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Opening Extract from...

The Queen's Fool

Written by Philippa Gregory

Published by HarperCollins

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HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2003
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 00 716659 1

Typeset in Postscript Linotype Minion
with Medici Script display
by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Summer 1548

The girl, giggling and over-excited, was running in the sunlit garden, running away from her stepfather, but not so fast that he could not catch her. Her stepmother, seated in an arbour with Rosamund roses in bud all around her, caught sight of the fourteen-year-old girl and the handsome man chasing around the broad tree trunks on the smooth turf and smiled, determined to see only the best in both of them: the girl she was bringing up and the man she had adored for years.

He snatched at the hem of the girl's swinging gown and caught her up to him for a moment. 'A forfeit!' he said, his dark face close to her flushed cheeks.

They both knew what the forfeit would be. Like quicksilver she slid from his grasp and dodged away, to the far side of an ornamental fountain with a broad circular bowl. Fat carp were swimming slowly in the water; Elizabeth's excited face was reflected in the surface as she leaned forward to taunt him.

'Can't catch me!'

''Course I can.'

She leaned low so that he could see her small breasts at the top of the square-cut green gown. She felt his eyes on her and the colour in her cheeks deepened. He watched, amused and aroused, as her neck flushed rosy pink.

'I can catch you any time I want to,' he said, thinking of the chase of sex that ends in bed.

'Come on then!' she said, not knowing exactly what she was inviting,

but knowing that she wanted to hear his feet pounding the grass behind her, sense his hands outstretched to grab at her; and, more than anything else, to feel his arms around her, pulling her against the fascinating contours of his body, the scratchy embroidery of his doublet against her cheek, the press of his thigh against her legs.

She gave a little scream and dashed away again down an *allée* of yew trees, where the Chelsea garden ran down to the river. The queen, smiling, looked up from her sewing and saw her beloved stepdaughter racing between the trees, her handsome husband a few easy strides behind. She looked down again at her sewing and did not see him catch Elizabeth, whirl her around, put her back to the red papery bark of the yew tree, and clamp his hand over her half-open mouth.

Elizabeth's eyes blazed black with excitement, but she did not struggle. When he realised that she would not scream, he took his hand away and bent his dark head.

Elizabeth felt the smooth sweep of his moustache against her lips, smelled the heady scent of his hair, his skin. She closed her eyes and tipped back her head to offer her lips, her neck, her breasts to his mouth. When she felt his sharp teeth graze her skin, she was no longer a giggling child, she was a young woman in the heat of first desire.

Gently he loosened his grip on her waist, and his hand stole up the firmly boned stomacher to the neck of her gown, where he could slide a finger down inside her linen to touch her breasts. Her nipple was hard and aroused, when he rubbed it she gave a little mew of pleasure that made him laugh at the predictability of female desire, a deep chuckle in the back of his throat.

Elizabeth pressed herself against the length of his body, feeling his thigh push forward between her legs in reply. She had a sensation like an overwhelming curiosity. She longed to know what might happen next.

When he made a movement away from her, as if to release her, she wound her arms around his back and pulled him into her again. She felt rather than saw Tom Seymour's smile of pleasure at her culpability, as his mouth came down on hers again and his tongue licked, as delicate as a cat, against the side of her mouth. Torn between disgust and desire at the extraordinary sensation, she slid her own tongue to meet his and felt the terrible intimacy of a grown man's intrusive kiss.

All at once it was too much for her, and she shrank back from him,

but he knew the rhythm of this dance which she had so light-heartedly invoked, and which would now beat through her very veins. He caught at the hem of her brocade skirt and pulled it up and up until he could get at her, sliding his practised hand up her thighs, underneath her linen shift. Instinctively she clamped her legs together against his touch until he brushed, with calculated gentleness, the back of his hand on her hidden sex. At the teasing touch of his knuckles, she melted; he could feel her almost dissolve beneath him. She would have fallen if he had not had a firm arm around her waist, and he knew at that moment that he could have the king's own daughter, Princess Elizabeth, against a tree in the queen's garden. The girl was a virgin in name alone. In reality, she was little more than a whore.

A light step on the path made him quickly turn, dropping Elizabeth's gown and putting her behind him, out of sight. Anyone could read the tranced willingness on the girl's face; she was lost in her desire. He was afraid it was the queen, his wife, whose love for him was insulted every day that he seduced her ward under her very nose: the queen, who had been entrusted with the care of her stepdaughter the princess, Queen Katherine who had sat at Henry VIII's deathbed but dreamed of this man.

But it was not the queen who stood before him on the path. It was only a girl, a little girl of about nine years old, with big solemn dark eyes and a white Spanish cap tied under her chin. She carried two books strapped with bookseller's tape in her hand, and she regarded him with a cool objective interest, as if she had seen and understood everything.

'How now, sweetheart!' he exclaimed, falsely cheerful. 'You gave me a start. I might have thought you a fairy, appearing so suddenly.'

She frowned at his rapid, over-loud speech, and then she replied, very slowly with a strong Spanish accent. 'Forgive me, sir. My father told me to bring these books to Sir Thomas Seymour and they said you were in the garden.'

She proffered the package of books, and Tom Seymour was forced to step forward and take them from her hands. 'You're the bookseller's daughter,' he said cheerfully. 'The bookseller from Spain.'

She bowed her head in assent, not taking her dark scrutiny from his face.

'What are you staring at, child?' he asked, conscious of Elizabeth, hastily rearranging her gown behind him.

'I was looking at you, sir, but I saw something most dreadful.'

'What?' he demanded. For a moment he was afraid she would say that she had seen him with the Princess of England backed up against a tree like a common doxy, her skirt pulled up out of the way and his fingers dabbling at her purse.

'I saw a scaffold behind you,' said the surprising child, and then turned and walked away as if she had completed her errand and there was nothing more for her to do in the sunlit garden.

Tom Seymour whirled back to Elizabeth, who was trying to comb her disordered hair with fingers that were still shaking with desire. At once she stretched out her arms to him, wanting more.

'Did you hear that?'

Elizabeth's eyes were slits of black. 'No,' she said silkily. 'Did she say something?'

'She only said that she saw the scaffold behind me!' He was more shaken than he wanted to reveal. He tried for a bluff laugh, but it came out with a quaver of fear.

At the mention of the scaffold Elizabeth was suddenly alert. 'Why?' she snapped. 'Why should she say such a thing?'

'God knows,' he said. 'Stupid little witch. Probably mistook the word, she's foreign. Probably meant throne! Probably saw the throne behind me!'

But this joke was no more successful than his bluster, since in Elizabeth's imagination the throne and the scaffold were always close neighbours. The colour drained from her face, leaving her sallow with fear.

'Who is she?' Her voice was sharp with nervousness. 'Who is she working for?'

He turned to look for the child but the *allée* was empty. At the distant end of it he could see his wife walking slowly towards them, her back arched to carry the pregnant curve of her belly.

'Not a word,' he said quickly to the girl at his side. 'Not a word of this, sweetheart. You don't want to upset your stepmother.'

He hardly needed to warn her. At the first hint of danger the girl was wary, smoothing her dress, conscious always that she must play a part,

that she must survive. He could always rely on Elizabeth's duplicity. She might be only fourteen but she had been trained in deceit every day since the death of her mother, she had been an apprentice cheat for twelve long years. And she was the daughter of a liar – two liars, he thought spitefully. She might feel desire; but she was always more alert to danger or ambition than to lust. He took her cold hand and led her up the *allée* towards his wife Katherine. He tried for a merry smile. 'I caught her at last!' he called out.

He glanced around, he could not see the child anywhere. 'We had such a race!' he cried.



I was that child, and that was the first sight I ever had of the Princess Elizabeth: damp with desire, panting with lust, rubbing herself like a cat against another woman's husband. But it was the first and last time I saw Tom Seymour. Within a year, he was dead on the scaffold charged with treason, and Elizabeth had denied three times having anything more than the most common acquaintance with him.