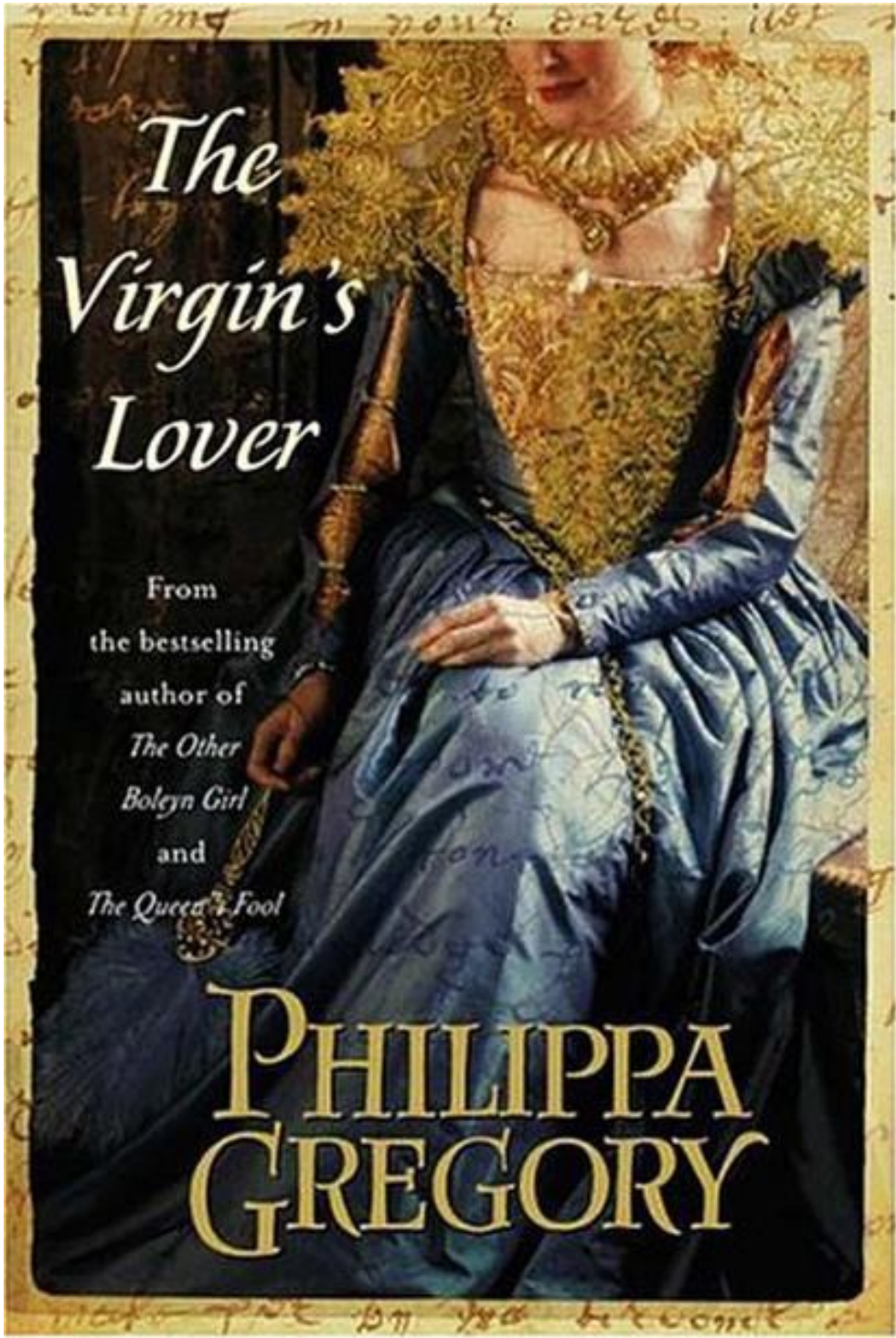
A woman in a blue and gold historical dress, possibly a queen or noblewoman, is the central figure. She is wearing a blue gown with gold embroidery and a gold necklace. Her hands are resting on her lap. The background is a textured, golden-brown color.

*The
Virgin's
Lover*

From
the bestselling
author of
*The Other
Boleyn Girl*
and
The Queen's Fool

PHILIPPA
GREGORY

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The Virgin's Lover



Philippa Gregory

A PRODUCTION BOOK
FORWARDED BY DODD & LEITCH
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Queen's Fool

The Other Boleyn Girl

Meridon

The Favored Child

Wideacre

The Virgin's Lover



Philippa Gregory

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For Anthony

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About The Author

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 agonizing, jangling sob 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 practiced 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 shorthanded at Stanfield Hall, her family's farm, stopped to stare at the brown leaves unraveling 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 favor 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 than ennobled as the handsome favorite 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?*

One Year Earlier: Summer 1557

IN HIS DREAM he saw once again the rough floorboards of the empty room, the sandstone mantelpiece over the big fireplace with their names carved into it, and the leaded window, set high in the stone wall. By dragging the big refectory table over to the window, climbing up, and craning their necks to look downward, the five young men could see the green below where their father came slowly out to the scaffold and mounted the steps.

He was accompanied by a priest of the newly restored Roman Catholic church; he had repented of his sins and recanted his principles. He had begged for forgiveness and slavishly apologized. He had thrown away all fidelity for the chance of forgiveness, and by the anxious turning of his head as he searched the faces of the small crowd, he was hoping for the arrival of his pardon at this late, this theatrical moment.

He had every reason to hope. The new monarch was a Tudor and the Tudors knew the power of appearances. She was devout, and surely would not reject a contrite heart. But more than anything else, she was a woman, a soft-hearted, thick-headed woman. She would never have the courage to take the decision to execute such a great man, she would never have the stamina to hold to her decision.

“Stand up, Father,” Robert urged him silently. “The pardon must come at any moment; don’t lower yourself by looking for it.”

The door behind Robert opened, and a jailer came in and laughed raucously to see the four young men up at the window, shading their eyes against the brilliant midsummer sun. “Don’t jump,” he said. “Don’t rob the axeman, bonny lads. It’ll be you four next, and the pretty maid.”

“I will remember you for this, after our pardons have come, and we are released,” Robert promised him, and turned his attention back to the green. The jailer checked the thick bars on the window and saw that the men had nothing that could break the glass, and then went out, still chuckling, and locked the door.