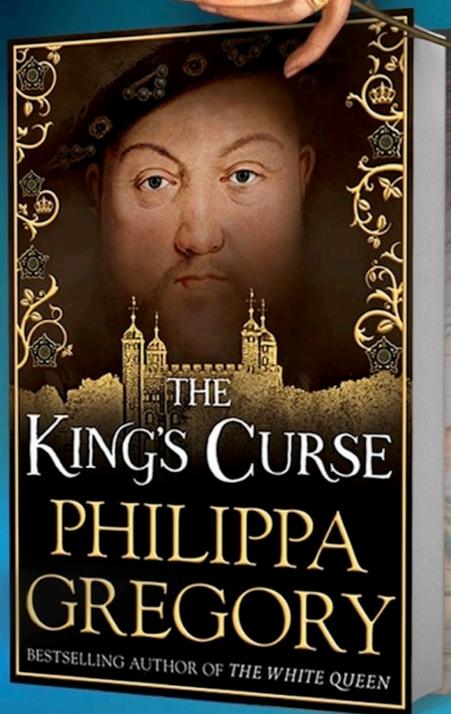
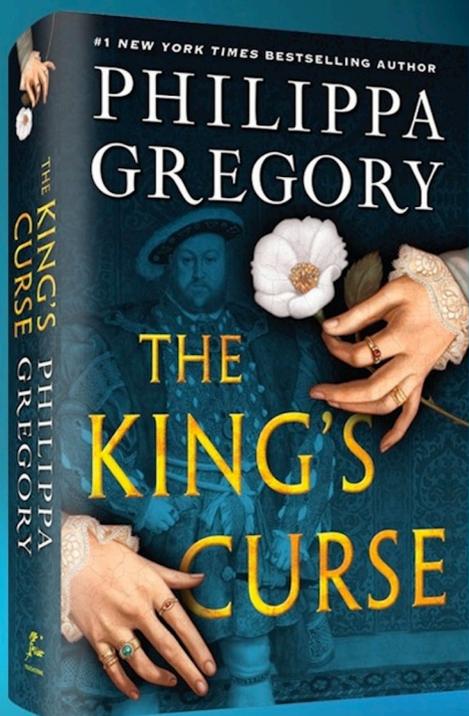


THE KING'S CURSE

PHILIPPA GREGORY

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the rise of the House of Tudor.
Only she knows how it can fall.





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THE
KING'S
CURSE

PHILIPPA GREGORY

A TOUCHSTONE BOOK

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Endpapers: The graffito of Geoffrey Pole's signature was found carved on a wall in the Tower of London, photographed by Johnny Ring. The plan of the Tower: "The Tower of London" from *London*, Volume II by Charles Knight, 1841.

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For Anthony



WESTMINSTER PALACE, LONDON,
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In the moment of waking I am innocent, my conscience clear of any wrongdoing. In that first dazed moment, as my eyes open, I have no thoughts; I am only a smooth-skinned, tightly muscled young body, a woman of twenty-six, slowly waking with joy to life. I have no sense of my immortal soul, I have no sense of sin or guilt. I am so deliciously, lazily sleepy that I hardly know who I am.

Slowly, I open my eyes and realize that the light coming through the shutters means that it is late in the morning. As I stretch out, luxuriously, like a waking cat, I remember that I was exhausted when I fell asleep and now I feel rested and well. And then, all in a moment, as if reality had suddenly tumbled down on my head like glossy-sealed denouncements from a high shelf, I remember that I am not well, that nothing is well, that this is the morning I hoped would never come; for this morning I cannot deny my deadly name: I am the heir of royal blood, and my brother—guilty as I am guilty—is dead.

My husband, sitting on the side of my bed, is fully dressed in his red velvet waistcoat, his jacket making him bulky and wide, his gold chain of office as chamberlain to the Prince of Wales splayed over his broad chest. Slowly, I realize he has been waiting for me to wake, his face crumpled with worry. “Margaret?”

“Don’t say anything,” I snap like a child, as if stopping the words will delay the facts, and I turn away from him into the pillow.

“You must be brave,” he says hopelessly. He pats my shoulder as if I were a sick hound puppy. “You must be brave.”

I don’t dare to shrug him off. He is my husband, I dare not offend him. He is my only refuge. I am buried in him, my name hidden in his. I am cut off from my title as sharply as if my name had been beheaded and rolled away into a basket.

Mine is the most dangerous name in England: Plantagenet, and once I carried it proudly, like a crown. Once I was Margaret Plantagenet of York, niece of two kings, the brothers Edward IV and Richard III, and the third brother was my father, George, Duke of Clarence. My mother was the wealthiest woman in England and the daughter of a man so great that they called him “Kingmaker.” My brother, Teddy, was named by our uncle, King Richard, as heir to the throne of England, and between us—Teddy and me—we commanded the love and the loyalty of half the kingdom. We were the noble Warwick orphans, saved from fate, snatched from the witchy grip of the white queen, raised in the royal nursery at Middleham Castle by Queen Anne herself, and nothing, nothing in the world was too good or too rich or too rare for us.

But when King Richard was killed, we went overnight from being the heirs to the throne to becoming pretenders, survivors of the old royal family, while a usurper took the throne. What should be done with the York princesses? What should be done with the Warwick heirs? The Tudors, mother and son, had the answer prepared. We would all be married into obscurity, wedded to shadows, hidden in wedlock. So now I am safe, cut down by degrees, until I am small enough to conceal under a poor knight’s name in a little manor in the middle of England where land is cheap and there is nobody who would ride into battle for the promise of my smile at the cry of “À Warwick!”

I am Lady Pole. Not a princess, not a duchess, not even a countess, just the wife of a humble knight, stuffed into obscurity like an embroidered emblem into a forgotten clothes chest.

Margaret Pole, young pregnant wife to Sir Richard Pole, and I have already given him three children, two of them boys. One is Henry, named sycophantically for the new king, Henry VII, and one is Arthur, named ingratiatingly for his son Prince Arthur, and I have a daughter, Ursula. I was allowed to call a mere girl whatever I wanted, so I named her for a saint who chose death rather than be married to a stranger and forced to take his name. I doubt that anyone has observed this small rebellion of mine; I certainly hope not.

But my brother could not be rechristened by marriage. Whoever he married, however lowly she was, she could not change his name as my husband has changed mine. He would still hold the title Earl of Warwick, he would still answer to Edward Plantagenet, he would still be the true heir to the throne of England. When they raised his standard (and someone, sooner or later, was bound to raise his standard) half of England would turn out just for that haunting flicker of white embroidery, the white rose. That is what they call him: "the White Rose."

So since they could not take his name from him, they took his fortune and his lands. Then they took his liberty, packing him away like a forgotten banner, among other worthless things, into the Tower of London, among traitors and debtors and fools. But though he had no servants, no lands, no castle, no education, still my brother had his name, my name. Still Teddy had his title, my grandfather's title. Still he was Earl of Warwick, the White Rose, heir to the Plantagenet throne, a living constant reproach to the Tudors, who captured that throne and now call it their own. They took him into the darkness when he was a little boy of eleven and they did not bring him out until he was a man of twenty-four. He had not felt meadow grass under his feet for thirteen years. Then he walked out of the Tower, perhaps enjoying the smell of the rain on the wet earth, perhaps listening to the seagulls crying over the river, perhaps hearing beyond the high walls of the Tower the shouts and laughter of free men, free Englishmen, his subjects. With a guard on either side of him, he walked across the

drawbridge and up to Tower Hill, knelt before the block, and put his head down as if he deserved to die, as if he were willing to die; and they beheaded him.

That happened yesterday. Just yesterday. It rained all day. There was a tremendous storm, as if the sky was raging against cruelty, rain pouring down like grief, so that when they told me, as I stood beside my cousin the queen in her beautifully appointed rooms, we closed the shutters against the darkness as if we did not want to see the rain that on Tower Hill was washing blood into the gutter, my brother's blood, my blood, royal blood.

"Try to be brave," my husband murmurs again. "Think of the baby. Try not to be afraid."

"I'm not afraid." I twist my head to speak over my shoulder. "I don't have to try to be brave. I have nothing to fear. I know that I am safe with you."

He hesitates. He does not want to remind me that perhaps I do still have something to fear. Perhaps even his lowly estate is not humble enough to keep me safe. "I meant, try not to show your grief . . ."

"Why not?" It comes out as a childish wail. "Why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I grieve? My brother, my only brother, is dead! Beheaded like a traitor when he was innocent as a child. Why should I not grieve?"

"Because they won't like it," he says simply.

WESTMINSTER PALACE, LONDON,
WINTER-SPRING 1500



The queen herself comes down the great stair from her rooms in the palace to say good-bye as we leave Westminster after the Christmas feast, though the king still keeps to his chamber. His mother tells everyone that he is well, he just has a touch of fever, he is strong and healthy and resting out the cold winter days beside a warm fire; but no one believes her. Everyone knows that he is sick with guilt at the murder of my brother and the death of the pretender who was named as a traitor, accused of joining in the same imaginary plot. I note, with wry amusement, that the queen and I, who have both lost a brother, go white-faced and tight-lipped about our business, while the man who ordered their deaths takes to his bed, dizzy with guilt. But Elizabeth and I are accustomed to loss, we are Plantagenets—we dine on a diet of betrayal and heartbreak. Henry Tudor is newly royal and has always had his battles fought for him.

“Good luck,” Elizabeth says shortly. She makes a little gesture towards the swell of my belly. “Are you sure you won’t stay? You could go into confinement here. You would be well served and I would visit you. Do change your mind and stay, Margaret.”

I shake my head. I cannot tell her that I am sick of London, and sick of the court, and sick of the rule of her husband and his overbearing mother.

“Very well,” she says, understanding all of this. “And will you go to Ludlow as soon as you are up and about again? And join them there?”

She prefers me to be at Ludlow with her boy Arthur. My husband is his guardian in that distant castle, and it comforts her to know that I am there too.

“I’ll go as soon as I can,” I promise her. “But you know Sir Richard will keep your boy safe and well whether I am there or not. He cares for him as if he were a prince of pure gold.”

My husband is a good man, I never deny it. My Lady the King’s Mother chose well for me when she made my marriage. She only wanted a man who would keep me from public view, but she happened upon one who cherishes me at home. And she got a bargain. She paid my husband the smallest possible fee on our wedding day; I could almost laugh even now, to think what they gave him to marry me: two manors, two paltry manors, and a little tumbling-down castle! He could have demanded far more; but he has always served the Tudors for nothing more than their thanks, trotted behind them only to remind them that he was on their side, followed their standard wherever it might lead without counting the cost or asking questions.

Early in his life he put his trust in Lady Margaret Beaufort, his kinswoman. She convinced him, as she convinced so many, that she would be a victorious ally but a dangerous enemy. As a young man he called on her intense family feeling and put himself into her keeping. She swore him to the cause of her son and he, and all her allies, risked their lives to bring her son to the throne and call her by the title she invented for herself: My Lady the King’s Mother. Still, even now, even in unassailable triumph she clutches at cousins, terrified of unreliable friends and fearsome strangers.

I look at my cousin the queen. We are so unlike the Tudors. They married her to My Lady’s son, the king, Henry, and only after they had tested her fertility and her loyalty for nearly two years, as if she were a breeding bitch that they had on approval, did they crown her as his queen—though she was a princess at birth and he was

born very far from the throne. They married me to My Lady's half cousin Sir Richard. They required us both to deny our breeding, our childhoods, our pasts, to take their name and swear fealty, and we have done so. But even so, I doubt they will ever trust us.

Elizabeth, my cousin, looks over to where the young Prince Arthur, her son, is waiting for his horse to be led from the stables. "I wish all three of you would stay."

"He has to be in his principality," I remind her. "He is Prince of Wales, he has to be near Wales."

"I just . . ."

"The country is at peace. The King and Queen of Spain will send their daughter to us now. We will come back in no time, ready for Arthur's wedding." I do not add that they will only send the young Infanta now that my brother is dead. He died so that there was no rival heir; the Infanta's carpet to the altar will be as red as his blood. And I shall have to walk on it, in the Tudor procession, and smile.

"There was a curse," she says suddenly, drawing close to me and putting her mouth to my ear so that I can feel the warmth of her breath against my cheek. "Margaret, I have to tell you. There was a curse." She puts her hand in mine and I can feel her tremble.

"What curse?"

"It was that whoever took my brothers from the Tower, whoever put my brothers to death, should die for it."

Horrified, I pull back so that I can see her white face. "Whose curse? Who said such a thing?"

The shadow of guilt that crosses her face tells me at once. It will have been her mother, the witch Elizabeth. There is no doubt in my mind that it is a murderous curse from that murderous woman. "What did she say exactly?"

She slips her hand through my arm and draws me to the stable gardens, through the arched doorway, so that we are alone in the enclosed space, the leafless tree spreading its boughs over our heads.

"I said it too," she admits. "It was my curse as much as hers. I

said it with my mother. I was only a girl, but I should have known better . . . but I said it with her. We spoke to the river, to the goddess . . . you know! . . . the goddess who founded our family. We said: "Our boy was taken when he was not yet a man, not yet king—though he was born to be both. So take his murderer's son while he is yet a boy, before he is a man, before he comes to his estate. And then take his grandson too and when you take him, we will know by his death that this is the working of our curse and this is payment for the loss of our son."

I shiver and gather my riding cape around me as if the sunlit garden were suddenly damp and cold with an assenting sigh from the river. "You said that?"

She nods, her eyes dark and fearful.

"Well, King Richard died, and his son died before him," I assert boldly. "A man and his son. Your brothers disappeared while in his keeping. If he was guilty and the curse did its work, then perhaps it is all done, and his line is finished."

She shrugs. No one who knew Richard would ever think for a moment that he had killed his nephews. It is a ridiculous suggestion. He devoted his life to his brother, he would have laid down his life for his nephews. He hated their mother and he took the throne, but he would never have hurt the boys. Not even the Tudors daresay more than to suggest such a crime; not even they are bare-faced enough to accuse a dead man of a crime he would never have committed.

"If it was this king . . ." My voice is no more than a whisper, and I hold her so close that we could be embracing, my cloak around her shoulders, her hand in mine. I hardly dare to speak in this court of spies. "If it was his order that killed your brothers . . ."

"Or his mother," she adds very low. "Her husband had the keys of the Tower, my brothers stood between her son and the throne . . ."

We shudder, hands clasped as tight as if My Lady might be stealing up behind us to listen. We are both terrified of the power of Margaret Beaufort, mother to Henry Tudor.

"All right, it's all right," I say, trying to hold back my fear, trying to deny the tremble of our hands. "But Elizabeth, if it was they who

killed your brother, then your curse will fall on her son, your own husband, and on his son also.”

“I know, I know,” she moans softly. “It’s what I have been afraid of since I first thought it. What if the murderer’s grandson is *my* son: Prince Arthur? My boy? What if I have cursed my own boy?”

“What if the curse ends the line?” I whisper. “What if there are no Tudor boys, and in the end nothing but barren girls?”

We stand very still as if we have been frozen in the wintry garden. In the tree above our heads a robin sings a trill of song, his warning call, and then he flies away.

“Keep him safe!” she says with sudden passion. “Keep Arthur safe in Ludlow, Margaret!”

STOURTON CASTLE, STAFFORDSHIRE,
 SPRING 1500



I enter my monthlong confinement at Stourton and my husband leaves me to escort the prince to Wales, to his castle at Ludlow. I stand at the great door of our ramshackle old house to wave them good-bye. Prince Arthur kneels for my blessing, and I put my hand on his head and then kiss him on both cheeks when he stands up. He is thirteen years old, taller than me already, a boy with all the York good looks and the York charm. There’s almost no Tudor about him at all, except in the copper of his hair and his occasional unpredictable swoop into anxiety; all the Tudors are a fearful family. I put my arms around his slim boy’s shoulders and hug him closely. “Be good,” I command him. “And take care jousting and riding. I promised your mother that no harm will come to you. Make sure it does not.”

He rolls his eyes as any boy will do when a woman fusses over

him, but he ducks his head in obedience and then turns and vaults onto his horse, gathering the reins and making it curvet and dance.

“And don’t show off,” I order. “And if it rains, get into shelter.”

“We will, we will,” my husband says. He smiles down at me kindly. “I’ll guard him, you know that. You take care of yourself, it’s you who has work to do this month. And send me the news the moment that the child is born.”

I put one hand over my big belly, feeling the baby stir, and I wave to them. I watch them as they go south down the red clay road to Kidderminster. The ground is frozen hard; they will make good time on the narrow tracks that wind between the patchwork of frosty rust-colored fields. The prince’s standards go before him, his men-at-arms in their bright livery. He rides beside my husband, the men of his household around them in tight protective formation. Behind them come the pack animals carrying the prince’s personal treasures, his silver plate, his gold ware, his precious saddles, his enameled and engraved armor, even his carpets and linen. He carries a fortune in treasure wherever he goes; he is the Tudor prince of England and served like an emperor. The Tudors shore up their royalty with the trappings of wealth as if they hope that playing the part will make it real.

Around the boy, around the mules carrying his treasure, ride the Tudor guard, the new guard that his father has mustered, the yeomen in their green and white livery. When we Plantagenets were the royal family, we rode through the highways and byways of England with friends and companions, unarmed, bare-headed; we never needed a guard, we never feared the people. The Tudors are always on alert for a hidden attack. They came in with an invading army, followed by disease, and even now, nearly fifteen years after their victory, they are still like invaders, uncertain of their safety, doubtful of their welcome.

I stand with one hand raised in farewell until a bend in the road hides them from me and then I go inside, gathering my fine woolen shawl around me. I will go to the nursery and see my children, be-

fore dinner is served to the whole household, and after dinner I will raise a glass to the stewards of my house and lands, command them to keep everything in good order during my absence, and retire to my chamber with my ladies-in-waiting, my midwives, and the nurses. There I have to wait, for the four long weeks of my confinement, for our new baby.



I am not afraid of pain, so I don't dread the birth. This is my fourth childbed and at least I know what to expect. But I don't look forward to it either. None of my children brings me the joy that I see in other mothers. My boys do not fill me with fierce ambition, I cannot pray for them to rise in the world—I would be mad to want them to catch the eye of the king, for what would he see but another Plantagenet boy? A rival heir to the throne? A threat? My daughter does not give me the satisfaction of seeing a little woman in the making: another me, another Plantagenet princess. How can I think of her as anything but doomed if she shines at court? I have got myself safely through these years by being almost invisible, how can I dress a girl, and put her forward, and hope that people admire her? All I want for her is a comfortable obscurity. To be a loving mother, a woman has to be optimistic, filled with hope for the babies, planning their future in safety, dreaming of grand plans. But I am of the House of York; I know better than anyone that it is an uncertain, dangerous world, and the best plan I can make for my children is that they survive in the shadows—by birth they will be the greatest of all the actors, but I must hope they are always either offstage, or anonymous in the crowd.

The baby comes early, a week before I had thought, and he is handsome and strong, with a funny little tuft of brown hair in the middle of his head like the crest on a cock. He takes to the wet nurse's milk and she suckles him constantly. I send the good news to his father and receive his congratulations and a bracelet of Welsh gold in reply. He says he will come home for the christening and

that we must call the boy Reginald—Reginald the counselor—as a gentle hint to the king and his mother that this boy will be raised to be an advisor and humble servant to their line. It is no surprise to me that my husband wants the baby's very name to indicate our servitude to them. When they won the country, they won us too. Our future depends on their favor. The Tudors own everything in England now; perhaps they always will.

Sometimes the wet nurse gives him to me and I rock him and admire the curve of his closed eyelids and the sweep of the eyelashes against his cheek. He reminds me of my brother when he was a baby. I can remember his plump toddler face very well, and his anxious dark eyes when he was a boy. I hardly saw him as a young man. I cannot picture the prisoner walking through the rain to the scaffold on Tower Hill. I hold my new baby close to my heart and think that life is fragile; perhaps it is safer not to love anyone at all.

My husband comes home as he promised—he always does what he promises—in time for the christening, and as soon as I am out of confinement and churched, we return to Ludlow. It is a long hard journey for me, and I go partly by litter and partly by horseback, riding in the morning and resting in the afternoon, but even so it takes us two days on the road and I am glad to see the high walls of the town, the striped black and cream of the lathes and plaster of the houses under their thick thatch roofs, and behind them, tall and dark, the greater walls of the castle.

LUDLOW CASTLE, WELSH MARCHES,
SPRING 1500



They throw the gates wide open in compliment to me, the wife of the Lord Chamberlain of the Prince of Wales, and Arthur himself

comes bounding like a colt out of the main gate, all long legs and excitement, to help me down from my horse and ask me how I am doing, and why have I not brought the new baby?

“It’s too cold for him, he’s better off with his wet nurse at home.” I hug him and he drops to kneel for my blessing as the wife of his guardian, and royal cousin to his mother, and as he rises up I bob a curtsy to him as the heir to the throne. We go easily through these steps of protocol without thinking of them. He has been raised to be a king, and I was brought up as one of the most important people in a ceremonial court, where almost everyone curtsied to me, walked behind me, rose when I entered a room, or departed bowing from my presence. Until the Tudors came, until I was married, until I became unimportant Lady Pole.

Arthur steps back to scrutinize my face, the funny boy, fourteen this year, but sweet-natured and thoughtful as the tenderhearted woman, his mother. “Are you all right?” he asks carefully. “Was it all, all right?”

“Quite all right,” I say to him firmly. “I’m quite unchanged.”

He beams at that. This boy has his mother’s loving heart; he is going to be a king with compassion and God knows this is what England needs to heal the wounds of thirty long years of battles.

My husband comes bustling from the stables, and he and Arthur sweep me into the great hall where the court bows to me and I walk through the hundreds of men of our household to my place of honor between my husband and the Prince of Wales, at the high table.



Later that night I go to Arthur’s bedchamber to hear him say his prayers. His chaplain is there, kneeling at the prie-dieu beside him, listening to the careful recitation in Latin of the collect for the day and the prayer for the night. He reads a passage from one of the psalms and Arthur bows his head to pray for the safety of his father and mother, the King and Queen of England. “And for My Lady

the King's Mother, the Countess of Richmond," he adds, reciting her title so that God will not forget how high she has risen, and how worthy her claim to His attention. I bow my head when he says "Amen," and then the chaplain gathers up his things and Arthur takes a leap into his big bed.

"Lady Margaret, d'you know if I am to be married this year?"

"Nobody has told me a date," I say. I sit on the side of his bed and look at his bright face, the soft down on his upper lip that he loves to stroke as if it will encourage it to grow. "But there can be no objection to the wedding now."

At once, he puts his hand out to touch mine. He knows that the monarchs of Spain swore they would send their daughter to be his bride only when they were assured that there were no rival heirs to the throne of England. They meant not only my brother Edward, but also the pretender who went by the name of the queen's brother, Richard of York. Determined that the betrothal should go ahead, the king entrapped both young men together, as if they were equally heirs, as if they were equally guilty, and ordered them both killed. The pretender claimed a most dangerous name, took arms against Henry, and died for it. My brother denied his own name, never raised his voice, let alone an army, and still died. I have to try not to sour my own life with bitterness. I have to put away resentment as if it were a forgotten badge. I have to forget I am a sister, I have to forget the only boy that I have ever truly loved: my brother, the White Rose.

"You know I would never have asked for it," Arthur says, his voice very low. "His death. I didn't ask for it."

"I know you didn't," I say. "It's nothing to do with you or me. It was out of our hands. There was nothing that either of us could have done."

"But I did do one thing," he says, with a shy sideways glance at me. "It wasn't any good; but I did ask my father for mercy."

"That was good of you," I say. I don't tell him that I was on my knees before the king, my headdress off, my hair let down, my tears falling on the floor, my cupped hands under the heel of his

boot, until they lifted me up and carried me away, and my husband begged me not to speak again for fear of reminding the king that I once had the name Plantagenet and that now I have sons with dangerous royal blood. "Nothing could be done. I am sure His Grace, your father, did only what he thought was right."

"Can you . . ." He hesitates. "Can you forgive him?"

He cannot even look at me with this question, and his gaze is on our clasped hands. Gently, he turns the new ring I am wearing on my finger, a mourning ring with a *W* for Warwick, my brother.

I cover his hand with my own. "I have nothing to forgive," I say firmly. "It was not an angry act or a vengeful act by your father against my brother. It was something that he felt he had to do in order to secure his throne. He did not do it with passion. He could not be swayed by an appeal. He calculated that the monarchs of Spain would not send the Infanta if my brother were alive. He calculated that the commons of England would always rise for someone who was a Plantagenet. Your father is a thoughtful man, a careful man; he will have looked at the chances almost like a clerk drawing up an account in one of those new ledgers with the gains on one side and the losses on the other. That's how your father thinks. That's how kings have to think these days. It's not about honor and loyalty anymore. It's about calculation. It's my loss that my brother counted as a danger, and your father had him crossed out of the book."

"But he was no danger!" Arthur exclaims. "And in all honor . . ."

"He was never a danger; it was his name. His name was the danger."

"But it's your name?"

"Oh no. My name is Margaret Pole," I say dryly. "You know that. And I try to forget I was born with any other."

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