Opening Extract from...

The Queen of Subtleties

Written by Suzannah Dunn

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The Queen of Subtleties

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
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Contents

For my own little
Tudor-redheaded heir,
Vincent

Notes

A 'Mrs Cornwallis' is recorded as having been Henry VIII's confectioner, and the only woman in the household's two hundred kitchen staff. All that is known of her, apart from her surname and job, is that the king eventually gave her a fine house in Aldgate in recognition of her services. All other aspects of the Lucy Cornwallis character and her story in this novel are fictional, as are those of her close colleagues. Names and job titles of other household staff aim to be historically accurate, as is the itinerary for the summer 'progress' (royal tour) of 1535.

All events recorded or referred to in the 'Anne Boleyn' sections of the novel aim to be historically accurate, with three small exceptions: the motto embroidered on the king's jousting costume for Shrove Tuesday, 1526, was not in fact 'No Comment' but 'Declare je nos' ('Declare I dare not'); Anne's uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, not Sir Henry Norris, broke the news to her of Henry's serious fall in the spring of 1536; and the aunt with Anne in the Tower was not the Elizabeth who had been Duchess of Norfolk, but another one.

Diminutives of names have been used to avoid confusion (between, for example, the many Henrys and Francises, Marys and Elizabeths) or to avoid a dated version (Meg Shelton was in fact known as Madge, and Betsy Blount as Bessie). Anne Boleyn's dog was in fact named 'Purkoy' (believed to be from the French 'pourqois', because of his enquiring expression) and not, as here, 'Pixie'.

The Queen of Subtleties

Anne Boleyn

❀❀❀

Elizabeth, you'll be told lies about me, or perhaps even nothing at all. I don't know which is worse. You, too, my only baby: your own lifestory is being re-written. You're no longer the king's legitimate daughter and heir. Yesterday, with a few pen-strokes, you were bastardized. Tomorrow, for good measure, a sword-stroke will leave you motherless.

There are people who'd have liked to have claimed that you're not your father's daughter at all, but you've confounded them. You're a Tudor rose, a pale redhead, whereas I'm a black-haired, olive-skinned, coal-eyed Englishwoman as dark as a Spaniard. No one has felt able to suggest that you're other than your father's flesh and blood.

You won't remember how I look, and I don't suppose you'll ever come across my likeness. Portraits of me will be burned. You'll probably never even come across my handwriting, because my letters and diaries will go the same way. Even my initial will be chiselled from your father's on carvings and masonry all around the country. And it

starts tomorrow, with the thud of the sword to my bared neck in time for my husband's public announcement of his forthcoming marriage. As his current wife, I pose a problem. Not such a big one, though, that the thinnest of blades can't solve it.

I want you to know about me, Elizabeth. So, let's start at the beginning. I was born at the turn of the century. And what a turn, what a century: the sixteenth, so different from every one before it. The changes I've seen. Gone, quite suddenly, is the old England, the old order of knights and priests. England used to be made of old men. Men born to their place, knowing their place. We Boleyns have always prided ourselves on knowing just about everything there is to know about anything, with the exception of our place.

I was born in Norfolk. My mother is a Howard. Her brother is the Duke of Norfolk. I was born in Blickling Hall. I've no memories of Norfolk, but I'm told that the land is flat, the sky high and wide. So, from the beginning, it seems, I've had my sights on the horizon. The climate, in Norfolk, is something I've heard about: blanketed summers and bare, bone-cracking winters. Inhospitable and uncompromising, like the Howards. If the world had never changed, that would have suited the Howards.

Something else I've heard about the Howards: that the Duke, my Uncle Norfolk, has the common touch. At first, it seems a strange thing to hear about the last man in England to have owned serfs; but in a way, it's true, because, for him, business is everything and he's unafraid to get his hands dirty. No airs and graces. Land and money: that's what matters to a Howard. My uncle has never read a book, and he's proud of the fact. Ruthlessness and efficiency: that's what matters. He'll clap you on the back, one day; stab you

in it, the next. No hard feelings, just business as usual. Never trust a Howard, Elizabeth, not even if you are one. Look where it got me, sent here to the Tower by my own uncle.

But I'm a Boleyn first and foremost. My father didn't have the Howard privileges; he's had to make his own way in the world. And he has; oh, he has: cultured, clever, cool-eyed Thomas Boleyn. England has never seen the likes of him. For a start, he has a talent almost unknown here: he speaks French like a Frenchman. Which has made him indispensable to the King.

We Boleyns have lived a very different life from everyone else, in this country; from everyone else under these heavy English skies, in their musty old robes and gowns, slowly digesting their stews. I lived in France from when I was twelve until I was twenty. I grew up to be a Frenchwoman, I came back to England as a Frenchwoman. There are women in France who are strong, Elizabeth, because they're educated. Unlike here, where the only way to be a strong woman is to be a harridan. Imagine how it was, for me, to come back. For years, I'd been thinking in French. In France, anything seems possible, and life is to be lived. Even now, stuck in the Tower, a day away from death, I'm alive, Elizabeth, in a way that most people here haven't ever been and won't ever be. I pity their bleak, grovelling little lives.

Forget Norfolk, Elizabeth; forget the Howards, and old England and Catholicism and creaky Blickling Hall. Think Hever: the castle which we, the Boleyn family, made our home. Mellow-coloured, grand and assured. Perhaps you'll go there, one day. I grew up there.

I was a commoner, but I became queen. No one thought it possible, but I did it. I supplanted the woman who'd been

England's queen for nineteen years, a woman who'd been born 'the daughter of the Catholic Kings'. Her royal blood, her regal bearing, her famed grace and benevolence were nothing against me, in the end. She was a fat old pious woman when I'd finished with her. And England was changed for ever. It had to be done. I got old England by the throat, and shook it until it died.

❁

Forget the ex-wife, for now, and let's start instead with men. Because the story of my life – and now, it seems, my death – is largely a story of me and men. I like them. They're easy to impress. I like male openness, eagerness. When I came to the English court, twenty and fresh from France, I fell in love with Harry, Lord Percy. Nothing particularly unusual in that. Women did it all the time. What made the difference was that Harry was in love with me. Twenty-two-year-old Harry Percy: that lazy smile; the big, kissable mouth. He dressed beautifully, but with none of the awful, old-fashioned flamboyance of his fellow-Englishmen. He was stylish. He could afford to be: he was one of the wealthiest heirs in the country. Which was another point in his favour.

Too easy-going for the saddle, and clearly bored by the prospect of tennis, he managed to be surprisingly popular with the men. He was a drinker, though, even then, which might explain it. He was somehow in the thick of things yet an outsider, an observer; and that appealed to me, newly arrived at court. Women loved him because he loved women: loved women's company, women's bodies. That was obvious, or at least to women. Men, clueless, probably didn't see him for the competition that he was. We women instinctively understood that Harry was a pleasure-seeker and that if we

granted him his pleasures, he'd savour them. Nevertheless, as far as I could discover, he had no reputation for sleeping around. On the contrary, it seemed that he was choosy, and unwilling to play the game of big romances. There was a take-it-or-leave-it air to him, a clarity of purpose and refusal to compromise that intrigued me and which I admired.

We circled each other for a couple of weeks, if 'circled' isn't too active a word for Harry. I knew he'd noticed me. How could he not? – I was the new girl at court, wearing the latest French fashions. One late afternoon, when I was sauntering down a passageway, he stepped from behind a door to stop me in my tracks.

'Walk with me,' he said.

I said nothing – biding my time – and simply did as he requested, moving ahead of him through the doorway into a courtyard. The air was warmer than I'd anticipated. All day long, I'd been stuck indoors, doing my lady-in-waiting duties: playing cards, playing music. Outside, my eyes seemed to open properly, wide, and I felt my shoulders drop. I wondered, briefly, why I didn't do this more often: get away, walk away.

We went towards the rose garden. 'Back home,' he said, breaking the silence, 'in our gardens, we can smell the sea. I miss it. I feel so hemmed in, here.'

'Oh, so, we're walking and talking, are we?'

That shut him up. Good. *Walk with me*, indeed.

I had a question for him: 'What did you think of the play, last night?'

He looked about to offer up a platitude, but caught himself in time. His shrug was pitched somewhere between non-committal and despondent.

I said, 'Yes, but you laughed all through it.'

He was defensive. 'We're at court.' Court: eat, drink, and be merry. Then came that smile of his: 'And, anyway, so were you; you were laughing.'

My turn to shrug. 'We're at court.'

'You were probably laughing the most of anyone. You're very good at it, aren't you.'

'At laughing?'

'At being at court.'

I said, 'I don't do anything by halves.'

In the garden, we sat on a bench, and I said, 'Do you want to know what I really think, Harry Percy, about that play? And all the plays, here? And the music, the poetry, the food, clothes, manners?' I sat back, crossed my ankles. 'The gardens, even?'

Elbows on thighs, he stared at the ground. 'You miss France.'

I snatched a petal, rolled it between my fingertips. 'Don't get me started. I mean it. Tell me about where *you* miss. Tell me about that home of yours.'

So, we started with the places we'd come from, and ended, hours later, with the books that were changing our lives. I remember asking him how he'd got hold of one of them, still banned in England, and him replying that he had his sources. I said that was a secret I'd like him to let me in on, when he felt able.

He took the fragment of petal from me and said, 'Oh, I don't envisage keeping any secrets from you.'

Dusk had closed over us. The palace was emerging as a constellation of lit porches, lit windows. Passers-by, spellbound by the half-light, talked less guardedly than usual. Harry and I were adrift from the rest of the world, yet right at the heart of it. On dark water, but in the shallows.

'Anne?' He sounded almost weary. The kiss was the

barest brush of his lips, very slowly, over mine. And mine over his.

From that moment onwards, all that mattered to us was being together. Whenever I saw him across a room being sweet and attentive to some woman, I'd smile to think how, a little later, he'd have his mouth jammed against mine and I'd have him helpless. I lived in a permanent state of offering silent thanks to God for Harry's existence. I couldn't believe my luck; I couldn't believe how close I'd come, unknowingly, to a living death of never having known him.

But I'd reckoned without the man who, in England, at that time, played God: Cardinal Wolsey. Wolsey had other plans for Harry, for various political reasons. He had plans for Harry's family which didn't include a Boleyn. He contacted Harry's father, who came and gave him hell before dragging him home and marrying him to a woman he didn't know and grew to hate. And he's still there: up there in Northumberland, rattling around his ancestral home, childless and drunk.

The worst that happened to me was that I was sent home to Hever for the summer; but, of course, at the time, it felt like a fate worse than death. I spent that summer railing against Wolsey. It wasn't long before I was joined in that by the rest of my family, because that was the summer when my father was made a peer – Lord Rochford – and it looked as if all his hard work was paying off until Wolsey forced his resignation as Lord Treasurer. Some rubbish about a conflict of interests. We Boleyns lost a salary, and Wolsey gained considerably in our animosity.

My father hadn't been alone, kneeling to be honoured in that crowded and unbearably hot Presence Chamber. In front of him was six-year-old Fitz, the king's bastard son.

Dimple-faced, apricot-haired Fitz, brought from his nursery in Durham House on the Strand. He was made Duke of Richmond, then he sat for the rest of the ceremony on the royal dais at his father's right hand. Officially welcomed to court. A month later, he was sent away again, but only because of the sweating sickness that drove into London's population. Suddenly he was the owner of a castle up north, and recipient of an income from eighty manor houses. Travelling up there with him was a staff of three hundred, including a retinue of the very best tutors. My point is that he left court not as he'd arrived – as Betsy Blount's lovely little boy, the king's adored bastard boy – but as a kind of prince.

Of course, something similar had to be seen to be done for the princess. Ludlow, for her, in August. I didn't see Fitz's departure but I was there in the courtyard for Mary's; I remember the vivid livery of those two hundred servants: blue and green. I was one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting. The queen was snivelling; she snivelled not only when the princess was taken away through the gates but for days afterwards. She was already becoming hard to please. Certainly the pomp of her daughter's departure for Ludlow wasn't enough to mollify her. She'd sat through little Fitz becoming a knight of the garter in April, but his peerage in June and the northern palace in July was, in her view, going too far. Wolsey dismissed three of her women for moaning about Fitz's fortunes, and, worse, when she appealed, he refused to reinstate them. He had his uses, he had his moments. This was quite a shot across Catherine's bows. And at a bad time, for her, too: the previously talked-of Spanish betrothal for her under-sized brat having been scuppered. My point is that quite suddenly, that summer, no one of any standing was taking Catherine seriously, nor did they look set to.

The story that everyone tells is that Henry divorced his long-suffering, sweet-natured, middle-aged queen for me, a younger woman, a dark-eyed, gold-digging, devil-may-care temptress. The truth is more complicated. Take my age. I was twenty-six when Henry fell for me. No girl, then. At that age, I really should have been married (and would have been – I'd have been Countess of Northumberland – but for Wolsey). I should have had children. At twenty-six, I was worldly, educated, ambitious. No wide-eyed plaything. Yes, I was younger than Catherine – but who wasn't? She was forty, and seemed half as old again. It was all over, for her: the supposed bearer of heirs, she hadn't been pregnant for a decade. She was a dead weight on Henry.

And what a weight! What she lacked in stature, she made up for in girth. With all the health problems that you'd expect. And no wonder: all those failed pregnancies. And no wonder they failed, with everything that she put herself through: the ritual fasting, the rising during the small hours to pray, the arduous pilgrimages, trekking in all weathers, for weeks on end, to Walsingham. All this took a toll on her spirits, too. She retreated among her pious Spanish ladies and their Spanish priests. Ceased to live in the real world. But, then, in many ways, she never had. I'll not deny what people say, that she always had a kind word for everyone. The problem was in understanding it. Despite all her years in England, she was hopelessly foreign.

Why had Henry ever married her? Let's not forget it was his choice. His father had died. Only just died, in fact, and there's the answer: the marriage was Henry's choice, his first; the first big decision of a new, seventeen-year-old king. Marrying Catherine, he all at once made his mark and a prudent political move, an alliance with Spain. And,

anyway, Henry was a chivalrous man; big-hearted, and determined to do the right thing. He wanted to end Catherine's misery: this kind, stoical, scholarly young woman, as he saw her, who was stuck in England, widowed, orphaned, and impoverished.

Anyway, there they were, years later: an odd couple. They even *looked* mismatched: she was the shortest woman at court; he, probably the tallest man in England. She waddled, whereas he was one of the best tennis players in Europe. She played cards with her ladies and then retired early to her bed. He partied until the early hours. She'd become an old lady while he was still a young man. She was looking forward to grandchildren, he was still hoping for heirs. There was, too, a fundamental difference in their attitudes to their faith. Henry's relationship with God was robust, direct. He didn't so much kneel before priests, in Catherine's manner, as clap them on the back and challenge them to debate.

By the time that I was one of her ladies-in-waiting, her life revolved around that scrappy, priest-worshipping daughter of hers. A repulsively colourless child. It was ridiculous, the idea that the dwarf daughter of an old Spaniard from a defunct lineage could ever follow in Henry's footsteps and rule England.

When Henry made his first move on me, my attention was elsewhere, albeit reluctantly. I hadn't bothered with love since Harry Percy. I didn't seem to have the heart for it. I didn't quite have the heart for Thomas Wyatt. Don't get me wrong, I was very fond of him: we'd been friends since childhood, and he was probably one of the best friends I had. But as a lover? I wasn't convinced. His feelings on this matter were unequivocal, though, and he was making them known. Easy, if you're a poet; and he was – is – one of England's finest. Everyone was reading the poems. No

one could understand my reticence. The consensus among my friends was that Tommy was the ultimate catch: dashing, and clever; sensitive, and baby-blond.

Henry made his first move with a gift: a sugar rosebud. Placed on my pillow. Someone had come into my room while I was out, and placed on my pillow a bud cast in molten sugar. Glassy; rosewater-tinted. I didn't know it was from Henry until I read the tag, *HR*.

The presents that started coming were sometimes sugar, sometimes gold, and sometimes the sugary-gold of marchepane. Brooches, emblems, statuettes; stars, unicorns, Venus herself. Of course I thanked him for every one of them. But I hated it. With every ounce of sugar and gold, he must have felt that he was putting down another payment. And I wasn't for buying. Eventually I decided that something would have to be said, and asked him for a moment in private. I hated it, that I had to go and ask and he got what he wanted: word from me.

I told him, 'I don't mean to seem ungrateful – and I'm not – but you should stop giving me presents.'

He said, 'Should I?' Amused. Lofty and amused.

Which annoyed me, although of course I was careful not to show it. Careful to act the gracious girl. Everything was always easy for him, nothing could ever compromise him: king, doing just as he pleased. 'Yes,' I said.

'Oh? Why?'

The honest answer? 'Because it makes things difficult for me.'

'Oh.'

Yes. You, sailing through life, the rest of us eddying in your wake.

He switched tactics, to wheedling. 'I *like* giving you presents.'

I commanded myself, Stay gracious. 'And I like receiving them,' and I did; of course I did, 'But –'

An imperious wave of that jewelled hand, *No buts*. 'They suit you. Gold suits you. Presents suit you.' A grin. 'You're a presents sort of person.'

True. *Damn*. The hook, the reeling in.

He said, 'They're only presents.' Then, quieter, 'I *have* to give you presents.' Then, '*Please*.'

It stopped nothing, my confrontation. On the contrary . . . The first letter came: *I should explain* . . .

And what was it, that he explained? Oh, that he'd never known anyone like me. That kind of thing.

So then I had to go to him about the letter. 'Your letter –'

'Yes?'

Well? 'Thank you for it.'

'Oh. And?'

And? 'That's all: thank you for your letter.'

He laughed as if I'd made a joke. 'You'll write back to me?' He was still amused, but there was another look, too: his eyes clear and steady.

'Oh. Yes.' *Damn*. 'Yes, if you like.'

'If *you* like.'

I nodded while it sank in. 'I do.' But I had to, didn't I.

A week or so later, when I couldn't put if off any longer, when he'd mentioned it several times, I wrote that letter. *I can't*, I wrote. *I'm touched and honoured but I can't. It's not you, it's me. I can't be anyone's mistress, not even yours.*

He'd had mistresses; of course he had, married to Catherine. No surprise, there. The surprise was his discretion: Henry, the consummate showman, becoming low-key, cloak and dagger, keeping it all under wraps. There were times when everyone had suspected there was someone, but no one seemed to

know who. A considerable achievement, such secrecy, at court. Other times, though, all was revealed and revelled in. Six or seven years before Henry wrote that first love letter to me, his mistress of the time had given birth to a baby boy. Mother of the king's only son, Betsy Blount was fêted. Little Fitz was given a grand christening, with Cardinal Wolsey, no less, named as Godfather. Catherine attended, fixed with that serene smile. Gracious, people said. Stupid, would be another way of putting it.

All my poor sister achieved was to have Henry name a battleship in her honour. Fitting, I imagine people said: *Mary Boleyn*, they probably said, has a lot of sailors in every port; *Mary Boleyn* rides the swell.

Any mistress of his known to us – my sister no exception – was of a certain type. Giggly. Fun. Fun is what a mistress is; it's what she's for. Henry loved fun, in those days; nothing was more important, to him, so nothing was more important to us at court. Court seemed to exist solely for that purpose: Henry's fun, day and night, summer and winter. Jousts, banquets, charades. Singing, hunting, gambling. And a mistress played her role. Knew her place, too. Fun while it – she – lasted. No misunderstandings. After Betsy had produced Fitz, in a residence provided for the purpose by the king, she never returned to court. Instead, she was married off to a man who was then favoured for various lucrative appointments. They've since had several children. My sister, too, in time, had had marital arrangements made on her behalf. Again, no problem: it was a happy marriage. No hard feelings, and no complications. For Henry, mistresses were mistresses, not potential wives. He *had* a wife.

I could never have been a mistress; it simply wasn't my style. Don't think that I couldn't be fun with the rest of them; more fun than the rest of them. (Remember: nothing

by halves.) But I could never have been discarded, like that; passed over, married off. All good things come to an end, Henry had said to my sister. But of course she'd had no say in when.

Henry said to me, 'I don't *want* you to be my mistress.' We were sitting side by side in his private garden at Greenwich; a private moment at his request. '"Mistress",' he quoted, full of impatience, derision. 'You're not – you couldn't be.' He shook his head as if to clear it. 'I don't want a mistress; I want *you*.' A shrug, helpless. 'I want to *be with* you.'

That's all very nice, I said; noble sentiments, I said; but – face it – what I'd be is a mistress. His long, blank look was unreadable; I anticipated a berating for being hard-hearted.

But he muttered, 'I wish –' Then closed his eyes, gave up, said nothing.

Never mind: it would pass in any case, I assumed; this crush on me. I was intriguing, he was intrigued: that was all it was. When nothing happened, he'd lose interest. But I was wrong: six months later, his infatuation was worse. There was no escaping him, not even when I retreated to Hever: letters came (*Listen to me: there has never been and never will be anyone but you; I knew nothing until I met you*); presents came (clusters of jewels, sugar-shapes, and haunches of venison); and on one occasion *he* came (dining with my family and staying overnight).

I wouldn't have known those letters were from Henry but for the handwriting, the signature. They had nothing in them of the king that I or anyone else knew; our valiant, bombastic king. In these letters was someone at sea, in the dark.

Anne, yesterday you said . . .

Anne, please, may I just . . . ?

His problem was that he'd never been in love. This was unknown territory, for him. He'd lusted after women, yes.

And there'd been women whose company he'd loved: he was a man who loved company, and there had been women. His marriage was testament to his chivalry, if nothing else. But in love? At someone's mercy? No, never. Not until me.

Not that this was enough, for me. Not enough to make me love him. Enough to stop me in my tracks, certainly, but to turn my head? No. All those letters, the walks in the gardens, the trysts that he requested: lovely though they were, they didn't do the trick. During those first weeks, he confided in me: his family, his horses, music, books, buildings, faith, France and Spain. I did warm to him, I'll admit, finding him mostly untouched despite the weight of the world on his shoulders. I listened, but deflected his questions. Keeping my distance, giving no ground.

It wasn't that I didn't like him. I did; by this time I liked him a lot. Funnily enough, what I liked in him was something that I loathe in everyone else: conservatism. It was understandable, in his case: part of the job. He wasn't a natural at it, though, which made him perfect prey for me to rib. And I do love to rib. And with no one but him was there ever enough danger, for me; no getting beneath the skin. He loved to *be* ribbed, perhaps because no one had ever dared do it. He was ripe for it, and I was match enough for him.

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Winter came and there wasn't a single day, I don't think, when it didn't rain. Wolsey began 1526 cheerfully, though, with a springclean. His vision was a tidied royal household. One result was that my brother George lost his place in the Privy Chamber. Nothing personal, we were assured. He was just one of the six closest companions to the king to lose his job. Another, incidentally, was our cousin Francis.

Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber down from twelve to six; just one of the cuts.

George was livid to have been so close to the centre and now be just another courtier. And – worse – guess who was in? Our brother-in-law, Mary's new husband: inoffensive William. William Carey: the name speaks for itself. And nice Harry Norris: Groom of the Stool, now, and Keeper of the Privy Purse (and who could be closer to a constipated, spendthrift king?). And cute Franky Weston, with his then not-quite-broken voice: he was taken on as a page. No one could ever have said that my brother or cousin were caring or nice or cute; theirs were different strengths. Not that it made much difference, in the end. Because they're all dead now, except Francis. Francis probably couldn't die unless a stake were driven through his heart. If he had a heart.

Not a stake through the heart, but a splinter in an eye: dashing Francis lost more than his place in the Privy Chamber, that year. It happened at the usual Shrovetide joust. Henry had ridden into the tiltyard on Govenatore, who was new to him then and perhaps even keener than him to make an impression. The horse played to the audience; and Henry, though loving the challenge and the spectacle, had his hands full. Hannibal Zinzano, the horsekeeper, was, I noticed, watchful at the side. It wasn't for Govenatore, though, that the crowd gasped; it was for what was embroidered in scarlet across the king's gold-and-silver chest: *No Comment*. Recognition rippled through the crowd as Henry cantered around and people saw it or had it translated for them. Everyone knew what it meant: there was someone; someone new. They thrilled to it; it was a game to them, a laugh. His own smile, if there was one, was behind his visor. I don't think he looked at me. He didn't need to. Me, I had no such luxury. Like everyone else, I was there to spectate.

I couldn't quite believe he'd done it. Indeed, I wasn't quite sure what it was that he'd done. Didn't know quite what to make of it. This declaring that he wouldn't declare. This being so public about his privacy. Was I in on the joke, or was the joke on me? And then, as I watched him skittering around the yard, it was as if the joke unfurled. This is what I saw: that when he'd had the idea, he would have had to go to Mr Jaspar, his tailor, and discuss design and colour; and later, he'd have had to take delivery of it, and express his appreciation. And on the morning of the joust, he'd have had to arrive at the stables in it to do his best with Govenatore. What I saw wasn't the seriousness of Henry's pursuit of me. Quite the opposite. What I saw was that it was a practicality, sometimes; and others, almost an irrelevancy. It was a fact of his life.

I saw it, and I turned away; I turned to my little cousin Maria. She and Hal, Uncle Norfolk's children, were at court for distraction from the worst of their parents' separation, and they'd come along with me to the joust. Maria was snuggled up to me and I turned to check she was wrapped tight against the cold. Behind me came a distinctive crowd-gasp: low, blunt. I snapped back to see Harry Norris sprinting across the tiltyard. He was aiming for Henry and Francis, who were dismounted and fighting, or so it looked: Henry, trying to hold Francis's visored head; and Francis, frantic, reeling, crouching, pushing him away. The horses stood by, helpless; Governatore, subdued. Henry's shouting was becoming words, a name: *Vicary; get Vicary*. His surgeon.

Vicary's good but he can't perform miracles. In the days after the accident, Francis's eye dried up and he never again removed the patch. It doesn't seem to have hampered him. On the contrary. Somehow he looks more dashing with it. No one knew how it had happened, that splinter into Francis's eye; not even Henry or Francis. Francis and I were

good friends, back then; Francis and George and I. He was one of us. But that hasn't been true for a while now, to say the least, and I have found myself wishing that I'd seen it and could relish the memory of it: that sly, stunning blow.

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No comment? But those in the know, already knew. Privacy at court is scarce; and, of course, the bigger you are, the less you have. There was all the *Dance with me, Anne*; and only so many ruby earrings that I could explain away and sugar stallions that I could get the boys to eat. I was beginning to understand that my resistance was, to a great extent, irrelevant. Word was that the king was obsessed with Anne Boleyn; and no one cared about the details, such as which favours he was or wasn't being granted. Why not play along with it, then? Go with it, get what I could from it? In a way, I didn't have a choice. Or, that wasn't the choice; the choice was not to end up as mother to some half-royal son and wife to some compliant, paid-off nonentity. That, I definitely wouldn't have. But why not have some fun, for a while? I should have been Countess Northumberland, with my own vast household, but instead I was still in the queen's rooms – all that praying and sewing – with no other suitor daring to raise his head. Why shouldn't I have a little fun, perhaps, and some jewellery?

So, I went to Henry, one evening, after a year or more of his attentions; I went changed, resolved, chancing it. He didn't register my change and was as unassumedly welcoming as usual: this king who, for my sake, was learning to live with so little of what he most wanted. I loved it, that evening: his guilelessness, openness. It dizzied me, made me tender. He was a sweet-natured man, in those days. His real nature is that of a soft-hearted man. At the end of that evening, when everyone had gone, I was still there. Me, the six weary

musicians, and a whey-faced Franky Weston who was on duty to prepare Henry's bed. Outstaying my brother and the others – cousin Francis, Harry, Billy – had taken some doing, even for me. Did I say evening? The small hours, more like. The banquet table was littered with sugar lemons, oranges, figs and walnuts that had been cracked open and chiselled away at, bitten into: shells, now, on a sugary sand. I told Henry that I'd like a word. 'In private,' I said, quietly.

He leaned towards me, expectant.

'Strictly private,' I whispered.

He indicated to the others: *Skedaddle, would you?*

Six lots of strings winding to a sudden silence, seven pairs of feet released across the carpet. He turned to me, pleasant; nothing too much trouble. I felt both solemn – this was some undertaking, *this was it* – and ridiculously giggly. I kissed him, and he took up the kiss and carried it on.

Later that night, that dawn, he asked me if I'd stay, and I said no. He didn't mind; he was happy, it was a novelty, and there was everything to look forward to. Not long now, he was probably thinking. '*You*,' he chided: indulgent, familiar.

Those early days were bliss, for me. It had been a long time since someone had placed his lips on my pulse. Too long since someone's forefinger had run down my naked ring finger. Every evening, that summer, we stayed alone on the riverbank when the shadows were too blue for comfort.

But that was all we did. Every night, he asked me if I'd stay; every night, I said no. I wouldn't be his mistress. Our relationship, as far as I was concerned, was a dalliance. I even liked the word, *dalliance*. And of course I liked the jewellery. But then, one day, sometime late in 1526, something happened. All that happened was that he walked into a room, smiling, and sat down. That was all, but that was it. He didn't see me, when he came through that door.

He came in with Billy Brereton, relating some tale that had Billy weak with laughter. I don't think he saw any of us in particular, merely raised a hand to the room, *Don't get up*. He strode past us all and slung himself into his throne; a long-limbed, loose-limbed man. He was grinning, pleased with himself: this king, this most kingly of kings, grinning like a boy. His hand flicked through his hair before he settled back and closed those gem-like eyes. *Look at you*, I thought, and knew, in that instant, that I'd been naive: we would have to spend our lives together. It was time, I saw, for him to move on. His marriage was over. Not that it was ever a marriage. Only ever a formality.

So, later that same evening, I asked him: 'If you love me so very much –'

'– Oh, I do, I do,' punctuated with kisses to my shoulder.

'– why don't you marry me?'

He laughed, 'Well– ' Stopped. Stopped laughing.

Yes. Precisely. You're already married.

Shaken, he tried to make light of it: 'Anyway, *you* wouldn't marry *me*.'

'Wouldn't I?'

That smile was frozen; behind it, I could see, he was thinking fast. 'A clever young girl like you.'

'I thought there was no one like me.'

'There isn't.'

'Well, then.'

He sat back, the better to see my face. 'But you wouldn't, would you?'

And now I allowed him a smile. 'You asking?'

The next time he asked me to sleep with him, he tried to bolster his case by reminding me that we were going to be married.

'*When* we're married,' I said, 'I'll stay.'

I could see that he barely believed it – that I was still refusing him – and was about to laugh me down, to protest long and loud. But of course there was no denying it: when we were married, we'd sleep together.

I pressed on: 'Henry, Henry, *listen*: what you don't need is another bastard.'

He might not have liked hearing it, but it was the truth. He said nothing for a moment, and then he conceded, 'Well, it'd better be soon, anyway.'

'Yes,' I said, 'that's right, it'd better be.'

Why hadn't it happened sooner? If it was the perfect match that I claim it was, a meeting of minds, why didn't it begin as soon as we met? I've been thinking about that. I've been thinking about those six years we lived alongside each other at court before he asked his confectioner to make me that sugar rose. It wasn't as if we hadn't been well-acquainted. The Boleyns couldn't have been closer to Henry: my father was Treasurer; my brother was a Gentleman of the Privy Chamber, one of the elite attending to the king; my sister doing the same, but differently, for her year or so as royal mistress. I suspect it was for precisely that reason: Henry was always there, and he was everything; defining our lives, our lives revolving around him. Because of that, he was almost irrelevant to me. I was busy, in my early twenties, with my girl-life. Smitten with a pretty-boy. Henry was a man, in his thirties and into his second decade of marriage. Moreover, of course, he was the king. For me, he wasn't a potential lover; it never crossed my mind. And if it had, Henry wouldn't have appealed to me. Oh, he *impressed* me, yes, of course. And intrigued me. But the sheer spectacle of him . . . Well, that was what it was: spectacle. He wasn't for falling in love with.

Henry didn't divorce Catherine because of me. *For* me,

yes; in the end, yes. But not *because* of me. He was thinking of doing so anyway, in time, probably to marry some French princess. Wolsey was keen on that idea. He was late to catch on to what was happening, was know-all Wolsey. Even though he did know about me. Or thought he did. But what he knew – or thought he did – was that I was the king's new bit on the side. I'd been suitable to invite again and again to lavish dinners at his gorgeous Hampton Court (a thousand rooms, a thousand crimson-clad servants) on the arm of the king . . . but I was nothing more. As wife-to-be, I rather crept up on Wolsey. But that's because he'd been kept in the dark. Replaced as the king's confidant. By me, funnily enough, as it happens. Right-hand man replaced by bit on the side: no wonder he was caught off-guard.

Leviticus 20, verse 21: *And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless*. Henry's wife was his – had been his – brother's wife, briefly, before his brother's death. The marriage had been deemed a non-event because, according to Catherine, Arthur hadn't been up to doing his husbandly duty. The problem was, Henry and Catherine still had no children. Well, no sons. There was of course the daughter, pathetic example though she was. A mis-translation, said Henry, turning sudden specialist in Hebrew: it should read 'sonless'. Henry and Catherine's lack of a surviving son, he decided, was God's judgement on a sinful marriage. That's what he said, and he believed it; he talked himself into believing it and from then onwards his fervour was unshakeable.

I didn't suggest Leviticus to him. Why would I? In my view, he had grounds enough to rid himself of that Spaniard: she'd proved no use at all, and now – aunt of a rampaging emperor – she was a liability. And Leviticus was no discovery

for him: he'd quoted it, years before we met, in his book on Luther. As for the dubious validity of his marriage: he knew that it had been an issue at the time; and he knew, too, that for some the misgivings had persisted. A French bishop, for example, had queried the brat's legitimacy during a round of marriage-brokering. None of it was news, and none of it – yet – was due to me.

Like anyone else at court, I'd heard speculation from time to time about a royal divorce: *Why doesn't he just get rid of her*? Marriage breakdown and separation happens all the time. Sometimes an annulment, or a divorce. And in this particular case? Our lovely young king married to a babbling old nun? Worse: a babbling old *Spanish* nun, when England's focus was firmly on France. Her being a Spaniard could be overlooked, though; she'd been here a long time. What really mattered was that distinct lack of live baby boys.

If Wolsey had had his way, he'd have got Henry his divorce and then shipped in some French flesh to produce princes, and to have French friends and deck up for functions. Well, I could do that. And more. And I wouldn't have to be royal; Elizabeth Woodville hadn't been, and it hadn't stopped her marrying Edward IV. And anyway I wasn't completely *un*-royal; I had that smidgeon of Plantagenet blood. (Didn't we all, though. All except Wolsey, that is.) Surely I could produce sons – my useless sister had just managed one – and I was practically French, I'd done a long stint at the French court and was liked by anyone, there, who was anyone. There was another way in which I was queen material, too: no one in England rivalled my dress sense. I dressed the part. So, I'd do. Better still, I'd be no homesick half-wit. But best of all, this was my country and I had plans for it, along with the guts to see them through. And one of those plans was going to make me very popular

with just about anyone who wasn't Wolsey: I wanted rid of Wolsey.

I'd say Wolsey was too big for his boots, but let's not beat about the bush: what Wolsey was too big for was England. Never before had there been a man in England so rich and powerful who wasn't a king. Moreover, this was a man who wasn't anything at all, not originally: a nobody turned cleric, a butcher's boy become cardinal. The nobles had a thing or two to say about that, behind his back.

I suppose that's why Henry trusted him with the kingdom: no friends to favour; no claim to the throne. Henry's talent – the best talent of all – is for recognizing other's talents. I wonder, now, if I should include myself in that. Did he see that I'd flinch at nothing to rid him of that used-up wife? He recognizes talent and he trusts: he trusts absolutely; right up until when, suddenly, he doesn't. It's Thomas Cromwell whom he trusts now: Cromwell, the next and even better Wolsey. Wolsey's talent had been running the country for Henry. And serious statesman though Henry is . . . well, when he was young, his passion was for the good life. He'd do a certain amount of work, but then he'd want to go hunting or dancing. Wolsey would stay behind and pick up the pieces. And build palaces from them.

If anyone was a match for Wolsey, glorified butcher's boy, then it was me, king-favoured granddaughter of a merchant. I knew where he was coming from. He, however, didn't even know I was coming. Me being a woman, he didn't see me coming. And I was ample match for him: no chinless wonder; no Stafford, who, four or five years earlier, had assumed he could click his fingers and have the nobility collect quietly behind him while he asked the Tudors a few awkward questions about their lineage. When Stafford clicked his fingers, Henry overheard. Henry did some clicking of his

own – for quill, ink, warrant – and Stafford went to the block. This, from a king not given in those days to bloodshed; a king who loved to be loved. Stafford's execution had left them all – even my Uncle Norfolk – sulking, subdued. But me, no. Stafford was history for me, I'd never known the man and wouldn't have liked him if I had. He was no loss for me: one more English aristocrat peering down his pox-eroded nose at the likes of us Boleyns. What had happened to Stafford was no warning to me. I wasn't about to lose my nerve.