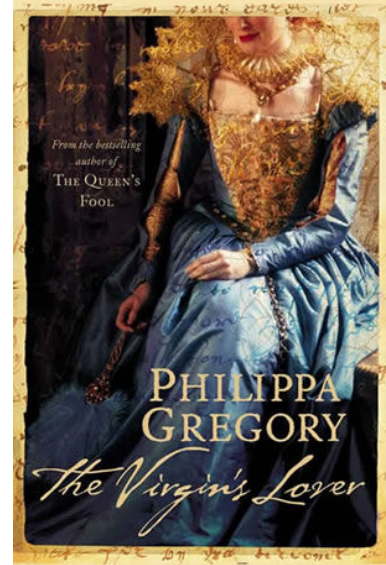


## Chapter 1 - Autumn 1558

All the bells in Norfolk were ringing for Elizabeth, pounding the peal into Amy's head, first the treble bell screaming out like a mad woman, and then the whole agonising, jangling, downward sobbing till the great bell boomed a warning that the whole discordant carillon was about to shriek out again. She pulled the pillow over her head to shut out the sound, and yet still it went on, until the rooks abandoned their nests and went streaming into the skies, tossing and turning in the wind like a banner of ill omen, and the bats left the belfry like a plume of black smoke as if to say that the world was upside down now, and day should be forever night.



Amy did not need to ask what the racket was for; she already knew. At last, poor sick Queen Mary had died, and Princess Elizabeth was the uncontested heir. Praise be. Everyone in England should rejoice. The Protestant princess had come to the throne and would be England's queen. All over the country people would be ringing bells for joy, striking kegs of ale, dancing in the streets, and throwing open prison doors. The English had their Elizabeth at last, and the fear-filled days of Mary Tudor could be forgotten. Everyone in England was celebrating.

Everyone but Amy.

The peals, pounding Amy into wakefulness, did not bring her to joy. Amy, alone in all of England, could not celebrate Elizabeth's upward leap to the throne. The chimes did not even sound on key, they sounded like the beat of jealousy, the scream of rage, the sobbing shout of a deserted woman.

'God strike her dead,' she swore into her pillow as her head rang with the pound of Elizabeth's bells. 'God strike her down in her youth and her pride and her beauty. God blast her looks, and thin her hair, and rot her teeth, and let her die lonely and alone. Deserted, like me.'

...

Amy had no word from her absent husband: she did not expect one. Another day went by and then it was a week. Amy guessed that he would have ridden at breakneck pace to Hatfield Palace from London at the first news that Queen Mary was dead. He would have been the first, as he had planned, the very first to kneel before the princess and tell her she was queen.

Amy guessed that Elizabeth would already have a speech prepared, some practised pose to strike, and for his part Robert would already have his reward in mind. Perhaps even now he was celebrating his own rise to greatness as the princess celebrated hers. Amy, walking down to the river to fetch in the cows for milking because the lad was sick and they were short-handed at Stanfield Hall, her family's farm, stopped to stare at the brown leaves unravelling from an oak tree and whirling like a snowstorm; southwest to Hatfield where her husband had blown, like the wind itself, to Elizabeth.

She knew that she should be glad that a queen had come to the throne who would favour him. She knew she should be glad for her family, whose wealth and position would rise with Robert's. She knew that she should be glad to be Lady Dudley once more: restored to her lands, given a place at court, perhaps even made a countess.

But she was not. She would rather have had him at her side as an attainted traitor, with her in the drudgery of the day and in the warm silence of the night; anything rather than ennobled as the handsome favourite at another woman's court. She knew from this that she was a jealous wife; and jealousy was a sin in the eyes of God.

She put her head down and trudged on to the meadows where the cows grazed on the thin grass, churning up sepia earth and flints beneath their clumsy hooves.

*– How could we end up like this? – she whispered to the stormy sky piling up a brooding castle of clouds over Norfolk. – since I love him so much, and since he loves me? Since there is no-one for us but each other? How could he leave me to struggle here, and dash off to her? How could it start so well, in such wealth and glory as it did, and end in hardship and loneliness like this? –*