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The Cousins' War

THE WHITE QUEEN

PHILIPPA GREGORY



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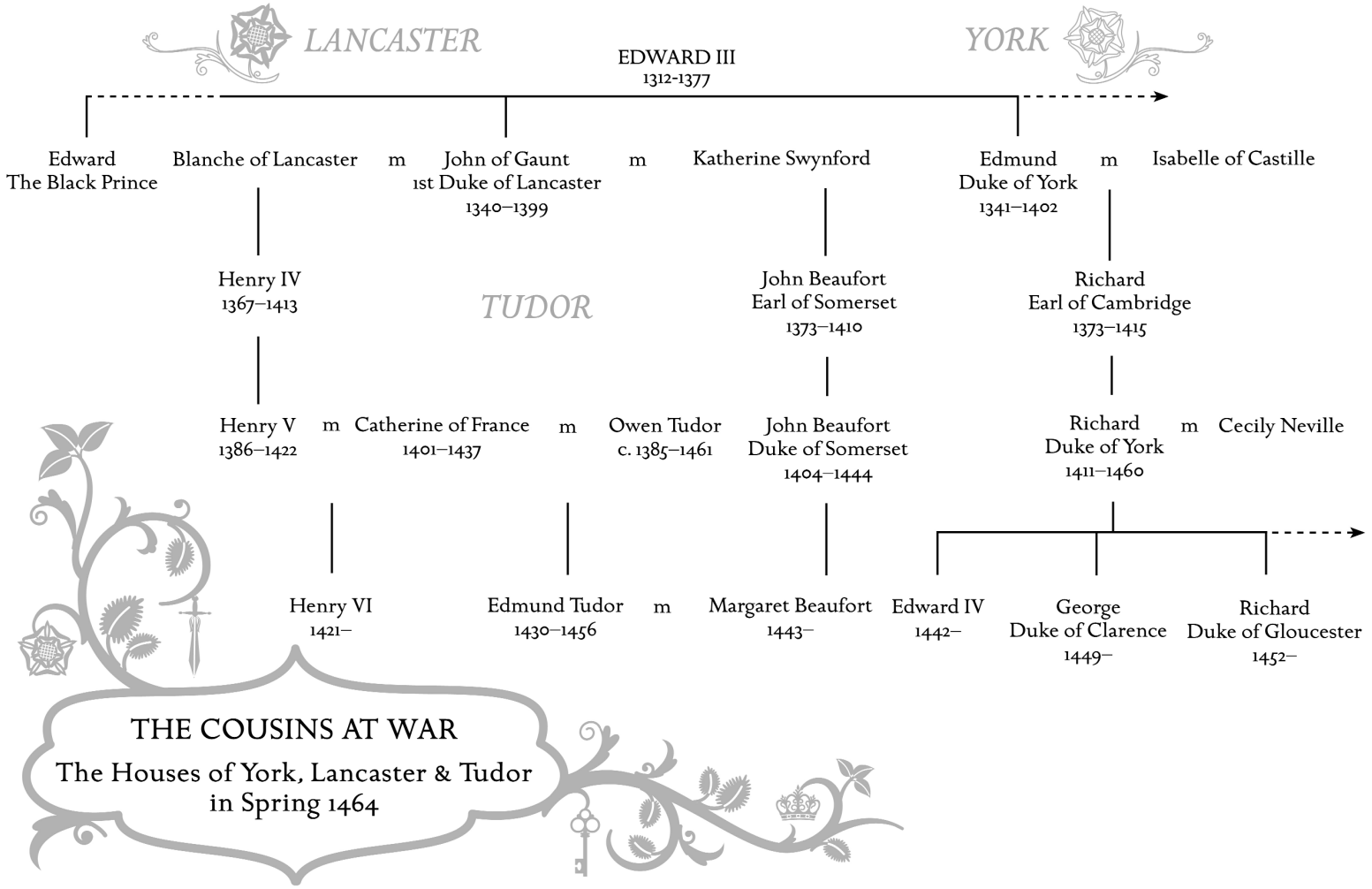
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For Anthony


LANCASTER
YORK
EDWARD III
1312-1377
Edward
The Black Prince
Blanche of Lancaster
m
John of Gaunt
1st Duke of Lancaster
1340–1399
m
Katherine Swynford
Edmund
Duke of York
1341–1402
m
Isabelle of Castille
Henry IV
1367–1413
TUDOR
John Beaufort
Earl of Somerset
1373–1410
Richard
Earl of Cambridge
1373–1415
Henry V
1386–1422
m
Catherine of France
1401–1437
m
Owen Tudor
c. 1385–1461
John Beaufort
Duke of Somerset
1404–1444
Richard
Duke of York
1411–1460
m
Cecily Neville
Henry VI
1421–
Edmund Tudor
1430–1456
m
Margaret Beaufort
1443–
Edward IV
1442–
George
Duke of Clarence
1449–
Richard
Duke of Gloucester
1452–
THE COUSINS AT WAR
The Houses of York, Lancaster & Tudor
in Spring 1464

In the darkness of the forest the young knight could hear the splashing of the fountain long before he could see the glimmer of moonlight reflected on the still surface. He was about to step forward, longing to dip his head, drink in the coolness, when he caught his breath at the sight of something dark, moving deep in the water. There was a greenish shadow in the sunken bowl of the fountain, something like a great fish, something like a drowned body. Then it moved and stood upright and he saw, frighteningly naked: a bathing woman. Her skin as she rose up, water coursing down her flanks, was even paler than the white marble bowl, her wet hair dark as a shadow.

She is Melusina, the water goddess, and she is found in hidden springs and waterfalls in any forest in Christendom, even in those as far away as Greece. She bathes in the Moorish fountains too. They know her by another name in the northern countries where the lakes are glazed with ice and it crackles when she rises. A man may love her if he keeps her secret and lets her alone when she wants to bathe, and she may love him in return until he breaks his word, as men always do, and she sweeps him into the deeps with her fishy tail, and turns his faithless blood to water.

The tragedy of Melusina, whatever language tells it, whatever tune it sings, is that a man will always promise more than he can do to a woman he cannot understand.

SPRING 1464



My father is Sir Richard Woodville, Baron Rivers, an English nobleman, a landholder and a supporter of the true kings of England, the Lancastrian line. My mother descends from the Dukes of Burgundy and so carries the watery blood of the goddess Melusina, who founded their royal house with her entranced ducal lover, and can still be met at times of extreme trouble, crying a warning over the castle rooftops when the son and heir is dying and the family doomed. Or so they say, those who believe in such things.

With this contradictory parentage of mine: solid English earth and French water goddess, one could expect anything from me: an enchantress, or an ordinary girl. There are those who will say I am both. But today, as I comb my hair with particular care and arrange it under my tallest headdress, take the hands of my two fatherless boys and lead the way to the road that goes to Northampton, I would give all that I am to be, just this once, simply irresistible.

I have to attract the attention of a young man riding out to yet another battle, against an enemy that cannot be defeated. He may not even see me. He is not likely to be in the mood for beggars or flirts. I have to excite his compassion for my position, inspire his sympathy for my needs, and stay in his memory long enough for him to do something about them both. And this is a man who

has beautiful women flinging themselves at him every night of the week, and a hundred claimants for every post in his gift.

He is a usurper and a tyrant, my enemy and the son of my enemy, but I am far beyond loyalty to anyone but my sons and myself. My own father rode out to the battle of Towton against this man who now calls himself King of England, though he is little more than a braggart boy; and I have never seen a man as broken as my father when he came home from Towton, his sword arm bleeding through his jacket, his face white, saying that this boy is a commander such as we have never seen before, and our cause is lost, and we are all without hope while he lives. Twenty thousand men were cut down at Towton at this boy's command: no one had ever seen such death before in England. My father said it was a harvest of Lancastrians, not a battle. The rightful King Henry and his wife, Queen Margaret of Anjou, fled to Scotland, devastated by the deaths.

Those of us left in England did not surrender readily. The battles went on and on to resist the false king, this boy of York. My own husband was killed commanding our cavalry, only three years ago at St Albans. And now I am left a widow and what land and fortune I once called my own has been taken by my mother-in-law with the goodwill of the victor, the master of this boy-king, the great puppeteer who is known as the Kingmaker: Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, who made a king out of this vain boy, now only twenty-two, and will make a hell out of England for those of us who still defend the House of Lancaster.

There are Yorkists in every great house in the land now, and every profitable business or place or tax is in their gift. Their boy-king is on the throne and his supporters form the new court. We, the defeated, are paupers in our own houses and strangers in our own country, our king an exile, our queen a vengeful alien plotting with our old enemy of France. We have to make terms with the tyrant of York, while praying that God turns against him and our true king sweeps south with an army for yet another battle.

In the meantime, like many a woman with a husband dead and

a father defeated, I have to piece my life together like a patchwork of scraps. I have to regain my fortune somehow, though it seems that neither kinsman nor friend can make any headway for me. We are all known as traitors. We are forgiven but not beloved. We are all powerless. I shall have to be my own advocate, and make my own case to a boy who respects justice so little that he would dare to take an army against his own cousin: a king ordained. What can one say to such a savage that he could understand?

My boys, Thomas, who is nine, and Richard, who is eight, are dressed in their best, their hair wetted and smoothed down, their faces shining from soap. I have tight hold of their hands as they stand on either side of me, for these are true boys and they draw dirt to them as if by magic. If I let them go for a second then one will scuff his shoes and the other rip his hose, and both of them will manage to get leaves in their hair and mud on their faces and Thomas will certainly fall in the stream. As it is, anchored by my grip, they hop from one leg to another in an agony of boredom, and only straighten up when I say, 'Hush, I can hear horses.'

It sounds like the patter of rain at first, and then in a moment a rumble like thunder. The jingle of the harness and the flutter of the standards, the chink of the chain mail and the blowing of the horses, the sound and the smell and the roar of a hundred horses ridden hard is overwhelming and, even though I am determined to stand out and make them stop, I can't help but shrink back. What must it be to face these men riding down in battle with their lances outstretched before them, like a galloping wall of staves? How could any man face it?

Thomas sees the bare blond head in the midst of all the fury and noise and shouts, 'Hurrah!' like the boy he is, and at the shout of his treble voice I see the man's head turn, and he sees me and the boys and his hand snatches the reins and he bellows, 'Halt!' His horse stands up on its rear legs, wrenched to a stand-still, and the whole cavalcade wheels and halts and swears at the sudden stop, and then abruptly everything is silent and the dust billows around us.

His horse blows out, shakes its head, but the rider is like a statue on its high back. He is looking at me and I at him, and it is so quiet that I can hear a thrush in the branches of the oak above me. How it sings. My God, it sings like a ripple of glory, like joy made into sound. I have never heard a bird sing like that before, as if it were carolling happiness.

I step forward, still holding my sons' hands, and I open my mouth to plead my case, but at this moment, this crucial moment, I have lost my words. I have practised well enough. I had a little speech all prepared; but now I have nothing. And it is almost as if I need no words. I just look at him and somehow I expect him to understand everything – my fear of the future and my hopes for these my boys, my lack of money and the irritable pity of my father which makes living under his roof so unbearable to me, the coldness of my bed at night, and my longing for another child, my sense that my life is over. Dear God, I am only twenty-seven, my cause is defeated, my husband is dead. Am I to be one of many poor widows who will spend the rest of their days at someone else's fireside trying to be a good guest? Shall I never be kissed again? Shall I never feel joy? Not ever again?

And still the bird sings as if to say that delight is easy, for those who desire it.

He makes a gesture with his hand to the older man at his side and the man barks out a command and the soldiers turn their horses off the road and go into the shade of the trees. But the king jumps down from his great horse, drops the reins and walks towards me and my boys. I am a tall woman but he overtops me by a head; he must be far more than six feet tall. My boys crane their necks up to see him; he is a giant to them. He is blond-haired, grey-eyed, with a tanned, open, smiling face, rich with charm, easy with grace. This is a king as we have never seen before in England: this is a man that the people will love on sight. And his eyes are fixed on my face as if I know a secret that he has to have, as if we have known each other for ever, and I can feel my cheeks are burning but I cannot look away from him.

A modest woman looks down in this world, keeps her eyes on her slippers; a supplicant bows low and stretches out a pleading hand; but I stand tall, I am aghast at myself, staring like an ignorant peasant, and find I cannot take my eyes from his, from his smiling mouth, from his gaze, which is burning on my face.

'Who is this?' he asks, still looking at me.

'Your Grace, this is my mother, Lady Elizabeth Grey,' my son Thomas says politely, and he pulls off his cap and drops to his knee.

Richard on my other side kneels too and mutters, as if he cannot be heard, 'Is this the king? Really? He is the tallest man I have ever seen in my life!'

I sink down into a curtsey but I cannot look away. Instead, I gaze up at him, as a woman might stare with hot eyes at a man she adores.

'Rise up,' he says. His voice is low, for only me to hear. 'Have you come to see me?'

'I need your help,' I say. I can hardly form the words. I feel as if the love potion, which my mother soaked into the scarf billowing from my headdress, is drugging me, not him. 'I cannot obtain my dowry lands, my jointure, now I am widowed.' I stumble in the face of his smiling interest. 'I am a widow now. I have nothing to live on.'

'A widow?'

'My husband was Sir John Grey. He died at St Albans,' I say. It is to confess his treason and the damnation of my sons. The king will recognise the name of the commander of his enemy's cavalry. I nip my lip. 'Their father did his duty as he conceived it to be, Your Grace; he was loyal to the man he thought was king. My boys are innocent of anything.'

'He left you these two sons?' He smiles down at my boys.

'The best part of my fortune,' I say. 'This is Richard and this is Thomas Grey.'

He nods at my boys, who gaze up at him as if he were some kind of high-bred horse, too big for them to pet but a figure for

awestruck admiration, and then he looks back to me. 'I am thirsty,' he says. 'Is your home near here?'

'We would be honoured . . .' I glance at the guard who rides with him. There must be more than a hundred of them. He chuckles. 'They can ride on,' he decides. 'Hastings!' The older man turns and waits. 'You go on to Grafton. I will catch you up. Smollett can stay with me, and Forbes. I will come in an hour or so.'

Sir William Hastings looks me up and down as if I am a pretty piece of ribbon for sale. I show him a hard stare in reply, and he takes off his hat and bows to me, throws a salute to the king, shouts to the guard to mount up.

'Where are you going?' he asks the king.

The boy-king looks at me.

'We are going to the house of my father, Baron Rivers, Sir Richard Woodville,' I say proudly, though I know the king will recognise the name of a man who was high in the favour of the Lancaster court, fought for them, and once took hard words from him in person when York and Lancaster were daggers drawn. We all know of each other well enough, but it is a courtesy generally observed to forget that we were all loyal to Henry VI once, until these turned traitor.

Sir William raises his eyebrow at his king's choice for a stopping place. 'Then I doubt that you'll want to stay very long,' he says unpleasantly, and rides on. The ground shakes as they go by, and they leave us in warm quietness as the dust settles.

'My father has been forgiven and his title restored,' I say defensively. 'You forgave him yourself after Towton.'

'I remember your father and your mother,' the king says equably. 'I have known them since I was a boy in good times and bad. I am only surprised that they never introduced me to you.'

I have to stifle a giggle. This is a king notorious for seduction. Nobody with any sense would let their daughter meet him. 'Would you like to come this way?' I ask. 'It is a little walk to my father's house.'

'D'you want a ride, boys?' he asks them. Their heads bob up

like imploring ducklings. 'You can both go up,' he says and lifts Richard and then Thomas into the saddle. 'Now hold tight. You on to your brother and you – Thomas, is it? – you hold on to the pommel.'

He loops the rein over his arm and then offers me his other arm, and so we walk to my home, through the wood, under the shade of the trees. I can feel the warmth of his arm through the slashed fabric of his sleeve. I have to stop myself leaning towards him. I look ahead to the house and to my mother's window and see, from the little movement behind the mullioned panes of glass, that she has been looking out, and willing this very thing to happen.

She is at the front door as we approach, the groom of the household at her side. She curtseys low. 'Your Grace,' she says pleasantly, as if the king comes to visit every day. 'You are very welcome to Grafton Manor.'

A groom comes running and takes the reins of the horse to lead it to the stable yard. My boys cling on for the last few yards, as my mother steps back and bows the king into the hall. 'Will you take a glass of small ale?' she asks. 'Or we have a very good wine from my cousins in Burgundy?'

'I'll take the ale, if you please,' he says agreeably. 'It is thirsty work riding. It is hot for spring. Good day to you, Lady Rivers.'

The high table in the great hall is laid with the best glasses and a jug of ale as well as the wine. 'You are expecting company?' he asks.

She smiles at him. 'There is no man in the world could ride past my daughter,' she says. 'When she told me she wanted to put her own case to you, I had them draw the best of our ale. I guessed you would stop.'

He laughs at her pride, and turns to smile at me. 'Indeed, it would be a blind man who could ride past you,' he says.

I am about to make some little comment but again it happens. Our eyes meet and I can think of nothing to say to him. We just stand, staring at each other for a long moment until my mother

passes him a glass and says quietly, 'Good health, Your Grace.'

He shakes his head, as if awakened. 'And is your father here?' he asks.

'Sir Richard has ridden over to see our neighbours,' I say. 'We expect him back for his dinner.'

My mother takes a clean glass and holds it up to the light and tuts as if there is some flaw. 'Excuse me,' she says, and leaves. The king and I are alone in the great hall, the sun pouring through the big window behind the long table, the house in silence, as if everyone is holding their breath and listening.

He goes behind the table and sits down in the master's chair. 'Please sit,' he says and gestures to the chair beside him. I sit as if I am his queen, on his right hand, and I let him pour me a glass of small ale. 'I will look into your claim for your lands,' he says. 'Do you want your own house? Are you not happy living here with your mother and father?'

'They are kind to me,' I say. 'But I am used to my own household, I am accustomed to running my own lands. And my sons will have nothing if I cannot reclaim their father's lands. It is their inheritance. I must defend my sons.'

'These have been hard times,' he says. 'But if I can keep my throne, I will see the law of the land running from one coast of England to another once more, and your boys will grow up without fear of warfare.'

I nod my head.

'Are you loyal to King Henry?' he asks me. 'D'you follow your family as loyal Lancastrians?'

Our history cannot be denied. I know that there was a furious quarrel in Calais between this king, then nothing more than a young York son, and my father, then one of the great Lancastrian lords. My mother was the first lady at the court of Margaret of Anjou; she must have met and patronised the handsome young son of York a dozen times. But who would have known then that the world might turn upside down and that the daughter of Baron Rivers would have to plead to that very boy for her own

lands to be restored to her? 'My mother and father were very great at the court of King Henry, but my family and I accept your rule now,' I say quickly.

He smiles. 'Sensible of you all, since I won,' he says. 'I accept your homage.'

I give a little giggle and at once his face warms. 'It must be over soon, please God,' he says. 'Henry has nothing more than a handful of castles in lawless northern country. He can muster brigands like any outlaw; but he cannot raise a decent army. And his queen cannot go on and on bringing in the country's enemies to fight her own people. Those who fight for me will be rewarded, but even those who have fought against me will see that I shall be just in victory. And I will make my rule run, even to the north of England, even through their strongholds, up to the very border of Scotland.'

'Do you go to the north now?' I ask. I take a sip of small ale. It is my mother's best but there is a tang behind it; she will have added some drops of a tincture, a love philtre, something to make desire grow. I need nothing. I am breathless already.

'We need peace,' he says. 'Peace with France, peace with the Scots, and peace from brother to brother, cousin to cousin. Henry must surrender; his wife has to stop bringing in French troops to fight against Englishmen. We should not be divided any more, York against Lancaster: we should all be Englishmen. There is nothing that sickens a country more than its own people fighting against one another. It destroys families, it is killing us daily. This has to end; and I will end it. I will end it this year.'

I feel the sick fear that the people of this country have known for nearly a decade. 'There must be another battle?'

He smiles. 'I shall try to keep it from your door, my lady. But it must be done and it must be done soon. I pardoned the Duke of Somerset and took him into my friendship and now he has run away to Henry once more, a Lancastrian turncoat, faithless like all the Beauforts. The Percys are raising the north against me.

They hate the Nevilles and the Neville family are my greatest allies. It is like a dance now: the dancers are in their place, they have to do their steps. They will have a battle, it cannot be avoided.'

'The queen's army will come this way?' Though my mother loved her and was the first of her ladies, I have to say that her army is a force of absolute terror. Mercenaries, who care nothing for the country, Frenchmen who hate us, and the savage men of the north of England who see our fertile fields and prosperous towns as good for nothing but plunder. Last time she brought in the Scots on the agreement that anything they stole they could keep as their fee. She might as well have hired wolves.

'I shall stop them,' he says simply. 'I shall meet them in the north of England and I shall defeat them.'

'How can you be so sure?' I exclaim.

He flashes a smile at me and I catch my breath. 'Because I have never lost a battle,' he says simply. 'I never will. I am quick on the field, and I am skilled, I am brave and I am lucky. My army moves faster than any other; I make them march fast and I move them fully armed. I outguess and I outpace my enemy. I don't lose battles. I am lucky in war as I am lucky in love. I have never lost in either game. I won't lose against Margaret of Anjou, I will win.'

I laugh at his confidence, as if I am not impressed; but in truth he dazzles me.

He finishes his cup of ale and gets to his feet. 'Thank you for your kindness,' he says.

'You're going? You're going now?' I stammer.

'You will write down for me the details of your claim?'

'Yes. But . . .'

'Names and dates and so on? The land that you say is yours and the details of your ownership?'

I almost clutch his sleeve to keep him with me, like a beggar. 'I will, but . . .'

'Then I will bid you adieu.'

There is nothing I can do to stop him, unless my mother has thought to lame his horse.

'Yes, Your Grace, and thank you. But you are most welcome to stay. We will dine soon . . . or . . .'

'No, I must go. My friend William Hastings will be waiting for me.'

'Of course, of course. I don't wish to delay you . . .'

I walk with him to the door. I am anguished at his leaving so abruptly, and yet I cannot think of anything to make him stay. At the threshold he turns and takes my hand. He bows his fair head low and, deliciously, turns my hand. He presses a kiss into my palm and folds my fingers over the kiss as if to keep it safe. When he comes up smiling I see that he knows perfectly well that this gesture has made me melt and that I will keep my hand clasped until bedtime when I can put it to my mouth.

He looks down at my entranced face, at my hand that stretches, despite myself, to touch his sleeve. Then he relents. 'I shall fetch the paper that you prepare, myself, tomorrow,' he says. 'Of course. Did you think differently? How could you? Did you think I could walk away from you, and not come back? Of course I am coming back. Tomorrow at noon. Will I see you then?'

He must hear my gasp. The colour rushes back into my face so that my cheeks are burning hot. 'Yes,' I stammer. 'T . . . tomorrow.'

'At noon. And I will stay to dinner, if I may.'

'We will be honoured.'

He bows to me and turns and walks down the hall, through the wide-flung double doors and out into the bright sunlight. I put my hands behind me and I hold the great wooden door for support. Truly, my knees are too weak to hold me up.

'He's gone?' my mother asks, coming quietly through the little side door.

'He's coming back tomorrow,' I say. 'He's coming back tomorrow. He's coming back to see me tomorrow.'



When the sun is setting and my boys are saying their evening prayers, blond heads on their clasped hands at the foot of their trestle beds, my mother leads the way out of the front door of the house and down the winding footpath to where the bridge, a couple of wooden planks, spans the River Tove. She walks across, her conical headdress brushing the overhanging trees, and beckons me to follow her. At the other side, she puts her hand on a great ash tree and I see there is a dark thread of silk wound around the rough-grained wood of the thick trunk.

'What is this?'

'Reel it in,' is all she says. 'Reel it in, a foot or so every day.'

I put my hand on the thread and pull it gently. It comes easily; there is something light and small tied onto the far end. I cannot even see what it might be, as the thread loops across the river into the reeds, in deep water on the other side.

'Magic,' I say flatly. My father has banned these practices in his house: the law of the land forbids it. It is death to be proved as a witch, death by drowning in the ducking stool, or strangling by the blacksmith at the village crossroads. Women like my mother are not permitted our skills in England today, we are named as forbidden.

'Magic,' she agrees, untroubled. 'Powerful magic, for a good cause. Well worth the risk. Come every day and reel it in, a foot at a time.'

'What will come in?' I ask her. 'At the end of this fishing line of yours? What great fish will I catch?'

She smiles at me and puts her hand on my cheek. 'Your heart's desire,' she says gently. 'I didn't raise you to be a poor widow.'

She turns and walks back across the footbridge and I pull the thread as she has told me, take in twelve inches of it, tie it fast again, and follow her.

'So what did you raise me for?' I ask her, as we walk side by side to the house. 'What am I to be? In your great scheme of

things? In a world at war, where it seems, despite your foreknowledge and magic, we are stuck on the losing side?'

The new moon is rising, a small sickle of a moon. Without a word spoken, we both wish on it; we bob a curtsey, and I hear the chink as we turn over the little coins in our pockets.

'I raised you to be the best that you could be,' she says simply. 'I didn't know what that would be, and I still don't know. But I didn't raise you to be a lonely woman, missing her husband, struggling to keep her boys safe; a woman alone in a cold bed, her beauty wasted on empty lands.'

'Well, Amen,' I say simply, my eyes on the slender sickle. 'Amen to that. And may the new moon bring me something better.'



At noon the next day I am in my ordinary gown, seated in my privy chamber, when the girl comes in a rush to say that the king is riding down the road towards the Hall. I don't let myself run to the window to look for him, I don't allow myself a dash to the hammered-silver looking-glass in my mother's room. I put down my sewing, and I walk down the great wooden stairs, so that when the door opens and he comes into the hall I am serenely descending, looking as if I am called away from my household chores to greet a surprise guest.

I go to him with a smile and he greets me with a courteous kiss on the cheek and I feel the warmth of his skin and see, through my half-closed eyes, the softness of the hair that curls at the nape of his neck. His hair smells faintly of spices, and the skin of his neck smells clean. When he looks at me I recognise desire in his face. He lets go of my hand slowly, and I step back from him with reluctance. I turn and curtsey as my father and my two oldest brothers, Anthony and John, step forwards to make their bows.

The conversation at dinner is stilted, as it must be. My family is deferential to this new King of England; but there is no denying that we threw our lives and our fortune into battle against him, and my husband was not the only one of our household and

affinity who did not come home. But this is how it must be in a war that they have called 'the Cousins' War', since brother fights against brother and their sons follow them to death. My father has been forgiven, my brothers too, and now the victor breaks bread with them as if to forget that he crowed over them in Calais, as if to forget that my father turned tail and ran from his army in the bloodstained snow at Towton.

King Edward is easy. He is charming to my mother and amusing to my brothers Anthony and John, and then Richard, Edward, and Lionel when they join us later. Three of my younger sisters are home and they eat their dinner in silence, wide-eyed in admiration, but too afraid to say a word. Anthony's wife, Elizabeth, is quiet and elegant beside my mother. The king is observant of my father and asks him about game and the land, about the price of wheat and the steadiness of labour. By the time they have served the preserved fruit and the sweetmeats he is chatting like a friend of the family, and I can sit back in my chair and watch him.

'And now to business,' he says to my father. 'Lady Elizabeth tells me that she has lost her dower lands.'

My father nods. 'I am sorry to trouble you with it but we have tried to reason with Lady Ferrers and my Lord Warwick without result. They were confiscated after—' He clears his throat. 'After St Albans, you understand. Her husband was killed there. And now she cannot get her dower lands returned. Even if you regard her husband as a traitor, she herself is innocent and she should at least have her widow's jointure.'

The king turns to me. 'You have written down your title and the claim to the land?'

'Yes,' I say. I give him the paper and he glances at it.

'I shall speak to Sir William Hastings and ask him to see that this is done,' he says simply. 'He will be your advocate.'

It seems to be as easy as that. In one stroke I will be freed from poverty and have a property of my own again, my sons will have an inheritance and I will be no longer a burden on my

family. If someone asks for me in marriage I will come with property. I am no longer a case for charity. I will not have to be grateful for a proposal. I will not have to thank a man for marrying me.

'You are gracious, Sire,' my father says easily and nods to me.

Obediently I rise from my chair and curtsey low. 'I thank you,' I say. 'This means everything to me.'

'I shall be a just king,' he says, looking at my father. 'I would want no Englishman to suffer for my coming to my throne.'

My father makes a visible effort to silence his reply that some of us have suffered already.

'More wine?' My mother interrupts him swiftly. 'Your Grace? Husband?'

'No, I must go,' the king says. 'We are mustering troops all over Northamptonshire and equipping them.' He pushes back his chair and we all – my father and brothers, my mother and sisters and I – bob up like puppets to stand as he stands. 'Will you show me around the garden before I leave, Lady Elizabeth?'

'I shall be honoured,' I say.

My father opens his mouth to offer his company, but my mother says quickly, 'Yes, do go, Elizabeth,' and the two of us slip from the room without a companion.

It is as warm as summer as we come from the darkness of the hall, and he offers me his arm and we walk down the steps to the garden, arms linked, in silence. I take the path around the little knot garden and we wind our way, looking at the trim hedges and the neat white stones; but I see nothing. He gathers my hand a little closer under his arm and I feel the warmth of his body. The lavender is coming into flower and I can smell the scent, sweet as orange blossom, sharp as lemons.

'I have only a little time,' he says. 'Somerset and Percy are mustering against me. Henry himself will come out of his castle and lead his army if he is in his right mind and can command. Poor soul, they tell me he is in his wits now, but he could lose them again at any moment. The queen must be planning to land

an army of Frenchmen in their support and we will have to face the power of France on English soil.'

'I shall pray for you,' I say.

'Death is near us all,' he says seriously. 'But it is a constant companion to a king come to his crown through the battlefield, and now riding out to fight again.'

He pauses, and I stop with him. It is very quiet but for a single bird singing. His face is grave. 'May I send a pageboy to bring you to me tonight?' he asks quietly. 'I have a longing for you, Lady Elizabeth Grey, that I have never felt for any woman before. Will you come to me? I ask it not as a king, and not even as a soldier who might die in battle, but as a simple man to the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. Come to me, I beg you, come to me. It could be my last wish. Will you come to me tonight?'

I shake my head. 'Forgive me, Your Grace, but I am a woman of honour.'

'I may never ask you again. God knows, I may never ask any woman again. There can be no dishonour in this. I could die next week.'

'Even so.'

'Are you not lonely?' he asks. His lips are almost brushing my forehead he is so close to me, I can feel the warmth of his breath on my cheek. 'And do you feel nothing for me? Can you say you don't want me? Just once? Don't you want me now?'

As slowly as I can, I let my eyes rise to his face. My gaze lingers on his mouth, then I look up.

'Dear God, I have to have you,' he breathes.

'I cannot be your mistress,' I say simply. 'I would rather die than dishonour my name. I cannot bring that shame on my family.' I pause. I am anxious not to be too discouraging. 'Whatever I might wish in my heart,' I say very softly.

'But you do want me?' he asks boyishly, and I let him see the warmth in my face.

'Ah,' I say. 'I should not tell you . . .'

He waits.

'I should not tell you how much.'

I see, swiftly hidden, the gleam of triumph. He thinks he will have me.

'Then you will come?'

'No.'

'Then must I go? Must I leave you? May I not . . .' He leans his face towards me and I raise mine. His kiss is as gentle as the brush of a feather on my soft mouth. My lips part slightly and I can feel him tremble like a horse held on a tight rein. 'Lady Elizabeth . . . I swear it . . . I have to . . .'

I take a step back in this delicious dance. 'If only . . .' I say.

'I'll come tomorrow,' he says abruptly. 'In the evening. At sunset. Will you meet me where I first saw you? Under the oak tree? Will you meet me there? I would say goodbye before I go north. I have to see you again, Elizabeth. If nothing more. I have to.'

I nod in silence and watch him turn on his heel and stride back to the house. I see him go round to the stable yard and then moments later his horse thunders down the track with his two pages spurring their horses to keep pace with him. I watch him out of sight and then I cross the little footbridge over the river and find the thread around the ash tree. Thoughtfully, I wind in the thread by another length and I tie it up. Then I walk home.