



THE TOWER OF LONDON,
MAY 1465



My Lady Mother goes first, a great heiress in her own right, and the wife of the greatest subject in the kingdom. Isabel follows, because she is the oldest. Then me: I come last, I always come last. I can't see much as we walk into the great throne room of the Tower of London, and my mother leads my sister to curtsy to the throne and steps aside. Isabel sinks down low, as we have been taught, for a king is a king even if he is a young man put on the throne by my father. His wife will be crowned queen, whatever we may think of her. Then as I step forwards to make my curtsy I get my first good view of the woman that we have come to court to honour.

She is breathtaking: the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life. At once I understand why the king stopped his army at the first sight of her, and married her within weeks. She has a smile that grows slowly and then shines, like an angel's smile. I have seen statues that would look stodgy beside her, I have seen painted Madonnas whose features would be coarse beside her pale luminous loveliness. I rise up from my curtsy to stare at her as if she were an exquisite icon; I cannot look away. Under my scrutiny her face warms, she blushes, she smiles at me, and I cannot help but beam in reply. She laughs at that, as if she finds my open adoration amusing, and then I see my mother's furious





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glance and I scuttle to her side where my sister Isabel is scowling. 'You were staring like an idiot,' she hisses. 'Embarrassing us all. What would Father say?'

The king steps forwards and kisses my mother warmly on both cheeks. 'Have you heard from my dear friend, your lord?' he asks her.

'Working well in your service,' she says promptly, for Father is missing tonight's banquet and all the celebrations, as he is meeting with the King of France himself and the Duke of Burgundy, meeting with them as an equal, to make peace with these mighty men of Christendom now that the sleeping king has been defeated and we are the new rulers of England. My father is a great man; he is representing this new king and all of England.

The king, the new king – our king – does a funny mock-bow to Isabel and pats my cheek. He has known us since we were little girls too small to come to such banquets and he was a boy in our father's keeping. Meanwhile my mother looks about her as if we were at home in Calais Castle, seeking to find fault with something the servants have done. I know that she is longing to see anything that she can report later to my father as evidence that this most beautiful queen is unfit for her position. By the sour expression on her face I guess that she has found nothing.

Nobody likes this queen; I should not admire her. It shouldn't matter to us that she smiles warmly at Isabel and me, that she rises from her great chair to come forwards and clasp my mother's hands. We are all determined not to like her. My father had a good marriage planned for this king, a great match with a princess of France. My father worked at this, prepared the ground, drafted the marriage contract, persuaded people who hate the French that this would be a good thing for the country, would safeguard Calais, might even get Bordeaux back into our keeping, but then Edward, the new king, the heart-stoppingly handsome and glamorous new king, our darling Edward – like a younger brother to my father and a glorious uncle to us – said as simply as if he was ordering his dinner that he was married



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already and nothing could be done about it. Married already? Yes, and to Her.

He did very wrong to act without my father's advice; everyone knows that. It is the first time he has done so in the long triumphant campaign that took the House of York from shame, when they had to beg the forgiveness of the sleeping king and the bad queen, to victory and the throne of England. My father has been at Edward's side, advising and guiding him, dictating his every move. My father has always judged what is best for him. The king, even though he is king now, is a young man who owes my father everything. He would not have his throne if it were not for my father taking up his cause, teaching him how to lead an army, fighting his battles for him. My father risked his own life, first for Edward's father, and then for Edward himself, and then, just when the sleeping king and the bad queen had run away, and Edward was crowned king, and everything should have been wonderful forever, he went off and secretly married Her.

She is to lead us into dinner, and the ladies arrange themselves carefully behind her; there is a set order and it is extremely important that you make sure to be in the right place. I am very nearly nine years old, quite old enough to understand this, and I have been taught the orders of precedence since I was a little girl in the schoolroom. Since She is to be crowned tomorrow, she goes first. From now on she will always be first in England. She will walk in front of my mother for the rest of her life, and that's another thing that my mother doesn't much like. Next should come the king's mother but she is not here. She has declared her absolute enmity to the beautiful Elizabeth Woodville, and sworn that she will not witness the coronation of a commoner. Everyone knows of this rift in the royal family and the king's sisters fall into line without the supervision of their mother. They look quite lost without the beautiful Duchess Cecily leading the way, and the king loses his confident smile for just a moment when he sees the space where his mother should be. I don't know how he dares to go against the duchess. She is just as terrifying as my mother, she

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is my father's aunt, and nobody disobeys either of them. All I can think is that the king must be very much in love with the new queen to defy his mother. He must really, really love her.

The queen's mother is here though; no chance that she would miss such a moment of triumph. She steps into her place with her army of sons and daughters behind her, her handsome husband, Sir Richard Woodville, at her side. He is Baron Rivers, and everyone whispers the joke that the rivers are rising. Truly, there are an unbelievable number of them. Elizabeth is the oldest daughter and behind her mother come the seven sisters and five brothers. I stare at the handsome young man John Woodville, beside his new wife, looking like a boy escorting his grandmother. He has been bundled into marriage with the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk, my great-aunt Catherine Neville. This is an outrage; my father himself says so. My lady great-aunt Catherine is ancient, a priceless ruin, nearly seventy years old; few people have ever seen a living woman so old, and John Woodville is a young man of twenty. My mother says this is how it is going to be from now on: if you put the daughter of a woman little more than a witch on the throne of England you will see some dark doings. If you crown a gannet then she will gobble up everything.

I tear my eyes from the weary crinkled face of my great-aunt and concentrate on my own task. My job is to make sure that I stand beside Isabel, behind my mother and do not step on her train, absolutely do not step on her train. I am only eight, and I have to make sure that I do this right. Isabel, who is thirteen, sighs as she sees me look down and shuffle my feet so that my toes are under the rich brocade to make sure that there is no possibility of mistake. And then Jacquetta, the queen's mother, the mother of a gannet, peeps backwards around her own children to see that I am in the right place, that there is no mistake. She looks around as if she cares for my comfort and when she sees me, behind my mother, beside Isabel, she gives me a smile as beautiful as her daughter's, a smile just for me, and then turns back and

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takes the arm of her handsome husband and follows her daughter in this, the moment of her utter triumph.

When we have walked along the centre of the great hall through the hundreds of people who stand and cheer at the sight of the beautiful new queen-to-be and everyone is seated, I can look again at the adults at the high table. I am not the only one staring at the new queen. She attracts everyone's attention. She has the most beautiful slanty eyes of grey and when she smiles she looks down as if she is laughing to herself about some delicious secret. Edward the king has placed her beside him, on his right hand, and when he whispers in her ear, she leans towards him as close as if they were about to kiss. It's very shocking and wrong but when I look at the new queen's mother I see that she is smiling at her daughter, as if she is happy that they are young and in love. She doesn't seem to be ashamed of it at all.

They are a terribly handsome family. Nobody can deny that they are as beautiful as if they had the bluest blood in their veins. And so many of them! Six of the Rivers family and the two sons from the new queen's first marriage are children, and they are seated at our table as if they were young people of royal blood and had a right to be with us, the daughters of a countess. I see Isabel look sourly at the four beautiful Rivers girls from the youngest, Katherine Woodville, who is only seven years old, to the oldest at our table, Martha, who is fifteen. These girls, four of them, will have to be given husbands, dowries, fortunes, and there are not so very many husbands, dowries, fortunes to be had in England these days – not after a war between the rival houses of Lancaster and York, which has gone on now for ten years and killed so many men. These girls will be compared with us; they will be our rivals. It feels as if the court is flooded with new clear profiles, skin as bright as a new-minted coin, laughing voices and exquisite manners. It's as if we have been invaded by some beautiful tribe of young strangers, as if statues have come warmly to life and are dancing among us, like birds flown down from the sky to sing, or fish leapt from the sea. I look at my mother and



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see her flushed with irritation, as hot and cross as a baker's wife. Beside her, the queen glows like a playful angel, her head always tipped towards her young husband, her lips slightly parted as if she would breathe him in like cool air.

The grand dinner is an exciting time for me, for we have the king's brother George at one end of our table and his youngest brother Richard at the foot. The queen's mother, Jacquetta, gives the whole table of young people a warm smile and I guess that she planned this, thinking it would be fun for us children to be together, and an honour to have George at the head of our table. Isabel is wriggling like a sheared sheep at having two royal dukes beside her at once. She doesn't know which way to look, she is so anxious to impress. And – what is so much worse – the two oldest Rivers girls, Martha and Eleanor Woodville, outshine her without effort. They have the exquisite looks of this beautiful family and they are confident and assured and smiling. Isabel is trying too hard, and I am in my usual state of anxiety with my mother's critical gaze on me. But the Rivers girls act as if they are here to celebrate a happy event, anticipating enjoyment, not a scolding. They are girls confident of themselves and disposed for amusement. Of course the royal dukes will prefer them to us. George has known us for all his life, we are not strange beauties to him. Richard is still in my father's keeping as his ward; when we are in England he is among the half-dozen boys who live with us. Richard sees us three times a day. Of course he is bound to look at Martha Woodville who is all dressed up, new to court, and a beauty like her sister, the new queen. But it is irritating that he totally ignores me.

George at fifteen is as handsome as his older brother the king, fair-headed and tall. He says: 'This must be the first time you have dined in the Tower, Anne, isn't it?' I am thrilled and appalled that he should take notice of me, and my face burns with a blush; but I say 'yes' clearly enough.

Richard, at the other end of the table, is a year younger than Isabel, and no taller than her, but now that his brother is King of



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England he seems much taller and far more handsome. He has always had the merriest smile and the kindest eyes but now, on his best behaviour at his sister-in-law's coronation dinner, he is formal and quiet. Isabel, trying to make conversation with him, turns the talk to riding horses and asks him does he remember our little pony at Middleham Castle? She smiles and asks him wasn't it funny when Pepper bolted with him and he fell off? Richard, who has always been as prickly in his pride as a gamecock, turns to Martha Woodville and says he doesn't recall. Isabel is trying to make out that we are friends, the very best of friends; but really, he was one of Father's half-dozen wards that we hunted with and ate with at dinner in the old days when we were in England and at peace. Isabel wants to persuade the Rivers girls that we are one happy family and they are unwanted intruders, but in truth, we were the Warwick girls in the care of our mother and the York boys rode out with Father.

Isabel can gurn all she wants, but I won't be made to feel awkward. We have a better right to be seated at this table than anyone else, far better than the beautiful Rivers girls. We are the richest heiresses in England, and my father commands the narrow seas between Calais and the English coast. We are of the great Neville family, guardians of the North of England; we have royal blood in our veins. My father has been a guardian to Richard, and a mentor and advisor to the king himself, and we are as good as anybody in the hall, richer than anyone in this hall, richer even than the king and a great deal better born than the new queen. I can talk as an equal to any royal duke of the House of York because without my father, their house would have lost the wars, Lancaster would still rule, and George, handsome and princely as he is, would now be brother to a nobody, and the son of a traitor.

It is a long dinner, though the queen's coronation dinner tomorrow will be even longer. Tonight they serve thirty-two courses, and the queen sends some special dishes to our table, to honour us with her attention. George stands up and bows his thanks to her, and then serves all of us from the silver dish. He



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sees me watching him and he gives me an extra spoonful of sauce with a wink. Now and then my mother glances over at me like a watch-tower beacon flaring out over a dark sea. Each time that I sense her hard gaze on me, I raise my head and smile at her. I am certain that she cannot fault me. I have one of the new forks in my hand and I have a napkin in my sleeve, as if I were a French lady, familiar with these new fashions. I have watered wine in the glass on my right, and I am eating as I have been taught: daintily and without haste. If George, a royal duke, chooses to single me out for his attention then I don't see why he should not, nor why anyone should be surprised by it. Certainly, it comes as no surprise to me.



I share a bed with Isabel while we are guests of the king at the Tower on the night before the queen's coronation as I do in our home at Calais, as I have done every night of my life. I am sent to bed an hour before her, though I am too excited to sleep. I say my prayers and then lie in my bed and listen to the music drifting up from the hall below. They are still dancing; the king and his wife love to dance. When he takes her hand you can see that he has to stop himself from drawing her closer. She glances down, and when she looks up he is still gazing at her with his hot look and she gives him a little smile that is full of promise.

I can't help but wonder if the old king, the sleeping king, is awake tonight, somewhere in the wild lands of the North of England. It is rather horrible to think of him, fast asleep but knowing in his very dreams that they are dancing and that a new king and queen have crowned themselves and put themselves in his place, and tomorrow a new queen will wear his wife's crown. Father says I have nothing to fear, the bad queen has run away to France and will get no help from her French friends. Father is meeting with the King of France himself to make sure that he becomes our friend and the bad queen will get no help from him.



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She is our enemy, she is the enemy of the peace of England. Father will make sure that there is no home for her in France, as there is no throne for her in England. Meanwhile, the sleeping king without his wife, without his son, will be wrapped up warm in some little castle, somewhere near Scotland, dozing his life away like a bee in a curtain all winter. My father says that he will sleep and she will burn with rage until they both grow old and die, and there is nothing for me to fear at all. It was my father who bravely drove the sleeping king off the throne and put his crown on the head of King Edward, so it must be right. It was my father who faced the terror that was the bad queen, a she-wolf worse than the wolves of France, and defeated her. But I don't like to think of the old king Henry, with the moonlight shining on his closed eyelids while the men who drove him away are dancing in what was once his great hall. I don't like to think of the bad queen, far away in France, swearing that she will have revenge on us, cursing our happiness and saying that she will come back here, calling it her home.

By the time that Isabel finally comes in I am kneeling up at the narrow window to look at the moonlight shining on the river, thinking of the king dreaming in its glow. 'You should be asleep,' she says bossily.

'She can't come for us, can she?'

'The bad queen?' Isabel knows at once the horror of Queen Margaret of Anjou, who has haunted both our childhoods. 'No. She's defeated, she was utterly defeated by Father at Towton. She ran away. She can't come back.'

'You're sure?'

Isabel puts her arm around my thin shoulders. 'You know I am sure. You know we are safe. The mad king is asleep and the bad queen is defeated. This is just an excuse for you to stay awake when you should be asleep.'

Obediently, I turn around and sit up in bed, pulling the sheets up to my chin. 'I'm going to sleep. Wasn't it wonderful?'

'Not particularly.'

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'Don't you think she is beautiful?'

'Who?' she says; as if she really doesn't know, as if it is not blindingly obvious who is the most beautiful woman in England tonight.

'The new queen, Queen Elizabeth.'

'Well, I don't think she's very queenly,' she says, trying to sound like our mother at her most disdainful. 'I don't know how she will manage at her coronation and at the joust and the tournament – she was just the wife of a country squire, and the daughter of a nobody. How will she ever know how to behave?'

'Why? How would you behave?' I ask, trying to prolong the conversation. Isabel always knows so much more than me, she is five years older than me, our parents' favourite, a brilliant marriage ahead of her, almost a woman while I am still nothing but a child. She even looks down on the queen!

'I would carry myself with much more dignity than her. I wouldn't whisper with the king and demean myself as she did. I wouldn't send out dishes and wave to people like she did. I wouldn't trail all my brothers and sisters into court like she did. I would be much more reserved and cold. I wouldn't smile at anyone, I wouldn't bow to anyone. I would be a true queen, a queen of ice, without family or friends.'

I am so attracted by this picture that I am halfway out of my bed again. I pull off the fur cover from our bed and hold it up to her. 'Like what? How would you be? Show me, Izzy!'

She arranges it like a cape around her shoulders, throws her head back, draws herself up to her four feet six inches and strides around the little chamber with her head very high, nodding distantly to imaginary courtiers. 'Like this,' she says. '*Comme ça*, elegant, and unfriendly.'

I jump out of bed and snatch up a shawl, throw it over my head, and follow her, mirroring her nod to right and left, looking as regal as Isabel. 'How do you do?' I say to an empty chair. I pause as if listening to a request for some favour. 'No, not at all. I won't be able to help you, I am so sorry, I have already given that post to my sister.'

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'To my father, Lord Rivers,' Izzy adds.

'To my brother Anthony – he's so handsome.'

'To my brother John, and a fortune to my sisters. There is nothing left for you at all. I have a large family,' Isabel says, being the new queen in her haughty drawl. 'And they all must be accommodated. Richly accommodated.'

'All of them,' I supplement. 'Dozens of them. Did you see how many of them came into the great hall behind me? Where am I to find titles and land for all of them?'

We walk in grand circles, and pass each other as we go by, inclining our heads with magnificent indifference. 'And who are you?' I inquire coldly.

'I am the Queen of England,' Isabel says, changing the game without warning. 'I am Queen Isabel of England and France, newly married to King Edward. He fell in love with me for my beauty. He is mad for me. He has run completely mad for me and forgotten his friends and his duty. We married in secret, and now I am to be crowned queen.'

'No, no, *I* was being the Queen of England,' I say, dropping the shawl and turning on her. 'I am Queen Anne of England. I am the Queen of England. King Edward chose me.'

'He never would, you're the youngest.'

'He did! He did!' I can feel the rise of my temper, and I know that I will spoil our play but I cannot bear to give her precedence once again, even in a game in our own chamber.

'We can't both be Queen of England,' she says reasonably enough. 'You be the Queen of France, you can be the Queen of France. France is nice enough.'

'England! I am the Queen of England. I hate France!'

'Well you can't be,' she says flatly. 'I am the oldest. I chose first, I am the Queen of England and Edward is in love with me.'

I am wordless with rage at her claiming of everything, her sudden enforcing of seniority, our sudden plunge from happy play to rivalry. I stamp my foot, my face flushes with temper, and I can feel hot tears in my eyes. 'England! I am queen!'

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'You always spoil everything because you are such a baby,' she declares, turning away as the door behind us opens and Margaret comes into the room and says: 'Time you were both asleep, my ladies. Gracious! What have you done to your bedspread?'

'Isabel won't let me . . .' I start. 'She is being mean . . .'

'Never mind that,' Margaret says briskly. 'Into bed. You can share whatever it is tomorrow.'

'She won't share!' I gulp down salt tears. 'She never does. We were playing but then . . .'

Isabel laughs shortly as if my grief is comical and she exchanges a look with Margaret as if to say that the baby is having a temper tantrum again. This is too much for me. I let out a wail and I throw myself face down on the bed. No-one cares for me, no-one will see that we were playing together, as equals, as sisters, until Isabel claimed something that was not hers to take. She should know that she should share. It is not right that I should come last, that I always come last. 'It's not right!' I say brokenly. 'It's not fair on me!'

Isabel turns her back to Margaret, who unlaces the fastening of her gown and holds it low so that she can step out of it, disdainfully, like the queen she was pretending to be. Margaret spreads the gown over a chair, ready for powdering and brushing tomorrow, and Isabel pulls a nightgown over her head and lets Margaret brush her hair and plait it up.

I lift my flushed face from the pillow to watch the two of them and Isabel glances across at my big tragic eyes and says shortly: 'You should be asleep anyway. You always cry when you're tired. You're such a baby. You shouldn't have been allowed to come to dinner.' She looks at Margaret, a grown woman of twenty, and says: 'Margaret, tell her.'

'Go to sleep, Lady Anne,' Margaret says gently. 'There's nothing to carry on about,' and I roll on my side and turn my face to the wall. Margaret should not speak to me like this, she is my mother's lady in waiting and our half-sister, and she should treat me more kindly. But nobody treats me with any respect, and my



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own sister hates me. I hear the ropes of the bed creak as Isabel gets in beside me. Nobody makes her say her prayers, though she will certainly go to hell. Margaret says: 'Goodnight, sleep well, God bless,' and then blows out the candles and goes out of the room.

We are alone together in the firelight. I feel Isabel heave the covers over to her side, and I lie still. She whispers, sharp with malice: 'You can cry all night if you want, but I shall still be Queen of England and you will not.'

'I am a Neville!' I squeak.

'Margaret is a Neville.' Isabel proves her point. 'But illegitimate, Father's acknowledged bastard. So she serves as our lady in waiting, and she will marry some respectable man while I will marry a wealthy duke at the very least. And now I come to think of it, you are probably illegitimate too, and you will have to be my lady in waiting.'

I feel a sob rising up in my throat, but I put both my hands over my mouth. I will not give her the satisfaction of hearing me cry. I will stifle my sobs. If I could stop my own breath I would; and then they would write to my father and say that I was quite cold and dead, and then she would be sorry that I was suffocated because of her unkindness, and my father – far away tonight – would blame her for the loss of his little girl that he loved above any other. At any rate, he ought to love me above any other. At any rate, I wish he did.

