

Lady Jehane, my long-lost sister, has cultivated an air of quietude that draws others to her. She listens attentively as I tell her about my dilemma.

“Richard is not a bad person,” I say. “I think he’s fond of me, or was. But I don’t love him, and I don’t think he could make me happy. Indeed, my whole being revolts at the idea of being tied down in marriage.”

“There’s no reason why you couldn’t take the veil.”

“But I couldn’t leave Mama.”

“Of course not. She has set much store by you, her youngest daughter.” Lady Jehane gives me a smile, untinged with bitterness. “But one day, Our Blessed Lady will gather our lady mother into her arms. If you’re not married by then, you could take the veil. I would help you.”

My soul soars. I would be spared the rigors of childbearing. I would have opportunities few other women dream of. I could cultivate my mind and improve my handwriting and my grasp of languages. I could learn to make medicines. I could lead a life of quiet contemplation.

I would have a measure of freedom.

But Richard achieved his majority in 1432, obtaining his vast estates back from the Crown. He became the wealthiest peer in the land. Then, in 1436, the king’s council decided that Richard of York should replace the king’s uncle as governor of Normandy and regent of France, the Duke of Bedford dying unexpectedly at the age of forty-six.

Becoming governor of Normandy was quite a coup for a young man of twenty-four, but it was not a coup for me as Richard now pressed his suit with more vigor and persistence. In April 1437, he even returned to England from Normandy.

Now, he demands to see me.

I recoil.

I remember well how my lord father gave me a beating after I’d dared to question his right to lock me up. I have the scars to prove it. The last time any man touched me was when Sir Ralph Neville lifted my skirts in the stables at Castle Raby. Even now, that humiliation makes me shudder.

The world of men is filled with violence, and I want none of it.



I am seated on a low stool, singing softly, surrounded by brother Salisbury’s children, when the crunch of gravel reaches my ears. Looking up, I find a young man.

He is well dressed in rich hues of velvet, as befits a noble. He fingers his heavy gold collar, decorated with white roses done in enamel. From this showy bijou drops a huge spear-pointed diamond.

A prickle wends its way up my spine. There is a silence as he stares at me.

“Need you something, my lord?” I enquire.

Absently fingering the diamond, the young man stutters out a reply. “My lady Cecylee—forgive this intrusion—I see you know not who I am.” He takes a deep breath. “Remember you a boy named Richard?”

God have mercy upon my soul. I look down at my lap. I had better get this over with, and quickly. I look up, and lock eyes.

He reads my face hungrily, as if concerned about my feelings. Then he smiles. His smile transforms his face, lighting up his blue-grey eyes and imbuing his expression with warmth and delight.

I cannot help it, I smile back. “Richard, it is you!” I exclaim. “Only you look different. I had not expected to see you look like—”

“Like what, sweetheart? You mean old and ugly?”

I tilt my head as I take him in. “There is a different feel about you.” I frown, trying to reconcile the serious, rather pompous boy I’d known with this attractive young man who kneels before me. Then I blush. What am I thinking? I do not wish to marry.

“I see my intrusion has discomforted you, my sweeting, for the which I am sorry. I should not have come upon you this way.”

I graze him with a glance. Is he making fun of me?

“We promised once to marry, my lady, but I’d not force you to it against your will.”

Now I stare.

He leans forward. “Is it still your wish to become my wife?”

I thin my lips and veil my eyes with my lashes. So this is why brother Salisbury has been closeted inside all morning. They must have been signing the marriage papers. Naturally, no one bothered to inform me.

I rise. “You know me not, my lord,” I say. Then I sweep out of the garden.