Opening Extract from...

THE FAMILIARS

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PART ONE

THE COUNTY OF LANCASTER (NOW LANCASHIRE), EARLY APRIL, 1612

Be ever well in blood, for otherwise she will not long be at your commandment but make you follow her.

The Book of Falconry or Hawking,
George Turberville, 1543–1597

Prudence and justice

Shuttleworth family motto

CHAPTER 1

I left the house with the letter because I did not know what else to do. The lawn was wet with late morning dew that soaked my favourite rose silk slippers, for in my haste I hadn't thought to put on pattens. But I did not stop until I reached the trees overlooking the lawns in front of the house. The letter I had clutched in my fist, and I opened it once more to check I hadn't imagined it, that I hadn't drifted off in my chair and dreamt it up.

It was a chill morning, misty and cool with the wind racing down from Pendle Hill, and though my mind was in turmoil, I'd remembered to take my cloak from its place at the end of the wardrobe. I'd given Puck a perfunctory stroke and was pleased to see my hands weren't shaking. I did not cry, or faint, or do anything at all except fold

what I had read back into its old shape and go quietly down the stairs. Nobody noticed me, and the only servant I saw was a brief glimpse of James sitting at his desk as I passed by his study. The idea that he might have read the letter himself crossed my mind, as a steward often opens his master's private correspondence, but I dismissed the thought quickly and left through the front door.

The clouds were the colour of pewter jugs that threatened to spill over, so I hurried across the grass towards the woods. I knew that in my black cloak I'd be conspicuous among the fields from servants' prying eyes at the windows, and I needed to think. In this part of Lancashire, the land is green and damp, and the sky wide and grey. Occasionally you see the flash of a deer's red coat, or a pheasant's blue neck, and your eye is drawn swifter than they can disappear.

Before I reached the shelter of the trees, I knew the sickness was coming again. I pulled the hem of my skirt away from where it splattered the grass, then used my kerchief to wipe my mouth. Richard had the laundrywomen sprinkle them with rose water. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths, and when I opened them I felt slightly better. The trees shivered and birds sang merrily as I went deeper, and in less than a minute I had lost Gawthorpe altogether. The house was as conspicuous as I was in these parts, made of warm golden stone and set in a clearing. But while the house couldn't keep you from the woods that seemed to draw ever closer and were

visible from every window, the woods could keep Gawthorpe from you. Sometimes it felt as though they were playing a game.

I took out the letter and opened it again, smoothing out the creases that had formed in my tight little fist, and found the paragraph that had left me reeling:

> *You can divine without difficulty the true nature of the danger that your wife has been in, and it is with solemn regret that I impart on you my professional opinion as a physick and expert in matters of childbed: that upon visiting her last Friday sennight, I drew the deeply unfortunate conclusion that she can not and should not bear children. It is with excessive importance that you understand if she finds herself once more in childbed, she will not survive it, and her earthly life will come to an end.*

Now I was out of sight of the house I could react with some privacy. My heart was beating furiously and my cheeks were hot. Another surge of sickness overcame me, and I almost choked on it as it burnt against my tongue.

The sickness came morning, noon and night, wringing me inside out. At the most, it was forty times a day; if it was twice I felt lucky. Veins burst in my face, leaving delicate crimson stems around my eyes, the whites of which turned a demonic red. The awful taste in my throat would last for hours, sharp and choking as the blade of a knife. I couldn't keep food down. I had no appetite for

it anyway, much to the cook's disappointment. Even my beloved marchpane lay in broad, unsliced tablets in the larder, and my boxes of sugar candy sent from London gathered dust.

The other three times I hadn't been this ill. This time it felt like the child growing inside me was trying to escape through my throat instead of between my legs like the others, who announced their untimely arrivals in red rivers down my thighs. Their limp little forms were grotesque, and I watched them being wrapped like fresh loaves in linen.

'Not long for this world, the poor mite,' the last midwife said, wiping my blood off her butcher's arms.

Four years married, three times in childbed, and still no heir to put in the oak cradle my mother gave me when Richard and I married. I saw the way she looked at me, as though I was letting them all down.

Still, I could not fathom that Richard knew what the doctor had said, and had watched me fatten like a turkey at Christmastide. The letter was bundled in among several papers from my three childbeds, so it was possible he could have missed it. Would he have done right by me in withholding it? Suddenly, the words seemed to fling themselves from the page and wrap around my neck. And written, too, by a man whose name I did not recognise, so wreathed in pain was I when he visited that I could not recall a single detail about him: his touch, his voice, or whether he was kind.

I'd not stopped to catch my breath, and my slippers were truly ruined now, soaked with greenish mud. When one of them got stuck and came off, sending my stockinged foot into the wet ground, that was more than I was prepared to take. With both hands I made the letter into a ball and threw it as hard as I could, taking a brief moment's satisfaction when it bounced off a tree several yards away.

If I had not done that, I might not have seen the rabbit's foot a few inches from where it landed, nor the rabbit it belonged to – or at least what was left of it: a mangled mess of fur and blood, then another, and another. I hunted rabbits; these had not been slain by a hawk or a falcon making a neat little kill before circling back to its master. Then I noticed something else: the hem of a brown skirt brushing the ground, and knees bent, and above them a body, a face, a white cap. A young woman was kneeling a few yards away, staring at me. Every line of her was alert with an animal tension. She was shabbily dressed in a homespun wool smock with no pinafore, which is why I did not see her straight away among all the green and brown. Flax-coloured hair spiralled down from her cap. Her face was long and narrow, her eyes large, their colour unusual even from a distance: a warm gold, like new coins. There was something fiercely intelligent, almost masculine, in her gaze, and though she was crouched down and I standing, for a moment I felt afraid, as though I was the one who had been discovered.

Another rabbit dangled from her hands, one eye resting unblinkingly on me. Its fur was stained with red. On the ground next to the woman's skirts a roughly hewn sack lay open. She got to her feet. A breeze rustled the leaves and grasses around us, but she remained perfectly still, her expression unreadable. Only the dead beast moved, swinging slightly.

'Who are you?' I asked. 'What are you doing here?'

She began bundling the little bodies into her sack. My crumpled letter lay pale and bright among the massacre, and she paused when she saw it, her long fingers hovering, stained red with blood.

'Give it to me,' I snapped.

Picking it up, she held it out from where she stood, and in a few quick strides I'd snatched it from her. Those golden eyes did not leave my face, and I thought a stranger had never looked at me so hard. Briefly I wondered how I must appear, with no outdoor shoes and my slipper lying in the mud. No doubt my face was flushed from vomiting, and the whites of my eyes would be red. The acid in my mouth made my tongue sharp.

'What's your name?'

She did not speak.

'Are you a beggar?'

She shook her head.

'This is my land. You have been poaching rabbits from my land?'

'*Your* land?'

Her voice broke the strangeness of the situation like a pebble tossed in a pool. She was just an ordinary village girl.

'I am Fleetwood Shuttleworth, the mistress at Gawthorpe Hall. This is my husband's land; if you are from Padiham you would know that.'

'I am not,' was all she said.

'You know the penalty for hunting on another man's land?'

She took in my thick black cloak, my gown of copper taffeta peeking through the bottom. I knew my skin was dull; my black hair made it sallow, and I did not wish to be reminded of this by a stranger. I suspected I was younger than her, but I could not guess her age. Her dirty dress appeared not to have been brushed or aired in months, and her cap was the colour of mutton's wool. Then my eyes fell on hers, and her gaze met mine, level and proud. I frowned and raised my chin. At four feet eleven inches, everyone I met was taller than me, though I did not intimidate easily.

'My husband would bind your hands to his horse and drag you to the magistrate,' I said, more boldly than I felt. When she did not speak, the only sound the trees hissing and shuddering, I asked again: 'Are you a beggar?'

'I am no one.' She held out the sack. 'Take them. I did not know I was on your land.'

It was a strange answer, and I wondered what I would tell Richard. Then I remembered the letter in my fist. I squeezed it hard.

'With what did you kill them?'

She sniffed. 'I did not kill them. They were killed.'

'What an odd way of speaking you have. What is your name?'

I had barely finished when, in a flash of gold and brown, she turned and ran away through the trees. Her white cap flitted between the trunks, the sack bouncing against her skirts. Her feet thudded into the earth, quick and deft as an animal, before the woods swallowed her whole.

CHAPTER 2

The sound of Richard's waist belt preceded him everywhere. I think it made him feel powerful – you heard his money before you saw it. Now, as I heard the familiar jangle and the tread of his kid leather boots on the stairs, I took a deep breath and brushed some imagined dust off my jacket. I stood as he entered the room, bright and invigorated from a business trip to Manchester. His gold earring caught the light; his grey eyes gleamed.

'Fleetwood,' he greeted me, putting my head between his hands.

I bit my lip where he kissed it. Could I trust my voice to speak? We were in the wardrobe, where he knew he would find me. Even though nobody had lived at

Gawthorpe before us, it was the only room that truly felt mine. I had thought it very modern that Richard's uncle, who designed the house, had thought to include a room just for dressing when he had no wife. Of course if women designed houses they would be as much a part of the plans as a kitchen. Having come from my own house of coal-coloured stone under grey skies, Gawthorpe, with its rich, warm colour, as though the sun was always rising on it, and three floors of gleaming windows, bright as the crown jewels, and the tower in the middle, had made me feel more like a princess than a mistress. Richard had led me through the maze of rooms, and all the fresh plaster and shining panels and little passageways teeming with decorators and servants and carpenters had made me feel dizzy. I tended to stay at the top of the house, out of the way of everyone. If I had a baby in my arms or a child to take down to breakfast I might feel differently, but while I didn't, I kept to my rooms and my wardrobe, with its pleasant view of the rushing River Calder and Pendle Hill.

'Conversing with your clothes again?' he said.

'They are my constant companions.'

Puck, my great French mastiff, roused himself from the Turkey carpet, stretching and yawning and revealing a jaw so wide it could fit my head inside.

'You fearsome beast,' said Richard, going to kneel by the dog. 'Not for long will you be the singular object of our affections. You will have to share them.' He sighed

and got to his knees, weary from a long ride. 'You are well? And rested?'

I nodded, tucking a loose strand of hair under my cap. Lately it had been falling out in great black clumps when I combed it.

'You are troubled. You have not . . . You are not . . .'

'I am fine.'

The letter. Ask him about the letter. The words hung thick in my throat, an arrow poised on a pulled bow, but there was nothing but relief in his lovely face. I held his stare for a moment too long, knowing my opportunity to question him was passing, slipping through my fingers like sand.

'Well, Manchester was a success. James always thinks he should go with me on these trips but I fare just as well alone. Perhaps he is only exasperated because I forget to write down receipts; I've told him I keep them as well in my head as in my jacket.' He paused, ignoring Puck sniffing at him. 'You are in a quiet mood.'

'Richard, I read the midwife's correspondence today. And the doctor's, who delivered the last.'

'That reminds me.'

He reached deep into the emerald velvet of his doublet, his face lit with a childlike excitement. I waited, and when he withdrew his hand he dropped into mine a strange object. It was a small silver sword, long as a letter opener, with a shining gold hilt. But the end was blunt and all over were little spheres dangling from miniature hooks. I

turned it over in my palm and it made a pleasant tinkling sound.

'It's a rattle.' He beamed, shaking it so it jangled like horses coming to a halt. 'They are bells, look. It's for our son.'

He did not even try to disguise the longing in his voice. I thought of the drawer that I kept locked in one of the bedrooms. Inside were half a dozen things he'd bought the other times – a silk purse with our initials, an ivory horse that could fit in a palm. In the long gallery was a suit of armour he bought to celebrate the first time my stomach grew. His faith that we would have a child was clear and strong as a stream, even when he was trading wool in Preston and passed a trader selling miniature animals, or when he was with our tailor and saw a bolt of silk the exact colour of an oyster's pearl. With the last one, only he knew if it was a son or daughter, and I did not ask, because I was still not a mother. Every gift he gave me was a token of my failure, and I wished I could burn them all and watch the smoke rise from the chimney and be swallowed by the sky. I thought about where I would be without my husband, and my heart was full of grief, because he had given me happiness, and all I'd given him were three absences, their souls extinguished in the gentlest breeze.

I tried one more time. 'Richard, is there anything you wish to tell me?'

Richard's earring glinted as he considered me. Puck

yawned and settled on the carpet. A deep voice called Richard's name from a distant floor below.

'Roger is downstairs,' he said. 'I should go to him.'

I put the rattle on the chair, eager to be rid of it, leaving Puck to sniff curiously at it.

'Then I will come down.'

'I came upstairs only to dress; we are going to hunt.'

'But you have been riding all morning.'

He smiled. 'Hunting is not *riding*, it is hunting.'

'Then I will go with you.'

'You feel fit for it?'

I smiled and turned back to my clothes.

'Fleetwood Shuttleworth! My eyes, look how pale you are!' Roger's voice boomed across the stable yard. 'You are whiter than a snowdrop but twice as beautiful. Richard, have you not been feeding your wife?'

'Roger Nowell, you do know how to make a woman feel special.' I smiled, drawing up on my horse.

'You are dressed to hunt. Have you accomplished all your ladylike pursuits of a morning?'

His voice carried to every beam and corner of the stable yard as he sat astride his horse, tall and broad, a grey eyebrow raised in question.

'I have come to spend time with my favourite magistrate.'

I pushed my horse between the two men's. Roger Nowell was easy company, and I admit now that I suppose I was a little in awe of him, having no father to compare him to. He had enough years to be mine or Richard's father – grandfather, even – and as ours were both long dead he became a friend to us when Richard inherited Gawthorpe. The day after we arrived he rode over on his horse carrying three pheasants and stayed all afternoon, explaining the lie of the land and everyone in it. We were new to this part of Lancashire, with its rolling hills and shadowy forests and strange people, and he was a wealth of knowledge. An acquaintance of Richard's long-dead uncle, who had been the chief justice of Chester and provided the closest link the family ever had to the Crown, Roger had known the Shuttleworths for years, and settled himself in our household like an inherited piece of furniture. But I liked him from the moment I met him. Like a candle, he burnt brightly, and his mood would flicker easily from one moment to the next, bringing warmth and knowledge wherever he went.

'News from the palace: the king may finally have found a suitor for his daughter,' Roger announced.

The hounds in their kennels were driven wild by the sound of us and were brought out, teeming and panting around the horses' legs.

'Who is it?'

'Friedrich the Fifth, Count Palatine of the Rhine. He

will come to England later in the year and hopefully put an end to the parade of jesters trying for the princess's hand.'

'Will you go to the wedding?' I asked.

'I hope to. It will be the grandest the kingdom has seen in many years.'

'I wonder what sort of gown she will wear,' I thought aloud.

Roger didn't hear me over the barking hounds, and he and Richard moved out of the yard to begin the hunt. With the hounds on leashes I realised the quarry would be hart, and I wished I had asked before. A hart at bay was not a friendly sight, with its antlers slashing and eyes rolling; I would have preferred almost anything else. I thought about turning around, but we were already in the forest so I kicked my horse onwards. Edmund the apprentice acted as whip, riding alongside the dogs. As we went through the trees I heard snatches of their furtive conversation and rode silently behind them, half-listening. An image from the day before came to me: spilt blood, glassy eyes and the strange golden-haired woman.

'Richard,' I interrupted. 'There was a trespasser on our land yesterday.'

'What? Where?'

'Somewhere south of the house, in the woods.'

'Why did James not tell me?'

'Because I did not tell him.'

'*You* saw him? What were you doing?'

'I . . . went out walking.'

'I told you not to go out alone; you might have got lost or tripped and . . . hurt yourself.'

Roger was listening.

'I am *fine*, Richard. And it was not a man but a woman.'

'What was she doing? Was she lost?'

That's when I realised I could not tell him about the rabbits, because I had no words for what I'd seen.

'Yes,' I said eventually.

Roger was amused. 'You do have a wild imagination, Fleetwood. You had us thinking you were attacked by a savage in the woods when really a woman had only got lost?'

'Yes,' I replied faintly.

'Although now even that isn't without harm – you may have heard of what happened to John Law the pedlar at Colne?'

'I have not.'

'Roger, you don't need to frighten her with tales of witchcraft – she already has nightmares.'

My mouth fell open and my face grew scarlet. That was the first time Richard had told anyone about The Nightmare, and I would never have believed it of him. But he continued ahead, the feather in his hat trembling.

'Tell me, Roger.'

'A woman travelling alone is not always as innocent as she seems, as John Law found out and will never forget

as long as he lives – and that might not be long, Lord have mercy.' Roger settled back in his saddle. 'Two days ago his son Abraham came to me at Read Hall.'

'Should I know him?'

'No, because he is a cloth dyer from Halifax. The lad has done well for himself, considering his father's trade.'

'And he found a witch?'

'No, *listen*.'

I sighed and wished I hadn't come, wished I was sitting in the parlour with my dog.

'John was travelling on the woolpack trail at Colnefield when he came across a young girl. A beggar, he thought. She asked him to give her some pins, and when he said he would not – he paused for effect – 'she cursed him. He turned his back and next thing, heard her speaking softly behind him, as though she was talking to someone. It sent a shiver up his spine. He thought at first it was the wind, but he looked back, and her dark eyes were fixed on him, and her lips were moving. He hurried away, and not thirty yards on, he heard running feet, and then a great thing like a black dog began attacking him, biting him all over, and he fell to the ground.'

'A thing *like* a black dog?' Richard asked. 'You said earlier it *was* a black dog.'

Roger ignored him. 'He held his hands to his face and begged for mercy, and when he opened his eyes the dog had disappeared. Gone. And the strange girl with it. Someone found him on the path and helped him to a

nearby inn, but he could barely move a limb. Nor could he speak. One of his eyes stayed shut to the world, and his face was all fallen down on one side. He stayed at the inn, but the next morning the young girl appeared again, bold as brass, and begged his forgiveness. She claims she wasn't in control of her craft, but that she did curse him.'

'She admitted to it?' I remembered the girl from yesterday. 'What did she look like?'

'Like a witch. Very thin and rough-looking, with black hair and a sullen face. My mother says never trust someone with black hair because they usually have a black soul to match.'

'*I* have black hair.'

'Do you want to hear my story?'

My mother used to threaten to sew my mouth as a child. She and Roger's mother would have plenty to discuss.

'I am sorry,' I said. 'Is the man well now?'

'No, and he may never be again,' Roger said gravely. 'That is worrying in itself, but there is something that troubles me more: the dog. While it is free to roam Pendle, no one is safe.'

Richard flashed me an amused, sceptical look before tearing ahead to keep up with the hunt. The thought of the animal did not frighten me – after all, I had a mastiff the size of a mule. But before I could point that out, Roger began again.

'At the inn, a few nights after it happened, John Law

woke to the sound of something breathing over him. The great beast was stood over his bed, the size of a wolf, with bared teeth and fiery eyes. He knew it to be a spirit; it was not of this earth. You can understand his terror: a man who is unable to move or speak, save for groaning out. Then who should be there by his bed in its place not a moment later, but the witch herself.'

I felt as though my skin had been brushed with a feather.

'So it turned into the woman?'

'No, Fleetwood have you knowledge of familiar spirits?' I shook my head. 'Then I will direct you to the book of Leviticus. In short, it's the Devil in disguise. An instrument, if you will, to enlarge his kingdom. This girl's is a dog, but they can appear as anything: an animal, a child. It appears to her when she needs it to do her bidding, and last week she told it to lame John Law. A familiar is the surest sign of a witch.'

'And you have seen it?'

'Of course not. A creature of the Devil is hardly likely to appear to a God-fearing man. Only those of questionable belief might sense its presence. Low morals are its breeding ground.'

'But John Law saw it; you said he was a good man.'

Roger waved me off, impatient. 'We have lost Richard; he will not be happy with me for tongue-wagging with his wife. This is what happens when women come on hunts.'

I did not point out that it was me indulging him – if Roger had a story, he wanted it heard. We set off at a canter, and slowed down again when the hunt came back into view. We were a long way from Gawthorpe, and now I was here I was not in favour of the thought of a full afternoon's riding.

'Where is the girl now?' I asked as we fell behind again.

Roger adjusted his grip on the reins. 'Her name is Alizon Device. She is in my custody at Read Hall.'

'In your *house*? Why did you not put her in the gaol at Lancaster?'

'She is not dangerous where she is. There is nothing she can do – she would not dare. Besides, she is helping me with some other enquiries.'

'What kind of enquiries?'

'My, my, you are full of questions, Mistress Shuttleworth. Must we *talk* the quarry to death? Alizon Device is from a family of witches; she told me so herself. Her mother, her grandmother, even her brother all practise magic and sorcery, no more than a few miles from here. They are also accusing their neighbours of murder by witchcraft, one of whom lives on Shuttleworth land. Which is why I thought your husband over there ought to know about it.'

He indicated his head at the expanse of greenery before us. Edmund, Richard and the hounds were again nowhere to be seen.

'But how do you know she is telling the truth? Why

would she betray her family? She must know what it means to be a witch – it's certain death.'

'Your guess is as good as mine,' Roger said simply, although I detected something beneath his words. He could be forceful and bullying when he wanted; I had seen it with his wife, Katherine, who was a tolerant sort of woman. 'And the murders she claimed her family are responsible for all happened.'

'They have *murdered*?'

'Several times. You would not want to cross a Device. Do not fear, child. Alizon Device is safe in custody, and I am to question her family tomorrow or the next day. I shall have to notify the king, of course.' He sighed, as though it was an impediment. 'He will be pleased to know it, I'm sure.'

'What if they escape – how will you find them?'

'They'll not escape. I have eyes all over Pendle – you know that. Not much gets past a high sheriff.'

'Former high sheriff,' I teased. 'How many years has she? The girl with the dog?'

'She does not know, but I would say she is seventeen or so.'

'The same as me.' After a moment of thoughtful silence, I spoke again. 'Roger, do you trust Richard?'

He raised a bushy eyebrow. 'With my life. Or what's left of it – I am an old man now, with my family grown and the best days of my work behind me, most regrettably. Why do you ask?'

I'd tucked the doctor's letter into my pocket, deep beneath my riding clothes, and it beat against my ribs like another heart.

'No reason.'

CHAPTER 3

Lent was not yet over and though my appetite was poor, I longed for a cut of stewed beef or a strip of soft, salted chicken. Roger stayed for dinner and rubbed his hands together as the servants brought out silver platters of pike and sturgeon. I knew I wouldn't touch any of it, even though I was hungry after the hunt, from which we had come back empty-handed as a chill mist descended. It pressed in now at the windows, and the dining chamber was cold. I broke my bread into pieces and sipped my wine, wondering when the time would come when I would be able to eat everything on my plate again. I hadn't told any of the servants of my condition, including Sarah, who helped me to dress, but a cook is always the first to know. The other servants would have seen me hold my

fingers out to Puck, offering him bits of things on my plate, but I had done that since he was young. My dog was growing fatter as I seemed to shrink. Richard once remarked that he ate better than most of Lancashire.

When I could take the sight of the fish heads no longer, I went to my chamber to lie down. At the top of the house it was quiet, away from the clatter of sauce dishes and knives, and the fire had been lit. Usually I would have drawn the drapes to help my headache but I felt too sick and tired, so I kicked off my slippers and lay down, staring out of the window with my hands on my stomach. There had been too much to think about this morning, but the doctor's letter came back to me, clouding my mind like mist. I suppose in the end it came down to who would survive: would it be me, or the child, or both, or neither? If the doctor was to be believed – and no doubt he was – the baby was fattening like a conker in a spiked green shell, and eventually would split me open. An heir was what Richard wanted more than anything, and where I had failed before perhaps I would not this time . . . but at the cost of my own life? Women carried life and death in their stomachs when they conceived; it was a fact of our existence. To hope and pray I might not join the departed was as useful as wishing the grass blue.

'Will you stay there and kill me?' I asked, looking down at my belly. 'Or will you let me live? Shall we try and live together?'

I must have fallen asleep because when I woke there was a jug of milk next to the bed. I reached over to dip in my littlest finger and lick it. My mother used to say the most beautiful girls had skin like fresh milk, plump and creamy. Next to it, mine looked like old parchment. I thought of the fuss Mother had made when Richard came to Barton for the first time with his uncle Lawrence; she wouldn't settle, fluttering around me like a moth.

'Show him your hands,' she said. 'Keep them folded.'

She didn't need to say my face wasn't my best feature – I knew that already. Still, none of it mattered, because we both knew my best feature was my name and the money it brought. Mother always said Father was tight-fisted, but when I asked why we lived in a draughty house and had to share a bedroom, she drew her lips into a thin line and said an old house was better than a new one.

The night of Richard's coming, as mother and I got into our beds, she asked me if I liked him.

'Does it matter?' was my petulant reply.

'It matters greatly to your happiness. You will spend every day of your life with him.'

He will save me from this miserable life, I thought. *I could not like him more if I tried.*

I thought of his pleasant, unlined face and light grey eyes. The beautiful jewellery he wore in his ears and the rings on his hands, one of which I would take so he could lead me to my new life.

'Do you like the playhouse?' he had asked me in my mother's parlour.

His uncle and my mother stood at the window, talking and glancing over at us. I knew my mother had tilled the ground for this marriage, but if Richard refused, nothing could be done.

'Yes,' I lied, for I had never been.

'Excellent. We shall go every year to London. That's where the best ones are. Twice, if you wish.'

How could I not be charmed and delighted by this young man, who did not treat me like an infant as everybody else did? I thought of his face every waking hour and every dreaming one, too. The wedding date was set in the parish church, and I could not wait for every morning to arrive and the nightfall after it, because each one drew me closer. I thought about what sort of mistress I would be: kind and wise, for I wasn't beautiful. A mother, one day, adored by her children and her husband. Whatever Richard wanted I would give him. His comfort would be my occupation, his happiness my life's work. For he had bestowed the greatest gift on me: accepting me as his wife, and I would live out the rest of my days with gratitude. I heard my mother shifting in her bed.

'Fleetwood,' she said. 'Are you listening? I asked if you liked Richard.'

'I suppose he will do,' I replied, and blew out my candle with a smile.

*

I rose awkwardly, my limbs stiff, and went into the long gallery at the front of the house to walk back and forth. To my surprise, Roger was there, examining the royal coat of arms above the fireplace, with his hands clasped behind his back.

'*Fear God, honour thy king, eschew evil and do good. Seek peace and ensue it.*' I recited the motif on the mantle from memory.

'Very good, Fleetwood. Consider it a promise from your justice of the peace.'

'Richard's uncle Lawrence had that put in. I think he hoped King James would hear about it and not feel the need to visit.'

'The Shuttleworths are loyal to the Crown, of course.' There was an edge of warning in Roger's tone.

'Faithful as dogs.'

Roger was thoughtful. 'Still, more demonstrations of loyalty need to be made in these parts. But how to make them?'

'I think it is not so much lack of loyalty but confidence. Besides, he would surely avoid these areas, with their old ways of faith.'

'This corner of the kingdom causes His Majesty a great deal of anxiety. A lot more could be done to honour thy king and eschew evil.' He leant forwards and frowned. 'I had not noticed the words around the king's arms. What does it say?'

'*Honi soit qui mal y pense*. "Shame on him who thinks evil of it."'

He made a face, as though he was considering it.

'Indeed. But thinks evil of what, Lawrence will never be able to tell us. Maybe I will ask the king himself.'

'You're at court soon?'

Roger nodded. 'His Majesty requires all of Lancashire's justices of the peace to make a record of every person who does not take communion at church.'

'For what purpose?'

'Oh, Fleetwood, you need not concern yourself with matters of the court, they hardly affect the life of a young gentlewoman. You do your duty and give your husband lots of little Shuttleworths, and I will do my duty in keeping Pendle safe.' I must have looked displeased, because he looked more kindly on me, becoming genial. 'Well, if you must know, His Majesty is still very . . . uneasy after the events at Parliament seven years ago. And you may have heard the whisperings about some of the traitors escaping to Lancashire. Something must be done to demonstrate the county's loyalty to the Crown, because currently the king is very mistrustful of our little part of the north, and the lawless people within it. He thinks us a pack of animals, compared to the genteel lords and ladies of the south. We are very far from society here, and I think he is afraid. But do you know what else he is mistrustful of?'

I shook my head.

'Witches.'

There was a gleam of triumph in his eye, and it took a moment for me to understand.

'You mean Alizon Device?'

Roger nodded. 'If I can convince the king that the people of Lancashire are under threat from the thing he hates most, his sympathies might extend to us, and he might grow less suspicious. If I am seen removing the *bad seeds*, if you will, the county may grow and prosper, and we may rejoin the kingdom with a new reputation.'

'But Catholics and witches are not the same thing. There are plenty of the first here, but not the latter.'

'More than you think,' was Roger's easy answer. 'And the king sees them as the same thing, besides.'

'Well, I doubt very much that the king should worry about us storing gunpowder around here. It's far too wet,' I said, and Roger laughed. I wondered then if I should tell him about my letter, folded deep in my pocket. Might he know already? 'Where is Richard?' I asked instead.

'He has some business with his steward and then he is showing me his new falcon before accompanying me back to Read. Will you join us?'

'He spends more time with that creature than me. No, thank you. But you could tell him to ask the tailor to call. I need some new clothes.'

Roger chuckled as we passed the entrance to my chambers and reached the top of the stairs.

'You and my Katherine are two equal forces. But still,

neither of you are a match for Richard. He has the largest collection outside of the king's wardrobe.' He paused at the top of the staircase. 'You will come and see Katherine soon? She often asks after you and your latest fashions. She is fascinated to see what the young people are wearing.'

I smiled and bowed as he descended the staircase that curled around the tower, but before he disappeared I called his name again, because I felt a sudden ache, and wanted desperately for him to embrace me as a father might. Roger certainly smelt as a father might, or so I imagined – of woodsmoke, and horsehair, and tobacco. He stood waiting below the portrait of my mother and me as a child – the one I would not hang in the long gallery or anywhere else. The reason was that nobody paused for long on the stairs, meaning guests walked past it and often forgot to mention it by the time they reached the next floor. In the picture, which was about the same height as me, my mother dominated in her wide collar and scarletwork gown. I occupied the bottom left corner, my mother's arm bent towards me, as though about to hurry me out of the frame. A little black martlet sat on my hand, the pet I had kept in a cage in my room made immortal. I could still recall the unpleasant silence of sitting for the portrait in the great hall at Barton, and the pointy-faced artist with the coloured oils on his fingers, the blackened tip of his tongue that flicked out of his mouth like a serpent.

'Roger . . .' My voice died in my throat. 'Do you think John Law will live?'

'Do not fret,' Roger said. 'His son is caring for him.'

I went back to my chamber, wondering how Roger Nowell slept with a witch in the house, and decided soundly.

I'd hidden the pan under the bed for when I needed it and covered it with a cloth, but Richard still recoiled when he walked into our chamber. I was lying in my nightdress, weak and empty, what little pike I'd had at dinner clinging to the bottom of the bowl. Richard sighed and came to kneel by me.

'Are you no better? You've barely eaten. I so want you to be well.'

I pulled at my nightdress so the tiny mound of my stomach showed through. Richard gazed at it, resting a gentle hand on the bump. I rolled his gold ring, the one his father gave him that he never took off. I could not decide what was worse: how sick I felt or not knowing if my husband was keeping this great truth from me. At some point that evening it had dawned on me as I sat in my chamber with only the candles' cheerful sputter for company: of course Richard valued his child's life more than mine. Would any man not, who had a great deal to leave behind?

'Richard?' I asked. 'What will happen if I cannot give you an heir?'

I thought of the old kings' wives, their necks on the chopping blocks. What would be better: to go painfully and messily, thrashing about in a blood-soaked bed, or clean and resigned, wearing your best dress? Divorce was decades old, but the word struck as much fear as death.

'Don't speak such things. It will not happen this time – the Lord will be kind to us. We will employ the best midwife.'

'We had a midwife last time; she did not stop it from coming out dead.'

He stood to undress, the candlelight casting off his buttons then settling on his bare skin. I watched him change into his nightshirt, then he came to my side and took my cold hand and held it, pink against grey. Although his voice was calm, his face was worried.

'Until you are well again, I will sleep in the dressing room.'

My stomach lurched. 'No! Richard, please, I won't hear of it. I'll not be sick again. I'll have a maid remove the pan.'

I tried to climb out of bed but Richard stopped me.

'I will only be in the next room until you are better, which will be very soon—'

'Richard, don't. Please. I don't like sleeping alone, you know I don't – The Nightmare.'

When I woke, soaked with sweat and blind with terror,

he would hold me until I stopped trembling. It only happened a few times a year, but he knew I would be terrified if he was not there.

'Please don't sleep in the dressing room. Please stay with me. I'm afraid.'

But he kissed my forehead and, with a pained face, left holding the soiled pan at arm's length. I slid down the headboard, feeling tears press at my eyes. He would never have done this when we were first married. After the wedding, in the house on the Strand, I could not sleep with the chaos outside the window. London was new to me, and everything in it – I'd never seen so many carriages in one place, or heard the cries of boatmen coming ashore, or so many loud bells and crowds of people. Richard would sit up with me at night, reading or drawing or just lying quietly, stroking my hair. When it got colder and we moved further out to the fields and wide skies of Islington, I told him I'd grown used to the sounds of the Strand, and now wouldn't be able to sleep because it was too quiet. He laughed and said I was far too spoilt and the only thing for it was for him to make the noises for me. Night after night, just as I was about to fall asleep, he neighed into the darkness, or gave the cry of a knife sharpener, or juggled like a coal seller pretending to scald his hands. I'd never laughed so much in all my life. Once, when it was snowing outside and the fire was low in the grate, I asked to see what he was drawing in my sketchbook. He told me to wait until he

was finished. I watched him work, his face taut with concentration, his hands making quick little movements and soft noises on the page. When he turned the paper around, I saw myself. I was wearing a beautiful trimmed hat, a fine ruff and collar, and elegant Spanish slippers. Around my shoulders was a cloak that flowed off the page, pressed with Paris buttons. I could almost feel its thickness.

'What colour is it?' I whispered, running my fingertips along the lines.

'The cloak is of branched satin and orange wool,' he said proudly. 'I'll have it made tomorrow. This is what you will wear to ride home in. To Gawthorpe.'

Nobody had ever done such a thing for me before. When the winter ended we arrived at the brand-new house that no one had ever lived in, just as he said. The journey took nine days, and all I could think about the whole way was arriving in Lancashire as Mistress Shuttleworth, wearing an outfit the likes of which not a soul in these parts had ever seen. Richard looked equally fine in an outfit he designed himself, a dagger and sword at his hip. Villagers lined the streets as we drew closer to our new home, smiling and waving. But with time the picture had changed in my mind, and all I could see was two children dressed for a play.

I blew out the candle and listened for sounds from the other room. This was the first time in our marriage we were both in the house and I was sleeping alone.

*

He did not come to me the next morning, going down to break his fast without waking me. He read his correspondence while I sat opposite, trying to force bread and honey into my mouth and keep it down. I watched his face, creasing or brightening as he read; I did not ask who wrote. As the servants passed in and out of the dining chamber, I wondered who knew a truckle bed and fresh linen had been placed in the dressing room next to our bedroom. As though in answer, one of the kitchen girls caught my eye and looked hurriedly away, the tops of her ears turning red. I felt cold, and could not eat or say what I wanted to, so like a coward I went to walk up and down the long gallery and pray, hoping for a sign from God. I watched the trees and the sky, and felt that burning itch to be outside without my thoughts, instead of inside with them.

Much later, I found Richard in the great hall, seated with James the steward, the household ledger open between them. The Gawthorpe ledger was as important in our house as the King's Bible: everything we bought, every bill we paid and everything that came in or out of Gawthorpe, whether on wheels, horseback or rolled in a barrel, was inked on its thick pages in James' immaculate hand. Suits of armour, tapestries and other frivolities that Richard liked to spend his money on were committed in ink, as well as everyday things: stockings for the servants,

cork for the wine. But like me, Richard took little interest in it, preferring to leave it to our men, so when I found him I knew he would be impatient; talk of quit-rents and profits bored him. As if reminding him to take the estate's business seriously, the grave portrait of his uncle, the Reverend Lawrence, sat overlooking them, the words *Death is the way unto life* painted at his shoulder.

I swallowed. 'Richard?'

He looked up quickly, welcoming the distraction. Then two things happened at once: James turned a new leaf so the pages were blank, even though they had only been halfway down the last, and I noticed Richard was dressed to travel.

'You are going away?'

'Lancaster. I leave tonight.'

'Oh. Did someone write to you this morning?'

'Only my sisters with news from London. They always write me a letter each but it might as well be one – they only talk of the same people and plays and the latest victim of scandal. At least there is more to entertain them there than at Forcett with my mother; I expect they'll never want to move back to Yorkshire. Did you need me?'

Yes, I need you.

The room rang with silence. James' feather quivered, its inky point eager to scratch.

I wanted to say 'Don't go', but instead replied, 'How are the Mistresses Shuttleworth?'

'Eleanor hints at something that has quite excited her, but Anne refers to it not at all.'

'Perhaps she is engaged.'

'It is not like Eleanor to be subtle.'

'Perhaps she hopes to be engaged, then.'

James cleared his throat pointedly.

'I am going into Padiham this morning for some linen from Mrs Kendall's. Is there anything you need?'

'Why don't you have one of the servants go?'

'They will get the wrong thing.'

'You are well enough?'

Lawrence's grey eyes stared at me from the frame. *Death is the way unto life.*

'Yes.'

I did not want him to go; he was always going, and I was always staying.

'When will you be back?'

'In a few days. Shall I check on Barton on my travels?'

'Why? My mother no longer lives there; there will be nothing but empty rooms and mice.'

'I should look in every now and again to check all is in order.'

James sniffed and shifted in his seat. I was taking up valuable time with his master. Perhaps then Richard looked at me properly, for he came to me, tilting my chin towards him with his finger.

'And how about we fit in a trip to London soon? Eleanor and Anne have made me miss it. We can get you one of

the best midwives, and I'll take you to a playhouse, the Lord knows we are starved of entertainment in these parts. This dreary hall could use some joy. James, find out if there are any players travelling in the area that could come and perform. Or send for some.' He wrapped an arm around my waist and held my hand, as though we were about to dance. Puck shuffled up to us, grunting curiously. 'Otherwise I shall have to train Puck to be a dancing bear. Behold!'

He discarded me and pulled the dog up to his height, so Puck's great paws rested on his shoulders and his monstrous head was level with Richard's. I could not help but smile as they sauntered in an awkward dance, Puck's tongue lolling as his feet staggered on the stone flags before he crashed ungracefully to the ground. He came immediately to me for a rewarding pat.

'Useless creature. We will have to work on our performance,' said Richard.

He left me with James, and James with their unfinished business. I knew I was not the only person in the household left disarmed at times by my husband's shifting moods. I watched him go, feeling his kiss feathery light on my cheek, and the weight of everything else heavy as a wet cloak around my shoulders.