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Written by Joanna Hickson

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JOANNA HICKSON

The Agincourt Bride

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1

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*'It is written in the stars that I and my heirs shall rule France
and yours shall rule England.*

*Our nations shall never live in peace. You and Henry have
done this.'*

Charles, Dauphin of France

NARRATOR'S NOTE

January 1439

Respected reader,

Before we embark on this story together, I think I should explain that I am not a historian or a chronicler or indeed any kind of scholar. I did not even read Latin until my dear and present husband undertook to teach me on dark winter nights by the fire in our London house, when a more dutiful goodwife would have been doing her embroidery. Luckily my days of being dutiful are behind me. I am now fifty-two years of age and I have had quite enough of stitching and scrubbing and answering becks and calls. I have been a servant and I have been a courtier and now I am neither so I have become a scribe, for one good reason; to tell the story of a brave and beautiful princess who wanted the impossible – to be happy. Of course, here at the start of the tale, I am not going to tell you whether she succeeded but I can tell you that some momentous events, scurrilous intrigues and monstrously evil acts conspired to prevent it.

Two things encouraged me to write this story. The first was those Latin lessons, for they enabled me to read the second, which

was a cache of letters found when I used a key entrusted to me for safekeeping by my beloved mistress, the aforementioned princess, to open a secret compartment in the gift she bequeathed to me on her untimely death. These were confidential letters, written at turbulent times in her life, and she was never able to send them to their intended recipients. But they filled gaps in my knowledge and shed light on her character and the reasons she chose the paths she followed.

Sadly, for the most part, she was powerless to shape the direction of her own life, however hard she tried. But there were one or two occasions when she, and I too by extraordinary circumstance, managed to steer the course of events in a direction favourable to us both, although this was never recorded in the chronicles of history.

I do not have much time for chroniclers anyway. They invariably have a hidden agenda, observing events from one side only, and even then you cannot trust them to get a story right. Some are no better than the ink-slingers who nail their pamphlets to St Paul's Cross. One of them got my name wrong when he recorded the list of my mistress' companions back in the days of Good King Harry. 'Guillemot' he called me, if you can believe it! Who but a short-sighted, misogynistic monk would saddle a woman with the same name as an ugly black auk-bird? But there it is, in indelible ink, and it will probably endure into history. I beg you, respected reader, do not fall into the trap of believing all you read in chronicles, for my name is not Guillemot. What it is you will discover in the story I am about to tell . . .



PART ONE

Hôtel de St Pol, Paris

The Court of the Mad King

1401–5

1

It was a magnificent birth.

A magnificent, gilded, cushioned-in-swansdown birth which was the talk of the town; for the life and style of Queen Isabeau were discussed and dissected in every Paris marketplace – her fabulous gowns, her glittering jewels, her grand entertainments and above all the fact that she rarely paid what she owed for any of them. The fountain gossips deplored her notorious self-indulgence and knew that, like the arrival of all her other babies, the birth of her tenth child would be a glittering, gem-studded occasion illuminated by blazing chandeliers and that they would effectively be funding it. Paris was a city of merchants and craftsmen who relied on the royals and nobles to spend their money on beautiful clothes and artefacts and when they did not pay their bills, people starved and ferment festered. Not that the queen spared a moment's thought for any of that, probably.

For my own part, when I heard the details of her lying-in, I thought the whole process sounded horrible. It's one thing to give birth on a gilded bed but at such a time who would want a bunch of bearded, fur-trimmed worthies peering down

and making whispered comments on every gasp and groan? With the notable exception of the king, it seemed that half the court was present; the Grand Master of the Royal Household, the Chancellor of the Treasury and a posse of barons and bishops. All the queen's ladies attended and, for some arcane reason, the Presidents of the Court of Justice, the Privy Council and the University. I do not know how the queen felt about it, but from the poor infant's point of view it must have been like starting life on a busy stall in a crowded market place.

Being born in a feather bed was the last the poor babe knew of luxury though, or of a mother's touch. I can vouch for that. In the fourteen years of her marriage to King Charles the Sixth of France, Queen Isabeau had already popped out four boys and five girls like seeds from a pod, which was about the level of her maternal interest in them. It was questionable whether she even knew how many of them still lived.

Once all the worthies had verified that the new arrival was genuinely fresh-sprung from the royal loins and noted that it was regrettably another girl, the poor little scrap was whisked away to the nursery to be trussed up in those tight linen bands the English call swaddling. So when I first clapped eyes on her she looked like an angry parcel, screaming fit to burst.

I did not take to her at first and who could blame me? It was hard being presented with all that squalling evidence of life, when only a few hours ago my own newborn babe had died before I was even able to hold him.

'You must be brave, little one,' my mother said, her voice

hoarse with grief as she wrapped the tiny blue corpse of my firstborn son in her best linen napkin. ‘Save your tears for the living and your love for the good God.’

Kindly meant words that were impossible to heed, for my world had turned dark and formless and all I could do was weep, great hiccougging sobs that threatened to snatch the breath from my body. In truth I wasn’t weeping for my dead son, I was weeping for myself, swamped with guilt and self-loathing and convinced that my existence was pointless if I could not produce a living child. In my grief, God forgive me, I had forgotten that it was He who gives life and He who takes it away. I only knew that my arms ached for my belly’s burden and desolation flowed from me like the Seine in spate. So too, in due course, did my milk – sad, useless goutts of it, oozing from my nipples and soaking my chemise, making the cloth cling to my pathetic swollen breasts. Ma brought linen strips and tried to bind them to make it stop but it hurt like devil’s fire and I pushed her away. And so it was that my whole life changed.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

I have to confess that my baby was a mistake. We all make them, don’t we? I’m not wicked through and through or anything. I just fell for a handsome, laughing boy and let him under my skirt. He did not force me – far from it. He was a groom in the palace stables and I enjoyed our romps in the hayloft as much as he did. Priests go on about carnal sin and eternal damnation, but they do not understand about being young and living for the day.

I am not pretending I was ever beautiful but at fourteen I was not bad looking – brown haired, rosy-cheeked and merry-eyed. A bit plump maybe – or well-covered as my father used to say, God bless him – but that is what a lot of men like, especially if they are strong and muscular, like my Jean-Michel. When we tumbled together in the hay he did not want to think that I might break beneath him. As for me, I did not think much at all. I was intoxicated by his deep voice, dark, twinkling eyes and hot, thrilling kisses.

I used to go and meet him at dusk, while my parents were busy in the bake-house, pulling pies out of the oven. When all the fuss about ‘sinful fornication’ had died down, Jean-Michel joked that while they were pulling them out he was putting one in!

I should explain that I am a baker’s daughter. My name is Guillaumette Dupain. Yes, it does mean ‘of bread’. I am bred of bread – so what? Actually, my father was not only a baker of bread but a patissier. He made pastries and wafers and beautiful gilded marchpanes and our bake-house was in the centre of Paris at the end of a cobbled lane that ran down beside the Grand Pont. Luckily for us, the smell of baking bread tended to disguise the stench from the nearby tanning factories and the decomposing bodies of executed criminals, which were often hung from the timbers of the bridge above to discourage the rest of us from breaking the law. In line with guild fire-regulations, our brick ovens were built close to the river, well away from our wooden house and those of our neighbours. All bakers fear fire and my father often talked

about the ‘great conflagration’ before I was born, which almost set the whole city ablaze.

He worked hard and drove his apprentices hard also. He had two – stupid lads I thought them because they could not write or reckon. I could do both, because my mother could and she had taught me – it was good for business. All day the men prepared loaves, pies and pastries at the back of the house while we sold them from the front, took orders and kept tallies. When the baking was finished, for half a sou my father would let the local goodwives put their own pies in the ovens while some heat still remained. Many bakers refused to do this, saying they were too busy mixing the next day’s dough, but my father was a kind soul and would not even take the halfpenny if he knew a family was on hard times. ‘Soft-hearted fool!’ my mother chided, hiding a fond smile.

He was not soft-hearted when she told him I was pregnant though. He called me a whore and a sinner and locked me in the flour store, only letting me out after he had visited Jean-Michel’s parents and arranged for him to marry me.

It was not very difficult. No one held my lover at knife-point or anything and afterwards Jean-Michel said he was quite pleased, especially as it meant he could share my bed in the attic above the shop. He had never slept in a real bed because until he went to work at the king’s stables, where he dossed down in the straw with the rest of the boy-grooms, he had slept on the floor of his father’s workshop with his three brothers. The Lanières were harness-makers and operated from a busy street near Les Halles, where the butchers and tanners plied

their odorous trades, making leather readily available. With three sons already in the business, there was no room for a fourth and so, when he was old enough, Jean-Michel was apprenticed to the king's master of horse. It was a good position for he was strong and nimble, but also kind and gentle-voiced. Horses responded to him and did his bidding.

The royal stables were busy day and night and inevitably the apprentices got all the worst shifts, so after we married we only shared my bed when he could wangle a night off. Otherwise it was a tumble in the hayloft or nothing – mostly nothing as I grew larger. When my father sent a message that my birth-pains had started, Jean-Michel rushed from the palace, hoping to hear the baby's first cry but instead he wept with me in the mournful silence.

Men don't feel these things the same as women though, do they? After an hour or so, he dried his eyes, blew his nose and went back to the stables. There was no funeral. I wanted to call the child Henri after my father, but when the priest came it was too late for a baptism and Maître Thomas took the tiny body away to the public burial ground for the unshriven. I know it is foolish but all these years later I sometimes shed tears for my lost son. The Church teaches that the unbaptised cannot enter heaven but I do not believe it.

It must be obvious already that I was an only child. Despite ardent prayers to Saint Monica and a fortune spent on charms and potions, my mother's womb never quickened again. Perhaps because of this, when my baby died she thought I might have lost my only chance of motherhood so, when she

could no longer bear the sound of my sobbing, she walked along to the church and asked the priest if there was any call for a wet-nurse.

It so happened that Maître Thomas had a brother in the queen's household, and later that day the appearance in our lane of a royal messenger brought all the neighbours out to gawp at his polished ebony staff and bright-blue livery with its giddy pattern of gold fleur-de-lis. When my mother answered his impatient rap, he wasted no time on a greeting, merely demanding imperiously, 'Does your girl still have milk?' as if he had called at a dairy rather than a bakery.

The first I knew of anything was when my mother's moon-face rose through the attic hatchway, glowing in the beam of her horn lantern. 'Come, Mette,' she said, scrambling off the ladder. 'Quick, get yourself dressed. We're going to the palace.'

Still befuddled with grief, I stood like a docile sheep while she squeezed my poor flabby belly and leaking breasts into my Sunday clothes and pushed me out into the daylight.

The route to the king's palace was familiar from my frequent love-trysts with Jean-Michel. We walked east along the river where the air was fresh and the sky was a bright, uncluttered arc. In the past I had often lingered to watch the traffic on the water; small fishing wherries with fat-bellied brown sails, flat-bottomed barges laden with cargo and occasionally, weaving between them, a gilded galley bedecked with livery, its crimson blades dripping diamond droplets as it ferried some grandee to a riverside mansion.

It was in these leafy suburbs close to the new city wall that

many imposing town-houses had been built by the nobility. The highest tower in Paris was to be found there, rising brand-new and clean-stoned above the Duke of Burgundy's Hôtel d'Artois. In the shadow of the ancient abbey of the Céléstins lay the impressive Hôtel de St Antoine where lived the king's brother, the Duke of Orleans. Neighbouring this, however, and overlooking the lush meadows of the Île de St Louis, was the king's magnificent Hôtel de St Pol, the largest and most sumptuous residence of them all. It sprawled for half a league along the north bank of the Seine, the spires and rooftops of a dozen grand buildings visible behind a high curtain wall of pale stone which was fortified with towers and gatehouses constantly a-flutter with flags and banners.

Old men in the market-place told how the present king's father, King Charles V, distraught at losing eight consecutive offspring in their infancy, had eyed his nobles' airy new mansions with envy and went about 'acquiring' a whole parish of them for himself around the church of Saint Pol. Then he had them linked with cloisters, embellished with Italian marble, surrounded with orchards and gardens and enclosed within one great wall, thus establishing his own substantial palace in a prime location and leaving his disgruntled vassals to rebuild elsewhere. This regal racketeering was justified on the grounds that the king's next two sons survived, born and raised in much healthier surroundings than the cramped and fetid quarters of the old Palais Royal.

For my trysts with Jean-Michel I used to slip into the palace by a sally gate in the Porte des Chevaux, where the guards came

to know me, but the queen's messenger led my mother and me to the lofty Grande Porte with its battlemented barbican and ranks of armed sentries, his royal staff acting like a magic wand to whisk us unchallenged through the lines of pikes into a vast courtyard. Men, carts and oxen mingled there in noisy confusion. I was kept so busy dodging rolling wheels and piles of steaming dung that I failed to notice which archways and passages we took to reach a quiet paved square where a fountain played before a fine stone mansion. This was the Maison de la Reine where the queen lived and held lavish court and where, presumably, since she'd produced so many children, she received regular visits from the king, although rumour had it that he had not fathered her entire brood.

The grand arched entrance with its sweeping stone staircase was not for the likes of us, of course. We were led to a ground-level door alongside a separate stone building from which belched forth rich cooking smells. The heat of a busy kitchen blasted us as we were brought to a halt by a procession of porters ferrying huge, loaded dishes up a spiral tower-stair to the main floor of the mansion. The queen's household was dining in the great hall and it was several minutes before we were beckoned to follow the final steaming pudding up the worn steps to a servery, where carvers were swiftly and skilfully dissecting roasted meats into portions. The aroma was mouth-watering even to my grief-dulled senses and my mother's long, appreciative sniffs were audible above the noise made by the hungry gathering on the other side of the screen that hid us and the carvers from them.

We were ushered through a door beyond the servery and down a narrow passage into a small, cold chamber lit only by a narrow shaft of daylight from a high unglazed window. Here our escort brusquely informed us that we should wait and then departed, closing the door behind him.

‘What are we doing here?’ I hissed to my mother, stirred at last into showing some interest in our circumstances.

‘Not being fed, obviously,’ she complained. ‘You would have thought they could spare a bit of pudding!’ Huffily she sank onto a solitary bench under the window and arranged her grey woollen skirt neatly around her. ‘Come and sit down, Mette, and compose yourself. You want to make a good impression.’

Gingerly I lowered myself onto the bench beside her. It was not many hours since I’d given birth and to sit down was painful. ‘Impression?’ I echoed. ‘Who should I make an impression on?’ My breasts throbbed and I was becoming distinctly nervous.

‘On Madame la Bonne, who runs the royal nursery.’ Now that she had got me here, my mother risked divulging more information. ‘She needs a wet-nurse for the new princess.’

‘A wet-nurse!’ I echoed, wincing as I recoiled along the hard bench. ‘You mean . . . no, Ma! I cannot give suck to a royal baby.’

My mother drew herself up, both chins jutting indignantly from the tight frame of her goodwife’s wimple. ‘And why not, may I ask? Your milk is as good as anyone’s. Better than most probably, for you are young and well-nourished. Think yourself lucky. If they take you, you will have drawn the top prize. It might have been a butcher’s baby or a tax collector’s brat.’

I opened my mouth to protest that a baker’s daughter could

hardly despise a butcher's baby but swallowed my words as the door opened to admit a thin, erect woman of middle age and height, dressed in a dark wine-coloured gown with sweeping fur-lined sleeves. The eaves of her black gable-headdress shadowed a pinched, rat-like face and she looked so unlike anyone's idea of a children's nurse that my mother and I were both struck dumb. We stood up.

'Is this the girl?' the woman asked bluntly. Her lip curled. 'Ah yes, I can see it is.'

Following her disdainful gaze, I glanced down and saw that damp milk-stains were beginning to spread over the front of my bodice. Shame and grief sent fresh tears coursing down my cheeks.

'What is your name?' demanded the fur-sleeved lady but any reply I might have made was forestalled as she grabbed me by the arm, pulled me under the beam of light from the window and wrenched my mouth open, peering into it.

My mother spoke for me. 'Guillaumette. My daughter's name is Guillaumette.' She frowned at the crude treatment I was receiving but was too over-awed to object.

Madame la Bonne grunted and released my jaw. 'Teeth seem good,' she observed, aiming her rodent nose at my damp bodice and taking a long investigative sniff. 'And she smells clean. How old is she?'

'Fifteen,' replied my mother, trying to edge her ample frame between me and my tormentor. 'It was her first child.'

'And it is dead, I hope? We do not want any common nursing bringing disease into the royal nursery.' My instantly

renewed sobs appeared to convince her of this for she nodded with satisfaction. ‘Good. We will take her on trial. Five sous a week and her bed and board. Any sign of ague or milk fever and she is out.’ Before my mother could question these terms, the dragon-lady turned to address me directly. ‘You should stop snivelling, girl, or your milk will dry up and you will be no use to anyone. The queen was delivered at the hour of sext and the princess needs suck at once. I will send someone to collect you.’

Not waiting to hear whether or not her offer was accepted, Madame la Bonne swept out of the room. My mother stared after her, shaking her head, but the mention of five sous a week had struck a chord. Although my eyes were blurred with tears, I caught the commercial glint in hers as she calculated how much this would add to the family coffers.

‘We had best say goodbye then,’ she said gruffly, kissing my wet cheeks. ‘It is a good opportunity, Mette. Blow your nose and make the most of it. Remember Jean-Michel is not far away. You will be able to visit him between feeds.’ Gently, she wiped away my tears with the edge of her veil. ‘It will be hard at first but who knows where it could lead? You will get used to it and the baby needs you. You heard the lady.’

I nodded, barely comprehending. When another liveried servant arrived to take me away I followed him without a backward glance. My head was spinning and my breasts felt as if they would burst. Relief from that piercing ache would be welcome, no matter what followed.

They put the baby in my arms and unlaced my bodice. I had

no idea what to do but the midwife was there, an ancient crone who must have witnessed a thousand births, and she showed me how to hold the tiny bundle so that my oozing nipple was available to the seeking mouth. At first the infant could not clamp the slippery teat between her hard gums and she yelled with frustration while fresh tears poured down my face.

‘I cannot do it!’ I cried. ‘She does not like me.’

The midwife wheezed with amusement. ‘What does she know about liking?’ she said, bringing the baby’s head and my breast together like a pair of ripe peaches. ‘All she wants is to suck. She is a little poppet this one, healthy as a milkmaid and strong as a cobweb. Just you sit quiet now and wait for her to latch on. She will. Oh yes she will!’

She did. Very soon she was fastened to my nipple like a pink leech and I could feel the painful pressure dropping. I stared down at the swaddled crown of her head and noticed a tiny wisp of pale gold hair had slipped between the linen bands. Otherwise, she seemed anonymous, almost inhuman, like one of the gargoyles on the roof of our church. I shivered at the sudden notion that she might be a creature of the devil. Supposing I had been foisted with a succubus?

I closed my inflamed eyes and took a deep breath. Of course she was not a demon, I told myself firmly. She was a baby, a gift of God, a morsel of human life that was strangely and avidly attached to my body.

Gradually, I began to feel a steady and reassuring rhythm in the mysterious process of giving suck, a regular swishing sound like the soft hiss made by the surge of the tide on the Seine

mudflats. I sensed that the child and I were sharing a universal pulse, joined together in the ebb and flow of life. And as my milk flowed, my tears dried. I did not stop grieving for my lost son but I no longer wept.

2

How can we ever know what life has in store for us? My new situation nearly ended as abruptly as it had begun, because the next morning some of my breast milk oozed onto the white silk chemise that had been pulled over the baby's swaddling in preparation for her baptism. I trembled, awaiting the full power of the rat-woman's wrath, but luckily the stain was quickly hidden under the folds of an embroidered satin christening robe and then, crowned with a tiny coil of lace and seed-pearls, the baby was carried off to the queen's chapel. Later we were told she had been baptised Catherine after the virgin martyr of Alexandria, whose staunch Christian faith had not even been broken by torture on the wheel.

In the beginning I did not really have much to do with Catherine, except to let her suck whenever she cried for the breast. Madame la Bonne insisted on attending to the swaddling herself. She changed it every morning, convinced that only she knew the secret of how to make the royal limbs grow straight. Two dim-witted girls were in charge of washing and dressing and rocking the cradle, which they did with scant care or attention, it seemed to me. After a few days the governess must

have decided I could stay, for my straw mattress and Catherine's crib were carried into a small turret room, separated by a thick oak door from the main nursery. I was told that this arrangement was in order to prevent the baby's cries waking the other children but I was far from happy. Terrified of the responsibility of looking after a royal baby alone throughout the night, I became jaded from lack of sleep, home-sick and heart-sick for my own lost son. Yet none of this seemed to affect my milk, which flowed profuse and steady, like the Seine beneath the turret window.

My experience of royal nurseries was nil but even so this one struck me as distinctly odd. Here we were in the palace of reputedly the most profligate queen in Christendom and yet, apart from the pearl-encrusted christening robe which had been swiftly borne away for safekeeping, I could find no evidence of luxury or wealth. There were no fur-lined cribs or silver rattles or chests full of toys, and the rooms, located in a separate tower to the rear of the queen's house, were cold and bare. Although my turret had a small grate and a chimney, there were no fires even to warm the newborn child, no hangings to keep out the autumn draughts and only smoky tapers and oil lamps to light the lengthening nights. Food came up from the queen's kitchen, but it was nothing like the fare I had seen on the day of my arrival. No succulent roasts or glistening puddings for us; we ate potage and bread messes, washed down with green wine or buttermilk. Occasionally there was some cheese or a chunk of bacon but rarely any fresh meat or fish. We might have been living in a monastery rather than a palace.

The reason was not hard to find, for in contrast with her name, there was very little that was good about Madame la Bonne. I quickly understood that her first concern was not the welfare of the royal children but the wealth of the royal governess. I was to learn that any savings she could make on the nursery budget went straight into her own pocket, which was why she had employed me. A courtier's wife would have been more appropriate as wet-nurse for a princess, but a lady of rank would not only command higher pay, she would also have powerful friends, and Madame la Bonne's plans and schemes depended on no one with any connection to power or authority ever coming near the place; none ever visited, not the master of the household or the queen's secretary or chancellor, or even one of their clerks and certainly not the queen herself.

As well as Catherine, there were three other royal children in residence. The oldest was Princess Michele, a solemn, rather plain-looking girl of six who was always trying to keep the peace between her two younger brothers, the Princes Louis and Jean. Louis was the dauphin, the unlikely heir to the throne, a skinny, tow-headed four-year-old with a pale complexion and a chronic cough whose clothes were grubby and too small. However, I observed that he had a quick brain and an active imagination, which often led him into mischief. His brother Jean was a bull-headed terror, a ruffian even at three, darker and sturdier than his brother and more headstrong. You could be sure that if Louis started some mischief, Jean would continue it beyond a joke. After I caught him dropping a spider into Catherine's crib, I decided to keep a very close eye on Monsieur

Jean! I knew that if any harm came to the baby, the blame would instantly be laid on me, not on her infant brother.

Being an only child, I had never had much to do with other children and yet, to my surprise, having been thrown into close contact with these as-good-as-motherless youngsters, I found I knew instinctively how to handle them. Oddly, I felt no similar instinct when it came to Catherine. I could not help nursing a certain resentment that she was alive while my own baby was dead and I could not see past those horrible swaddling bands, which seemed to squash all the character out of her. Sometimes it felt as if I was suckling a sausage. Besides, I grew restless just sitting around waiting to open my bodice, so in between Catherine's feeds I started playing with the older children.

I could see that the boys' naughtiness sprang from boredom rather than wickedness. They were bright and spirited but the two giggling nursemaids were too busy gossiping or sneaking out to meet their lovers to have much time for their charges. They would plonk food on the table but they rarely brought water to wash the children and never talked or played with them. Madame la Bonne had pared their wages to the minimum and, like my mother always said, 'If you pay turnips you get donkeys'.

To start with, the children were wary of me but soon Michele opened up, being touchingly grateful for some attention. A slight, mousy little girl, she had fine, dirty blonde hair that was always in a tangle because Louis had thrown the only hairbrush out of the window in a tantrum and Madame la Bonne had chosen not to replace it. Although outwardly placid, she was terribly

insecure, shying at raised voices, assuming slights where there were none and fearful that at any moment she might be whisked away to marry some prince in a foreign land. When I tried to reassure her that she was too young for that, she blinked her solemn sea-green eyes and shook her head.

‘No, Mette.’ My full name, Guillaumette, was too much for young tongues to master. ‘My sister Isabelle was only eight when she went away to England.’

I remembered that departure. I had watched Princess Isabelle being paraded through the streets of Paris at the time of her proxy marriage to King Richard of England, a tiny doll-like figure propped up in a litter, weighed down with furs and jewels, and it had never occurred to me or to any of us in that noisy crowd of citizens how frightened she must have been, being carted off to a strange country to live with a man old enough to be her grandfather. And what had become of that little bride? An English lord named Bolingbroke had stolen King Richard’s throne and his abandoned child-queen was still languishing somewhere across the Sleeve, her future uncertain. I realised that Michele was right to be frightened.

The boys took longer to respond to my overtures. Prince Louis’ insecurities sprang from a different source but were equally deep-seated. He was haunted by a ghost. At the start of the year his older brother Charles had died of a sudden fever and the whole of France had plunged into mourning. Unlike his younger siblings, the nine-year-old dauphin had been doted on by Queen Isabeau, kept beside her at court, given his own household and showered with gifts and praise. He was shown

off to every high-ranking visitor and proclaimed 'the glorious future of France'! Even my down-to-earth mother had joined the crowds cheering him in the streets, raining blessings on his bright golden head.

It was the sweating sickness that carried him off. One day he was riding his pony through the city and the next he was dead, consumed by a raging fever. Queen Isabeau collapsed and the king succumbed to one of his devilish fits. I suppose during the months that followed, the new dauphin might have expected to be whisked off to the life of luxury and privilege that his brother had enjoyed, but this did not happen and so, every time he was reprimanded or denied something, Louis would throw a tantrum, hurling himself to the ground shrieking 'I am the dauphin! I am the dauphin!' This was always a source of great entertainment for Jean, who would squat down nearby and watch with undisguised glee as Louis drummed his heels and screeched. I never saw him try to comfort his brother. Even in infancy Jean was an odd, isolated boy.

Madame la Bonne had devised her particular way of ensuring that the sound of Louis' tantrums did not carry outside the nursery. The first time I heard his blood-curdling yells, I rushed in panic to the big day-room and was horrified to see the governess lift up the screaming little boy, bundle him into a large empty coffer, close the lid and sit on it.

'Madame, really you cannot . . .!' I protested.

'Presumptuous girl!' she snapped. 'Be silent. You are here to give suck, nothing more. I advise you to keep your mouth shut and your bodice open or another wet-nurse will be found.'

Beneath her skinny rump Louis' muffled cries dwindled into whimpers and I was forced to retreat to my turret. It was not until much later, when I was convinced he must be dead, that the governess let the little boy out. Peeping cautiously around the door I saw him emerge trembling and gasping and run to a far corner to press his tear-stained face against the cold stone wall. In his terror he had wet himself but no one offered him dry hose. No wonder he always stank. The governess caught me peeking and gave me another warning glare, so I fled.

A month or so after her birth, Catherine started sleeping for longer periods and I was able to risk my first visit to the stables. Always a man of action rather than words, Jean-Michel greeted me shyly and immediately led me up the ladder to the hay-loft and began shifting bundles of fodder to create a private corner for us, away from the prying eyes of his fellow-grooms. The rows of horses in the stalls below radiated warmth and although at first we talked awkwardly and strangely, it wasn't long before we were exchanging eager kisses. The result was predictable. I am sure I don't need to go into detail. I was fifteen and he was eighteen and after all we were married . . . it wasn't natural for us to remain sad and celibate.

Afterwards we talked some more, carefully avoiding the subject of our dead baby. I told Jean-Michel how Madame la Bonne's greed made life so cold and comfortless in the royal nursery. By now it was early December and the nights were freezing in the turret chamber. Being a kind-hearted lad, he exclaimed indignantly about this and the next time I came he presented me with some bundles of firewood. 'Smuggle them

in under your shawl. No one will see the smoke if you burn it after dark,' he suggested.

So when Catherine next woke in the small hours, making restless hungry sounds, I lit a taper with my flint, pulled straw from my mattress for kindling, piled some sticks on top and set the taper to them. As I did so I noticed that her swaddling had come loose and a strip of damp linen was dangling down. On an impulse I pulled it and all at once I could feel her legs begin to kick. In the light of the fire I could see pleasure blaze in her deep-blue eyes and I made an instant decision.

I pulled my bed in front of the hearth, spread the blanket over it and laid Catherine down, eagerly removing the rest of the offensive linen bands. I prayed that no one would take notice of her squalls of protest as I used the icy water from my night-jug to clean her soiled body, and soon the warmth of the flames silenced her cries and she began to stretch and kick, luxuriating in the dancing firelight. Her little arms waved and I bent to smile and coo at her, blowing on her neck and belly to tickle her soft, peachy skin so that she squirmed and burbled with delight.

The previous summer, walking among the wildflowers on the riverbank, I had watched entranced as a butterfly emerged into the sunshine, the full glory of its multicoloured wings gradually unfurling before my eyes. In those first moments by the fire Catherine reminded me of that butterfly. For the first time her big blue eyes became sparkling pools, glowing with life, and her soft mop of flaxen hair, for so long flattened and confined, began to spring and curl. Then, as I bent low

and whispered soft endearments into her ear, I was rewarded with a wide, gummy smile.

All the love I had been unable to lavish on my own baby seemed to burst like a dam inside me. I wanted to shout with joy but instead, mindful of the ‘donkeys’ sleeping in the next room, I swept Catherine up and pressed her little body tightly against mine, whirling her round in a happy, silent dance. I could feel her heart fluttering under my hands and, tiny and helpless though she appeared, she put a powerful spell on me. From that moment I was no longer my own mistress. In the leaping firelight I gazed at that petal-soft, bewitching cherub and became her slave.

When I again wrapped her warmly and began to feed her, giving suck was an entirely new experience. At my breast I no longer saw a pink leech but a rosy angel with a halo of pale hair and skin like doves’ down. Now that her limbs were free, she pushed one little hand against my breast and kneaded it gently, as if caressing and blessing me at the same time and under the power of this benison the milk that flowed from me seemed to contain my very heart and soul.