

GREENWICH PALACE,
SUMMER

1534

I N THE HAMMERED silver of the mirror, we look like two headless ghosts – our black hoods hiding our faces. I throw back the thick veil to reveal the mask of a golden falcon. The sharp beak is enamelled gold, the flaring eyebrows brass. The feathers of head and throat are cloth of gold: they shift and settle like plumage, speckled like peregrine feathers, as if a free bird has been cursed into gold by *Midas*.

I push up my mask over my light brown hair to show my creamy skin, my secretive smile.

‘And you can take that look off your face,’ Anne says, throwing back her own hood, raising her head for me to raise her veil and free her of her mask.

‘What look?’

‘Your false face – your two-faced face. What are you thinking?’

A courtier’s mouth is always full of unspoken words. ‘I was thinking: it’s going to be hard to dance in this,’ I lie. ‘It’s going to be hard to see.’

‘We’re here to be seen, not to see.’

She gets up and spreads her arms for me to unlace her stomacher, her sleeves, the skirt of her gown. She scratches her rounded belly through the fine linen shift. Five months into her second pregnancy, she is more tired than with her first. She says this is a sign of a son. Her daughter, Princess Elizabeth, was easier to carry. She rests on

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her bed every afternoon before dinner when the king is bathing and changing his clothes after his afternoon sports.

‘What’s the masque called?’ she asks, climbing into the great golden bed.

‘*The Falconers*. We dance as birds, and then . . .’

‘Let me guess,’ she interrupts. ‘The king and his friends come in disguised as falconers, and they catch us, and we dance with them? And then we all unmask, and I discover I am dancing with the king! I am amazed! I had no idea! I thought he was a handsome stranger.’

I give a trill of false laughter. ‘You’re so funny!’

I take off her embroidered shoes and peel down her fine silk stockings. This is honourable work for a lady-in-waiting to a queen, and the duty of a beloved sister-in-law. I am proud to be both.

She closes her eyes. ‘Surely, not even he can believe I don’t know my own husband?’

Of course, the king does not think that we believe a group of strange Savoy princes or unknown Russian lords in thick furs have burst into the queen’s presence chamber. This is a game at court that we all play knowingly, and the prize is that the king shines. Among all the playacting is a single truth: the second son, the second-rate, second choice has been transmuted into gold; he is heir. Over and over again, we re-enact this miracle, as if it were the greatest luck that Arthur, the firstborn, died, and Henry became heir and then king. Twenty years ago, someone named him the ‘handsomest prince in Christendom’, and we have had to keep it up ever since.

When I first came to court as a maid-of-honour I was a lonely bookish little girl of eleven and he was the twenty-six-year-old dazzling young husband to the beautiful queen: Katherine of Aragon. I fell in love with him, with her, with the glamour and beauty of the young royal couple. Then I fell in love with the whole Boleyn family: Anne, her ambitious brother George, her sweet-natured sister Mary, their parents, and the noble House of Howard – all professional courtiers as I wanted to be, in service to the most beautiful powerful court in the world.

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Now, I am a Boleyn myself, married to George for almost half my life, rising with him to the title of Lady Rochford, nearly thirty years old. The queen I first loved and served is long gone, and the handsome king is in his prime. I have watched his need for praise grow from a young man's joy to a mature man's vanity, and I have learned – we all have – to fatten the compliments to match his hunger.

‘Masking and revealing is a game to him,’ I say soothingly. ‘He just wants the world to see that you choose him, even when he is disguised. You fall in love all over again.’

‘Well, I do,’ she says, with a sudden wide false smile. ‘I am Anne, “The Most Happy”.’

I tuck the lambswool blanket around her. Thanks to Anne, I am first lady at court, and I will be aunt to her baby, the next king of England, and first in the procession to carry him to his baptism. It will be a victory parade for us beautiful, clever women – we will have defeated the old lords and won the king from them.

‘When will you announce you’re with child? You announced Elizabeth much earlier.’

She shrugs. ‘When I choose.’

Only the favoured few know that she is expecting a baby this autumn. She is right to delay sounding the starting bell for a new race of eager young women to the king's bed; every slut at court will snatch at the king's attention when they know the queen is pregnant.

‘Do something for me, Jane,’ she says as I warm lavender and juniper berry oil in my palms to rub on her swollen feet and ankles. ‘Speak to that Agnes girl. She’s not respectful.’

Agnes is a young maid-of-honour, blonde, and agreeable. Dark-haired Anne dislikes blonde, smiling women, but still, they flock to court in their best gowns.

‘What’s she done?’

‘Her curtsy is too shallow; she bobs up and down as if I am nothing more than a viscountess.’

This is my title. I was born Jane Parker, won the name Boleyn

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through marriage, and now I am Lady Rochford. I pinch her toes, smiling. 'It's very grand to be a viscountess,' I tell her.

'It's good enough for now,' she agrees. 'But when I give birth to a prince, I'll have George named as a duke!'

This is the dizzying Boleyn ambition. My father's plan was for me to be a mid-rank courtier, expert in this new trade for educated men and women. He sent me to court speaking French and English and reading Latin. He advised me to learn German, as the Protestant thinkers write in German, and hide my Spanish from the Spanish queen.

But Anne never had any interest in discreet courtier work; she went straight to the fount of power and seduced and married the king. She has all the courage of her mother's grand house, the Howards, and all the ambition of the self-made Boleyns. If she wants a dukedom for George, she will get it, and I will be a duchess. Anne, and all of us, Boleyns and Howards, are on the rise – we cannot be distracted by a girl like Agnes.

'She curtsied properly to the old queen. She used to sink down as if Katherine of Aragon was the Virgin Mary,' Anne complains.

We all did. But that was three years ago and courtiers' memories are as short-lived as mayflies.

'Dowager princess now,' I remind her.

'And she was talking to the Spanish ambassador,' Anne says fretfully. 'What can a fool like her have to say to a fool like him?'

I make a mental note to tell my patron that Agnes has been recruited into the Spanish ambassador's network of friends and spies. 'Oh, he talks to everyone,' I say reassuringly. 'What else can he do?'

'He can go home to Spain. He can lock himself up in Kimbolton Castle with the queen.'

'Dowager princess,' I prompt again.

'But who else does she talk to?' she asks. 'To the Papist lords? The Courtenays? The friends of the old queen and Princess Mary?'

'Lady Mary,' I remind her.

Queen Katherine is to be called dowager princess, and her

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daughter is newly named as Lady Mary; but those who served and loved them refuse to miscall them, and the rest of us have to learn a new habit.

‘None of them matter to you. You’ve won. It’s only old people, childhood friends of the king! Doddering Papists! Looking back to the old days. Not us – not us of the new court, the new religion, the new world. Time is on our side. They’ll die of old age or just give up. If your baby is a boy, it will prove that your marriage is God’s will, and the old queen, her daughter, and the Spanish ambassador and all the faithful will just fade away.’

‘Where’s George?’ she demands. ‘He’s late.’

I never complain of George being late; but I am his wife of ten years, and she is his queen.

‘Go and fetch him, Jane.’

I am saved from looking like a needy wife hunting for her husband by a tap on the door that connects the queen’s bedroom to the king’s private gallery. George slips in, breathtakingly handsome in a new hose and jerkin of rich brown velvet. He carries a mask and a hat with a long sweeping heron’s feather in his hand. He is like his sister: dark-eyed and dark-haired, as if they are twins, carved from mellow polished wood into the same hard intelligent features and darkly promising eyes.

‘Behold a rustic falconer!’ he announces and comes to the bed and takes Anne’s hand to kiss. He looks at her keenly. ‘You’re pale.’ He turns to me. ‘You’ve not let her get overtired?’

‘She only tried on her costume and ran through the dance – since then, she’s been resting.’

I step towards him for a kiss of greeting; but he turns to sit beside her and unpins her hair. I hand him her silver hair brushes, and he sweeps the long dark heap of hair from her forehead and plaits it.

‘I’m troubled,’ Anne complains.

‘Don’t be,’ he says instantly. ‘You must think of holy things, joyous things to make the baby grow. You have to be Anne, “The Most Happy”.’

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‘Agnes Trent,’ I explain, and see his quick nod of thanks.

‘She has to show respect,’ Anne says.

George fastens two ivory pins in the plaits at the nape of her neck, so loosely that the king can release a tumble of her scented hair and bury his face in it when they are alone.

Anne gestures for me to slide on fresh stockings, and winces at the tightness of the red silk shoes. ‘I’ve told Jane to speak to her.’

‘She’s a new favourite,’ George warns me. ‘Speak tactfully.’

‘But clearly,’ Anne insists. ‘I’ll have nothing less than complete loyalty. I didn’t send the queen—’

‘Dowager princess—’ George and I say together.

‘The dowager princess to Kimbolton Castle, Cardinal Wolsey to hell, and Bishop Fisher and Thomas More to the Tower, only to have enemies under my own roof. The old lords speak against me in council; their old wives gossip behind their hands. All the old people want everything back the way it was. They want the old queen back.’

‘Well, you can’t put them all in the Tower!’ I joke; but nobody laughs. At once, I am grave. ‘Of course, I’ll speak to Agnes.’

Anne stands up in her tight shoes. ‘Fetch her now; she can dress me.’

George drops a kiss on her shoulder and throws a salute to me. ‘Thank you!’ he mouths, hidden by the door.

I see the door is safely closed behind him before I cross to the opposite door to the queen’s privy chamber. ‘Her Grace is ready for dressing,’ I say, and three maids of honour obediently rise. Agnes swings past me, not a care in her world.

I touch her arm. ‘Is there any reason that you don’t make a proper curtsy to the queen?’ I ask her pleasantly. ‘I’m sure there must be some mistake.’

‘No mistake but hers,’ she says rudely. ‘I curtsy low enough for her.’

‘Curtsey low enough for a crowned queen. And let the matter end here.’

‘It’ll end where it started: with her.’

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I tighten my grip. ‘Mistress Agnes, when I was first at court, I minded my manners. That’s how I rose to be first lady-in-waiting.’

‘And I mind mine! There’s no need for you to pinch me, Lady Rochford. Your sister has a Tower full of torturers to do that.’

‘I wasn’t pinching you,’ I lie.

‘And I curtsy just right,’ she lies in reply, and goes into the queen’s bedchamber.

I watch her through the open door, and I see that she does not.