



A NOVEL
OF
MARGUERITE
DE VALOIS

MÉDICIS DAUGHTER

SOPHIE PERINOT



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*To E, K, and C,
Never let any person's will
supplant your own,
nor anyone's advice override
the dictates of your
conscience.
Not even mine.*

PART ONE

Si jeunesse savait ...
(If only youth knew...)

PROLOGUE

Summer 1562—Amboise, France

In my dreams the birds are always black.

This time when I wake, breathless and frightened, I am not alone. Hercule, perhaps disturbed by nightmares of his own, must have crawled into my bed while I was sleeping. I am glad to have his warm little body to curl around as I try to go back to sleep. No, he is no longer called Hercule, remind myself sternly. Since his confirmation he is François, the second of my brothers to bear the name. The older, other François was not my friend or playfellow but rather the King of France. He has been dead nearly two years.

My nurse claims it is *because* King François II died young, and my father King Henri II died tragically before him, that large black birds fill my nightmares. She insists images of weeping courtiers clothed in somber black etched themselves upon my youthful mind and were turned to birds by my overactive imagination.

I know she is mistaken, but I bite my tongue.

My brother Henri was equally mistaken. When we shared a nursery at Vincennes, he teased me that the birds were crows, noisome and noisy but, *à la fin*, harmless. They were not crows then, nor are they now. Crows with their grating clatter have never frightened me. Besides, my birds are silent. Silent and watchful. And always one is larger than the others. This one stares at me with beady eyes as if she would see into my very soul. I recognize my mother, Catherine de Médicis, Queen of France, even if none to whom I relate my dreams ever see her.

Putting an arm around my brother, I pull him close and smell the summer sun in his hair. I recall this night's vision—the birds arrived out of the northern sky, swooping over Amboise. The one in the lead was so large, she obscured the sun. Lower and lower they flew, until they came to rest on the spire of the Chapel of Saint-Hubert.

My mother is coming. Even as I close my eyes and my thoughts blur, I know it. I am as certain as I had received a letter in her own hand declaring it.

The next morning, standing at the limestone parapet in the château garden, I feel rather smug. Madame *gouvernante* laughed when I said Her Majesty was coming, but crossed herself when the messenger arrived, proving me right. Madame kept giving me strange looks all the time she was fastening me into one of my best gowns—the one Monsieur Clouet painted me in last year, all heavy cream silk and pearls. Looking down to make certain my hem did not become dirty as I ran here, I realize my beautiful dress has grown short.

Never mind, I think, Mother is coming! Pushing myself up on my tiptoes, I rest my arms on top

the wall and look over—experiencing a familiar mixture of awe and apprehension. On the other side everything falls away precipitously. Below, the calm, green Loire winds past, giving way to the deeper and more varied green of the trees on its opposite bank. To the left, the river is traversed by a bridge as white as the wall I lean upon. My eyes follow the road across that bridge. I can see a long way, and just before the road dissolves into shimmers of light I see movement. Can it be Mother's party?

A motion closer at hand draws my attention. François followed me when I snuck out, and now he is trying to pull himself up onto the wall to see better. My stomach clenches. The drop from the top of the rooftops below would surely break his body to pieces should he go over. Grabbing my brother by the waist, I try to haul him back, but he clings tenaciously to the stone.

"Let go," I command.

Whether in response to my demand or under the pressure of my tugging, François' fingers release me, and we tumble backwards into the dry dust of the path. My youngest brother is slight of build, but at seven he is still heavy enough to knock the wind out of me. He scrambles up indignantly, heedless of the fact that he finds his footing in my skirts.

"I am not a baby."

"You are certainly behaving like one!" I shriek, looking at the dirty marks upon my gown. I can only imagine how the back of me—the part sitting in the dirt—looks. I feel like crying and my face must show it, for François' expression changes from defiance to guilt.

"I am sorry, Margot." He drops his eyes and nudges the path with his foot.

"Help me up." I reach out, unwilling to turn onto my knees and do further damage to my dress.

Taking my hands, François throws his weight backwards. For a brief, perilous moment I am lifted. Then my brother's feet slide from under him and I drop back to the ground as he lands there himself. At that precise moment, I spot my *gouvernante*, the Baronne de Curton, running toward us with my nurse and François' following. Madame's face is as white as my dress, or rather, I think, fighting the desire to laugh, considerably whiter given the state of my once lovely gown.

"What would Her Majesty say to see *une fille de France* in such a position!" Madame picks up François and sets him on his feet. He—wisely, to my way of thinking—scurries to his nurse, who has paused a few yards away, panting. "You are too old for such behavior."

This is a familiar phrase, and the only one that annoys me more is "You are too young"—something I seem to hear with equal frequency. I am too old to play the games I used to play with François. I am too young to join my mother and her ladies at Court. What, I wonder, am I of an age to do? I know better than to raise such a philosophical point under present circumstances.

I allow Madame to help me up. She circles me, shaking her head. "You must change. Her Majesty cannot see you like this."

A flurry of movement and burst of sound attract our attention. A group of figures emerges from an archway at the far side of the garden. The livery of the servants and the exceedingly fine dress of the handful of gentlemen and ladies proclaim the unwelcome truth. Whether we are ready for her or not, Mother has arrived.

The sight of her—gliding forth from amidst her companions, dismissing them by gesture—sets me trembling, and not merely because of the state of my gown. François, breaking from his nurse, takes

refuge behind me. But I am too old for such behavior, and if I tried to dart behind Madame I doubt she would willingly shield me. I give a quick shake to my skirts and square my shoulders. Madame shoos François from behind me and urges us into motion. I try to walk smoothly so that I will appear to flow as Mother does, but my sliding only stirs up dust, causing my *gouvernante* to hiss, “Pick up your feet!”

Then I am face-to-face with Mother. Her eyes are as dark and as searching as those of the bird in my dream. And for a moment, while Madame and the nurses curtsy and murmur, “Your Majesty,” I am frozen by her gaze. A none-too-gentle nudge from Madame frees me. I make my own reverence, then, straightening, take François’ hand, not so much to reassure him as to fortify myself.

“Baronne de Curton”—the black eyes sweep over François and me from head to toe—“I presume from the grandeur of my children’s attire that my courier arrived. Given that you knew I was coming, I cannot, then, account for the state of that attire.”

Madame dips her head. I hear her draw breath. I wish I could find mine. Wish I could say that it is all François’ fault for climbing where he ought not. But my voice has flown. So instead I bite my lip so hard that it hurts, to punish myself.

“Abject apologies, Your Majesty. I am mortified.” My *gouvernante* bows her head lower still, and guilty tears prick the corners of my eyes.

Mother stands silent, perhaps to let each of us fully feel our faults. At last, when I do not think I can bear another moment of her scrutiny, she speaks. “I will see the children later. Make certain they are in better order.” Then, without a single word to François or me, Her Majesty moves past our little party, to take a seat by the same wall we just left.

* * *

As the shadows lengthen, I am dressed once more in a selection of my best things. The time has come for François and me to be brought before the Queen. I am desperate to make a better impression than I did this morning. Madame is equally eager. As we walk to Her Majesty’s apartment she makes me practice the Plutarch I plan to recite—twice. And when we stop before Mother’s door, she straightens my necklace and wipes some mark that only she can see from François’ face.

Satisfied, Madame raps and opens the door without hesitation at Mother’s summons. Her step does not falter as she crosses the threshold, while my feet feel as if they are made of lead.

“Your Majesty, the Prince and Princess,” Madame says, offering a nod to Mother’s venerable maid of honor, the Duchesse d’Uzès.

Mother regards us with a look of appraisal.

“François, have you been obedient and applied yourself to your lessons?”

My brother makes a solemn little bow. “Yes, Madame.” Our mother rewards his display with a slight inclination of her head. Then she turns her eyes to me.

“Margot, you are such a pretty child when you are not covered in dirt.”

I feel my face color, and make a low curtsy by way of reply—far easier than finding my voice.

“It pleases me to see both children in health.” Mother offers the Baronne an approving nod. “The thought of them here, safe, where the air is pure and free from both the infection of war and the creeping illness of heresy, was a great consolation to me while I attempted to talk peace with the

Prince de Condé.”

At Mother’s mention of the notorious heretic commander Madame crosses herself. I mimic her gesture.

“I trust there are no French prayers here,” Mother continues.

“No indeed, Your Majesty!”

“Good. I have rooted out whatever there was of that nonsense in my Henri.” Her eyes shift back to me. “Does it please you to know that, when you see your brother next, there will be no need for you to hide your Book of Hours?”

I nod. I am pleased. Pleased to have Mother’s attention, and pleased that my brother will no longer be inclined to cast my books on the fire. While we were living in company, he burned more than one. He gave me a book of Huguenot prayers to replace them, but I gave that to Madame and prayed daily that he would turn away from heresy. I was not sorry when his transgressions came to Mother’s attention, though I was sorry for the beating he got as a result.

“The Lady Marguerite is very pious,” Madame says. These are surely meant to be words of praise, why, then, does she shift from foot to foot? “But...” Her voice trails off and she clasps and unclasps her hands.

“Yes,” Mother urges. The eyes upon me harden.

“Your Majesty,” Madame’s voice drops as if she will tell something very secret, “the Lady Marguerite *knew* you were coming. Knew it before the courier arrived.” She crosses herself again.

“She knew?”

“Yes...” Madame’s voice fades. I can hear her swallow. “During our morning lessons she told me she was waiting for you.”

Mother’s eyes sparkle. “So, Margot, it seems you are a daughter of the Médicis as well as the Valois.”

I do not understand. Nor, it appears, does Madame. She looks entirely bewildered.

“I foresaw your father’s death,” Mother says, looking me in the eye. “I dreamt of his face covered with blood. I begged him not to enter the lists on the day he was mortally wounded. He would not listen.” There is tremendous sadness in her voice, but then the corners of her mouth creep upward almost slyly. “Some fear the gift of premonition. But I tell you, daughter, never fear what is useful to you.” Mother intertwines her fingers before her and her smile grows.

“Mark my words, Baronne, I will find a crown for this one, as I did for her sister the Queen of Spain. There will be no need to settle for a Duc as we did for Claude.”

I have but imperfect memories of my sister the Duchesse de Lorraine, but I know that she had a sweet temper and a deformed leg. Apparently the former mattered less than the latter when it came to making a match for her. I find this both surprising and interesting.

I wonder if this talk of my future means I will be allowed to return to Court with Mother. I am too young to be married, but surely I could learn many things—both from observing Her Majesty and from her retinue of great ladies. Henri is at Court; why not me? I open my mouth to ask, then close it again.

“Have you something to say, child?” The question stuns me. Nothing, not a breath, not a twitch

escapes Mother's attention.

"I..." The permission I would seek lies on the tip of my tongue. Instead I hear my voice say, "I have prepared a recitation for Your Majesty's pleasure."

"Well then, go on."

Frustrated by my own timidity, I will myself to ask the question, but the moment has passed. I have been bid recite. Obedience and training take over. Almost without volition, the well-rehearsed Plutarch pours smoothly from me like wine from a cask. My mother's glance never leaves my face. When I am finished, I stand, hands clasped, waiting for her verdict. Perhaps if she praises me I might raise the topic of Court.

But no words of praise come, at least not for me. Instead, the Queen's attention turns to Madame. "The effects of your tutelage show well in the Princess. I think, perhaps, she may be ready for more rigorous study."

"A tutor at her age, Your Majesty?" Madame seems mildly shocked, and her reaction rankles me. I know that I am clever.

"Yes. To secure a crown Margot's looks and family name may be enough, but to be useful to us once she is crowned, more will be required. To be a queen, a disciplined and developed mind is essential."

And like that our audience is over. Mother merely waves her hand by way of dismissal and, Madame shepherds us toward the door, picks up a piece of fruit from a bowl on her table.

Well, I console myself as I am tucked into my bed, perhaps I will manage to find the courage to ask about Court tomorrow. When I awake in the morning and learn the Queen has gone—departed without taking leave of François or me—I hide and cry bitter tears.

CHAPTER 1

Winter 1564—Fontainebleau, France

“Dear God, the cold!”

It must be the hundredth time my *gouvernante* has uttered these words, or something very like, the last three days.

“It was also cold in Amboise,” I reply, trying to keep my voice cheerful while repressing an urge to kick Madame in the shins as she sits across from me in the coach. How can she think of the cold at a time like this?

“There were fires at Amboise, Your Highness, and chimneys that drew properly.”

When we stopped at Nemours last evening, Madame was nearly smothered, thanks to an ill-maintained flue. Well, she can hardly blame me: I wanted to continue on to Fontainebleau, as it could not be more than another two hours’ ride. Madame, however, insisted we stop. She wanted me fresh-dressed and looking my best for our arrival at the château, for my arrival at Court.

Court—since word came a fortnight ago that I was summoned, I have thought of nothing else. I am going to join the Court, and the Court *ensemble* will depart upon the largest royal progress ever undertaken.

Drawing back a tiny corner of the heavy drapes that cover the window, so as not to seem disrespectful of Madame’s comfort, I devour the landscape. The views on our trip have been dominated by rivers—first the Loire and then the Loing—but we are surrounded by woods now, the royal forest of Fontainebleau. Most of the trees are leafless in the gray winter light, but I can imagine them clothed in green, just as I can imagine a royal hunting party like those my brother Henri and I used to watch at Vincennes. I can almost see the riders in their dazzling attire moving between the trees; hear the snorts and pawings of the horses, and the barking of the dogs. I do not need to imagine the stag, for suddenly, *juste à côté* the road, a magnificent animal appears.

“Look!” I cry. But Madame and the other ladies are too slow. Before their heads turn, the stag is gone. Never mind—there will be more of interest to be seen, much more. I remain eyes out the window and mute, letting the conversation of my companions flow over me like water over stone. For a time I forget the scenery and think of my younger brother. How François cried when he discovered that he would not make the progress. He was told he is too young for such exhausting travel and too imperfectly recovered from a bout of smallpox that nearly killed him just short of a year ago. He insisted he was neither. Then, late on the night before he left for Vincennes, where he will stay, he woke me to say he thought the pox was to blame for his exclusion.

“It is because I do not look right,” he said, tears streaming down his scarred face. “They are afraid

will scare the horses and ruin the pageants.”

I told him not to cry, that no one would be frightened of him. To lie in such a situation cannot be sin. In truth, the damage illness did to my once comely brother is shocking. Deep pits mark his face and his nose remains misshapen. And part of me wonders, and feels guilty for doing so: Is he right? Has Mother left him behind because he would spoil the tableau that all murmur she wishes the progress to paint—a picture of the House of Valois triumphant and firmly in command of a France last at peace? Surely one scarred little boy would not be the ruination of all her plans. No, I must believe he was left for his own good.

My sadness over separation from François cannot dampen my excitement for long. The trees give way to a more cultivated landscape. I spot a magnificent lagoon with an island in its center, then a portion of a château of white stone piped with delicate rose brick. It is long where Amboise was tall. I feel the wheels touch stone and my excitement surges. I am not alone: curtains on both sides of our conveyance are pushed open despite the rush of frigid air. The Baronne smooths her gown and the woman reaching across, pinches both my cheeks.

We pass through a magnificent gate, stopping in an oval courtyard ringed by a delicate colonnade. Everywhere my grandfather’s salamander greets us—carved in stone or worked in gold. Liveried figures and lackeys of all sorts swarm toward our coaches. Among the moving bodies and jumble of faces, I spy one I have been longing to see.

Without waiting for assistance, I reach out and fling the coach door wide. “Henri!” I hear Madame’s gasp—a mingling of fear and disapproval—as I spring down, but I do not care. I haven’t seen my thirteen-year-old brother in nearly two years. “You’ve grown so tall!”

“You have forgotten to say dignified.” He takes my hand and makes a show of bowing over it. Then, pinching my arm, he turns and runs. I pursue as he weaves through the crowd in the courtyard and darts into the château.

Henri has the advantage. Not just because he is older and taller, but because he knows Fontainebleau. I pass through several rooms heedless of my surroundings, intent solely on closing the gap between myself and my brother. Then, suddenly, I am in a vast space. Winter light spills through enormous windows, causing the parquet floor to shine like ice, and swimming in this glossy surface I see my father’s emblem. I stop and look upward, searching for the source of the illusion. There, among elaborately carved panels of wood touched with blue paint and gilt, I spy my father’s device. Now that I have stopped, Henri stops as well.

“What is this place?” I ask.

“The *salle des fêtes*, you goose.”

Ignoring the jibe, I turn slowly, admiring the room. Just behind my brother, frescos show hunting scenes like those I imagined this morning, only the figures are clothed in the ancient garb of my father rather than the grandiose fashions of the Court. I want to dance here. It is a ballroom after all. Without another thought, I begin an *almain*. As I rise to balance on the ball of one foot for the fourth time, Henri joins me. Humming beneath his breath, he catches up my hands and begins to lead me in a circle. I realize that we are no longer alone. A small dark figure stands just inside the door by which we entered. Mother! I pause, arresting Henri’s motion, but not before he steps on my foot.

“Why do you stop?” Mother’s voice is clear despite the considerable distance. “Come, let me see how you manage a *gaillarde*.”

My brother does not hesitate. “We will do the eleven-step pattern,” he whispers, and then begins to hum the more rapid music the dance demands. My brother is a natural athlete. And I, I am the star prancing and full of high spirits. As we execute the cadence and come to rest, Mother applauds.

“Henri my heart, you put gentlemen twice your age to shame! So elegant! It is pleasant to see you partnered by one whose looks and grace match your own. We must have a ballet featuring you both now that Margot has come.” Mother walks forward as she speaks, stopping just before us.

“As part of the Shrove Tuesday festivities?” my brother asks eagerly.

Mother smiles indulgently, offering her hand. “Ambition too,” she says, stroking Henri’s hair with her free hand as he bends over her other. “You are God’s most perfect gift.” Then, turning in another direction, her eyes harden and her lips compress. “Your *gouvernante* was at a loss to explain your whereabouts when I arrived in the Cour Ovale.”

I feel myself blushing.

“It is my fault.” Henri’s voice surprises me. “I was waiting for Margot and whisked her away.”

Mother’s expression softens. Putting an arm around my shoulders, she says, “The King waits to receive you.”

I imagined meeting Charles in his apartments—a gathering of family. So I am awed when a door opens to reveal His Majesty seated on a dais with dozens of courtiers in attendance.

A woman and a young man stand before him. I can see neither of their faces. Charles looks away from them at the sound of our entrance. He has become a man! A slight mustache darkens his lip. His face is not as handsome as Henri’s, but it is kind. Does the King smile at the sight of me? If so, the smile is fleeting. Standing beside me, Mother gives a sharp nod and Charles’ eyes return to the pair before him.

Taking advantage of his attention, the lady, who is exquisitely dressed, says, “Your Majesty, appeal to your sense of justice. Surely a woman deprived of her husband by an assassin’s hand is entitled to pursue his killer.”

“Duchesse de Guise, Jean de Poltrot was put to death a year ago. Is that not justice?”

Charles’ voice has deepened. If it is Anne d’Este who petitions, then the sandy-haired young man on her side must be her son Henri, Duc de Guise.

“Your Majesty, Poltrot may have struck the blow, but he was merely an instrument.”

Mother sweeps forward. “Your Grace knows,” she says, brushing past the Dowager Duchesse and ascending the dais to stand at Charles’ side, “how dear justice and your persons are to His Majesty. But you must also know, Duchesse, how dear to His Majesty, indeed to all who care for France, is the present tenuous peace. It is not a year old. Would Your Grace kill it in its infancy with this lawsuit against Gaspard de Coligny?”

Mother’s eyes are piercing. They seek an answer while making quite clear that only one answer will do. “His Majesty does not dismiss your suit, he merely suspends it,” she presses.

“Three years is a very long time to wait for justice.” The Duc speaks, drawing himself up. He is very tall for a young man Charles’ age.

Mother offers him a smile—the patronizing type adults give children. But she does not answer him. Instead she speaks to the dowager. “Your son’s feelings honor his fallen father, but also reveal his youth. You and I, Duchesse, have lived long enough to know how very short a time three years are when properly reckoned.”

The Duchesse curtsys. “Your Majesties, we will be patient, since that is the King’s will.” She touches her son on his shoulder and he bows, then the two make their way down the aisle. I see a mingling of confusion and impatience in the Duc’s eyes as he glances sideways at his mother. He is quite as handsome as he is tall.

My observations are arrested by the voice of a household officer. “Her Highness the Duchesse of Valois,” he announces.

I look at Madame and she nods. Down the aisle I go to a general murmuring while the others of my party, announced in the same officious tone, follow. Stopping at the foot of the dais, I am aware that all eyes are upon me. I stand as straight as I can before executing my curtsy.

“Sister,” Charles says, “we are pleased to have you at our Court. You will be a great ornament to it. We are certain, for we have received good report of your wit and of your dancing.”

I am surprised. I supposed my education beneath Charles’ notice. And if Mother is the source of Charles’ information, then I am astounded to hear him praise me. There have certainly been very few words of approbation in the letters she sends Madame—or at least in those portions read out to me. Why, I wonder, if she is willing to speak well of me to my brother, can Mother not spare a word of encouragement for me? I have worked so hard this past year—applying myself to every lesson whether with the tutor she sent for me or with my dancing master.

Turning to Her Majesty, Charles says, “Madame, the collection of beauties in your household is already the envy of every court in Europe, and here is another lovely addition.”

I am to be a member of my Mother’s household!

“As Your Majesty’s grandfather King Francis was wont to say, ‘A court without beautiful women is springtime without roses,’” Mother replies, smiling.

* * *

Late in the afternoon I get my first glimpse of the roses. Dressed in the sort of finery seldom required at Amboise, I am shepherded to Mother’s apartment by the Baronne de Retz, who came with me from Amboise. The door of Her Majesty’s antechamber opens to reveal at least two dozen young women. The colors of their fine silks, velvets, and brocades set against the room’s brightly painted walls dazzle my eyes, and the smell of perfumes—both sweet and spicy—fills my nose. The entire scene is fantastical and made even more so by the arresting spectacle of a bright green bird flying above the gathered ladies.

“Here is the little princess!” The woman who exclaims over my arrival gives a small curtsy. Smiling, she reaches out her hand. I offer mine. “She is like a doll,” she says, spinning me around. The other ladies laugh and clap in admiration.

“Something is missing.” This new speaker has hair so blond, it looks like spun gold. She also has the tiniest waist I have ever seen. I simply cannot take my eyes from it. Stepping forward, she takes

my chin and tips my face first this way and then that. "A little rouge, I think."

There is a ripple through the assembled ladies and someone hands a small pot to the woman before me. Opening it, she dips her finger then touches it, now covered with a vermillion substance, to my lips. "*Parfaite!*" she declares. "She will break many hearts."

The Baronne de Retz clears her throat softly. "Mademoiselle de Saussauy, Princess Marguerite too young to think of such things."

The pretty blonde laughs. "One is never too young to think of such things."

I *like* Mademoiselle de Saussauy.

"Where is Charlotte?" the Baronne asks.

A girl with chestnut hair and carefully arched eyebrows comes forward. "Your Highness, may I present Mademoiselle Beaune Semblançay. She is the young lady nearest to your own age among the present company. Perhaps you would like to become better acquainted?"

The Mademoiselle holds out her hand. "Come," she says, "let us go where we can see the dress better as everyone enters."

"This is not everyone?" I ask, amazed.

"No indeed, not by half," my companion replies. "Her Majesty has four score ladies, from the best and oldest houses."

My companion threads herself expertly through the crowd until we reach a spot that she adjudges satisfactory. As the door swings open to admit two ladies arm in arm, Charlotte screens her mouth with one hand and says, "The shorter is the Princesse de Porcien, the taller her sister the Duchesse de Nevers."

I can see the resemblance. Both have luxurious hair with tones of auburn. Both have milk-white skin. The Duchesse, however, has the better features, for the Princesse has a childish roundness to her cheeks.

"How old is the Princesse?"

"Fifteen." I detect envy in my companion's tone.

Wanting to make my new friend happy, I whisper, "You are far prettier than she."

Charlotte kisses me on the cheek. But her pleasure is short-lived and the look of jealousy creeps back into her dark eyes. "Ah, but the Princesse has been married already three years. I will be fourteen this year and have no husband."

For a moment I no longer see the door or the ladies who enter. I am lost in thought. At Amboise my companions did not speak of men. But here the topic seems to be on the tip of every tongue, from Mademoiselle de Saussauy, who said it was never too early to think of charming them, to the girl beside me, who worries because she does not have one.

"Her Majesty the Queen."

The pronouncement brings me back to my surroundings.

I do not immediately see Mother, but I do see a splotch of black against the colorful garb of the ladies-in-waiting. Working my way toward these somberly clad figures, I find Mother with the green bird perched upon her shoulder.

I wait to be recognized, but her eyes pass over me.

“We must not keep His Majesty waiting,” she declares, clapping her hands and putting her feathered companion back in flight.

The room is so full of movement, talking, and laughter that it seems impossible anyone but those us closest could hear. Yet the effect of Mother’s declaration is immediate. The ladies part, allowing Her Majesty to precede them, then follow in her wake.

Charlotte takes my arm. “Hurry, before the best places are taken.”

The best places are those with the best view of the King and the powerful men assembled about him. My brother Henri is already seated *tout proche* to Charles. He gestures to Charlotte and me, and we move to join him. A young man beside him rises at our approach. “François d’Espinay de Saint-Luc,” Henri says, inclining his head casually in the youth’s direction. Then, changing the tilt, he says “My sister.” Saint-Luc bows.

“Do not even think of asking her to dance,” Henri continues, patting the seat beside him and forcing Saint-Luc to move down one by the gesture. “Now she is come, I finally have an adequate partner and I will not suffer to share her.”

I blush.

I may sit beside him, but as the meal progresses I notice that another lady’s eyes are constantly upon Henri. She has dark, curly hair and her dress is cut very low. “Who is that?” I ask Charlotte.

“Renée de Rieux.”

“Is she one of us?”

“She is one of Her Majesty’s maids of honor,” Charlotte sniffs diffidently. “But she is very witty and ambitious. Take care: she will use anything you tell her to her advantage.”

I look back at the girl. Not far from her, the tall woman who spun me round earlier sits with her hand possessively on the sleeve of a man clad entirely in black.

Again I consult my knowledgeable friend. “Who is that gentleman, and whom does he mourn?”

Charlotte laughs. “He does not mourn. Why should he, when his Protestants have peace with the crown? That is the Prince de Condé. He and many of his sect favor dour dress, though why they think such drab colors are pleasing to almighty God, I cannot say.”

I am stunned. This man with striking blue eyes and a well-groomed sandy-colored beard, who exudes an aura of importance, is the bugbear of my nursery? Good heavens. For most of my childhood I have known him as an enemy of the crown, yet here he is at Court dining and laughing as if there were nothing extraordinary in that. And perhaps there isn’t. Perhaps this is peace. It seems I must reorder my thinking.

The Prince leans over and says something that makes the tall lady color.

“However severe his dress, the Prince seems to please that lady,” I say.

“The Baronne de Limeuil? Indeed.” My friend laughs.

The Prince reaches out a finger and runs it along the Baronne’s cheek. A gentleman near to me scowls at the gesture.

“Poor Florimont.” Charlotte rolls her eyes and tilts her head in the direction of the scowler. “He makes a fool of himself. He cannot accept being replaced by Condé. He doubtless reasons he is better looking than the Prince. And so he is. But with his patron the old Duc de Guise dead, the Queen has

less need to know his mind than to know what passes through the Prince's. So the Baronne is in the proper bed, for the moment."

Perhaps I do not understand. It sounds as if Charlotte implies the Baronne has been both men's mistress. My face must show my dismay, for Charlotte, lowering her voice and pressing her mouth almost to my ear, says, "Do you think Her Majesty collects the most beautiful women in France solely to amuse herself? Some in her household serve her in ways that are less conventional than helping her to dress and guarding her against *ennui*."

Then, as if there were nothing shocking in her statement, Charlotte takes a drink of wine and speaks across me to another of Mother's ladies.

The balance of the evening passes in a blur. By the time I return to my chamber, I am utterly exhausted, thoroughly overwhelmed, and tremendously excited! There is so much of everything here—so much food, wine, dancing, music, and intrigue.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I do not know which hurts more, my feet, my stomach, or my head. Yet, even as I rub my arches, I cannot wait for the sun to rise again, heralding a new day of discovery and adventure.

"Tomorrow," I tell my pillow, extinguishing my light and pulling shut the curtains of my bed. "after attending Mother and Mass, I mean to begin exploring this grand château."

* * *

I expected my grandfather's great gallery to be beautiful. I did not expect to have the breath sucked from my body by its majesty. It is unlike anything I've ever seen, unlike anything I have imagined—vast, glorious, eye-filling with late morning sun spilling through its elegant windows. The carved wood of the wainscoting and ceiling is so elaborate, it makes the *salle des fêtes*, which held me spellbound yesterday, seem nothing at all. Frescoes framed in stucco and full of figures in classical dress cover the upper portion of the walls. A magnificent elephant wears my grandfather's regal F and a scattering of salamanders. Did King Francis own such a beast? How I wish I could have seen it!

Moving along, mouth open in wonder, I experience a growing awareness that many of the people and even the animals in the paintings are behaving unusually. A woman leans from a white horse, caressing an enormous swan. There is something about the look on her face that makes me uncomfortable in the same way that I was last evening when Mademoiselle de Rieux took a gentleman's hand and laid it in her lap.

Turning from this disturbing image, I cross the gallery but find little relief for my agitated feelings on the opposite wall. A pair of putti touch each other ... in a very naughty place. Further along, I am confronted by a collection of men and animals contorted in face and form. How innocent the putti suddenly seem. I feel I ought not to see such things without knowing exactly what I *am* seeing. Yet I am fascinated. Glancing about, to reassure myself I am alone, I climb onto a bench beneath the frescoes to have a better look. A door at the west end of the gallery opens and I freeze, hoping to remain unnoticed.

The boy who enters seems out of place in this gleaming and elaborate setting. His ruff is crooked, one leg of his breeches hangs lower than the other. The fabric of his clothing, while certainly

suggesting he is a gentleman, is very plain. He does not notice me—or I presume he does not—because, without warning, he begins to run at top speed down the gallery. His arms pump. His footfalls echo on the wooden floor. A smile illuminates his unremarkable face, quite transforming it. Then he spies me.

Pulling up short a few feet from my perch, he bends, hands resting on his knees, and breathes heavily for a moment. Then looking up he asks, “Why are you standing on the bench?”

I do not feel I owe him an explanation. So I content myself with trying to mimic one of Mother’s stern looks. “You ought not to run in here,” I admonish.

“I know.” The boy straightens up fully. He is not particularly tall and he wears his light-brown hair as haphazardly as his clothing. “But my tutor says it is too cold to go outside, and it is not as easy to sneak out as you would think.”

Sneak out? I cannot imagine wanting to sneak out of the *château*, especially after weeks of wishing to and waiting to arrive. “Can you not find amusement inside, in a court full of every sort of entertainment and attended by everyone of consequence?”

“I would rather look for frogs at the lagoon.” He shifts from foot to foot. Slipping one hand inside his shirt, he gives his neck a scratch.

“You would get dirty,” I say.

Again the shrug. “I like dirty.”

“I don’t.” I smooth my overskirt in a gesture I’ve seen Madame do a thousand times.

“Best not let your mother catch you looking at that picture, then.” He points at the fresco behind me.

My eyes rise unbidden to the naked men nearest me, their lips pressed. My cheeks burn. The boy’s words come remarkably close to my own thoughts before I spotted him. How dare he make me feel guilty! Narrowing my eyes, I snap, “What do you know of my mother?”

“She is the Queen,” he replies without hesitation. “You are Princess Marguerite. You’ve just arrived. I saw you at dinner yesterday.” Then, as if he can hear the question I am preparing to ask, “I am your cousin Henri de Bourbon, Prince of Navarre.”

“Why did you not say so at once? You are not very polite.”

“No, I guess not. Or at least, people here tell me that I am not—often. I wish I could go back to Béarn.” He shuffles his feet again. “My manners were fine there. And I was outside all the time—climbing, swimming, hunting.”

I remember hearing that his mother, Jeanne d’Albret, Queen of Navarre, returned to Béarn after his father died of wounds suffered in the Siege of Rouen. I never gave any thought to where my cousin was. Or even, truth be told, to his continued existence since last we met as very young children. I wonder why he is here rather than at the court of his mother? But, more pressingly I wish him gone. He is singularly irritating.

“Why not go to Béarn, then?”

“Oh, I *am* going, if I have to slip away from the progress to do it. But I don’t think it will come that.” He lifts his chin and looks me directly in the eye. “My mother will meet His Majesty during his travels, and I will go home with her then.”

He reaches out a hand. “Would you like help down?”

I am not eager to accept his assistance, but jumping would be undignified, so I take his proffered hand and gingerly lower one foot to the floor.

“You are very pretty.” The words are delivered more as a statement than a compliment.

“Thank you,” I reply stiffly.

“I think I will kiss you.”

“You will not!” I drop his hand and take a step backwards.

He shrugs. I swear, if I never see his shoulders rise and fall again, that will suit me very well.

“Later, then.”

“What?” I sputter. “I have no intention of *ever* permitting you to kiss me!”

“Not even if you marry me?” He tilts his head to one side and looks down his long, thin nose at me.

“Why would I marry you? You cannot even put your hose on straight.” I point accusingly to his right ankle, where his hose is badly twisted. He does not seem at all discomforted.

“When I was little, His Majesty King Henri told me I was to be your husband.”

I have no idea if he is telling the truth, nor do I care. “My father is dead,” I say matter-of-factly. “And my brother, King Charles, would never make me marry a boy who runs in the grand gallery and would rather play with frogs than dance.” Turning on my heels, I walk away. I hope I have left my cousin mortified, staring at my back. But when I turn at the end of the gallery to see what effect my pronouncement had upon him, the Prince of Navarre is gone.

* * *

It is Shrove Tuesday. We will have one final magnificent entertainment before such things give way to the solemnity of Lent. The meadow beside the lagoon looks like an ancient world. Delicate white columns—some standing, others purposefully lying in pieces—are scattered among the tables. It is as if we dine amidst the ruins of Ancient Greece.

Mother has outdone herself and she knows it. I can tell by the way her cheeks color and her eyes shine. “The House of Valois,” she declares, one hand on Henri’s shoulder and the other on mine as we ascend to the King’s table, “arrayed in splendor to remind all that we are the sole authority in France and His Majesty will tolerate none who seek to undermine him or to undo the peace he has brought to his kingdom.”

Taking my seat, my eyes are drawn to the island at the center of the lagoon where a hundred torches illuminate a slender tower and its surroundings. “*Regardez!*” I say to Henri, clapping my hands. “Look who guards the tower.”

Henri laughs, for the pair are odd. While both are men, and both are dressed in white flowing tunics topped by glowing golden armor, one is enormous, a veritable giant, while the other is Mother’s favorite dwarf. I can hardly wait to discover what story will play out on the well-lit scene.

The House of Guise makes its entrance, the Duc at its head. His uncle the Cardinal of Lorraine walks with one arm draped possessively around the young man’s shoulder. They are followed by the House of Montmorency, doubtless awarded precedence owing to the fact that the constable is charged with managing the royal progress. Finally it is time for the Princes of the Blood—the Bourbon

Louis, Prince de Condé, having bowed graciously to Charles, moves toward the table immediately my right and nearly abutting our own and takes his seat at its center. A host of others connected to the Bourbons follow, my cousin, the Prince of Navarre, among them. I have not spoken to him since our encounter in the gallery, and that is just as well. Every glimpse of him since has reminded me of the moment he impudently threatened to kiss me. I pray he will not be seated near, but he is pushed down the table to be at my side.

I intend to ignore him, an effort that should be assisted by the fact that the riser supporting the Bourbon table is lower than the royal dais.

“Hello,” he says, looking up at me.

I angle my body toward my brother as if I have not heard.

Despite the distance between us, I feel a tug on my sleeve. I cannot afford to be entirely rude while on display, and so, turning with an icy smile, I say, “Good evening.”

Undaunted, he continues, “Are you performing?”

“My brothers and I have a pastoral later, after the sweets.”

“Poetry.” My cousin articulates the word as if in expectation of torture.

“The work of Monsieur Ronsard,” I reply with some pique, “and very good.”

“Not as good as yesterday’s mock battle I’ll wager.”

“Then I suggest you run and hide after the sweets are served.”

“That,” he says, without the slightest touch of irony, “is an excellent idea. I fear I cannot fit many biscuits in my pockets and I do not wear a purse. So I suppose I had better limit myself to marzipan and candied nuts.” He sighs as if this is a heavy sacrifice.

The thought of my cousin secreting treats on his person and slinking away merely to avoid seeing my brothers and I perform makes me furious. “Cousin, you may do as you like, but in the meantime I pray leave me unmolested.”

“As you wish.” The shrug reminds me of our last meeting. “So long as you do not accuse me of being rude later.” He turns away, and I know by the knot in my stomach that it is I who have been impolite. I hate my cousin. He brings out the absolute worst in me.

As the meal progresses, those with roles in the theatrical slip away. On the island, musicians take their places. I stop eating to watch, surprised that the others around me can attend to their plates and their conversations. There is light inside the tower now. I glimpse the back of a man in a red hood and devil’s horns at one of the windows. So transfixed am I by the actors getting into place, I do not even touch my last course.

Then, at my elbow, Henri says, “Come on! The best spots will be gone.”

Looking around, I am startled to see the others already streaming toward the lagoon’s edge. We join them. As we reach the bank, Charlotte runs up. Snatching my hand, she says, “There is a little river under that stand of trees. What a view we shall have.” We scamper off with Henri and Saint-Louis following.

Charlotte is right. The petite grove offers an excellent view. We are not the first to discover that Édouard de Carandas, a handsome young Picard, sits upon the mossy ground, and as we lay claim to spots at the water’s edge, Mademoiselle de Saussauy arrives. Without hesitation she drops down

beside Carandas and, gesturing to his lap asks, "Is this place taken?"

The gentleman laughs. "I was saving it for you, Mademoiselle. Will you sit upon it?"

"Perhaps later, for now I will rest my head." She stretches out with her head upon the gentleman's padded slopes. Small clusters of ladies arrive arm in arm. I particularly notice the Duchesse of Nevers, but then, I always do. Over these last weeks she has become a subject of fascination for me—always wearing the best gowns and making the boldest statements. I find her thrilling.

Trumpets sound and music begins. The windows of the tower are filled with ladies close pressed by devils with swords and wicked leers. The ladies pantomime terror, holding hands before their faces to shield themselves and trembling exaggeratedly. Mademoiselle de Rieux leans from the uppermost window and, cupping her hands about her mouth, calls for help. The arrangement of things assures that her words cannot be heard, but one of my brother's dwarves trots out, carrying a placard spelling out the Mademoiselle's cry.

Liberators appear armored as Trojan warriors, the Marshals of France at their vanguard. The venerable Constable de Montmorency stumbles. My brother laughs and I shush him.

"I cannot help myself," he rejoinders. "It is ludicrous to see a man of seventy storm a castle—even when it is only made of silk."

The choreography allows the constable to bring down the dwarf, and then, his honor fulfilled, the elderly gentleman drops back to the rear of the knights.

A bell sounds. Armored devils spill from the tower, some dragging their captives. The Prince of Condé leads them. He is masterful with a sword, and though, given his presence among the demons, he must lose in the end, I cannot help admiring his ferocity.

One by one the devils fall twitching grotesquely under the blades of the Trojan knights. When only a few demons remain, the silken tower bursts into flame, and as fireworks light the sky, the last of the captives run forth to embrace their rescuers.

Next to me Henri cheers loudly. Others join in and everyone applauds. "Come on Saint-Louis and Margot, it is time for the sweets!" My brother sprints off, oblivious to the fact that his friend does not follow.

I have no intention of running like a child. I link my arm through Charlotte's. Standing, Monsieur de Carandas draws Mademoiselle de Saussauy to her feet. "The Prince de Condé wields a mighty sword," he says admiringly.

"Ah, but not longer than the one you keep in your scabbard. I could feel it where I lay," Fleurie replies.

Those standing nearest laugh heartily, as does the gentleman himself. He bows and kisses Mademoiselle's hand with an elaborate show of gallantry. Mademoiselle de Saussauy is all dimples and good humor in return and the two stroll off arm in arm.

"Fleurie is so beautiful," Charlotte comments wistfully. "That golden hair ... And so *charmant*. If she does not snare a wealthy suitor in the course of our upcoming travels, I shall be surprised. Someone of more substantial rank than Monsieur de Carandas."

"Oh, but he is very fair of face," I remark. Under the influence of Mother's ladies, I have begun to notice such things.

“‘Fair of face’ is a fine consideration for flirting but of little import in marrying,” the Duchesse de Nevers says, stepping between us and placing one arm around each. “Remember, girls, marriage is a matter of politics, finance, and family. Looks are for lovers.” Then, releasing us, she disappears into the deepening darkness.

While we are standing there, looking after her, Saint-Luc approaches. “Ladies,” he says, inclining his head. Charlotte and I look about and then realize he speaks to us. Are we to be the object of flirtation this evening as well? How delightful! If Mademoiselle de Saussauy may practice on a less noble from Picardy, why should I not try my skills on Saint-Luc? He is from an ancient and preferred Norman family.

“Seigneur”—I flutter my eyes as Mademoiselle de Saussauy does—“will you escort us?”

“It would be my pleasure.” His voice squeaks a bit as he replies, and I notice there is color in his cheeks as he bows before offering one arm to each of us.

Charlotte squeezes my hand then lets it go. “You two go on.” She scampers off, leaving Saint-Luc to me.

I take his arm and feel ... nothing. What I expected to feel I do not know, but surely something because I have observed the eyes of many a lady widen as she takes a gentleman’s arm.

We walk in silence a short way. In the torchlight I can see Saint-Luc’s Adam’s apple move as he swallows. “I greatly look forward to Your Highness’s performance in the pastoral,” he says at last.

I cannot help but think of my cousin’s scowls at the thought of my recitation. “More than the sugared fruits?” I ask, offering what I hope is a coquettish smile and wishing I had dimples like Mademoiselle de Saussauy.

“Of course! How can sugar hope to compare to the sweetness of your voice?” Saint-Luc is warming up to this game. We are two courtiers trading compliments. I feel very grand and grown-up.

“Would you believe there are some”—I lower my voice to a faux whisper and experiment with raising my eyebrows—“who would prefer a pocket full of nuts?”

“Impossible!” His attempt to sound shocked exceeds the mark a bit, but I appreciate the effort.

We have reached the edge of the dining area. Henri and Charlotte wait, already nibbling on dainties. A glorious table covered with confections of every sort, including a fanciful sugar paste fish decorated with golden scales, stands at the center of a ring of torches.

“I assure you, the Prince of Navarre confessed as much earlier.” I give my head a sad little shake as if I am ages older than my cousin. “He plans to run and hide while I perform.”

“Someone should thrash him.”

“Would you? Would you give him a beating for me?” I press Saint-Luc’s arm with my free hand. I can visualize him dressed in the golden armor of this evening’s entertainment ... and my cousin in the horns of one of the devils.

“Who is Saint-Luc going to beat?” Henri asks, sauntering up. He holds out a rolled-up sugared *crepe* so I can take a bite.

“The Prince of Navarre,” Saint-Luc says, “for insulting your sister.”

“Oh-ho, I should like to see that, Saint-Luc. Our cousin may be ill-dressed and ill-spoken, but I believe he is a capital wrestler, thanks to his upbringing, and handy with a sword.”

A nice little group has gathered about us, drinking, listening. I want to say something clever—something capable of evoking laughter.

“Do not let my brother dissuade you”—I turn to Saint-Luc and offer him a kiss on the cheek—“for surely the Prince of Navarre has a short sword compared to the one which hangs in your scabbard.”

My jest has the desired effect. Those around us titter appreciatively.

Suddenly I feel a hand upon my shoulder. It is the Baronne de Retz. She is not laughing. In fact, her face looks very severe. “Come,” she says. Turning, she moves through the crowd. It is necessary for me to walk very quickly to keep up. By the time we enter the palace, I am breathless.

Rounding on me the Baronne says, “Mademoiselle Marguerite, I am shocked to hear you make jest about a gentleman’s intimate anatomy!”

I am flabbergasted. I did not say anything about Saint-Luc’s person. Only his sword. I am about to say as much, but the Baronne presses onward. “What would Her Majesty think?”

The question stings. Mother has shown me precious little attention since my arrival. I certainly do not wish to garner maternal notice in a negative manner.

“What do you mean?” I stammer. “I only spoke as Her Majesty’s other ladies do. I heard Mademoiselle de Saussauy use that quip this evening. She is a *dame d’honneur* from one of the finest houses in France. How can it be wrong for me to speak as she does?”

The Baronne gives a deep sigh. “You must conduct yourself with more decorum and aloofness than Fleurie de Saussauy. You may pass your time *with* the ladies of Her Majesty’s household, but you are not *of* them. You must understand the difference.”

“But I do not,” I reply. “I see that Her Majesty’s ladies behave differently than I have been brought up to do by you and Madame at Amboise, but theirs are the manners of Court. Why may I not adopt them?” I am warming to the injustice of my situation. “Why,” I challenge, “may they wear the gowns without a partlet while I remain covered to the neck? Why may Renée de Rieux flirt shamelessly with my brother while I am made to feel ashamed for joking with his friend?”

The Baronne is silent, contemplating my face earnestly in the dim light. “Your Highness, every woman in the Queen’s household has a duty to Her Majesty, a duty of obedience. If they are not content to serve the Queen as she will be served, they may leave Court. If they are derelict in their duty, they will be sent. The specific duties of Her Majesty’s other ladies are not for me to say, nor for you to speculate upon.

“The duty you owe the Queen is different than that owed by the others. Yours is the duty of *une fille de France* and a daughter. The nature of your duty—to reflect well upon your royal house and to marry to the crown’s advantage in due time—has been clear since your infancy. Such duty, set upon your shoulders by birth, cannot be declined. You may, however, fail in it.”

My defiance collapses instantly. Tears gather in the corners of my eyes. “I do not wish to fail.”

“Of course not. No more do I want you to.” She places her hand upon my shoulder. “Her Majesty has not announced it yet, so perhaps I ought not tell you, but Madame is growing old. Her Majesty has adjudged it time for that lady to be relieved of her duties and allowed to enjoy leisure in recompense for years of service. As we depart on progress, I will take Madame’s place as *gouvernante* charge officially, with overseeing Your Highness.”

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