

THE WHITE PRINCESS

SHERIFF HUTTON CASTLE,
YORKSHIRE, AUTUMN 1485



I wish I could stop dreaming. I wish to God I could stop dreaming.

I am so tired; all I want to do is sleep. I want to sleep all the day, from dawn until twilight that every evening comes a little earlier and a little more drearily. In the daytime, all I think about is sleeping. But in the night all I do is try to stay awake.

I go to his quiet shuttered rooms to look at the candle as it gutters in the golden candlestick, burning slowly through the marked hours, though he will never see light again. The servants take a taper to a fresh candle every day at noon; each hour burns slowly away, although time means nothing to him now. Time is quite lost to him in his eternal darkness, in his eternal timelessness, though it leans so heavily on me. All day long I wait for the slow rolling-in of the grey evening and the mournful tolling of the Compline bell, when I can go to the chapel and pray for his soul, though he will never again hear my whispers, nor the quiet chanting of the priests.

Then I can go to bed. But when I get to bed I dare not sleep because I cannot bear the dreams that come. I dream of him. Over and over again I dream of him.

All day I keep my face smiling like a mask, smiling, smiling, my teeth bared, my eyes bright, my skin like strained parchment, paper-thin. I keep my voice clear and mellow, I speak words that

have no meaning and sometimes, when required, I even sing. At night I fall into my bed as if I were drowning in deep water, as if I were sinking below the depths, as if the water were possessing me, taking me like a mermaid, and for a moment I feel a deep relief as if, submerged in water, my grief can drain away, as if it were the river Lethe and the currents can bring forgetfulness and wash me into the cave of sleep; but then the dreams come.

I don't dream of his death – it would be the worst of nightmares to see him go down fighting. But I never dream of the battle, I don't see his final charge into the very heart of Henry Tudor's guard. I don't see him hacking his way through. I don't see Thomas Stanley's army sweep down and bury him under their hooves, as he is thrown from his horse, his sword arm failing, going down under a merciless cavalry charge, shouting: 'Treason! Treason! Treason!' I don't see William Stanley raise his crown and put it on another man's head.

I don't dream any of this, and I thank God for that mercy at least. These are my constant daytime thoughts that I cannot escape. These are bloody daytime reveries that fill my mind while I walk and talk lightly of the unseasonal heat, of the dryness of the ground, of the poor harvest this year. But my dreams at night are more painful, far more painful than this, for then I dream that I am in his arms and he is waking me with a kiss. I dream that we are walking in a garden, planning our future. I dream that I am pregnant with his child, my rounded belly under his warm hand, and he is smiling, delighted, and I am promising him that we will have a son, the son that he needs, a son for York, a son for England, a son for the two of us. 'We'll call him Arthur,' he says. 'We'll call him Arthur, like Arthur of Camelot, we'll call him Arthur for England.'

The pain, when I wake to find that I have been dreaming again, seems to get worse every day. I wish to God I could stop dreaming.



THE WHITE PRINCESS

My dearest daughter Elizabeth,

My heart and prayers are with you, dear child; but now, of all the times in your life, you must act the part of the queen that you were born to be.

The new king, Henry Tudor, commands you to come to me at the Palace of Westminster in London and you are to bring your sisters and cousins. Note this: he has not denied his betrothal to you. I expect it to go ahead.

I know this is not what you hoped for, my dear; but Richard is dead, and that part of your life is over. Henry is the victor and our task now is to make you his wife and Queen of England.

You will obey me in one other thing also: you will smile and look joyful as a bride coming to her betrothed. A princess does not share her grief with all the world. You were born a princess and you are the heir to a long line of courageous women. Lift up your chin and smile, my dear. I am waiting for you, and I will be smiling too.

Your loving mother

Elizabeth R

Dowager Queen of England

I read this letter with some care, for my mother has never been a straightforward woman and any word from her is always freighted with levels of meaning. I can imagine her thrilling at another chance at the throne of England. She is an indomitable woman; I have seen her brought very low, but never, even when she was widowed, even when nearly mad with grief, have I seen her humbled.

I understand at once her orders to look happy, to forget that the man I love is dead and tumbled into an unmarked grave, to forge the future of my family by hammering myself into marriage with his enemy. Henry Tudor has come to England, having spent his whole life in waiting, and he has won his battle, defeated the rightful king, my lover Richard, and now I am, like England itself, part of the spoils of war. If Richard had won at

Bosworth – and who would ever have dreamed that he would not? – I would have been his queen and his loving wife. But he went down under the swords of traitors, the very men who mustered and swore to fight for him; and instead I am to marry Henry and the glorious sixteen months when I was Richard's lover, all but queen of his court, and he was the heart of my heart, will be forgotten. Indeed, I had better hope that they are forgotten. I have to forget them myself.

I read my mother's letter, standing under the archway of the gatehouse of the great castle of Sheriff Hutton, and I turn and walk into the hall where a fire is burning in the central stone hearth, the air warm and hazy with wood-smoke. I crumple the single page into a ball and thrust it into the heart of the glowing logs, and watch it burn. Any mention of my love for Richard and his promises to me must be destroyed like this. And I must hide other secrets too, one especially. I was raised as a talkative princess in an open court rich with intellectual inquiry, where anything could be thought, said and written; but in the years since my father's death, I have learned the secretive skills of a spy.

My eyes are filling with tears from the smoke of the fire, but I know that there is no point in weeping. I rub my face and go to find the children in the big chamber at the top of the west tower that serves as their schoolroom and playroom. My sixteen-year-old sister Cecily has been singing with them this morning, and I can hear their voices and the rhythmic thud of the tabor as I climb the stone stairs. When I push open the door they break off and demand that I listen to a round they have composed. My ten-year-old sister Anne has been taught by the best masters since she was a baby, our twelve-year-old cousin Margaret can hold a tune, and her ten-year-old brother Edward has a clear soprano as sweet as a flute. I listen and then clap my hands in applause. 'And now, I have news for you.'

Edward Warwick, Margaret's little brother, lifts his heavy head from his slate. 'Not for me?' he asks forlornly. 'Not news for Teddy?'

‘Yes, for you too, and for your sister Maggie, and Cecily and Anne. News for all of you. As you know, Henry Tudor has won the battle and is to be the new King of England.’

These are royal children; their faces are glum, but they are too well-trained to say one word of regret for their fallen uncle Richard. Instead, they wait for what will come next.

‘The new King Henry is going to be a good king to his loyal people,’ I say, despising myself as I parrot the words that Sir Robert Willoughby said to me as he gave me my mother’s letter. ‘And he has summoned all of us children of the House of York to London.’

‘But he’ll be king,’ Cecily says flatly. ‘He’s going to be king.’

‘Of course he’ll be king! Who else?’ I stumble over the question I have inadvertently posed. ‘Him, of course. Anyway, he has won the crown. And he will give us back our good name and recognise us as princesses of York.’

Cecily makes a sulky face. In the last weeks before Richard the king rode out to battle, he ordered her to be married to Ralph Scrope, a next-to-nobody, to make sure that Henry Tudor could not claim her as a second choice of bride, after me. Cecily, like me, is a princess of York, and so marriage to either of us gives a man a claim to the throne. The shine was taken off me when gossip said that I was Richard’s lover, and then Richard demeaned Cecily too by condemning her to a lowly marriage. She claims now that it was never consummated, now she says that she does not regard it, that Mother will have it annulled; but presumably she is Lady Scrope, the wife of a defeated Yorkist, and when we are restored to our royal titles and become princesses again, she will have to retain his name and her humiliation, even if no-one knows where Ralph Scrope is today.

‘You know, *I* should be king,’ ten-year-old Edward says, tugging at my sleeve. ‘I’m next, aren’t I?’

I turn to him. ‘No, Teddy,’ I say gently. ‘You cannot be king. It’s true that you are a boy of the House of York and Uncle Richard once named you as his heir; but he is dead now, and the

new king will be Henry Tudor.’ I hear my voice quaver as I say ‘he is dead’, and I take a breath and try again. ‘Richard is dead, Edward, you know that, don’t you? You understand that King Richard is dead? And you will never be his heir now.’

He looks at me so blankly that I think he has not understood anything at all, and then his big hazel eyes fill with tears, and he turns and goes back to copying his Greek alphabet on his slate. I stare at his brown head for a moment and think that his dumb animal grief is just like mine. Except that I am ordered to talk all the time, and to smile all the day.

‘He can’t understand,’ Cecily says to me, keeping her voice low so his sister Maggie cannot hear. ‘We’ve all told him, over and over again. He’s too stupid to believe it.’

I glance at Maggie, quietly seating herself beside her brother to help him to form his letters, and I think that I must be as stupid as Edward, for I cannot believe it either. One moment Richard was marching at the head of an invincible army of the great families of England; the next they brought us the news that he had been beaten, and that three of his trusted friends had sat on their horses and watched him lead a desperate charge to his death, as if it were a sunny day at the joust, as if they were spectators and he a daring rider, and the whole thing a game that could go either way and was worth long odds.

I shake my head. If I think of him, riding alone against his enemies, riding with my glove tucked inside his breastplate against his heart, then I will start to cry; and my mother has commanded me to smile.

‘So we are going to London!’ I say, as if I am delighted at the prospect. ‘To court! And we will live with our Lady Mother at Westminster Palace again, and be with our little sisters Catherine and Bridget again.’

The two orphans of the Duke of Clarence look up at this. ‘But where will Teddy and me live?’ Maggie asks.

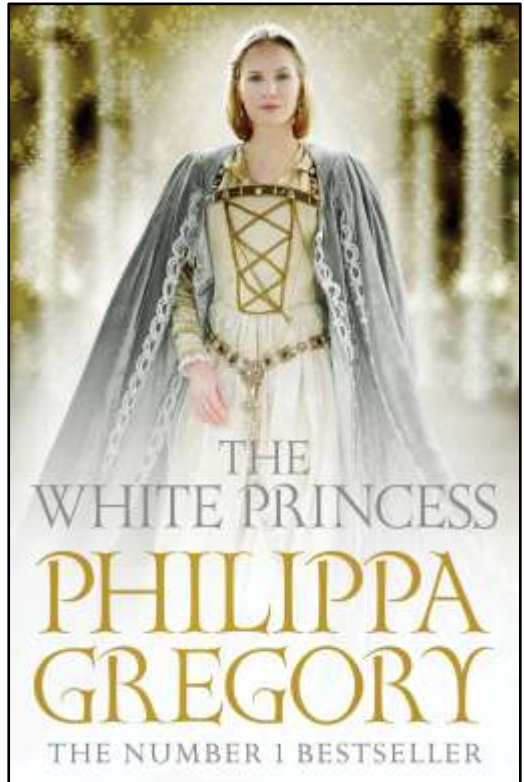
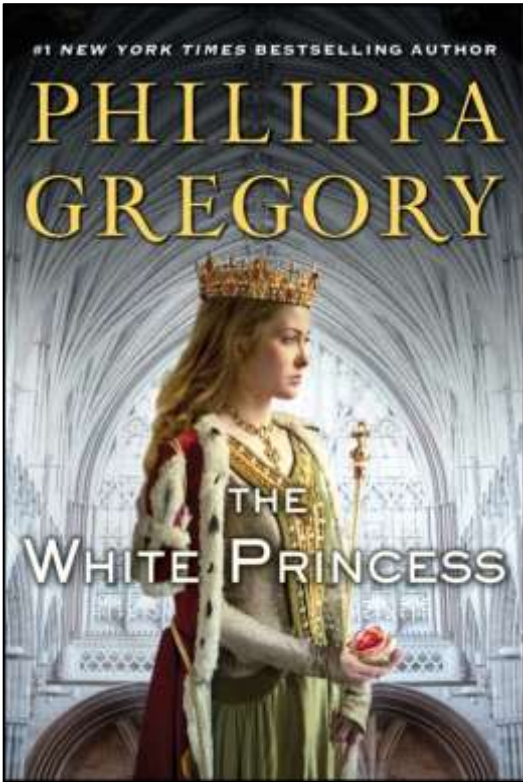
‘Perhaps you will live with us too,’ I say cheerfully. ‘I expect so.’

‘Hurrah!’ Anne cheers, and Maggie tells Edward quietly that we will go to London, and that he can ride his pony all the way there from Yorkshire like a little knight at arms, as Cecily takes me by the elbow and draws me to one side, her fingers nipping my arm. ‘And what about you?’ she asks. ‘Is the king going to marry you? Is he going to overlook what you did with Richard? Is it all to be forgotten?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say, pulling away. ‘And as far as we are concerned, nobody did anything with King Richard. You, of all people, my sister, would have seen nothing and will speak of nothing. As for Henry, I suppose whether he is going to marry me or not is the one thing that we all want to know. But only he knows the answer. Or perhaps two people: him – and that old crone, his mother who thinks she can decide everything.’

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