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The King's Daughter

Written by Christie Dickason

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CHRISTIE DICKASON

The King's Daughter



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Francis II [1]
King of France

m.

MARY, QUEEN
OF SCOTS
r. 1542–67

m.

[2] Henry Stuart
Lord Darnley
d. 1567

JAMES VI and I
r. 1567–1625 (Scotland)
r. 1603–25 (England)

m.

Anne of Denmark
d. 1619

Henry
1594–1612

Elizabeth
1596–1662

m.

Frederick V
Elector Palatine

Margaret
b. 1598
d. in infancy

Sophia
1630–1714

m.

Ernest Augustus
1630–98
Elector of Hanover

Elizabeth's Family Tree

CHARLES I
King of England
and Scotland
r. 1625–49

m. Henrietta
Maria

Robert
b. 1601
d. in infancy

Mary
1605–7

Sophia
b. & d. 1607

George I
Elector of Hanover
King of England
and Scotland
1714–27

m. Sophia Dorothea
of Celle
1666–1726

(via Victoria)

Elizabeth II
1952–

Rex fuit Elizabeth: nunc est Jacobus Regina.
Elizabeth was King. Now is James Queen.

Popular saying

*I am ever for the medium in everything. Between foolish rashness
and extreme length, there is a middle way.*

King James

Be wary, then, best safety lies in fear.

Hamlet I, iii

PROLOGUE

1

WHITEHALL PALACE, LONDON, JUNE 1610

ELIZABETH

Today, I learned what I am for. I think that the information has always been there, but I've chosen to ignore it. Then, this morning, when the Duc de Bouillon looked me up and down and allowed that I was indeed 'handsome enough', my grip on wilful ignorance began to slip.

I felt a tide of unbecoming red begin to rise from the top of my bodice. I tried to imagine that I had turned into a tortoise so that I could pull my head inside my shell and close the flap.

I was standing in the Great Presence Chamber on show as a prospective bride, weighed down by a pearl-crusted blue satin gown, with a chain of bright little enamelled gold flowers draped across my (still-improving) breasts. My hair had been savagely disciplined. My finest pearl and sapphire ear-drops knocked at my jawbones. Ten pairs of adult male eyes, including my father's chilly gaze, stared at me as if I were a greyhound or horse for sale.

'Good breeding,' I imagined them saying. 'Shame about the cow hocks.' 'Nice deep chest, not certain about the set of the ears . . .'

'Handsome enough,' the duke had said. I tried to think what had made me so uneasy.

Such guarded praise might have squashed my vanity, if I had any.

I know how I look – tall and skinny with wild amber-red hair and fair Scottish skin. I may not be beautiful, like Frances Howard or fair, dainty Lucy, Countess of Bedford, but I'm not a trowie crept from under a stone, neither. But there was more to my sudden unease than hurt feelings.

Since I can remember, I've known that my father will marry me off, when and where he pleases. Marriage meant exile. I would be forced to leave my brother, to go, again, to a strange country to live among foreigners, with a man I didn't know, to be his queen. Just as my poor mother had to leave her home in Denmark for Scotland to live with my father. And then had to follow him here to England.

I know that my brother Henry has no more choice in his fate than I, but at least he knows where he will be when he becomes king. He can let himself learn to love England. It's his country now. My heart must not settle here.

That is the price of escaping from my father.

'She's tall for her tender years,' said the Duc de Bouillon. The marriage broker for the German state of the Palatine slid his probing eyes over me again with a private adult male gleam that made me squirm and look away. My chest and face burned. My grip on wilful ignorance slipped a little further.

My father, a smallish man, moved his mouth as if chewing and scratched his neck. He didn't trouble himself to reply. He knows that his wits are quicker than those of most men. And he's the king, so he can play the fool if he wants to.

'Of course, there's no harm if the wife is taller than her husband,' de Bouillon added quickly.

My mother is taller than my father.

My father still said nothing. He was behaving well, for him.

I rested my hands on the shelf of my farthingale and looked at the floor. The white ostrich plumes of my fan trembled in my fist. I felt a secret meaning in the duke's words, which I did not yet grasp. I saw secret understanding gleam in other male eyes.

I know that I would be married even if I had tiny eyes like a

badger and the stumpy legs of those German hounds they send down the badger's hole – which I don't. I am the First Daughter of England. Whoever marries me marries England. 'Handsome' has nothing to do with it.

The Dauphin of France, the most likely of my possible husbands according to my old nurse Mrs Hay, is a sulky, big-nosed boy not handsome enough for any purpose that I can think of. And yet his mother means to arrange a good marriage for him, in spite of his nose and absence of chin, like a trout – although I wrong the trout, which is a beautiful creature, all polished pewter-brown and speckled silver with the flush of dawn lining its gills. Also, its wits are sharper than his from what I hear. And its temper is less haughty, irritable and melancholy.

Handsome enough for what, then? I glanced up.

The duke's eyes were now unlacing me, searching under the pearl-crusted silk for the swelling curves of my breasts. They lifted up my petticoats. They rested on my mouth. They dug through the layers of silk and linen looking for my most secret parts.

'His highness will be pleased,' he said.

He didn't care that I could read his eyes. With a private smile, he nodded to himself. She will do, said his eyes. With her amber hair and blue eyes, which are much larger than those of a badger, and long legs under those petticoats. She will do very well.

For . . .

The cold edge of understanding slid into my heart. My thoughts scattered. I struggled for breath like a fish cast-up on the rocks. But I could no longer blind myself to what I hadn't wanted to see.

I'm no looby. Of course I've known. I listen to gossip. I have observed dogs locked together and the noisy, terrifying breeding of horses. I can draw conclusions. But I never thought it might happen to me. To my flesh and skin and heart beat, to this thing that lives behind my eyes and breathes and fears and is me. Here is what I saw slithering through the duke's eyes and let myself understand at last:

I am no more than a greyhound bitch or a mare to be bred.

Marriage is not mere exile and strangeness. Marriage means that I must serve my country with my body. On my wedding night, Spain, or France or some German state – as our father chooses – like a dog or stallion, will push its designated cock into my private parts to plant an infant treaty.

Into that prim, closed mussel shell with its new amber fur, mysterious even to me. Closed like a book, even to me. Closed like a peach. Closed like a dark eye, still blind.

That is what I am for. How will I bear it?

PART ONE

The Dangerous Daughter

*To make women learned and foxes tame has the same effect –
to make them more cunning.*

James I & VI

2

5 NOVEMBER 1605 – Combe Abbey, Warwickshire

It was my fault, but the sun had to share the blame. Because of the sun, I had escaped alone. It had been a wet November in England. To judge by the purple-edged clouds hanging just above the horizon, the rain would return before nightfall. But just then, bright sunlight spilled down through holes torn in a bruised cloudy sky.

Like contented hens, my three ladies had spread out their feathers on the river bank and settled in the patches of sun. Tipsy with unexpected sunlight and greedy for more, they agreed that I could come to no harm here on my guardian's quiet estate.

'I won't go far,' I promised. 'Just a little way along the forest track across the ford.'

I was learning. When I was younger, perhaps six years old, I could never grasp why I should always seem to do as I was told. Then I learned. When people trust you, they watch you less.

My greyhound Trey splashed across the river Smite beside me as I balanced from stone to stone. Then he raced off after a squirrel and now barked furiously in the distance. My favourite

toy spaniel, Belle, with her little short legs, had stayed behind on the riverbank.

Under cover of the forest canopy, I stopped to look back. No one had followed me.

Around me, the sun poked wavering holes through the wind-stirred trees and scattered spots of light across the ground like golden coins. I set off along a twisting leafy tunnel, through occasional pools of sunlight, to discover what adventure lay around the mysterious bend ahead of me. Under my leather riding boots the crumbly leaf mould of the forest track was sharp-smelling and black from rain in the night.

I stopped in a clearing, took off my hat and held up my face and hands to the rare, wonderful heat. A day like this tempted me against my better judgement to fall in love with England after all.

Something struck my hair lightly and slid down my chest – a yellow oak leaf, so bright and smooth that it seemed precious and mysteriously purposeful. I picked it off my bodice and held it up to the sun. It was so perfect that it made me want to cry. I tucked it, smooth and cool, into my bodice to press later in a book.

The voices and laughter of my attendants arrived only faintly on the wind from the far side of the river. I picked up a piece of fallen branch and threw it as far as I could. I listened to the satisfying crash. I wanted to shout with joy.

Unwatched, unattended. A miracle of freedom.

I spread my legs wide. Happily, I emptied my bladder like a mare under the cone of my skirts, felt the steamy warmth and smelled the friendly barnyard odour from my own body.

Ever since my family came south, I had lived in a cage of eyes. Scotland had been far more free. In Edinburgh, while we waited to travel down to London, I rode almost every day with my older brother Henry, one of his hawks on his wrist.

Accompanied only by a single groom and my greyhounds, Trey, Deuce, Quattro and Quince, we escaped together up onto the crags above the city under a sky of bright luminous grey. There, we stood side-by-side looking down on Edinburgh from the Cat Nick, a rocky point higher than the castle where our father had been born, higher even than the gulls. In the waters of the Firth beyond us, an island crouched low and dark in the water like a dragon waiting to spring on Fife. We would watch the mists blow in from the sea to cover it before we rode back. On the last day before we left Scotland, I took a small piece of sharp granite from the crags and hid it in my writing chest. I hold it in my hand now when I can't fall asleep.

I paused again in a little glade pitted with rabbit holes. The only sound was a leafy whispering. Trey had stopped barking. I stood so still that five rabbits popped out from under the roots of an old oak and began to forage on the forest floor.

I imagined that I became a rabbit. My nose twitched. I hopped forward to nibble a fresh tuft of grass, then pulled my hindquarters up after me, as if I had almost forgotten and left them behind.

One of the rabbits lifted its head. In an explosion of movement, they all disappeared into the ground.

I turned.

A handsome young man stood on the track watching me. Coins of sunlight danced on his shoulders and fair hair, which was almost the colour of the oak leaf.

I felt a thump of startled interest and grew a little breathless. He had materialised silently in the forest glade as if by magic. I knew that I had just stepped out of my everyday life into something far more interesting.

As we stood regarding each other in silence, I grew more and more certain that he was one of the magical creatures from my nurse's bedtime stories, who lived in forests and

lochs and under stones. Always in our world but invisible unless they choose to show themselves.

I tried to think how to speak to him. He might have been anything, a tree-soul or a magic stag like those that roamed the Highlands, which had taken the shape of a man.

I wanted to reach out and pick the coins from his broad shoulders and put them into my purse, knowing that they would turn into real gold.

I was not afraid. His handsome face, though pale, was gentle and seemed made for cheerfulness. In any case, I was protected by the fairy shot, an ancient flint arrowhead, which my nurse, Mrs Hay, had sewn into my petticoat.

I smiled in greeting. When he did not smile back, I nodded encouragement.

He did not respond. We stood in silence.

‘Are you a spirit of the forest?’ I asked at last.

He opened his mouth as if he wished to speak but still remained silent.

I thought I understood then. I looked at his hands, clasped tightly in front of him. ‘You’re under a spell so that you can’t speak? Must I set you free?’

‘You must come with me.’ His voice cracked a little, as if I had indeed just lifted a spell and his words were still rusty.

‘Why?’ I told myself that this adventure was exactly what I had secretly hoped for when I set off down the mysterious, twisting path. All the same, I suddenly wished that Trey were there. ‘Where do you want me to go?’

He held out his hand to me.

I considered the urgency in his voice and gesture. But he was not threatening me. On the contrary, his words and reaching hand were a plea, not an order.

‘Are you an enchanted prince?’ I knew from Mrs Hay how the story went. He needed a kiss from me to set him free from a curse, but if he explained beforehand, he would stay cursed forever.

I looked at his mouth. I had never kissed a man, only my dogs and monkey and horses. Until this moment, I had not thought I would ever want to. To my surprise, I could imagine kissing him. My chest felt thick and full, making it hard to breathe.

I closed my eyes. It would be impossible to kiss a man while looking at him.

‘Please come, your grace!’

I opened my eyes. With his uncertain eyes and fierce words, he now reminded me of Baby Charles playing at being a soldier, though he was taller and far more handsome than my puny five-year-old brother.

I saw now that his hand shook. Now I detected the reek of ordinary human fear, stronger than the sharp tang of leaf mould and comfortable smells of dog and horse on my own clothes. Unease stirred.

He wasn’t doing it right. This no longer felt like the story I’d been imagining. With a thud, I dropped back into my everyday self. He was not an enchanted prince, and I was far too old to believe such things. A flush of shame began to creep up past the top of my bodice.

I smiled coolly, as I had learned from watching my present guardian’s wife, Lady Harington. He was most likely nothing more than an importuning courtier. Even at my age, when the tender pebbles on my chest were just beginning to swell into breasts, petitioners pursued me, imagining that I might at least put in a good word for them with my father or mother, or older brother, even when I was locked away here at Combe.

The young man did not smile back.

But then, people were often too overwhelmed to smile back at royalty, even young female royalty.

I eyed the silver buttons on his doublet and the fine Brussels lace edging his collar. In truth, he didn’t look like one of the usual awe-struck. More like one of those well-born Englishmen who sniggered behind their hands at my father

and the 'barbarian Scots'. A gentleman, in any case, impertuning or not.

'I beg you!' he said.

'Are you a footpad?' I asked, to punish him because I had imagined foolish things, and thought of kissing him. 'My purse is empty, but my amethyst buttons might be worth taking.'

He looked so startled and indignant that I almost smiled at him again.

The lace on his collar was vibrating against his coat.

But then, many people trembled before my father. Some even trembled before me, young as I was and only a girl. But such people were not often gentleman like this one.

Suddenly, I heard my father's voice in my head, 'Trust *nae* man.' Then with that little flick of cruel disdain, '*Nae* woman neither.'

Beyond the beech saplings and arching bramble framing the young man, the forest track was deserted. Suddenly, I felt very young and alone. I had gone too far. My screams would not carry back against the wind to my attendants on the riverbank.

'Where must I go with you?' I asked.

'Please trust me, your grace. I take you to some true friends.'

'What do you and these friends want with me?'

He shook his head.

'I won't come unless you give me a good reason.'

We stared at each other again.

'You must be queen,' he said desperately.

I did not like that 'must'. 'Very likely, in time,' I agreed cautiously. That had always been my eventual fate. 'But of which country?'

He looked away. A branch creaked in the silence.

'Where am I to be queen?' I repeated. My voice sounded reedy and caught in my throat.

'England.' He spoke so quietly that I almost couldn't hear.

‘Queen of England?’ My heart lurched into a gallop like a startled deer. A giant foot seemed to step on my ribcage. ‘England already has a king! And a queen!’ I took a step back. ‘My father is king! My brother Henry will be king after him!’ He set his hand on his sword.

I was alone in the forest . . . the king’s oldest daughter . . . alone in the forest with an armed, unknown man, who wanted to . . . I wasn’t yet sure what he intended, but it was not good . . . fool! Fool! Should have seen the danger at once . . . not magic deer or enchanted princes.

I took another step back. I could not believe how this scene had turned. Mrs Hay had also told me tales of politics and treason, and they were true. Those who laughed at my father’s fears were fools. Demons pursued our family everywhere. This young man, with his urgent voice and smell of fear was one of the demons.

I looked around, as if someone might come to my rescue. No ladies, no grooms, no guardian. No instructions what to do next. Not even Trey!

‘When am I to become queen? What do you mean to do?’

Henry! I could never become queen while my father and older brother Henry were alive! This young man spoke treason and meant to harm my brother, Henry.

Treason. A word with a huge sharp beak that bit off people’s heads. It had bitten off my grandmother’s head. It could bite off my head.

I might die, I suddenly thought. For the very first time, I understood that my life could end. I would die. Now . . . one day . . . or very soon.

My wits scattered. My eyes blurred. I had never before in my life felt such fear. A dark, cold hollowness at my centre grew larger and larger until the thin shell of my being seemed about to crack. I wanted to sit down on the track. To imagine this scene away and make it back into a story.

But he stood there waiting, reaching out to take me. And there was no one to help me but myself.

‘I won’t come,’ I said.

‘You must.’

I slid my hand down to my dirk, hanging at my belt. But, though sharp enough, it was only a short-bladed, jewelled woman’s toy.

‘Don’t make me call the others,’ he begged. ‘I swear I won’t harm you.’

He drew his sword and stepped closer.

I wanted to scream at him. ‘You may have killed me already.’ I kept my voice steady. ‘... killed me without touching me!’ Did he think I didn’t know my own family’s history?

I knew I could not outrun him but my body would no longer stand still. I turned and ran.

My skirts jounced up and down, swayed out of control, knocked into my legs. Though dressed for riding in a soft-hooped farthingale, I was still too wide, too heavy, too ornamented, too stiffened and pinned together.

I snagged on bushes, tore free. I heard his breathing close behind. A weight hauled at my skirt. I yanked free of his grasp. Felt a fumble at my sleeve. Then his hand clamped tightly around my upper arm.

His face was distorted, no longer handsome nor amiable. No going back for him now, not after laying hands on me. Not after those words. No going back for me, neither. With my free hand, I tried to hit him, to claw at his face, lost my balance. We fell together into a tangle of scrub.

Treason! I thought, now as desperate as he. As I fell, I clutched at leaves that tore away in my hands. I landed on the side of my ankle, lay wedged, half-toppled, my skirts caught in the thicket, my bodice twisted tightly around my ribs so that I could not breathe.

Our fall broke his grip on my arm. I snatched a tiny breath

with the top of my chest, pushed myself out of the scrub and hit him hard in the face. He stepped back.

'My grandmother had friends . . .' I yanked at my bodice, tried to breathe and run again. ' . . . like you! She died on the block because of . . . friends . . . like you!' I could already feel the axe falling towards my bared neck.

Even the loyal Mrs Hay was willing to whisper how the Scottish king had been happy to take the English crown from the same hand that had signed the warrant for his own mother's death.

The young man picked up his sword, dropped in our struggle. 'I can't let you go.'

He must know as I did that he was almost certainly a dead man now, sooner or later, no matter what happened to me.

And I could no longer scream for help, even if I could be heard. Not now that I knew what he intended.

I shifted my weight onto my hurt ankle as slowly as a cat stalking a bird. The ankle felt cold and watery with pain but held, just. I tried to read him as I would a new dog or horse. 'I also see that you don't want to do this. I think you'd rather let me go.'

Startled eyes met mine. I hopped my good foot back beside the other. 'I think you're a good man and something has gone wrong.'

'If you knew . . . !' he agreed fervently. 'But I have no choice now.'

Our panting seemed to fill the low vault of arching trees. In his face, I could still see a last gleam of my enchanted prince. 'I thought at first you were under a curse,' I said. 'I wasn't entirely wrong, after all.'

And in a different story, we might have been friends. I hopped another step.

'I'm damned,' he whispered.

I begged my courage rise up to fill that cold hollow space inside me. 'I trusted you when I first saw you,' I said.

‘That’s why Robin . . .’ He caught himself. ‘. . . why I was sent alone. For fear that you would take fright at a group of armed men.’

I straightened my back to give my courage room to rise. Please, I begged. At first it felt as fluid as water, flowing into my limbs, rising through my belly and chest. Slowly, another stronger creature, that was both me and something else far greater than I was forced its way up through the tight column of my throat until it reached my eyes.

I burned my attacker with a wolf’s fierce gaze. ‘Is my father already dead?’ Even stiffened by courage, I didn’t dare ask about Henry.

‘I don’t know. But it makes no difference now. It’s too late to turn back!’ He looked at me, his mouth slightly open. ‘I beg you, forgive me, your grace, I never meant . . .’

‘I think you should run,’ said the young she-wolf steadily. ‘As fast as you can.’

He closed his eyes. ‘Holy Mother, protect me . . .!’ His sword shook in his hand.

I had to tempt him to rewrite this story. I felt certain that he wanted to. ‘It doesn’t have to be too late,’ I said. ‘I don’t know who you are, or what you truly intend. If you go now, I won’t raise an alarm.’

He shook his head.

‘You don’t believe me? Don’t you see why I can’t raise an alarm? Why I must not even admit that you exist?’

I might be just a slip of a girl, but even I could see why no one must ever connect me to him and his friends. I knew suddenly that, though he was a grown man armed with a sword, my wits were quicker than his.

He kept shaking his head.

‘You’re a fool! But not wicked enough.’ I eased back another step. ‘They sent the wrong man. I swear I won’t betray you. Save yourself, if you can.’

I watched his eyes as I watch those of a new hound to see

whether it means to lick my hand or bite. 'Whatever you and your friends are plotting, you must stop it, so I can try to save myself.' I saw struggle in his blue eyes. 'Neither of us wants to be here.'

'No,' he whispered.

'Then we must simply agree that we're not here and never were. If I don't betray you, what crime will you have committed?' I held my breath.

'You're scarce more than a child and don't understand men's affairs.' Then he went still, in that moment-of-just-before. Just before a dog is unleashed. Just before a bow-man releases his bolt or the dangling pig's throat is cut. I had seen men gather themselves up like that before, when they had to do something unpleasant.

'You must come with me,' he said. 'Please don't make me hurt you.'

I had lost him.

But I wouldn't die on the scaffold like my grandmother! Because that was how I would end, if I let him take me to these 'friends'. Better to die now, with only a short time for fear. Struggling, perhaps not even noticing the fatal blow. Better that than to wait blindfolded for the first blow of the axe, and the second and the third. Better that my Belle not creep whimpering out from under my skirts, like my grandmother's little dog, covered with my blood, to sniff at my severed head.

'I won't come!'

He shook his head, avoiding my eyes.

I tightened my grip on my dirk.

'I can't be queen if I'm dead.'

'I swear that I won't kill you.'

'But I will.'

He stepped towards me.

I placed the tip of the dirk in the hollow at the base of my throat. I felt the point prick my skin. I took another step back.

Don't think! Don't think! Be ready to push . . . twist . . .
Just do it!

'It's harder than you imagine,' he said. But I had made him uncertain again.

I hopped back another step. He started to follow.

'Don't misjudge my age or sex! I'm not a child, whatever you may think.' The young she-wolf looked him in the eyes. 'And I'm not one of your delicate English ladies, neither. I'm a Scottish barbarian. I cut the shoulder of a stag when I was seven.' I hobbled another step. The she-wolf still knew that I would use the dirk. My eyes told him so.

And another step.

He wavered, sword half-raised.

'God speed you!' I turned my back with the knife still at my throat.

Breathe in. Hop. Breathe in. Hop.

The courage-wolf inside me gobbled up the pain.

Breathe in. Hop.

I listened for his footsteps over the sound of my own breathing.

Around a bend in the track, then past a hazel clump. I began to hope. Unreasonably, that fragile physical barrier between us made me feel safer.

Breathe in. Hop. And again. And again.

Suddenly, the pain returned. I stopped, dizzy with pain. I looked back. Through the screen of brown hazel leaves, I could see him only in parts. He sat on his heels in the middle of the track, rocking, with his head in his hands.

Get out of England! I urged him silently. As far away from me as possible!

'Robin,' he had said, 'a band of armed men.'

There were others, but how many? And what were they doing at this very moment? What did they intend? Oh, God! I begged. Please let Henry be unharmed!

The snake word 'treason' coiled around my throat and

tightened. I must warn Henry. But how, without entangling myself in treason?

A fine deep tremor began in the bones of my legs. I leaned my hand on a beech trunk. My heart felt smothered, as if it didn't have room to beat. I tugged at my stomacher and bodice again. Distractedly, I picked broken twigs and leaves from my skirt and sleeves. The smell of fear rose from under my arms. I felt small and empty. My wolf had left me. I was on my own again.

I hobbled on. Now I had to return to my attendants and try to lie.

Trey raced up covered with mud and bits of dead leaf from rolling on the ground. Then he galloped ahead and back again, reproaching me for my slowness.

I had been such a fool!

If only our thoughts could leap across distances.

Take care, beloved brother. Take care! I don't know where you are. I don't even know what I must warn you about.

'You don't understand men's affairs,' my would-be kidnapper had said. Please, God, let someone tell me what is happening.

Henry and I had been kept apart from birth, he at Stirling Castle under the rod of Lord Mar, I at Dunfermline and Linlithgow with Lady Kildare. But when we met at Holyrood before coming south to England, we had recognised each other as true kin in our first shy glance. Henry, who would one day be king, would know what I should do next.

Are you still alive?

It did not seem possible that Combe would still be standing when we got back.

On the riverbank, the grooms were asleep on the grass.

Lady Anne Dudley Sutton, a niece chosen by my guardian to be my chief companion, was making a necklace of plaited grass.

‘What has happened to you?’ cried one of the two older ladies with the beginning of alarm.

‘Twisted my ankle,’ I said. ‘Slipped from a fallen log.’ Only half a lie.

The ladies clicked their tongues over my ankle and promised a poultice. They exchanged amused glances while they re-pinned my sleeves and skirt without further questions. This time, at least, past misbehaviour worked in my favour.

To my relief both my guardian and his wife were away when we returned to Combe and would not return that night. But I had to let Mrs Hay resume her former role as my nurse, and order my fire built higher and fuss over my ankle with cool cloths and ointments. I agreed to eat my supper propped up on pillows in my big canopied bed. I stroked the four upright carved oak lions that held up the canopy and protected me from bad dreams. But tonight they stared past me with blank, denying eyes.

There was no help for it, I decided as I tried to force down some pigeon pie. I must risk implicating myself with guilty knowledge and warn Henry. If any harm came to him that might have been avoided, I would have to kill myself after all. I would not let myself think that the harm might already be done. I pushed aside the chicken broth. I asked Anne to fetch my pen and ink.

‘You don’t understand men’s affairs,’ the man in the forest had said. He was right. My life was being shaped by events I might know nothing about until it was too late. But I knew enough to know that my father’s demons had followed us here to his Promised Land and threatened both Henry and me.