
Opening Extract from...

After Flodden

Written by Rosemary Goring

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AFTER FLODDEN

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POLYGON

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For Alan

Characters

The Scottish court, family and followers

James IV
Margaret Tudor, his wife, and sister of Henry VIII
James, Duke of Rothesay, James's toddler son and only surviving legitimate child, later James V
Alexander Stewart, Archbishop of St Andrews, James's eldest illegitimate child (he had eight, by four mistresses)
Patrick Paniter, James's secretary and right-hand man
Goodwife Black, Paniter's housekeeper and more
Gabriel, Viscount Torrance of Blaneford and Mountjoy, a young courtier and advisor to Paniter
Robert Borthwick, master meltar

Nobles with James IV at Flodden

Alexander Hume, Lord Home, led disastrous plundering foray into England in August 1513, called the ill-raid. Was in charge of vanguard at Flodden, with Huntly
George Gordon, Earl of Huntly, in charge of vanguard at Flodden, with Home
Lieutenant General Archibald Campbell, Earl of Argyll
Patrick Lindsay, Lord Lindsay
Andrew Herries, Lord Herries of Terregles
Matthew Stewart, Earl of Lennox
William Hay, Earl of Erroll
John Lindsay, Earl of Crawford
William Graham, Earl of Montrose
John Douglas, Earl of Morton

The Leith household

Davy Turnbull, head of the house, a sea merchant and brigand, father of Louise Brenier
Madame Brenier, his dissatisfied French wife
Benoit Brenier, her eldest child, by her first husband
Marguerite Brenier, her elder daughter, by her first husband
Louise Brenier, her third child, by Davy Turnbull
Vincent, tenant, shipwright and family friend
John and Andrew Barton, Davy Turnbull's cousins, sea-traders and adventurers
The vixen, the family mongrel

The Croziers

Adam Crozier, head of the clan, whose stronghold is in the Scottish Borders, near Selkirk
Tom Crozier, his younger brother
Nat Crozier, their reckless father, now dead
Old Crozier, Adam and Tom's grandfather
Martha Crozier, Adam and Tom's mother
Bella, her sister, who lives in Berwick-upon-Tweed
Oliver, her husband
Wat the Wanderer, Adam's cousin and henchman
Murdo Montgomery, Adam's cousin and henchman
Bertie Main, cousin, in charge of the clan's scouts

Other

Hob, an East Lothian boy, orphaned at Flodden
Ella Aylewood, a silversmith's daughter

The English court and its followers

Henry VIII

Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, Henry's lieutenant-general in the north of England

Thomas, Baron Dacre, Lord-Warden of the English Marches

Thomas Ruthall, Bishop of Durham, Henry's secretary and a privy councillor

Beecham, Henry's clerk of records

The Ambassadors

Monsieur De La Mothe, French ambassador from the court of Louis XII

Dr Nicholas West, English ambassador

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!
The lights burn blue; it is now dead midnight.
Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by . . .

Richard III, Act 5, Scene 3, 180–184
SHAKESPEARE

CHAPTER ONE

18 September 1513

There was a knock at the door, and then another. It was early morning and the sound of a small fist on oak would have been lost in the rumble of carts if Patrick Paniter had not been at his window. He had been standing there since daybreak, peering into the street from behind a half-closed shutter, dreading the return of his visitor the way some men fear the day of judgement.

In the years he had lived here these doors had been battered with cudgels and struck by swords, but he had not felt this kind of shiver at any previous summons. It was as if the hand was hammering straight onto his bones.

The hand was small, little larger than a child's, but it brought with it memories Paniter could not bear to revisit. The young woman at his door looked nothing like her sister, whose warm-eyed lustre carried the scent of vineyards to this cold coast. No, this woman had a boy's figure, and a boy's rude insistence. He knew what she wanted: money, more than already had been thrown at her.

He did not entirely blame her. Had Marguerite lived, had the king, there would have been a steady flow of riches into her family's coffers. But the sister was dead. It was an unfortunate and untimely end, Paniter would not deny that, but for her mother to lay the blame for Marguerite's death at the king's feet was the madness of grief. The pretty little thing had done as she wanted, and with the mother's blessing. The consequences were regrettable, but not unusual.

Now the king was gone. Most of the country's soldiers too. After what he had witnessed of his sovereign's final throes, he would call Marguerite's deathbed gentle. Enviable, even. Tormented by what he had seen, it was as if Paniter's mind had been flayed. Even a whisper from happier days, a reminder of all he had lost, was like brine dripped into a wound. He could not deal with the Brenier girl, and her ill-timed greed. She came from a past that was now as lifeless and bruising as stone. The present was every bit as unforgiving. Worse, perhaps, because it promised nothing but pain.

There was a scratch at his door. Paniter kept his eyes on the street, where his unwelcome visitor's horse was tethered. The housekeeper came in, her face flushed. 'It's her again, sir, the Brenier lass, and she says she won't leave until you speak to her.' She hesitated, then ignored Paniter's hand, which was waving as if to drive off his thoughts as well as the young woman below stairs. 'She means it, master. She's taken a seat in the hall, and her dog growls like he's seen a rat whenever I try to make her go.'

A sound escaped Paniter that in a weaker man would be described as a moan. His hand covered his eyes, and he sagged against the wall, as if he had no strength to reach a chair. Goodwife Black was at his side before he could fall, and with an arm around his waist helped him to a seat. He began to sob. This man who, when he stood up to speak in council rose above his peers like a mainsail mast, whose voice on a calm day could reach across the Forth into Fife, began to splutter and girn as if he were a child, clutching the housekeeper's sleeve so wildly his nails grazed her arm. His tears fell, dampening his lap, until she drew his head down onto her neck and began to rock him, to quieten his grief.

Goodwife Black closed her eyes, or else she too would have cried. Paniter had not slept since he had come home, a week past, and neither had she. The night he walked back into the house his face was so grim she had clapped a hand to her mouth. He looked like a

stranger, and when he told her a little of what had befallen, and when she heard what others in the city were saying, she doubted the man she had once known so well would ever pass this way again.

Worn out by seven days of misery, of refusing all food and company, Patrick Paniter finally found comfort in his mistress's arms. He had lain there often enough before, his hands roving over her abundant form. Today, though, no whisper of lust disturbed the relief he found in her touch. For a few minutes the ceaseless roar in his head retreated. The ache behind his eyes did not fade, but its sharpness was dulled. Images he thought had been chiselled into his eye lost a little of their vividness, as did the sounds that came with them. The smells? Well, they would be with him for the rest of his life. Never again would he eat succulent roast beef or relish a plate of sheep's lungs. The butchery he had witnessed had cured him of his taste for meat.

Downstairs Mistress Brenier scuffed her feet in the hallway. Her hound sat at her side. This house was dim as a forest, no tallow wasted for the ease of guests. Its windows were shuttered, and the grate in the entrance was unlit. The girl shivered. It was not the chill of the hall, or of the housekeeper's reception that made her tremble, but the grim business that brought her here.

Eighty miles south of Paniter's house lay the worst devastation of living memory, a blight more fearsome than plague or famine. The name 'Flodden' was already spreading like pestilence through city and country, a word so tainted with misery and anger it tasted bitter in the mouth. Some spat when they uttered it. A month before, only a handful of Borderers knew the place existed. Now, even before the last body had been stripped of coins and spurs, and flung into the village pit, it was a stain on the country's spirit as dark as the quarts of hot blood that flowed onto the hillside and seeped into the bog. Spring would bring fresh weeds and flowers, a new spurt of growth in the sturdy Borders trees, but who would be

able to watch their nodding leaves and buds without thinking of the iron water they fed upon?

Paniter's young visitor had not seen the battlefield, nor could she imagine it. But like everyone in Edinburgh she knew the fate of their army. At first, like many others, she thought the rumours were part myth, the scare stories of those who have escaped with their lives and wish to be seen as heroes, survivors of terror and carnage, not the flotsam of some skirmish where skill played no part and pure luck carried the day. A week after the battle, though, and it was evident that the worst tales had yet to be told. Most of the returning soldiers would not speak; some could not.

Only one tale interested this girl. Though just nineteen, she would not be brushed off without hearing it. Her brother had ridden out to battle, and had not been heard of since. There was little chance he was alive, she knew, but until she was told he had been killed, or died, she had to keep looking. The dead king's secretary was the only man in a position to know what had happened. As Mme Brenier had said, when Louise turned her horse towards the town, the court certainly owed their family help.

'And if he offers money as well, don't you dare turn it down,' she called after her daughter. 'We need all we can get.' Louise kicked the horse into a trot, and did not turn around.

* * *

There had been no thought of defeat when James and his army set out. Even the foot soldiers, eking out their month's store of salt meat and biscuit and ignoring the rumble of their stomachs, had glory in their sights; glory and – God willing – riches to repay their effort.

James rode at the head of his men, the amethyst in his bonnet flashing in the late summer sun. Its rosy glint mirrored the wood-smoke sky above the hills as they marched out of Edinburgh towards

the Lammermuir hills. The old drove roads were flattened and scored, heather and bracken ground to dust beneath hooves and carts. Days earlier, four hundred oxen had plodded across this route, the castle's guns at their backs. Their yokes creaked as the cannons were hauled across earth, grass, stone and mud. Boys ran ahead of the teams, digging out the drays whenever the mud tried to swallow them whole. Cracking whips, hollering oxen, barking dogs made a fierce sort of music as the beasts and their drivers picked their way south in the melting harvest light.

For the king's army following in their wake, evidence of this violent passage littered the way: broken-boned oxen heaved off the road, throats cut to shorten their suffering; splintered drays; a gun nose-deep in glaur, so sunken it was not considered worth the effort of retrieving.

The sight of the gun grieved Paniter. It was as valuable as a score of men. They might as well have slain their own infantry before setting out as abandon these weapons. But when he edged his horse alongside the king's, and brought the gun to his attention, James shrugged. He kept his eyes on the horizon. 'The first casualty,' he said. 'There will be worse. You are too squeamish, Paddy. You must learn to steel your heart. If you are to survive this game, it should be as merciless as a blade.'

Paniter felt the first chill wind of a deadly autumn. James's teasing smile invited his secretary to raise his sights, and his spirits, but for the first time in their years of friendship, he saw a guarded admission of fear. What they were doing was audacious, and audacity takes courage. Courage is the shadow to fear's blaze, growing shorter and rarer as the fire strengthens, but never – with God's help – entirely absent. What lay ahead was daunting enough to make even the battle-seasoned James waver, and Paniter felt a new measure of respect for his king. Were blame ever to be levelled for what lay ahead, it would fall on James's head, and he was bracing himself.

Their horses trotted neck to neck. The men did not talk. Behind them wound the steel river of their army, the clink of bridles, spurs and spears rattling like coins in a gambler's hand.

For years, James, Paniter and the inner circle of court had been stealthily preparing for war. They did not know who they would face, whether it would be their quarrelsome English neighbour, their French allies or some new pieces on the board. The only certainty was that conflict was on its way. And now they were heading into its mouth. This march out of the city and into England was the result of half a lifetime's preparation: diplomatic visits, parliamentary councils, and enough letters to drain a sea of ink. Not to mention the smelting of iron and hammering of weapons at the master meltar's furnaces, and the frenzy of work in James's shipyards along the Firth of Forth.

All were to vanish in a single afternoon that took with it not only James but James's son, a boy as dear to Paniter as his own child. The best part of Scotland's aristocracy fell that day, but it was the loss of James and young Alexander that brought Paniter to his knees. Which is where he rested, wrapped in his housekeeper's arms and sleeping, open-mouthed as a babe, for the first time since he fled the battlefield. Downstairs Mistress Brenier found a chair, and put an arm around her dog for warmth.

Soldiers started sneaking home days after the army left the city. Those first deserters crawled back quietly, under cover of night. Within a month, however, their numbers were swelling, and this new wave of soldiers burned not with shame but anger and resentment. Their first destination was the alehouse for beer to wash the grit of the road from their mouth. Bakeries did well out of them, oven boys staring as these filthied, hard-talking men shovelled bread into their mouths, their packs lying on the street for anyone to steal while they closed their eyes and ate, as if life could offer no greater delight than freshly baked dough. Later, though, some would be

reminding themselves of even sweeter ecstasy, the flour-white attractions of the pox-house doing a trade almost as brisk as the brewer's and baker's.

'Hey, soldier,' cried one baker's boy to a Highlander, whose hand sat on his sword even as he ate. 'Hey, man, did ye get a fight?' The boy danced out onto the street, brandishing an invisible sword over an invisible enemy, running him through with a roar.

'Naw, son. Nae fight.'

'So why're you back then?'

The Highlander looked skywards, chewing. 'We'd done our 40 days,' he finally said. 'Owed the bastards nothin mair.'

He picked up his pack, and left.

The Highlander and all the others who had served their time were half-starved. Their rations had run out on the march south, and still they had seen no action. Many would call them deserters, but to their minds they had done their duty. If the king wanted them for a long campaign, he would have to pay them. Foolishly, James had made it plain that he had nothing to offer until they had trounced the English, but he called on their loyalty to their country to give him several more weeks' service. 'You will be home by the end of September,' he promised. But for those with land to hoe for winter planting, or boats that had not seen a day's catch since the summer, a call on their conscience and the promise of booty was not enough. Late in September, though, when their comrades returned from the field – and many more did not – they were not then quite so easy in their minds as they'd have liked, or let on.

The first soldiers back from the field at Flodden reached Edinburgh on horseback two days after battle, so torn in clothes and body they were more like crow bogies than men of arms. No-one could mistake them for soldiers who had slipped their leash. Even those unharmed smelled of steel and blood. As news spread of the Scottish army's rout, of the king's death and the devastation

of Scotland's troops, fear licked through the city. The king is dead! The English are coming! Word spread fast. Church bells were set ringing, a heart-stopping knell that seemed to mark every one of Flodden's dead.

Mothers and daughters had heard what advancing armies were wont to do. With too few men to defend them, they hung sheets and shifts from their windows, flags of surrender that whipped at their windowsills all that night, and for many to come. At their doors they gathered their fire-irons and long-handled pots, a housewife's armoury. They set their household on watch, taking turns to sleep, but there was little rest for anyone that night.

In the dark, builders piled their carts high with lime and stones. The next morning, before full light, work began on a new wall, facing south towards the road the English would ride if they came to capture the capital – as surely now they would. Stones were slapped into place by a chain gang, sweat oiling every face despite the cold and wind. The bricklayers worked in near silence. Only when the wall had risen higher than their heads did they relax sufficiently to talk. Their conversation was so gloomy, though, it was worse than silence, and slowly they resumed their miserly habit with words, breaking it only to shout for mortar or rubble or ale.

In a small house in the port of Leith, two seagull's miles from Edinburgh Castle, the days that followed the news from Flodden were a modern sort of torture. Louise Brenier had heard of the rack and the boot, of what they did to traitors, enemies and spies in the dungeons beneath the castle, but what she and her mother suffered as they waited for Benoit's return was surely almost as cruel. She felt physical pain, listening for the foot on the stair that never came, or watching the vixen's ears prick, as if she had heard his voice on the dockside, and then lie flat when she knew it was not him.

When word of the battle reached Mme Brenier, her daughter learnt that blood drains faster from a face than wine from an overturned bottle.

'Maman!' she cried, as Mme Brenier slumped onto the settle. 'Mon fils,' her mother whispered, 'mon fils est mort. Dieu me sauve, Dieu me sauve.'

'He is not dead!' Louise shouted, 'He cannot be. He promised he'd be back.' Even to her own ears she sounded like a spoilt child. She bit her lip.

The rest of that day they cried until their eyelids were swollen, their throats rough. Mme Brenier retreated into French. This was the language of her heart, and wrapped at the centre of that heart lay Benoit.

'I thought I had lost him, once, you see,' she would explain when her preference for her son over her daughters was so blatant it could not be ignored. If her second husband, Louise's father, was not in the room, she would add: 'And he is, of course, the image of his father. I named him well, you know, for he was truly blessed when he survived near certain death.'

Louise knew the story as if it were her own. Benoit had been little more than five, Marguerite three, when smallpox, la petite vérole, spread through the family's village in Normandy. It carried away Monsieur Brenier within hours of him taking to his bed. The sight of his once fine body laid out in a shroud for the common grave would have destroyed his wife's mind had there not been Marguerite and Benoit to look after. Monsieur Brenier's sheets had been burned, and fresh herbs newly set on the hearth when Benoit too began to ail. Mme Brenier knew she would go mad if she lost her son as well. Handing Marguerite into the care of her grandmother, she hovered over the boy night and day. As he stewed and mewled, she wetted his lips with wine, and bathed his limbs with vinegar. When the pustules were at their worst, she

could scarcely recognise him. He still looked beautiful to her, but she knew that if he were to survive, the disease would brand him for life.

Benoit's face was badly pocked, certainly, but the steeliness of character that brought him back to health as a child allowed him to shrug off the taunts of the urchins who mocked his complexion when he first arrived in Scotland. In time his face proved an asset. Men trusted him more for it, and liked his lack of vanity. Women were intrigued by a man with the body of a blacksmith, and the eyes of a dreamer. He was known to read books. Some said he wrote poetry. More than one longed to run her hands over his marked face and put her mouth to his wide, French lips. Now, before he had even reached his twenty-third birthday, it seemed that no-one ever would again.

Rain and wind whipped the east coast in the days after Flodden. Mme Brenier's timbered house in Leith was set creaking, as if unseen guests were running across the roof and dancing down the stairs. As the wind moaned and whistled around the rafters, Louise retreated into misery. First her father, then her sister, and now Benoit too, it seemed, was gone. This house was emptying fast, death moving through it room by room.

It was three years since her father's death at sea – despatched by sword, not drowning, as she later discovered. Nor was it an unprovoked attack. Davy Turnbull, the kindest man in Leith, his daughter would have sworn, had been trying to board a Portuguese ship with his fellow crew. Pirates the lot of them, she learned. Her sea trader father, it transpired, was a thief, and violent too. Louise mourned twice over for him, first for his loss, and then for the man she had thought he was.

'Why didn't you tell me, any of you?' she screamed, when his body was brought home shrouded in sailcloth, and laid out on a table, a grisly, sea-stained package. No-one could meet her eye.

'He should have told me,' she cried. 'I was the only one who loved him.'

Marguerite put an arm around her sobbing sister. 'He dreaded you thinking less of him,' she said.

The truth was, of course, that none of them had fully known what Davy and his cousins did at sea. A member of the Barton clan, who had sewn up all shipping trade south of St Andrews, Davy Turnbull was that common breed of men, a merchant whose business was entirely aboveboard except when it was more profitable to bend the rules. If that meant marching off with other folks' possessions at sword-point rather than buying them at market, so be it. His wife certainly never queried the rich cloth and spices he brought home, nor the comfort of their house, even though it was plain to all that most seafarers lived cramped as herring in a barrel, with little to fall back on when storms kept their boats in harbour save a daily visit to chapel and the open ear of their patron saint Peter. While the weather raged, and fishermen grew wan, Davy Turnbull and his cousins repaired to the alehouse. The coins they tossed onto the board for food, drink, or wagers would have kept more honest men in victuals for a year.

Louise was right, though, in believing her father a kind man. If he had only a half-groat in his pocket, he would still have shared it. How he squared his knavery with his charity, she never understood. The question taunted her to the end of her life.

Indeed, it was partly sympathy that made him offer for Louise's mother, a widow with two children at her skirts as she touted roasted sweetmeats around the streets of Dieppe under the noses of foreign merchants. The hungry eyes of her children, as well as their mother's fragile beauty, fired his chivalry, and when, later, she insisted their infant daughter bear her name and not his, he reluctantly agreed.

Now, with her second husband dead, Mme Brenier was adrift. She did not particularly miss him, but she missed the security he had brought her. And she also had the grace to admit that she had used him badly. 'He was a good man,' she told Louise, 'whatever others think. He told me he only ever killed one man, when he was young, and would not do it again, if it could be avoided. He kept his word.' She crossed herself, and turned to the window. 'Good man or not, he was also an idiot, like almost every man who has ever lived. To put money ahead of his safety. To risk everything, and lose it all.'

Her hand hovered over Louise's head as she sat, staring into her lap. Louise felt its warmth, even though it did not touch a single hair. 'He thought the world of you, ma petite,' she said. It was a rare moment of tenderness from mother to daughter, and Louise later realised it was also a testament of respect, if not love, from wife to husband.

Louise felt the loss of her father like a creel of stones on her back. Anger soon gave way to sorrow, but the dragging burden of his absence proved less easy to shift.

Everyone is equal in death, the priest intoned over Davy Turnbull's grave, as he was pitched into the hole, but when Marguerite died, Louise understood that even the Church tells lies. Marguerite's death was not only a loss, but an outrage. It was as if the world had been shaken inside out and upside down: sky turned to sea, food into clay, day blackened into perpetual night. More than a year later, and the sight of her sister's velvet counterpane, and the wolf-skin on the floor by her bed, still stung Louise into tears. Yet she could not close her door, nor seal up her room. Her sister's voice rang around the house. Her laughing presence surrounded them all. It was an unexpected balm.

When she learnt that Benoit might also be dead, Louise spent the night in her sister's room, face burrowed in a pillow still scented

with lavender. The touch of cold bedclothes and a fading perfume offered her more comfort than her mother, immersed as she was in private grief for her favourite child.

Now it seemed that the only living creature Louise could call on was the vixen. The hound slept that night by her side, her dog-breath warming her face.

Soup was simmering over the fire. Since Benoit had ridden off to war, Mme Brenier's cooking had retreated to the simplest and cheapest fare: vegetables, fish, a rare shank of lamb or knuckle of pork. Each week she took a handful of coins from the caddy where Benoit had stored his wage. The box was emptying, and she was growing uneasy.

'Écoute-moi!' she said, ladling out broth and tossing the stock bone into the vixen's bowl. 'The rain here, it is wetter than the sea. This country is barbaric, you know. In Beaubecq now it will be golden and sunny. Hark at that wind!'

The shutters rattled in the gathering storm, hammered by rain driven in off the sea. It was September, but the last fortnight had been as wet and cold as winter. The weather suited the country's mood. With the king dead and so many with him, there was a deep sense of foreboding. Sunshine would have felt like mockery.

'This surely is the most uncivilised land in the world,' said Mme Brenier, gathering her shawl close as she sucked soup from her spoon. Louise said nothing, but for once she nodded. This complaint had been her mother's refrain from the first day she stepped ashore. She seemed to have been determined to like nothing about her new home except the distance she had put between herself and her first husband's grave, between her children and hunger.

The weather was an obvious target, but she also loathed the language (impenetrable) and the people (vulgar). Everything was rough and coarse here that in Normandy was refined and elegant. Even the king was not glorious enough. She had seen him walk

around Leith docks without a courtier or bodyguard in sight. He was no more impressive than any other nobleman, and they were a penny-pinching, threadbare bunch compared with the gentilshommes of Paris. King Louis, she liked to say, would no more be seen in public without his retinue than he would go to court in his nightshift. Anyone who tried to touch his cloak would have had their hand chopped off. Yet she had seen James drop coins into a beggar's dish even though the wastrel had clutched at his boot to draw his attention, and no doubt smeared it with grease.

With a clatter, Mme Brenier cleared the dishes. Louise took a chair at one side of the fire, and her mother sat at the other, a piece of fine linen in her hands. The vixen lay across Louise's feet, warming her toes. Save for the rising wind outside, the room was quiet. Mme Brenier's needle moved quickly. The rushlight was weak, but she could sew a straight seam blindfold. She was making a shirt for her son.

In this subdued light, it was possible to guess at Mme Brenier's youthful self, well hidden now beneath her pigeon-chest and sour brow. Louise looked at her bent head. She had been lovely, once. Her eyes were large and dark, her mouth generous, her nose neat and winsome as a child's. Now that nose was sunken in flesh that spilled into rolls at her neck, cleverly concealed by a ruffle of cambric. Her once black hair was now grey and brittle, but it escaped her cap in curls that recalled its once tipsy seductiveness.

By northern lights, Mme Brenier's skin was exotic, not the wintry pallor or wind-roughened rosiness of local women. Benoit had inherited that skin. In summer, when he was working outdoors in the dry dock he turned dark brown, as if someone had tipped a bottle of walnut juice over him while he slept. Louise's complexion was, in contrast, like milk that's been skimmed of all cream. That came from her father, Davy Turnbull, whose additional bequest of his ginger hair had mellowed, in Louise, to the warmth of copper.

Like her father, Louise was slight. Mme Brenier bemoaned her lack of bosom, but she could not complain at the narrowness of her waist or the neatness of her hands and feet. Benoit, by contrast, had the barrel chest of his Norman father and the swaggering gait that went with it. Mme Brenier would congratulate him on inheriting his father's looks too often for Louise's liking.

Staring into the fire, she remembered the salt smell of her father's leather jerkin, as he scooped her into his arms. 'My little fish,' he'd say as she squirmed with delight. 'What's my little fish been doing while I've been away?'

He would be gone for long stretches at sea, returning with a satchel of treats for the children and their mother. At the scrape of his boots at the door, Louise would throw herself at the latch with a squeal. She was always the first into his arms, but even as a child she could tell that her father's eyes went immediately to her mother, who would approach sedately, as if he had been gone only a morning. She would kiss him, but her lips never lingered. When once he tried to pull her into an embrace, she pushed him away. Mind the children! she scolded. Sometimes at night there were sounds from their room, but it was always her father Louise heard, never her mother.

'I should never have married him,' Mme Brenier told Marguerite, shortly after Davy Turnbull's death. She did not hear Louise passing the door, and stopping at the sound of her mother's conspiratorial tone. 'I only did it to keep us from starving. When we met, I was almost ill with worry about how to look after you both. I thought he realised that. I made it plain from the beginning: this was not love. I could promise to be a faithful wife, une femme convenable, but I would never be a passionate one.'

'Maman, please,' said Marguerite, uncomfortable at such intimate detail.

'You needn't flinch like an ingénue,' her mother replied. 'Time's

coming when you will be thinking about such matters yourself. And the truth is, loving or not, there is a duty on all wives to be amenable. Agréable. And so I was. Davy, he tried to fool himself I felt more for him than gratitude. Men are willing fools where bed is concerned – you'll soon learn that. A useful lesson.'

She sighed, though whether with remorse or exasperation Louise could not tell. 'He went to his death deluded, for all I tried to make him see how things really stood between us.'

'Better that, perhaps, than the cold facts,' said Marguerite. Louise caught the unease in her sister's voice, as if a door had blown open, a north wind delivering a truth about the nature and conduct of married love that she did not want to hear.

And her mother had been right. Marguerite was pitched into love and passion before the year was out, as familiar by Christmas with the urges of men as her mother could wish. Mme Brenier could not be accused of soliciting the king's attentions towards her daughter, who caught sight of her by chance, but that she then did everything she could to encourage his interest made her, in Louise's eyes, partly to blame for Marguerite's death. It must be one of the most uncomfortable feelings in the world, Louise thought, to blame your mother for your sister's death. Uncomfortable, unnatural, and unchristian. She had prayed to be able to forgive her mother, but as yet the bitterness was fresh, unassuaged by her nightly petitions to God.

There was no doubt that Mme Brenier had mourned her beautiful daughter and that she felt some guilt too. But in Mme Brenier's universe there was little room for sentiment. The death of her first husband had cured her of any tenderness or optimism, save for her beloved son. Life was hard, and the sooner one understood that, the more resolutely one would meet it. Nothing proved her point better than the news from Flodden. There would be scarcely a family in the Lowlands unscathed by this battle. Louise gripped

her hands in her lap and tried not to believe that God had cursed this household. She was less afflicted than many.

The fire spat, and the vixen whined. Louise lifted her gaze from the flames to find her mother looking at her, her black eyes sparked into life by the firelight.

'I wish your father was here,' said Mme Brenier. Louise raised her eyebrows in surprise, and was rewarded by a severe stare, as if it was she who underrated Davy. 'He would know what to do in a situation like this,' said Mme Brenier. 'But in his absence, I have been thinking. There is one man who can help us. Who must help us, if he wishes to atone for his sins.'