

Chapter 1 - 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!'

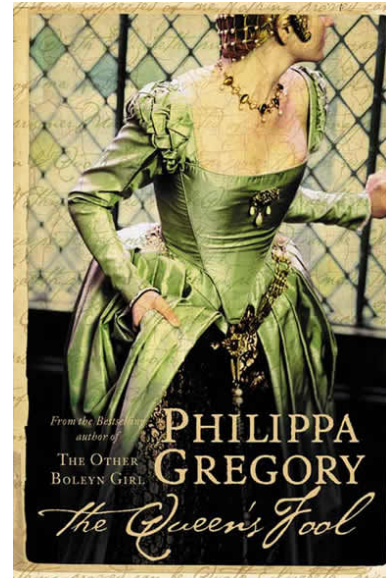
'Course I can.'

She leaned so low 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 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 inside 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.