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About the Author

ANNE O'BRIEN taught History in the East Riding of Yorkshire before deciding to fulfil a long-standing ambition to write historical fiction. She now lives in an eighteenth century timbered cottage with her husband in the Welsh Marches, a wild, beautiful place renowned for its black and white timbered houses, ruined castles and priories and magnificent churches. Steeped in history, famous people and bloody deeds, as well as ghosts and folklore, the Marches provide the inspiration for her interest in medieval England.

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PROLOGUE

February 1330

'I'll not allow this – this *travesty* – of a ceremonial to keep you on your feet in these damnable conditions any longer,' Edward muttered in my ear as we stood in the nave of Westminster Abbey, waiting for the procession to begin. It was a cold February, and our breath billowed in clouds in the freezing air.

I smile wanly – even my smile was frozen. At least the building was complete, and the roof did not leak even if the lively draughts around my ankles were enough to ruffle my skirt. When I had wed Edward two years ago in York – in an equally bone-freezing January – we had all had to sidestep the puddles and the drops of water showering down from overhead as we walked down the aisle. It had all been a thoroughly shabby affair for the marriage of the English king to a daughter of Hainault. It seemed to be my destiny to experience the greatest moments of my life in the worst of circumstances.

'We've been waiting on Isabella's appearance for half an hour ...' Edward observed.

'And hour at least,' I amended, equally low-voiced. My feet, like blocks of ice in my tight shoes, had registered every minute of the Dowager Queen's tardiness. Edward's mother played by her own rules. 'If these clerics don't hurry I expect I'll give birth to your first-born on the steps of the high altar. And then what would your lady mother have to say? Her dignity would be irrevocably besmirched.'

I was beyond caring what I said, beyond weary, having struggled into the second change of clothing of the day, discarding the green velvet and miniver for a less-than-warm red and grey samite tunic and mantle. The sable edgings barely stretched to meet over my belly. I was not carrying this child well, feeling clumsy and overwrought. I could see my new gilded shoes only if I leaned forwards.

'I didn't mean *that!*' For a moment Edward looked startled, then amused, and finally frowning at my levity, downright forbidding. I enjoyed the range of emotions that chased across his features. It proved he still managed to retain his sense of humour, no matter the weight of adversity on his damask-slick shoulders. I discovered the energy to admire those shoulders, albeit fleetingly: today he looked every inch the King he was. But then his gaze, glittering with suppressed anger, slid away from me. 'Look at them,' he growled. 'Every last one of them plotting to undermine *my* power. *My* authority. Kent and Mortimer are like fighting cocks, squaring up to do battle to win the spoils. I can just about tolerate Kent. At least he is my father's brother and has royal blood in his veins. I swear there's nothing but venom in Mortimer's.'

I looked as he indicated with a lift of his chin. Dowager Queen Isabella, now arrived to honour me with her appearance at my coronation, was wrapped about in cloth of gold and ermine, relishing her superiority and entirely indifferent to my sufferings. I was a bride whose dowry and Hainault connections were of more value than my person. I had been paid

of Isabella's strategy to raise an army, oust her husband from his throne and take control. Military aid had come as part of the deal. And how spectacularly successful Isabella had been for herself and her damnably ambitious lover, Lord Mortimer.

Mortimer was smiling with insincere charm like the rogue he was, eyes as cold as the stone paving. Edward's uncle, the Earl of Kent, scowled indiscriminately on the whole performance. Tension was high and the rank odour of imminent civil war tainted the incense-filled air. Edward could have sliced through the vicious atmosphere with no effort and a blunt broadsword.

'Do you remember the advice you gave me?' Edward suddenly asked, as the blast of fanfare to herald the beginning of the procession all but deafened us. We shuffled slowly into line.

'I do,' I said. I rested my hand lightly on Edward's arm, anticipating the moment when he would present me to his subjects as their Queen. 'As I recall, I gave you a particularly hard time.'

'And I expect I deserved it.' A fleeting grin curved his mouth, quickly vanishing so that he looked older than his years. 'Well, my percipient wife, the time is come for change. First we'll get you crowned ...' He covered my hand with his, peering down into my face. 'Can you tolerate it?'

'Of course.' Were not daughters of Hainault made of stern stuff? And the brush of Edward's fingertips over my chilly skin had warmed my blood. I might be a strategic bride, and less outwardly appealing than my sisters, but that did not mean that Edward did not love me.

'I'm not convinced,' Edward frowned. 'I see shadows under your eyes deep enough to bury Mortimer in.'

Behind us, Mortimer gave the order for the procession to begin. I took a breath and steeled myself for the lengthy but necessary formalities. Since I was so obviously carrying Edward's child, I presumed that it was essential that my crowning be as formal and magnificent as was possible to make it.

'Wait!'

It was Edward's command, to my surprise. Mortimer stepped out of the procession to see what was amiss. He was not pleased. Nor was Isabella, whose pre-eminence was suddenly compromised.

It gave me a little jolt of pleasure. Unworthy, perhaps, but quite understandable.

Edward raised his hand to beckon Mortimer's newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury who had been lurking uneasily on the edge of the milling courtiers. The priest, resplendent in mitre and full regalia, approached and bowed.

'I want this done fast,' Edward stated without preamble.

There was a pregnant silence.

'Her Majesty should be crowned with all due process, Sire,' Archbishop Meopham reproved, glancing over to where Mortimer, arms folded across his chest, was keeping a jaundiced eye on the proceedings.

'Her Majesty should have been crowned two years ago,' Edward retorted. 'Now her health'

is under strain.'

The Archbishop lowered his voice. 'But the Lord Mortimer wishes the full ceremony, Sir, to honour the Lady.'

More like to honour Mortimer! I could see the thought dance in Edward's eyes as he stared at the Archbishop, but not a word of it passed his lips. This was neither the time nor the place for so formidable a level of confrontation. 'My wife will be honoured when the holy oil touches her brow,' Edward stated. 'The length of the ceremony is irrelevant. I wish it to be cut short.'

'But, Sire ...' The cleric cast another furtive glance towards Lord Mortimer.

And at last the edge of temper rumbled. 'I am your liege lord, Meopham. If you are wise, you have an eye to your future in this kingdom, you will obey me. Affairs will not always be as they are today. The humiliations of the past can be tolerated no longer. Do you understand me?'

The Archbishop, pierced by Edward's stare, understood all too well, the warning and the promise. He swallowed hard and bowed.

'Yes, Sire. Indeed I do. It will be as you desire.'

And so it was. It must have been the fastest coronation in history. Mortimer glowered, Isabella plucked irritably at her ermine, Kent stood throughout with his hand on his sword hilt, but I was duly anointed, crowned and feasted almost before I could change my garments yet again for cloth of gold and a miniver cloak. And as the crown was placed on my head, I knew. Here, in this one small wielding of royal power, in this oblique statement of future intent, was my first real intimation of the King who would emerge from the shadow of the furious, frustrated young man who had come to Hainault three years before to wed my love's elder sister, and who had got me instead.

CHAPTER ONE

My coronation complete to everyone's satisfaction, I managed the briefest of celebratory tours so that the people of Windsor, Guildford and Winchester might see their new and burgeoning Queen, before Edward insisted that it was time I was restored to the peace of Woodstock. Isabella was not sorry. It would mean less financial outlay on my behalf. Mortimer had his thoughts turned to a persistent rumour that Kent was massing an army of mercenaries to challenge him for power. And Edward? Edward was merely caught in a snare between the two, struggling to keep a foothold in a morass of treason and counter-treason. As for my own thoughts, I was not reluctant to return to Woodstock – days spent in the self-absorbed company of Isabella and Mortimer were wearing – except that my time with Edward was now drawing to a close. Edward would leave me to return to Westminster with Mortimer, and I would take to my chamber to await the birth of my first child.

Our arrival at the gracious old palace of Woodstock proved to be an edgy occasion.

'I have a pressing need of money,' I said to Edward, keeping a firm hold of his sleeve as soon as he had helped me to alight from my well-cushioned litter. Queen Isabella was already summoning him to follow her, to give his royal assent to any number of charters that would bring gold into the royal coffers – none of it, unfortunately, to be spent on me. 'I need money desperately, unless you want your new Queen to be even deeper in debt that she is already.'

My ankles were swollen, my eyes heavy from lack of sleep, making me unusually irritable. I did not wish to part from Edward with dissension between us, but as I saw it I had no choice. I could barely scrape together two silver pennies.

'It's bad, is it?' His eyes were sharp on my face, reading there all that I could not say in public, his hand supportive beneath my arm.

'I may be God's recently anointed,' I pointed out, rather waspishly, 'but I am in effect no better than a beggar in the gutter. My servants stay with me out of loyalty only.' It was difficult to hide my bitterness.

Edward nodded. He understood all too well. Of course he did. *The humiliations of the past can be tolerated no longer*, he had said in the Abbey. How clear the humiliations, the constant degradation that dragged us both down, had become to me since I had arrived in this unhappy, tension-ridden kingdom. I lived under Isabella's control with no household of my own, my dower fallen into her hands so that I had no money for my own needs. Reluctant to release power or status, she had resisted my crowning until my advanced pregnancy became an embarrassment. An heir born and the Queen not even crowned? I detested the constraint of the sweeping aside of my consequence, but for Edward, the lawfully anointed King, it had been so much worse. He had been King now for three years, since his father's reported death in Berkeley castle, but the grip on England's crown and throne was as much Mortimer's as it had ever been. It was Mortimer who decided that Edward must abandon English powers in Scotland. It was Mortimer who discussed English policy of war in France. It was Mortimer who dispensed patronage and earldoms with open-handed generosity to those loyal to him.

while Edward was kept chained and impotent, without the means to retaliate.

Some days my heart bled for him. The day he was forced to put his hand to the shameful peace with Scotland, at Mortimer's insistence, and so lose a part of his inheritance, was a black day indeed. Edward did it, his face engraved in stone. Only I knew the cry for vengeance deep in his soul.

Did Edward never speak out against such illegal appropriation of royal power? Did he never demand his rightful position? Oh, he did – but who was there to hear? Mortimer had England's money and England's army in his thrall. Who was there to fight for Edward, when those who did not actively support Mortimer still feared him as they feared the Devil himself?

'I don't have the money to pay my servants,' I hissed, 'and ...'

'... and Isabella, of course, will not give you any,' Edward completed my accusation.

I raised my brows in reply. In the terms of my marriage, Isabella had promised to provide me with an appropriate dowry, assigning to me lands and rents from her own dower worth three thousand pounds. I had never seen one gold coin of it. The land and the income remained firmly in Isabella's hands and I lived on her charity when she saw fit to dispense it.

'Come with me,' Edward took my hand in his. 'You can put your case and I'll support it. I'm sorry.' He hid his outrage well as he raised my fingers to his lips in a neat little gesture of affection. 'It's the best I can do.'

We followed Isabella into her accommodations. I tried not to resent their magnificence, the colossal amounts that had been spent on tapestries and furnishings and gleaming furniture. This was truly a room fit for a Queen. My own inadequate chambers paled into insignificance, making my lack even more painful. And there in the centre, a rare gem in a gleaming setting, a coffer open before her, was Dowager Queen Isabella. What a remarkably handsome woman she was, as finely carved and without blemish as one of our priceless ivory statues from Hainault. Her hair was silver fair, her skin finely textured and, looking up as we entered, she spoke in a cold, diamond-clear voice.

'There is no need for your wife to be present, Edward. All I need is your signature.'

'She does need to be here,' Edward replied. 'Philippa needs money, madam.'

'I expect she does.'

Isabella looked me up and down from my dusty veil and crispinette – neither in the first rank of fashion – to my disappearing waistline. She rarely looked at me. To do her justice, she did not actively dislike me. She did not treat me with any degree of cruelty, unless neglect in itself be a form of cruelty. She simply ignored me, a thing of no importance now that my hand in marriage had brought the wherewithal to enable her to wrest the crown from her husband, the old king. I was no longer useful except to breed and provide a future heir. I had simply to fend for myself.

'Tell my mother what you lack, Philippa,' Edward ordered, his hand firm around mine.

I needed no second invitation, although I was not hopeful. 'It is for my birthing chamber, my lady' I said baldly.

I should have had a splendid suite of rooms already prepared for me, where I would stay

for the birth of my child and for the requisite month afterwards until I was church-cushioned from the rest of the world in the full panoply of royal luxury. There I should, by tradition, be welcomed with wine and spices, music and celebration, all in anticipation of the coming event. As it was, I would be lucky to pay for bread and small beer and a single lute player.

‘What do you need?’ Isabella was already preoccupied in opening a large sealed document and perusing its contents.

‘I need money to pay those who will care for my baby. Martha who will rock the child in the crib. Joan who I have employed as a wet nurse. My valet Thomas who will fetch and carry for my door,’

‘Very well. Is that all?’ Isabella almost yawned.

‘No. There is Lady Katherine Haryington too, my lady, my own particular lady-in-waiting.

‘They will all be provided for, of course ...’

‘I need clothes for myself and for my servants,’ I continued, determined to itemise every possible need before my soft incarceration. ‘I need tapestries and bed covers. Bed linen and pillows ...’

‘I’m sure we can find some unused hangings here in the palace.’ Isabella showed her teeth in a smile. It held no warmth.

‘I am most grateful, my lady.’ Well they would be better than nothing when the dust and moth had been beaten out of them. I nearly said as much but felt Edward’s hand squeeze harder, and so forced my tone to remain flat. ‘I need money to pay for the food we will need for the months of my confinement.’

‘I will not let you starve to death, Philippa.’ Brows raised in elegant *ennui*, Isabella picked up a pen. ‘Now, if that is all, I wish you to put your signature to this, Edward, before you leave ...’

I sighed silently, but Edward’s voice was as cold and clear as his mother’s.

‘Not yet. This matter must be settled, madam. You must supply my wife with what she needs. It is not fitting that she should have to beg. Nor must she have any worries about this. He glanced down at me then back to his mother. ‘She should have at least two of the manors that were promised to her for her dower.’

Isabella continued to read the terms of the document.

‘Philippa,’ Edward reiterated with an insistence that forced me to hide a smile, ‘she should have Pontefract and Knaresborough for her own.’

It crossed my mind that she might still refuse outright, but Isabella shrugged gracefully and she at last looked up. ‘Very well. I will sign them over to her. They raise little in revenue and are inconveniently far to the north, but you are welcome to them, dear Philippa.’

I pinned a grateful smile to my lips. I should have had them two years ago. I recognised them as part of the promised dower.

‘Excellent.’ Edward remarked. He escorted me to the door.

‘She won’t do it,’ I whispered, under cover of him bending to salute my cheek.

'I know ...'

'Edward ...!' Isabella's demand floated after us.

Edward's face became a bland mask. He kissed my cheek again, opened the door for me and returned to put his royal seal on the documents of his mother's choosing.

There was one blessing from that unpleasant little interview.

'Will you remain at Woodstock during Philippa's confinement?' Edward had asked.

'No,' Isabella had replied.

She did not explain. I knew she would be wherever her lover Mortimer was. And I heaved a sigh of relief. Sometimes neglect could be a blessing.

CHAPTER TWO

Edward was able to spend one night with me at Woodstock before his escort was instructed to sweep him up and deposit him back under Mortimer's beady eye at Westminster. It was no time for passion. Edward was restless and preoccupied with something he was not telling me, and I was too furious with Isabella to put aside my grievances and actually ask him what it was. But my mood improved when Edward rubbed my ankles, then held me in his arms and told me how much he loved me. With my head comfortably resting in the little hollow below his shoulder, I continued to be astonished, for I of all the four Hainault daughters, was the least blessed with physical beauty. The family features were strong in all of us, but they had not done their best by me. I had square, practical hands, a broad forehead, wide cheeks and a lank hair of pale mouse. The sallowness that glowed after a sunny day on Margaret and Jeanne and baby Isabelle looked merely dull on me. Nor was I very tall, even for my age. Jeanne and Isabelle, younger than I, would soon outgrow me. I was, my mother the Countess of Hainault frequently observed, a plain and wholesome daughter. Jeanne, in moments of sisterly bile, labelled me a poor dab of a girl. Isabella had wanted the Hainault dowry and did not care which sister became the bride, but Edward had wanted me.

I held on to that one miraculous thought when fears rained down on me thick and fast. For now, sheltered in his arms, I was content.

'I'm afraid you'll not see Pontefract or Knaresborough,' he murmured, his chin resting on my head, as I sighed deeply.

'No, I don't suppose I shall.' I laughed a little. 'I didn't expect to be scrabbling for money as Queen of England. But still ...' I paused for a moment, merely to tease. '... on the whole, I'm pleased I wed you.'

'Only pleased?'

I raised my head so that our eyes met, barely a handspan apart, and as we smiled at each other I recalled my first sight of him, striding into the audience chamber at Valenciennes at the wake of Isabella. How astonishingly handsome he had been, this Plantagenet prince striding confidently forward with a proud tilt of his head and a spine as straight as a pikestaff. His skin was fair, his eyes blue and his luxuriant hair as gold as a corn sheaf. He was to me as breathtaking as the image of the warrior angel St Michael in the window of our private chapel. And he still was.

'I thought Isabella would choose Jeanne for you,' I confessed, pushing back the fall of hair that invariably got in his eyes. I was feeling in a mood for confession and intimacy.

'She did,' Edward admitted dryly, 'since Margaret was already wed. But how could I refuse a girl who was kind and resourceful – a girl who was bold enough to accuse me of being stupid when I informed her that to my mind it was impossible to trust anyone, particularly servants.'

I laughed at the memory. 'You were impossibly opinionated. I was surprised that Walter did not hit you.' Walter Manny, my page – now a squire and come with me to England – was

unquestionably loyal to me and to those of my choosing.

‘So was I. I deserved it, I expect. My pride knew no bounds.’

Allowing my head to sink back against his chest, I sighed again, remembering. It had been a dire story that Edward had eventually told after much persuasion.

‘How can I be expected to trust anyone?’ he had demanded furiously when I had accused him of rank insensitivity to me and to Walter. ‘I am spied on. Every minute, every day. Everything I say or do is reported back to the Queen or Mortimer. If I write a letter, it is intercepted and read. I am not allowed my own friends. My servants are not my appointment. I am burdened with a bodyguard in my mother’s pay. I swear everything I eat and drink is reported to my mother. It’s worse than being in a prison cell.’

It had chilled my blood. From a position of privilege, a childhood where I had been given love and freedom and no more restriction than was thought good for a daughter of Valois and Hainault, I could not imagine such shackles. As for every word I spoke being reported to the Count or Countess: even my governess showed more tolerance than that, and accepted my childish misdemeanours. It must, for Edward, have been an intensely lonely existence.

‘You taught me to trust, and to have faith in my own destiny,’ Edward mused now, interrupting my reverie, his own thoughts obviously far away. ‘I never met anyone with so many opinions. Or so much advice to give.’

I chuckled. ‘And did you take it?’

‘Oh yes. I needed to, to survive.’

Sobering, I let my mind drift back again. I had told him, whether he wanted to know or not, while we were seated in my father’s kitchens - a warm, busy place, and a perfect refuge for Edward to escape the eagle-eyed attentions of his skulking bodyguard.

‘It seems to me that in your present position you can do nothing but wait,’ I had said when I had persuaded him to tell me of Isabella’s ambitions, and of her lover Mortimer’s hold on power. What else could I tell a prince who had not yet reached his sixteenth year? ‘One day your chance will come to seize power. On that day you will cast off your mother’s influence and that of this dreadful man Mortimer, and take your place at your father’s side. Once you do that, you will find your friends will flock to your banner.’

The Prince had slammed his hands down against the table at which we sat, flattening the crumbs of bread. ‘I have no friends.’

It had been the bleakest statement of all that he had made that day. ‘Then you must *make* friends.’

‘How can I, when I am kept isolated from men to whom I would look for support? Sometimes I feel like a beetle squeezed in Mortimer’s fist ...’

‘I will be your friend.’

‘You can’t fight for me.’

I had stood, out of all patience. Walter, a silent shadow, stood as well. ‘But I can give you advice, for what it’s worth. Be temperate, be patient. Listen and take counsel. Build a power base when you can. Is that not what all rulers do? One day you will be King whether the Queen wishes it or not. Be ready for that day.’ I had given him frown for frown. ‘But if you

are to win friends, you have to charm your supporters rather than grumble and snarl and be them about the head with your complaints!’

He had reared back as if I had struck him. ‘Do I grumble and snarl?’

‘Yes. You are doing it now.’

What a turbulent wooing it had turned out to be. My lips curved at the memory of the brief episode - all of eight days.

‘Why are you smiling?’ Edward asked.

‘Just remembering,’ I replied, my mind leaping sharply back to reality in Woodstock, and sat up again as a thought struck me. ‘Why was Mortimer scowling at you when we parted company?’ We had left him at Winchester. Mortimer had been more heavy-browed than usual, barking out orders that Edward must not linger after depositing me at Woodstock, as I were a parcel of cloth for the market.

Edward shrugged, but his lips tightened. ‘I’m in his black books.’

‘What have you done?’ I asked, my mouth suddenly dry with apprehension.

‘Only refused to obey orders and attend my sister’s wedding,’ Edward replied. ‘It’s no news, Philippa. But Mortimer hasn’t forgiven me. He says I dishonoured his good name before the whole kingdom. *His* good name, by God! And as if I did not know the meaning of dishonour and shame ...’

Edward might pat my hand to reassure me, but he did not succeed. No, it wasn’t news. The whole episode had had caused a major furore. Edward had refused to attend the political marriage of his sister Joan to the son of the Scottish King Robert Bruce after the kingdom of Scotland had been wilfully handed back to the Scots. But I hadn’t heard Edward’s explanation from his own lips before. All I knew was that Edward had refused pointblank to go across the border.

‘Mortimer said it had been agreed, and that I would attend,’ Edward bit out the words. ‘I said that I had not agreed to it. The agreement signed at Northampton with the Scots was none of my doing. I didn’t make the treaty so felt in no mind to live by it.’ I was impressed by his fighting words, and my initial fright was overlaid by pride in him. ‘I wasn’t prepared to dance at their wedding,’ he continued. ‘I would have more likely spitted the groom on my sword and widowed my poor sister than given them my good wishes.’ He shuffled restlessly, rucking up the bed linen into an uncomfortable heap. ‘My absence was the only way I could express my abhorrence of the whole proceedings.’

It had come, as I knew, at the end of an unsatisfactory campaign, with England’s defeat at Stanhope Park, even if Mortimer had been able to prevent a subsequent Scottish invasion of England. Edward’s own desire to push on with an attack had been thoroughly thwarted. Mortimer had ordered a withdrawal, and the Northampton agreement had, in Edward’s mind, been nothing more than an ignominious backing down.

‘Mortimer sees my sister as the future Queen of Scotland.’ Edward still felt the loss as a personal failure, even though he had come close to being captured and killed. ‘All I see is the English dead and dying on the battlefield at Stanhope Park. I refused to condone what was done then, and I won’t now.’

‘It’s months ago now,’ I observed. ‘Can Mortimer not put it aside?’

‘Apparently not. He’s still smarting. He said my absence was an embarrassment – that I had damaged the alliance. What alliance? In my eyes, there is no alliance, and there is no peace. Scotland is mine.’ Thrusting himself from the bed as if driven by a need to take action, Edward strode to the coffer beside the fireplace, peered suspiciously into the flagon he found there, and poured two cups of wine, returning to hand one to me. ‘I can’t overthrow Mortimer yet,’ he said quietly as if the walls might have ears. ‘All I can do is make life difficult for him ...’

‘... but not so difficult that he might clap you up in a dungeon in the Tower.’ I had no faith in Mortimer’s compassion.

‘Yes. Just like he clapped up my ...’

The air around me prickled. Edward stiffened and his mouth closed in a firm line, as if he had come up against a rock that blocked his path but was too solid and vast for him to shatter. I, too, closed my mouth. And I did not question him, knowing it was too painful a matter to broach. Did not all families have their secrets? Ours were simply more complex and more dangerous than most. Without a word I took his hand to draw him back down with me and waited until he relaxed a little and managed a wry grimace that might just have been a smile.

‘No. Mortimer won’t lock me up,’ he said as if he had thought about the possibility often. ‘He needs me. King Edward, the sacred figurehead, who will obey every dictate. Except that he won’t.’ He took a gulp of wine and rubbed one hand over his face, his voice rough with desperation. ‘Ah, Philippa. Mortimer plays the king in front of me, posturing and preening as if he were the true King and I some prancing upstart, dressed and groomed to mimic royalty. And before God, it’s no mummer’s play! I have to tolerate it because as yet I can find no way to break free. I’m running out of patience.’

‘But not out of time,’ I urged, winding my fingers into his furred cuff. The fright was back with a vengeance. Sometimes my dreams were red with bloody murder, and I woke with ragged breathing and a galloping heart.

‘He has every trick up his sleeve.’ Edward might laugh, but it was laced with anger. ‘Did you know? Mortimer is now claiming descent from the mighty King Arthur – the line which ancient prophecy says will one day rule all England and Wales. Isabella will love that.’ The laugh was transformed into a snarl. ‘And what’s more, as his first step on the damned ladder he’s claimed the premier earldom in the kingdom for himself. Did you know? Mortimer is now the Earl of March, by his own gift.’

Mortimer’s ambitions were no surprise, but this outrageous claim shook me.

‘God rot him!’ I exclaimed. Which at least made Edward smile.

‘Amen to that.’

I waited until Edward had drained his cup, then took it from him, placed it on the floor beside my full one, and held his hands enclosed in mine. He cocked his head as if he might read my mind, and when he failed – for cannot every clever woman hide her thoughts from the man she loves? he said: ‘Tell me, then. I can almost hear your mind scurrying with advice.’

‘Let him be Earl of March,’ I replied urgently. ‘I say he’ll not enjoy it much longer. You have friends now, I think, who will not turn their back on you when Mortimer orders them into line.’

‘I have indeed.’ Edward’s eyes suddenly gleamed with a presentiment of the future. ‘I have friends who look to me as the young wolf who will one day challenge the old pack leader. So you have been listening to gossip?’ I think I amused him, as I often did.

‘Walter collects useful facts like a magpie collects bright objects,’ I explained.

‘I only hope Mortimer’s not as well informed as you seem to be – or my friends might find the edge of an axe against their neck before they are much older.’

‘Walter and I are very discreet,’ I pronounced. ‘I drink to your friendships.’

I rescued my untasted cup and we made the toast.

‘To friends,’ I said. ‘To the future, and your ultimate victory.’

‘Well said, Madam Counsellor.’ And I saw him deliberately step away from the weighty matters of state, for my sake, as he dragged me back into his embrace, his chin once more on my hair. ‘Now you must sleep. This child needs to rest, too, if one day he is to take on my sword and my kingdom. Let him be at peace – and don’t lecture him on what he must and mustn’t do if he is to be the perfect prince.’

I said no more, but lay in Edward’s arms as he fell asleep – he always fell asleep as if felled by a battle-axe. I lay awake. I loved him with all my heart, even when he presumed in high-handed manner that the child I carried would be a son rather than a daughter. I had cried at the end of those eight days at Valenciennes when Edward had left me, and I still ignorant of whether I would be the royal bride or not. I wept again now, silently, even more bitter tears. For tomorrow we would be parted and I would not know what happened to him, what dangers he faced. I trusted neither Isabella nor Mortimer.

Fortunately neither did Edward.

It struck me, just as I was falling into sleep at last – I never had found out what Edward’s preoccupation was.

Nor did I, until the following day.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning Edward rose early. I could not find him in the rabbit warren of rooms of the old palace so I sent Walter to track him down. There was no man I could trust more with a subtle investigation.

‘He’s talking with Montague and Ufford in the mews, my lady,’ Walter reported back.

‘What are they talking about?’

He shrugged lightly. ‘I couldn’t hear. I tried hard enough.’

I thought for a moment. ‘Is it trouble?’

‘I would say so. Montague looked severe.’

I knew the names Walter had given, but not their affiliation. ‘Friend or foe?’ I asked bluntly.

‘Friend,’ Walter replied promptly. ‘I’d say they’re putting their money on Edward for the future.’

‘Good.’

‘I expect the King will want some advice from you before he leaves, my lady.’ Walter grinned. My habit of dispensing it was well known.

‘Then he’ll get it,’ I replied.

I did not see Edward until the household met for Mass before his departure. He knelt beside me and held my hand throughout the service, but although he followed the words and made the appropriate responses, his mind was not in the confines of the chapel. Whatever the preoccupation of the previous day had been, it was still with him in full measure. I prayed as hard as I could that Edward’s patience would hold until the time to strike was good and his support sufficient to make a victorious stand against the monster that Mortimer had become. Failure would undoubtedly bring death. How or what Edward would do, I had no idea, but I prayed for God’s grace and blessing on him. I prayed for Mortimer’s downfall. And I prayed for a son. If Edward had a son to fight for, it would strengthen his sword arm against both Mortimer and his mother. For he would have to deal with Isabella, too, and she shared his blood.

My spirits were not restored. Soon I would be alone and bereft.

After the blessing, the household intent on leaving the chapel to go about its daily tasks, struggled to rise from my knees, but to my surprise Edward held me down, his face fixed on the silver crucifix on the altar.

‘What is it?’ I whispered. It seemed that since I had come to England my whole life had been spent whispering in corners.

‘Wait a little ...’ he breathed.

So I did, wishing he would hurry up. My girth was not good for this. But Edward needed to talk to me before he left, and here we were simply husband and wife kneeling together.

before parting, giving no cause for suspicion. Isabella left with barely a glance in our direction. We continued to stare at the altar as if still in private prayer. The chapel gradually emptied around us apart from Father Godwin.

‘I wasn’t going to tell you,’ Edward said quietly. ‘I decided not to give you anything else to worry you. But I must because you’re sure to hear about it now that it’s surfaced ...’ He hesitated for a fraction of a second. ‘There is a plot. Montague brought me word.’

A jolt took me like a punch beneath my heart. Here was trouble indeed. Walter had been right. ‘Against you?’ I asked.

‘No. Against Mortimer.’

My head swung round before I could stop it, then I forced myself to look forward again.

‘Are you involved?’ My voice was shaking, and not from the cold rising up through my long-suffering knees.

‘No. It is my uncle of Kent. He’s amassed troops.’ Edward took a breath. ‘He plans to rescue my father from Corfe castle and set him up as King again in Mortimer’s stead. And in mine, of course.’

This time I turned, staring at him with wide eyes. Many would have been totally disbelieving of such a statement. Many would have considered that Edward, making such a remark, had run mad. Had not the old king, Edward the Second of that name, died at Berkeley castle of some unknown ailment and been buried with all pomp and ceremony at Gloucester, with Edward in attendance? But I knew that Edward, my Edward, was as sane as the next man. And we both knew that Edward’s father was not dead and buried at all, but alive and well and a prisoner in Mortimer’s hands in Corfe Castle, far away in Dorset. We were out of the way so that nothing could stand in Mortimer’s path to glory except for my Edward who so far had been too friendless and inexperienced to retaliate.

So Kent was planning to release the old king? My mind, seeking the repercussions of such a momentous an act, became impossibly blank.

‘It could cast us all into the fires of Hell.’ Such a melodramatic statement but Edward’s voice as calm as if he had made a passing comment on the state of the roads to Westminster.

‘I don’t know what to say ...’

And what I saw in Edward’s face in that moment of revelation was neither youth nor inexperience, but a hard acceptance that from this day things would never be quite the same.

‘Oh, Edward,’ I breathed. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘I have decided. I don’t like it, but I have been manoeuvred into a position where I have no choice.’ He thought for a moment or two as I sat helplessly back on my heels. Still with his gaze fixed on the altar he asked: ‘What would you advise me, Philippa? I would value ...’

He stopped. The priest passed by us. I bent my head over my hands as if still in prayer.

‘I would advise you to do nothing,’ I stated carefully.

‘I knew you would say that.’ He sighed softly. ‘But even so, even though I am constrained to do exactly that, he is my father. Do I condemn him to a life enclosed forever within the walls in Corfe?’

Edward knew the answer to that. He knew it all too well. As did I.

‘What if he is rescued?’ I asked, now turning four-square to look at his ravaged face. ‘What if your father is released and Mortimer overthrown?’

‘Then my father becomes King of England again,’ he replied promptly. ‘Possibly in name only and with his brother Kent pulling the strings.’

‘And Mortimer?’

An eloquent lift of a shoulder was all the reply I got to that. An axe would figure prominently.

‘What of Isabella?’

‘I don’t know. I doubt my father would ever trust her again, but who’s to say? She might be prepared to inveigle her way back into his favour if it meant having a stake in ruling. But would my father accept her? He might. He seems not to have been known for his willpower.’ Edward lifted a shoulder again. ‘But I see no reconciliation. I think Isabella will have a high price to pay for her infidelities.’

I nodded. So far the return of King Edward II was not unacceptable. But for my Edward the storm clouds loomed as threatening as thunderheads.

‘So where do you stand in all this?’ I asked.

‘Up to my neck in treason.’

I could not deny it, not even to give him solace.

‘He is my father, Philippa. My compassion is strong for him. But if he is discovered to be alive, deposed and constrained against his will, then am I, King by some appalling duplicitous means, not complicit in his illegal overthrow?’ Fury flared in Edward’s eyes, all pretence and prayer abandoned. ‘Yet how could I be complicit? I didn’t even know. It was all done in some hole-and-corner conspiracy, and I wasn’t told until three months after I had stood beside my father’s coffin and watched its interment, that is was all a fabrication. Who in his right mind would believe that? And if Mortimer swears that I was complicit in the whole thing, the treason sits on my shoulder like a chattering monkey.’

I held onto Edward’s hand as tightly as I could. He spoke nothing but the truth. His reading of the situation had even more clarity than mine.

And the penalty for treason was death.

‘No, I will not join my uncle. To become involved would be ill-considered. I will remain aloof until I know the outcome. And then ...?’ The decision was ground out between Edward’s teeth. ‘I know exactly what I must do.’

‘You will do what is best – for you and for England.’ I had no doubts, despite Edward being torn apart by it.

‘Yes. Of course.’ The fury died, replaced by a dark flood of emotion. ‘Kingship brings weight of responsibility. I know what my duty is. Why, Philippa, is duty sometimes so impossibly painful?’

We said our farewells later in public. A clasp of hands, a brush of lips, nothing more except ...

‘Here.’ From his sleeve Edward slid a leather pouch that clinked softly. Smoothly, with no undue movement, he passed it to me. Without a glance I slid it into my own sleeve.

‘Where did you get this?’ I whispered.

‘Filched from Isabella’s coffers.’ He grimaced. ‘Mortimer keeps me almost as short as my mother keeps you.’

Relief and pleasure mingled with the grief that he was leaving me. I could recompense those who served me. I need not feel the ignominy of having to ask for service without payment – or at least not until this unexpected largesse ran out.

And Edward rode out, but not alone. He had Walter Manny at his side. I decided at the last moment that I would like Walter to stay with him. There would be at least one loyal servant in his entourage.

‘Keep an eye on him,’ I said to Walter, anxiety gripping hard as the escort gathered. ‘Don’t let him ...’

My words dried. Don’t let him what? Come to harm? Challenge Mortimer before he has the weight of support to do so effectively? Join Kent in an effort to release his father – an effort that would effectively destroy his own position as king, at the same time tarnishing beyond redemption the face of divine monarchy and throwing England into chaos?

It was all out of my hands and, besides, Edward was his own man.

‘The King will act as he sees fit, my lady.’ It was as much a reprimand as I had ever had from Walter. Edward and I shared his allegiance equally now, it seemed. But I held on to Walter’s arm before he mounted.

‘Of course he will. But watch him anyway, Walter. For my sake as well as his.’

I attended a Mass to mark my passing into the enclosed world where I would give birth. And in the end, as tradition demanded it, even the wine and spices, paid for by Edward's gold. This first-born royal child must be born in a mystic and sacred manner. I was enveloped in a claustrophobic world, in effect a womb, as my child was enclosed in mine. The servants I took with me were women, fulfilling the roles usually apportioned to men. All men were barred from my presence until the child was born and I was churched to allow me to return to the outside world.

And the luxuriously prepared chambers, where I would reside for the weeks of waiting. They were not luxurious at all. Her promises as empty as a tithe barn in a famine year. Isabella had provided no furnishings of any description. I sent Lady Katherine, accompanied by Walter to do the heavy work before he left, to purloin what they could from any rarely used chamber where their depredations would not be noticed. And what an odd selection they garnered! Most of the hangings depicted bloodshed and hunting, which might not be appropriate for a royal birth, but at least some energetic beating had removed most of the dust. My bed cover had a lurid representation of a buck being torn apart by a pack of alant. I did not inspect carefully for the moth.

So there I sat, Lady Katherine delivering my requirements beyond the locked doors, my young valet Thomas stationed outside the door to carry those requests on and report back anything I might need to know.

Oh, I was bored with my inaction by the end of the first week. Books, unusually, held no attraction for me and stitching was merely something to do to keep my hands busy. My mind was far from Woodstock, and I was afraid. I fretted. I paced as much as I could until my ever-swollen ankles drove me to bed. And still I fretted as my mind was free to consider the dangers that Edward must face. His position was deplorable, and all created by Mortimer.

What if ...?

If one thought started with that hopeless question, it was more like a score.

What if Kent's rebellion succeeded and the old king, Edward II, was restored to his crown? Well if that was so, then Mortimer would surely hang. As for Isabella, I was as doubtful. Edward was of her reconciliation with her husband. I would wager on a fast divorce for the Dowager Queen and an enforced stay in a nunnery for the rest of her life. I had no fault to find in that.

But what of Edward, my Edward? Could he in truth be accused of being an accomplice in breaking the law to keep a man – and a holy anointed one at that – wrongfully imprisoned? Without doubt he could, just as he would be dethroned if his father were restored. Mortimer. Edward might even be arrested for treason, guilty of keeping his father hidden, attending a fake royal funeral, taking a crown that was not his to take. He might plead ignorance. He might plead Mortimer's supremacy and his own youth – it still astonished me that Edward was not yet into his eighteenth year. But who would believe him? I would believe, having seen Mortimer's heavy hand in operation, but Edward might have to face a hostile

questioning.

Or even an axe hovering over his neck. Unfair! Unfair!

My lack of knowledge of what was happening at Westminster, or indeed at Corfe Castle was a physical pain. Edward's anguish was mine too. It was getting beyond my bearing when Edward came to Woodstock.

'Edward!' I hitched my skirts and ran through my rooms, as well as I was able, to the door so that I might fling it back and be swallowed up in his arms. All my fear was swept away by a surge of pure joy. Whatever had happened at Westminster or Corfe, Edward was not under constraint. I would see him, touch him – except that Lady Katherine, more agile than I in these circumstances, was there before me like a guard dog at the gate. Her hands were fists uncompromisingly on her hips

'You cannot go there, my lady.'

'But I need to see him.' I was horrified by the weakness in my voice, but my longing was so strong.

Lady Katharine's face was compassionate but her voice held the tone of a military commander. 'You must not, my lady.'

'What would it matter? Who would know?' Tears were unnervingly close.

'It would matter. This is how it is done. You do not leave these rooms. You have no contact with any man.' She led me, protesting all the way, back to my inner chamber.

'Then how can I speak with him?' I had no intention of allowing Edward to leave without some form of communication passing between us. I suddenly thought, a ray of hope. 'Can we not speak through the closed door?'

'No.' Lady Katharine, well versed in all such traditions, was adamant.

'Then what?' To my horror, the tears that had threatened began to fall in torrent. Pregnancy made me remarkably emotional. And here was Edward, still with the Keble conspiracy hanging over him like a curse, and I unable to even tell him even how much I missed him. Lady Katherine stared at me unhelpfully.

'Help me!' I pleaded.

'Well ...' Her eye slid from mine.

'What?' I demanded, hope renewed.

'You can I write, I suppose.' Lady Katherine considered. 'I don't see why not. You are not in contact.'

And I laughed through my tears, at the prospect of Edward sitting, pen in hand, to communicate whatever it was he wanted to say to me. Writing was not beyond Edward's skills, but it was not his favourite occupation. Yet that is how we managed it, the notes carried by the long suffering and still-not-sufficiently-paid Lady Katherine, who scurried between us like a harvest mouse stocking up grains of corn for winter. I imagined Edward using every oath known to him as he penned his notes as briefly as he could. And what a heart-rending tale it was. I laughed no longer as I was informed in Edward's scratchy handwriting without any greeting, formal or informal:

The rebellion is over. Kent is arrested. Mortimer will put him on trial. Kent is accused attempting to rescue the old king, which is treason against me.

I considered. Mortimer had struck hard.

What does Kent say? I wrote back.

The handwriting on Edward's second note changed. Walter was with him. Edward abandoning the effort, was dictating to Walter. At least it was easier to read.

Kent is terrified, he begged forgiveness. He had not meant treason, only to rescue his brother and set him free.

I considered this. A facile reasoning that no one would believe. Once rescued, would Kent have set the old king up as King of England again? The answer would have to be yes.

Will Kent be found guilty? I wrote. I knew the answer even before it came back.

Mortimer is out for blood. He intends to act as prosecutor himself, in a court he has set up for the sole purpose of finding Kent guilty. There is no hope. He will stamp Kent and his supporters underfoot.

I could imagine Edward saying the final words, as if he were speaking them to me. The trial was not so much about Kent's guilt, but about Mortimer's sovereignty. Kent would be arraigned, declared guilty, and then ... The pure Plantagenet blood in Kent's veins would weigh nothing against Mortimer's ambition.

Can you stop it? I wrote urgently.

And there came back the single word. *No.*

There was really nothing more to say. I considered what it was I wanted to know most of all, what I would have asked if I had been allowed to fling myself into Edward's arms. And finally I wrote: *Are you in any danger?*

I had to wait for some minutes for the reply to this, and the lines were longer and were considered. Walter's handwriting was deteriorating. And if Edward was trying to protect me from anxiety, he failed miserably ...

Mortimer has now been forced to admit openly that my father is still alive. He has done it with blatant confidence, as if he fears no retaliation. But now that it's known, there are voices raised against me, as I had feared. Am I not guilty of treason, keeping the rightful king, my father, under restraint when I knew he was alive, robbing him of his crown? If those accusations gain momentum I could be brought down with Mortimer. There was a space as if it had taken some time to add the final words. *There is only one course of action for me.*

Oh! My heart plummeted, thudding so hard that nausea swam for a moment in my belly. I had always seen the possibility of this, but to have it written, in Edward's words even if in Walter's hand, made it all as clear as day. And there was absolutely no purpose in my asking if Edward had any influence over Mortimer's ultimate decision with regard to Kent. Mortimer would do as he chose. I would not have wagered a groat on Kent keeping his neck intact.

I pondered my reply, allowing the nausea to dissipate, then wrote as dispassionately as I could. How was it possible to be dispassionate when contemplating execution and imprisonment? But I did it.

Restoring your father to the throne was never the way forward, Edward. He would have remained a puppet in Kent's control. You have to keep your crown at all costs. You have to show your people that you will preserve the dignity and sacredness of your inheritance. You must never give up your crown. Neither your crown nor that of the child that is to be born. It is your right to be king and you must hold fast.

How heavy it sounded. How portentous. And how I wished that I could have stood beside Edward as I said what I believed to be the truth, however hard it was. I added.

It is a terrible sacrifice for you to make.

Edward's reply was as sombre as mine, and written in his own hand as if he could not burden Walter with writing the words.

I know what I must do. As do you. God forgive me.

And I wrote back, my heart full of sorrow.

God be with you, Edward. I will pray for you. And my tears splattered over the page.

There was a lull in the passing of letters, so long that I thought Edward had left. Finally, I wrote again.

My dear Philippa, I have burdened you with affairs of the realm, and not once asked what I most want to know. Are you in good health? I came to Woodstock to discover exactly that. I hope you are sleeping and eating and not worrying.

Not worrying! My laughter had a tearful quality. Not worrying, with my husband threatened with treason against his father? How typical of a man to inform his wife of his inner fears, and then hope she would not worry!

I am well, I wrote staunchly. So is the infant, who is far too lively for my comfort. I miss you. Come to me when it is over, if you can. Never doubt my love and my thoughts are with you, day and night. And I signed it. *Philippa.*

Edward responded:

You are my pearl beyond price. My matchless wife.

Edward R.

An excruciatingly formal ending, but a very necessary one, I decided, Edward laying claim to his birthright, even if only to me. I held the final note against my heart. 'That's it,' I informed Lady Katharine, mopping up my tears once more. 'We have said all that needs saying.' I caught her critical eye. 'And we have, I hope, preserved the mysticism of my condition.'

We had written of blood and rebellion and family treachery. A dark shadow of it lingered in my rooms, a terrible presence of the ultimate decision that Edward would be forced to make. It hovered by my bed. It lingered at my shoulder as I went to pray in my chapel. It sat at my side as I tried to eat. If Mortimer could be struck down by the hand of God, I considered it might be a blessing all round, but such an outcome was unlikely to happen. The march of Mortimer's power continued apace.

Who could stop him? Who could snatch sovereignty back from his unworthy hand?

Edward. Only Edward. I prayed fervently as the days of silence passed slowly by.

It was at the beginning of April. A letter was brought to me, delivered by Walter, who did not even stop long enough to receive a reply. Having read the content, how could I have sent one that would have had any value? The news – in Edward's own hand again – was raw with an emotion that was not expressed in the cold words. I wondered how Edward had managed to get it past Mortimer's ring of spies. It was brief.

The rebellion is finished. My father remains under lock and key in Mortimer's control. I think he has moved to Ireland. My uncle of Kent was found guilty of treason against me. He was executed for his loyalty to his brother on 19th March.

A little space, as if Edward had had to think hard about the rest.

Mortimer declared Kent's guilt. But I had to ratify the decision. I sentenced Kent to death. I signed the warrant. His blood is ultimately on my head.

It was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life.

My cheeks were wet with tears. Edward had made no excuses, made no attempt to shift the blame to where it rightfully lay, for which I admired him more than I could say. I saw Mortimer's hand in this, from top to bottom: the court, the judgement, the sentence, and Edward once more an unwilling pawn. If Edward had pardoned Kent he would have challenged Mortimer, and thus risked his own future and that of the child I carried. What an appalling choice, that a man must condemn his uncle to death and his father to endless imprisonment in order to safeguard his own kingship, however imperfect a kingship it might be.

Cold-hearted selfishness, some would say.

Hard-headed pragmatism, I decided. A much needed quality for a man who had the ambition and the quality to be a great king.

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