?’
‘The rumours fly as usual. Every unmarried woman has had her name bandied, even you, Kit.’
‘Absurd,’ mutters Katherine.
‘It is Anne Bassett who people are putting their money on,’ continues Anne. ‘But she is nothing but a girl, younger even than the last one. I can’t imagine him taking another young maid like that. Catherine Howard shook him to the core. But little Anne’s family are pushing her forward nevertheless. She has a whole new wardrobe to flaunt.’
‘This place,’ says Katherine with a sigh. ‘Did you know Will suggested a match between Meg and that Seymour fellow?’
‘That doesn’t surprise me in the least.’ Anne rolls her eyes. ‘They are thick as thieves, those two.’
‘It won’t happen,’ Katherine snaps.
‘So you weren’t taken with the palace charmer then?’
‘Not one bit. Found him . . .’ She can’t find the words, is too distracted by the fact that Seymour has been tapping at the edge of her mind this last hour. ‘Oh, you know.’
‘This lot wouldn’t agree with you,’ Anne says, nodding towards the group of younger maids strewn about the hearth chatting and pretending to sew. ‘You should see how they flutter as he passes, like butterflies in a net.’
Katherine shrugs, telling herself that she is not one of those butterflies. ‘Has he never been married; he must be, what, twenty-nine?’
‘Thirty-four!’
‘He carries his age well,’ she says, surprised. But the thought that is foremost in her mind is that Thomas Seymour is older than she is.
‘He does indeed . . .’ Anne pauses, then adds, ‘I seem to remember talk of him and the Duchess of Richmond once.’

‘What, Mary Howard?’ asks Katherine. ‘I thought the Howards and the Seymours were . . .’

‘Not friendly . . . yes, that’s likely why it never happened. Personally I think he’s holding out for an even more illustrious match.’

‘Well then, Meg wouldn’t be suitable.’

‘She is full of Plantagenet blood,’ says Anne.

‘That may be, but I’d call her a good match, not illustrious.’

‘True,’ says Anne.

Meg breaks away from the tapestries, coming to sit beside them. The group of maids looks her up and down as she passes, a few whispers hissing around them.

‘Did you see your father, Meg?’ asks Sister Anne.

‘I did. I’m sure it was him, on the battlefield beside the King.’

There is a commotion as Susan Clarencieux slides out from Mary’s bedchamber announcing in that bossy yet quiet way particular to her, ‘She will be dressed now.’ And turning to Katherine she says, ‘She has asked that you choose her outfit.’

Katherine, noticing her nose is put out of joint, replies, ‘What would you suggest, Susan? Something sober?’

Susan’s face softens. ‘Oh no, I think something to cheer her.’

‘You are quite right, of course. Something bright it is then.’

Susan’s face stretches itself into an uncomfortable smile. Katherine knows how to deal with these slippery courtiers and their insecurities. She learned it from her mother.

‘And,’ adds Susan as Katherine is smoothing down her
dress and straightening her hood, ‘she wants the girl presented.’

Katherine nods. ‘Come, Meg. We can’t keep her waiting.’
‘Must I come?’ whispers Meg.
‘You must, yes.’ She takes Meg’s arm rather more brusquely than she means to, wishing the girl would be less gauche, then berates herself inwardly for her unkindness and adds, ‘She may be the King’s daughter but she is nothing to be scared of. You shall see.’ Stroking Meg’s back she notices how thin she has become, the bones of her shoulders protruding like the nubs of wings.

Lady Mary sits in her bedchamber engulfed in a silk robe. She looks frail and puffy about the face; her youth seems to have deserted her entirely. Katherine does the mental calculation, trying to remember how much younger Mary is than her. It is only about four years, she thinks, but Mary looks wizened and has a feverish glaze to her eyes – the legacy of the treatment she has received at her father’s hands, no doubt. Now at least she lives at court where she belongs and is no longer stuck in some dank distant place, hidden away. Her position remains tenuous, though, and since her father tore the country apart to prove he wasn’t ever truly wed to her mother, poor Mary still has the blot of illegitimacy hanging over her. No wonder she clings to the old faith; it is her only hope of legitimacy and a good marriage.

Her thin mouth twists into a smile of greeting. ‘Katherine Parr,’ she says. ‘Oh how glad I am to have you back.’
‘It is a privilege to be here indeed, my lady,’ Katherine replies. ‘But I am only here for the baptism today. I am told you are to stand godmother to the new Wriothesley infant.’
‘Only today? That is a disappointment.’
‘I must respect a period of mourning for my late husband.’
‘Yes,’ Mary says quietly, bringing a hand up, closing her eyes and pressing the place between her brows for a moment.

‘Are you in pain? I can mix you something,’ says Katherine, bending to stroke a hand over Mary’s brow.

‘No no, I have tinctures – more than enough,’ she replies, sitting upright and taking a deep breath.

‘If I rub your temples that might ease it.’

Mary nods her assent, so Katherine stands behind her and gently presses the pads of her fingers to the sides of Mary’s forehead, moving them in a circular motion. The skin there is parchment thin, revealing an isthmus of blue veins. Mary closes her eyes and leans her head back against Katherine’s stomacher.

‘I was sorry to hear about Lord Latymer,’ Mary says. ‘Truly sorry.’

‘That is kind, my lady.’

‘But Katherine, you will come back soon to serve in my chambers . . . I am in need of friends. There is only your sister and Susan whom I fully trust. I want to be surrounded by women I know. There are so many ladies in my rooms – I don’t even know who they are. You and I shared a tutor as children, Katherine, your mother served my mother. I feel we are almost kin.’

‘I am honoured that you think of me in that way,’ Katherine replies, realizing only now how lonely life must be for a woman like Mary. By rights she should have been married long ago to some magnificent foreign prince, borne him a flock of pricelings and allied England to some great land, but she has been pushed from pillar to post, in favour, out of favour, legitimate, illegitimate. No one knows what to do with her, least of all her father.

‘Are you still of the true faith, Katherine?’ Mary asks,
dropping her voice to a whisper though there is no one else in the room save for Meg, hovering awkwardly behind her stepmother. ‘I know your brother is committed to reform, your sister and her husband too. But you, Katherine, you have been long wed to a northern lord and the old faith holds sway up there still.’

‘I follow the King’s faith,’ Katherine replies, hoping nothing is assumed from her vagueness. She knows only too well how things go in the North when it comes to faith. She cannot think of it without feeling Murgatroyd’s rough hands on her, the unwashed stink of him. She tries to push the thought away but it persists.

‘My father’s faith,’ Mary is saying. ‘He is still a Catholic at heart, though he broke with Rome. Is that not right, Katherine?’

Katherine has barely heard her, can’t help herself from remembering her dead baby, his black eyes popping open, his disquieting gaze reminding her from whence he came. But she collects herself, replying, ‘It is, my lady. Matters of faith are no longer straightforward as they used to be.’

She hates her own ambiguity, feels no better than all the other perfidious courtiers, but she cannot bring herself to say to what extent she has taken up the new faith. She couldn’t face Mary’s disappointment. This is a woman whose life has been a series of great disappointments and Katherine cannot bear to add to that, even in a small way, by telling the truth.

‘Mmmm,’ Mary murmurs. ‘Would that they were. Would that they were.’ She fiddles absently with a rosary, its beads clicking as she moves them along the silk string. ‘And this is your stepdaughter?’

‘Yes, my lady. Allow me to present Margaret Neville.’
Meg makes a tentative step forward and drops into a deep curtsy as she has been taught.

‘Come closer, Margaret,’ Mary beckons, ‘and sit, sit.’ She waves towards a stool beside her. ‘Now, tell me your age.’

‘I am seventeen, my lady.’

‘Seventeen. And you are promised to someone, I suppose?’

‘I was, my lady, but he passed away.’

Katherine has told her to say this. It wouldn’t do to publicize the fact that her betrothed was one of those hanged for treason after the Pilgrimage of Grace.

‘Well, we shall have to find you a replacement, won’t we?’

Only Katherine seems to notice the colour drop from Meg’s face.

‘You can help your stepmother dress me.’

The mass is endless. Meg fidgets and Katherine’s mind wanders to Seymour and his disconcerting gaze, those periwinkle eyes. Just the thought of him disturbs her, makes her clench up inside. She forces herself to remember the ridiculous bouncing feather and the ostentation of him, everything overdone, and focuses her attention back on the service.

Lady Mary seems so fragile it’s a wonder she can hold the infant, which is round and robust with a pair of lungs that would scare the Devil himself. Bishop Gardiner, who has a fleshy look about the face, as if he is made of melting wax, presides. He drags things out, his voice, slow and interminable, rendering the Latin ugly. Katherine can’t help but think of him questioning her sister, terrifying her – that and the poor choirboy’s finger. They say Gardiner has manoeuvred himself closer and closer to the King in recent years, that the King seeks his counsel as much as the Archbishop’s.
The child wails red-faced, without let-up, until the holy water is poured on her head. From that instant she is completely silent, as if Satan has been chased from her, and Gardiner carries a smug look, as if it is his doing rather than God’s.

The King does not attend. And Wriothesley, the infant’s father, seems perturbed. He is a ferrety man with a permanent look of apology and a tendency to sniff; he is Lord Privy Seal and some say he holds the reins of all England along with Gardiner, but you wouldn’t think it to look at him. Katherine notices his mud-coloured eyes making frequent anxious glances towards the door as he absently cracks his knuckles, so that an occasional soft gristly clack punctuates Gardiner’s drone. A slight such as this could mean anything with a King whose fancies change on a whim; the Lord Privy Seal may hold the reins of England but that means nothing without the King’s favour. Wriothesley should know all about the King’s whims; after all, he was Cromwell’s man once, but managed to slip and slide out of that association as soon as the tide turned – another one not to be trusted.

Once it is all done everyone files out behind Lady Mary, who holds tight on to Susan Clarencieux’s yellow arm as if she might collapse. Her ladies follow her down the long gallery through a scrum of courtiers who part as she approaches. Seymour is among them, and two of the younger girls giggle stupidly when he smiles and doffs that ludicrous feather their way. Katherine looks away, pretending to be fascinated by old Lady Buttes’s commentary on the way the young dress, the loose interpretation of the sumptuary laws and what has happened to courtesy. In her day things were different, she goes on, doesn’t anyone these days know how to show respect for their elders? Katherine vaguely hears Seymour
say her name along with some flattery about her jewels, doubtless insincere. She looks his way briefly with a tight nod before turning back to Lady Buttes’s string of dull complaints.

Once back in the relative calm of Lady Mary’s chambers Susan Clarencieux hustles them all through to the outer rooms and helps Mary, who seems on the brink of collapse, into her bedchamber. The younger girls, now they are in private, start to pull off their elaborate hoods and loosen their gowns, chattering and giggling. The women mill about in quiet groups, settling eventually to their reading or needlework, and spiced wine is handed around. Katherine is about to take her leave when a kerfuffle starts up outside, a drumming and singing accompanied by a lute and a great stamping of feet. The girls all reach for their hoods, hurriedly shoving them back on their heads again, helping each other to tie them on, stuffing stray tendrils of hair away, while pinching their cheeks and biting their lips.

The doors fly open and a band of masked minstrels dances into the room to a cacophony of clapping and cheering. They jig about in a complicated reel, twirling in figures of eight, pushing the ladies out to the sides. Katherine steps on to a stool, pulling Meg up with her, in order to get a view over the heads. She can feel the atmosphere in the room heighten to a contained frenzy, like static before a storm.

Sister Anne grabs one of the girls and says, ‘Fetch Susan. Tell her Lady Mary must come out; tell her there is a visit.’

Katherine sees now, with a barely concealed gasp, what all the fuss was for – there at the centre of the circling minstrels, limping and hefting his huge form about, is the King, absurd in his minstrel garb, one leg black and the other white. She remembers him doing this years ago, believing himself to be
completely disguised, and the whole court colluding in the
dumbshow, so desperate was he to discover if people were as
delighted by the man as they were by the King. He burst in
then as now, surrounded by his finest courtiers, and he, a
head taller than them all, agile, muscular, vigorous, was an
impressive sight indeed; the effect was completely disarming,
particularly to Katherine who was then just a girl. But to be
cavorting in such a way still, barely able to stand without the
support of a man either side of him, his minstrel’s doublet
stretched around his girth, straining at its laces; it reeks of
desperation. And to surround himself with such well-formed
specimens, his fine ushers and chamberers, young and burst-
ing with life, fit from the hunt, makes the whole charade
infinitely worse.

Meg is standing open-mouthed.
‘It is the King,’ whispers Katherine. ‘When he removes his
mask you must feign surprise.’
‘But why?’ Her face is a picture of bewilderment.
Katherine shrugs. What can she say; the entire court must
collude in an illusion that makes the King feel young and
beloved for himself, when all he inspires truly these days is
fear. ‘This is court, Meg,’ she says. ‘Things here often defy
explanation.’

The men are now skipping in a circle and at its centre is
little Anne Bassett, posturing coyly. Her mother, Lady Lisle,
stands watching, practically salivating, as her ripe sixteen-
year-old daughter is twirled about among the men under the
greedy gaze of the King.
‘I fear history is repeating itself,’ whispers Sister Anne. She
doesn’t need to say in what way, the whole room is thinking
of Catherine Howard, except perhaps Lady Lisle whose
sense is doubtless clouded by ambition. But the circle breaks
up and Anne Bassett is spun out to the edge of the crowd; the music dies and the King whips off his mask to a great gasp of counterfeit surprise.

The room drops to its knees, the ladies’ dresses crumpling to the floor in a sea of silks.

‘Who would have believed it – the King!’ cries someone.

Katherine keeps her eyes down, inspecting the grain of the oak floorboards, resisting the temptation to nudge her sister for fear of the giggles. The whole thing is more ludicrous than an Italian comedy.

‘Come,’ booms the King. ‘This is an informal visit. Rise, rise. Now let us see who is among you. Where is our daughter?’

The crowd parts, allowing Lady Mary to move forward. A rare smile casts itself over her face and the years seem to drop away from her as if a crumb of her father’s attention has collapsed time.

A few other men have arrived and are milling about.

‘Will is here,’ Anne says. ‘With his crowd.’

Katherine catches sight of that feather bucking and bobbing about the room. Her stomach gives a flip and she pulls Meg away, only to find herself standing before the King.

‘Ah, is that my Lady Latymer we see lurking? Why do you lurk, my lady?’

A waft of fetid breath engulfs her and it is all she can do not to reach for the pomander that hangs from her girdle.

‘Not lurking, Your Majesty, just a little overwhelmed.’ She holds her gaze on his chest. His tightly laced black and white doublet, which on closer inspection is encrusted with pearls, seems to hold him together, with rolls of him spilling out from its edges and giving the impression that were he to remove it he would lose his form altogether.

‘We offer our condolences for your husband’s passing,’ he
says, holding out his hand for her to kiss the ring, which is embedded in the flesh of his middle finger.

‘That is kind, Your Majesty.’ She dares a glance towards his face, round and doughy with raisin eyes sunk into it, wondering what became of the magnificent man he once was.

‘I am told that you cared well for him. You are quite known for your nursing skills. An old man needs to be cared for.’ Then, before she has a chance to respond, he leans in towards her ear, close enough for her to hear the wheeze of his breath and get a whiff of ambergris. ‘It is good to see you back at court. You look appetizing even in a widow’s weeds.’

She feels a hot blush rise through her and struggles to respond, managing just a few mumbled words of gratitude.

‘And who is this?’ he booms, the moment of intimacy thankfully over. He is waving a hand towards Meg, who drops into a deep curtsy.

‘This is my stepdaughter, Margaret Neville,’ announces Katherine.

‘Get up, girl,’ the King says. ‘We want to see you properly.’ Meg does as she is told. Katherine notices the tremble in her hands.

‘And turn about,’ he demands. Then, when she has turned for him like a mare at auction, he cries, ‘BOO!’ causing her to jump back, terrified. ‘Nervy little thing, isn’t she,’ he laughs.

‘She has been sheltered, Your Majesty,’ Katherine replies.

‘Needs a fellow to break her in,’ he states, then asks Meg, ‘Anyone here take your fancy?’

Seymour saunters by and Meg looks briefly towards him.

‘Ah! We see you have an eye for Seymour,’ the King exclaims. ‘A handsome fellow, don’t you think?’

‘N-n-no,’ Meg stutters.

Katherine kicks her sharply on the ankle. ‘I think what she
is trying to say is that Seymour is nothing when compared to
Your Majesty,’ she chips in, her voice slick as oil, barely able
to believe such stuff can trip so easily off her tongue.
‘But he is talked of as the handsomest man at court,’
replies the King.
‘Hmmm,’ says Katherine, her head to one side, thinking
how best to form her response. ‘That is a matter of opinion.
Some prefer greater maturity.’
The King emits a loud guffaw and says, ‘I think we will
arrange a match between your Margaret Neville and Thomas
Seymour. My brother-in-law to your stepdaughter . . . It has
a nice ring to it.’
Clasping both women by the elbow, he steers them across
the room to a gaming table. He is a dead weight and Kath-
erine can think of no way to politely discourage the match, so
she remains silent. Two chairs are brought by a scurry of
staff and the King heaves himself into one, indicating for
Katherine to take the other. A chessboard is magicked from
nowhere and the King beckons Seymour to set out the pieces.
Katherine dares not even glance his way, for fear of the con-
fusion of feelings that twists about inside her seeping to the
surface.
She is aware of Lady Lisle’s darting glances from where
she stands with her daughter; she can almost hear the wom-
an’s machinating thoughts of how better to push her girl,
school her, groom her, to catch the biggest fish in the sea.
She must be happy with the fact that Katherine is no com-
petition, twice widowed and beyond thirty, next to Anne in the
full flush of her youth. If he wants sons he will choose Anne
Bassett or one like her. And he does want sons, everyone
knows that. She makes her play.
‘Queen’s gambit accepted,’ says the King, taking her white
pawn, rolling it between fat fingers. ‘You mean to rout me at the centre of the board.’ He looks at her, sunken eyes flashing, his breath wheezing as if there is no space for air in him.

They make their moves back and forth, swiftly and in silence.

He takes a sweetmeat from a platter, popping it into his mouth, smacking his lips, then picks up a rook between his fat fingers, placing it, blocking her move with an, ‘Aha!’ Then he leans in towards her and says, ‘You will want a husband as well as your stepdaughter.’

She absently runs the little white knight over her lower lip. It is smooth as butter.

‘Eventually, perhaps I shall remarry.’

‘I could make you Queen,’ he declares.

She feels droplets of his spit land next to her ear. ‘You tease, Your Majesty,’ she says.

‘Perhaps,’ he growls. ‘Perhaps not.’

He wants sons. All the world knows he wants sons. Anne Bassett would give him a score of infants – or a Talbot girl, or a Percy, or a Howard. No, not a Howard; he has had two Howard Queens and sent both to the block. He wants sons and Katherine has had nothing in two marriages save for a secret dead baby. The thought hits her like cannon shot: the thought of making a child with Seymour, beautiful Seymour, a man in his prime. It would be a sin for such a man not to procreate. She silently admonishes herself for entertaining such a ludicrous idea. But it refuses to be quashed and sits there germinating at the back of her mind.

She has to use all her willpower to keep her eyes off Seymour, to focus on the game and on amusing the King.

* * *

36
Katherine wins.

The small gathering of spectators shrinks back a little, like a crowd anticipating a loud explosion, as she cries, ‘Checkmate.’

‘That is what we like about you, Katherine Parr,’ the King says with a laugh.

The gathering relaxes.

‘You do not humour us by losing, like all the others who think it pleases us always to win.’ He takes hold of her hand. ‘You are honest,’ he adds, pulling her towards him, stroking her cheek with waxy fingertips. The room watches and Katherine is aware of her brother’s impish grin as the King cups a hand for secrecy, presses his wet mouth to her ear and mumbles, ‘Attend us in private later.’

Katherine flails for some kind of response. ‘Your Majesty, I am honoured,’ she says. ‘Deeply honoured that you would choose to spend time alone with me. But with my husband so recently gone I –’

He places a finger over her lips to hush her, saying, ‘No need to explain. Your loyalty shines from you. We admire that. You need time. You shall have time to mourn your husband.’ And with that he beckons one of his ushers to help hoist him from his chair and, leaning heavily on him, limps towards the door, followed by his entourage.

Katherine watches as the usher stumbles on the King’s foot. The King’s arm flies out in a sharp slap across the man’s face, like a frog’s tongue to a fly. The hubbub of conversation dies.

‘Out of my sight, idiot. Want to have your foot cut off for clumsiness?’ the King bellows, sending the poor cowed usher scuttling off. Another takes his place and everyone continues as before. It is as if nothing has happened – no one remarks on it.
As Katherine seeks out her sister she can feel the atmosphere of the room has shifted, turned towards her. People part to let her pass, throwing compliments like flowers in her wake, but Anne Bassett and her mother look sideways at her across the room. Sister Anne is like an island in this dissimulating sea.

‘I need to get away from this place, Anne,’ she says.

‘Lady Mary has retired, no one will mind if you go,’ her sister replies. ‘Besides,’ she adds with a playful nudge, ‘it appears you can do no wrong.’

‘Sister, this is no joke. There is a price for this kind of favour.’

‘You are right,’ says Anne, suddenly serious. They are both thinking of all those miserable Queens.

‘He was only flirting. He is the King . . . Entitled to that, I suppose . . . not serious . . .’ Katherine is gabbling. ‘Best I keep away from court for a time, though.’

Sister Anne nods. ‘I’ll see you out.’

It is almost dark in the courtyard and fine flakes of snow are caught hanging in the light from the torches under the arcades. Much of the sludge has frozen over now and the grooms tread carefully over the treacherous cobbles. A large party arrives, dismounting noisily, and the flurry of pages and ushers that appears to receive them suggests they must be of some note. Katherine notices the goggle eyes and thin-lipped sneer of Anne Stanhope whom she knows from childhood, a spiteful and self-important girl who had sometimes shared the royal schoolroom all those years ago. Stanhope swans past, nose aloft, shoving Sister Anne with her shoulder as she passes, as if she hasn’t seen her, not acknowledging either of the Parr sisters.
‘I see some things never change,’ snorts Katherine.
‘She’s been insufferable since she married Edward Seymour and became the Countess of Hertford,’ says Anne. ‘You’d think she was the Queen the way she goes about.’
‘But she is descended from Edward III,’ says Katherine, rolling her eyes.
‘As if we didn’t know that,’ Anne says with a groan.
‘As if she’d let us forget.’

A page brings their furs, which Katherine and her stepdaughter fold themselves into against the cold, and they bid goodbye to Sister Anne, who disappears up the stone steps. Katherine will miss the easy familiarity she has with Anne; the beckoning gloom of Charterhouse is not appealing, though she will be glad to be away from here.

They wait for the horses on an alcove bench. Meg looks drawn. Katherine closes her eyes, letting her head drop back to the cold stone wall, thinking of Latymer’s prolonged agony, of how difficult it must have been for the girl.

‘My Lady Latymer,’ says a voice, drawing her out of her thoughts.

She opens her eyes to find Seymour standing over her. Her stomach lurches.

‘Margaret,’ he says to Meg, smiling like a man who always gets what he wants. ‘Would you be very kind and make my excuses to your uncle. He waits for me in the Great Hall and I have some business to discuss with Lady Latymer before she leaves.’

‘Business?’ questions Katherine as Meg disappears up the steps. ‘If you’re intending to ask for Margaret’s hand –’ she starts, but he interrupts.

‘Not at all. No . . . though she is a lovely girl . . . and with Plantagenet blood to boot,’ he gabbles as if slightly disarmed.
This surprises Katherine, for she is feeling the same, confronted by this man alone. He stands a little too close to her, closer than is correct. The planes of his face all seem to agree with each other, his jaw defined, his cheekbones high, his forehead lofty with a point of hair at the centre, like an arrow.

‘Oh,’ exclaims Katherine.

He smells male and musky and is looking at her again with those blue, blue eyes. Her belly feels liquid and she would run if she could, but she is at bay to her good manners and those eyes that have paralysed her.

‘No, it was this.’ He is holding something in the outstretched palm of his hand. ‘Yours, I believe.’

She looks. It is a pearl.

‘I think not.’ As she says it her hand reaches up to her mother’s cross, feeling just an empty place where the central pearl should be and the jagged ends of the broken link.

How did it come to be lying in this man’s palm?

She is bewildered, as if he has performed some kind of sleight of hand on her, like the copper Will Sommers pulled from behind Meg’s ear. She stares at it for some time, angry with him, as if he’d ripped it from her throat deliberately.

‘How did you get your hands on it?’ Her voice is clipped and cross and she’s annoyed with herself for revealing too much in her tone. She feels his eyes still boring through her. Her breath sounds loud in the silence.

‘I saw it drop from your pendant in the long gallery and tried to get your attention. And then again in Lady Mary’s rooms but the King . . .’ He stops.

‘The King,’ she repeats. She had all but forgotten about the King’s approach.

‘I’m so glad I found you before you left.’ His face opens up into a wide, beguiling smile with his eyes creasing at the
corners, and suddenly they are no longer menacing but bright and captivating.

She doesn’t return his smile but neither does she take the pearl, which still sits in his palm waiting to be claimed. She can’t get away from the feeling that she has been tricked.

He sits down on the stone bench beside her, saying, ‘Take it.’

But she doesn’t move.

‘Or better still,’ he adds, ‘give me the necklace and I shall have my goldsmith mend it for you.’

She turns to look at him, wanting to find fault. Everything is so perfectly put into place, the careful ruffle of his silk shirt, the neatly clipped beard, the way his cap sits firmly over one ear, and that infernal feather, so showy. The crimson satin spilling from the slashes in his doublet makes her think of bloodied mouths. She wants to reach out and scuff him up a little. The snow has spotted his velvet shoulders and the tip of his nose is red. She smiles and turns her back, surprising herself, lifting the lappets of her hood to expose the nape of her neck. He slips the loose pearl into her hand and unclasps her necklace with warm fingers. She had not intended to do that, but something in this man’s open smile and the sweet ruddy tip of his nose makes her feel, in spite of herself, that she has misjudged him.

He takes the necklace, bringing it briefly to his lips before stashing it somewhere inside his robe. A melting sensation passes through her as if it had been her throat he’d kissed rather than the necklace.

‘Take care of it. It was my mother’s and is very precious to me.’ She has managed to gather the drifting bits of herself together and injected her voice with its usual straightness.

‘I can assure you, my lady, I shall,’ he replies, adding after
a pause, ‘I am truly sorry for your husband’s passing. Will tells me he suffered greatly.’

She doesn’t like the idea of her brother discussing her or her husband with this man, wonders what else might have been said. ‘He did suffer,’ she says.

‘It must have been unbearable for you to see that.’

‘Yes.’ She is still looking at him and his face seems to register genuine concern. A curl has escaped above the whorl of his ear and it is all she can do to resist stretching out her hand and tucking it away. ‘Unbearable.’

‘He was a lucky man to have you to take care of him.’

‘You think he was lucky,’ she snaps. ‘He wasn’t lucky. Not lucky to be struck down like that.’ Her voice is sharp. She can’t help it.

Seymour looks chastened as he says, ‘I didn’t mean to –’

‘I know you meant no harm,’ she interrupts, seeing Meg descending the steps. ‘Meg is back, it’s time to go.’

She stands and notices Rafe outside, waiting with the horses. Meg goes straight to him and Katherine wonders if she is avoiding Seymour after all that talk of a match.

‘And the pearl,’ Seymour says.

Momentarily confused, she opens her hand and finds the pearl nestled there. She feels tricked again, can’t remember taking it from him. ‘Oh yes, the pearl.’ She hands it over.

‘Do you know how a pearl is made?’ he asks.

‘Of course I do,’ she snarls, suddenly angry with herself at being taken in by this man with his sweet talk and platitudes, imagining all those giggling maids hanging on to his every word as he describes the making of a pearl, twisting and turning the metaphor for them until they are talked into bed and into revealing their own oysters. ‘And you are a grain of sand in my shell,’ she spits, turning to leave.
Seymour will not be rebuffed so easily and takes her hand, plants a wet kiss on it, saying, ‘But perhaps in time I will become a pearl,’ before mounting the steps two at a time, his gown swaying from his broad shoulders.

She wipes the back of her hand on her dress and makes a little huff, blowing out a cloud of condensation that may as well be smoke. She wishes she’d made it clear that if he’s after a tumble with a widow, she wouldn’t be that widow for a thousand gold pieces. She is struck with a sense of loneliness, feels unmoored without her husband, misses him desperately, wishes she were going back to him.

There is a commotion on the stairs, a clatter and a gust of laughter. She looks up to see one of the young pages on the floor with an upturned plate of tarts that are scattered everywhere. People pass, kicking the tarts about, treading them into the floor, taunting the boy. She can see the humiliation in his crimson little-boy cheeks. She moves forward to help him but, as she does so, she sees Seymour drop to the floor on his silk-clad knees and begin to gather up the tarts. This silences the wags, who drift away shiftily for they know Seymour is the King’s brother-in-law and that they all ought to be scraping to him. You’d think by the looks on their faces that he’d turned the world on its head by getting down on his white-stockinged knees to help this nobody.

He pats the boy on the back, teasing a smile out of him. They sit there a while, chatting happily, then Seymour helps the boy to his feet and Katherine hears him say, ‘Don’t you worry. I’ll talk to the cook.’

As they ride off Katherine absently feels for her mother’s cross, finding only an empty place where it should be, and wonders if she should have given it over to Seymour so lightly when she barely knows him. He is Will’s friend, surely