The Sixth Wife

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Extract

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Here lyethe Quene Kateryn wife to Kyng Henry the VIII and last the wife of Thomas Lord of Sudeley high Admirall of England and onkle to kyng Edward the VI dyed 5 September MCCCCCXLVIII

Inscription scratched onto Katherine Parr's coffin

I can say nothing but as my Lady of Suffolk saith, 'God is a marvellous man'.

Katherine Parr, in a letter to Thomas Seymour

This day died a man with much wit, and very little judgement

Princess Elizabeth – later Queen Elizabeth I – on hearing of Thomas Seymour's execution

One



I won't testify. They'll get no help from me. Not that they need it, the trial being a formality. It's over already for him. No need for this investigation, the intimidation and confessions. And anyway they should have left him to it, saved themselves the bother. He'd have ended up doing the job for them. He'd have got nowhere, in the end. Got away with nothing.

It seems they have little better to do, though, than rubbish the memory of a good woman who's barely cold in the ground. That's what's happening: it's making her look bad, what they're digging up on her widower. Making her look as if she was beguiled and hapless.

Kate?

Listen: she'd dealt with it; it was all dealt with. She'd dealt with Thomas and the mess he'd made. She'd saved everybody's skin.

One mistake: that was all Thomas was in her life. Could just as easily not have been a fatal one, that mistake; just the turn of events made it fatal.

I won't testify, and if they come for anyone in my household, they'll have me to reckon with.

Which they know.

Which is why they haven't.

I'll tell you something about Kate; I'll tell you what it was about her. She always made everything all right. That's what she did. That was Kate.

And now she's gone. And now look.



I didn't go to her funeral. I arranged it, the day she died, that long, long day of her death. Then, when the next day came around as suddenly as a drawn curtain, I didn't go. I couldn't watch her lowered into that vault.

You could say that I didn't need to go; you could look at it that way. I'd made the arrangements, I already knew that funeral from first moment to last. I'd dressed the chapel, lain drapes over the altar rails and then supervised the men struggling with the black, embroidered hangings. I'd planned the procession, right down to the servants at the rear. Well, someone had to do it. I'd selected the four knights to walk hooded with the pallbearers, and the two torchbearers to walk with them. Then would come Jane, tiny ten-year-old Jane Grey, chief mourner, and I'd coached her maid how to carry her train, forewarned her of steps and loose slabs. The psalms and the sermon: Reverend Coverdale had gone through everything with me.

I'd dressed Kate for her burial, chosen the dress, a dress

that I'd loved on her: holly red, running with gold stitching. Kate had colourless eyes like a dawn sky, but she had sunrise hair and I turned it loose for her burial as if she were a girl again.

While the funeral was taking place, I stayed with the baby. I couldn't believe she was our compensation for Kate. Such an unequal exchange. She was like something skinned; she was nothing like my boys had been, born big and with frank, focused gazes. But, then, they were boys: from their first moments, the world was theirs for the taking. The baby was unsettled, so I walked with her. With everyone at the chapel, the house was deserted and I'd never been so alone. It might have been that everyone had died. Everyone in the world, even, so that I could have walked from the house and kept walking but never found anyone again. Just kept walking until I, too, died. From starvation or exhaustion or perhaps sheer loneliness – can you die from loneliness?

I was bone-tired when the baby finally gave in to sleep, so I sat down where I was, nowhere in particular, on a carpet-draped chest in a hallway, my back uncomfortable against the linenfold. Suddenly a nearby door was opening. Who on earth wouldn't be at the funeral? But then I knew. There was indeed one person in the household who wouldn't be there. The one person I didn't want to see. I should have thought of that. Of him. And so there we were, facing each other. My heart was furious, each beat nipping hard. His beauty rankled; he'd always been everything that Kate wasn't, and never more so than today. It was an affront, that bright beauty, on this darkest of days. I wanted to strike it from him.

A frown snatched at his eyes. I knew what he meant: didn't I want to be in chapel?

I said, 'Someone has to look after this baby.' He looked back at me with no look at all; his incomprehension said, *There are nurses for that.*

I could have said, *I don't have to explain anything to you.*

Or I could have said, *The nurses are all there, they wanted so much to go, because everyone loved Kate. Everyone, that is, except you.*

He said, 'Cathy . . .' I hugged that oblivious baby to me and turned, walked away.



If she'd never married Thomas, Kate would still be alive. She should have stayed a widow, that last time. The king's death had been her third widowing, and had made her dowager queen. I'd been around while Henry was dying, in case she needed me, but it just so happened that I wasn't with her when they finally came with the news. I'd gone into the gardens to take a few minutes to myself. When I returned to her room, unaware, she asked everyone to leave us. In her hands was one of the pairs of spectacles – silver rims, Venetian lenses – that she'd encouraged Henry to buy and which he'd tended to mislay all over his palaces. She watched everyone leave the room as if their leaving was of some interest to her. Always so polite, Kate. Not until the last of them had gone and only her dogs remained stretched in front of the fireplace did she look at me, and that was when she sighed and closed her eyes. The mildly interested expression went from her face – indeed, all expression went from her face – and she covered it with her hands and began to cry.

I'd never seen her cry. All our years of best-friendship and I'd never seen her cry. She'd never seen me cry, either, for

that matter. Should she ever, though, I realised, she'd know exactly what to do. I couldn't even guess, myself, what that would be, but *she'd* know. She'd rise to it. She'd comfort me, I imagined, without making me self-conscious. For now, though, folded forward there on that huge chair, she looked awkward. It was usually well hidden, that gawkiness of hers; she tended to turn it to her advantage, turn it into something else, walk tall with it. I crouched beside her – awkward, too – and rubbed her bony shoulder. She cried harder and I didn't know if that was because I was doing something right or something wrong. Exasperation dizzied me. Tell me what to do, I wanted to say, and I'll do it.

Just two years before I knelt there with my arm around Kate, my own husband had died. My husband of twelve years. I was widowed at twenty-six Charles had been a little older than Henry – sixty – but in good shape and could have passed for forty. His death – a sudden illness one weekend – was a shock, whereas no one could claim that Henry's death had come as a shock. It wasn't shock that was causing Kate's tears.

Four years, they'd been married. Kate had known him fairly well when he was gorgeous and big-hearted, but those days were long gone by the time she'd been persuaded to stand at the altar and think of England. During their marriage, he'd been a cantankerous, backwards-looking monstrosity. No sense in pretending otherwise. It couldn't have been the loss of Henry that was causing Kate's tears.

Queenship, though: the loss of her queenship. She'd loved the role. Not just the work that was required of her – the easy but tedious meeting and greeting – but the bringing of changes. As queen, she'd been able to champion certain

people, albeit quietly, Kate-like. How suited she was to all that: the talk, the confidences. She'd always had people's trust, but as queen she had the ear of anyone who mattered. Careful work, for which I'd never have had the patience. My view is: what a time this is to live – it's *the* time to live – because the world is opening up to new ideas and the truth is here, now, for the taking, if you just look. And if people don't take it, if they don't look, don't make the effort to learn, it's because they're lazy, self-interested, they're cowards. But Kate's view was that people are slow to change because they're scared, or misguided, misinformed. And people trusted her. No one trusts me. That's not what I'm for. Kate used to say to me, *We all have different strengths, Cathy.* I don't know if she omitted to say what mine were, or if I just can't now remember.

Queenship had been Kate's big chance and now, suddenly, one January day, through no fault of her own, it was being taken away. Over, for her, before time. Just four years she'd had, and there was so much more to do. No wonder she was miserable. I'd never before seen her miserable. Frightened, yes. Impossible – foolish – to live through our times and not be frightened. Even I'd been frightened. And I'd seen her angry, too, beneath her considerable composure. But never miserable. Because that's something that you feel for yourself, which wasn't Kate, she didn't do that. Or hadn't done, before now.

A month later, something happened that made me see her dejection on the day of the king's death as perhaps having had rather less than I'd imagined to do with her no longer being queen. At least some of those tears had been because she was in her mid-thirties, still childless, and once again unmarried. And who'd marry her now?