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By Alison Weir

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As co-author
The Ring and the Crown: A History of Royal Weddings, 1066–2011
SIX TUDOR QUEENS

Anne Boleyn
A King’s Obsession
To Rankin, my wonderful husband, and Julian, my brilliant literary agent, without whom none of my books would be possible.
Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
   As well as I may spend his time in vain.
And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written her fair neck round about:
   *Noli me tangere*, for Caesar’s I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.

(Sir Thomas Wyatt)

‘. . . Verily,
   I swear, ’tis better to be lowly born
And range with humble livers in content,
Than to be perk’d up in a glistening grief,
   And wear a golden sorrow.’

(William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, Act 2, Scene 3)
Part One

‘Not of Ordinary Clay’
Chapter 1

1512

Her skin was rather sallow, Anne thought as she studied herself in the silver mirror, and she had too many moles, but at least her face was a fashionable oval. At eleven she had no womanly figure to speak of, but that hopefully would change in the next year or so. Mary, after all, was already buxom at thirteen.

She drew back, considering herself. People had often said, within her hearing, that Mary was the more beautiful of the two Boleyn sisters. Yet they were both brunettes, with long glossy hair, high cheekbones and pointed chins, and both slender and graceful, for the deportment fit for royal courts had been drummed into them. So what was it that made a girl beautiful? What made the arrangement of Mary’s features better than hers? It had begun to bother Anne, now that she was growing up and was constantly being enjoined to prepare herself for a glorious future in which royal favour and a wealthy husband of rank loomed large.

Maybe it was the moles and the sallow skin. The sallowness could be rectified by a lotion of powdered egg whites and alum. At least she had a pretty mouth, and the black eyes that her Grandmother Butler always said were her best feature.

‘And you know already how to use them for effect, child.’ Anne had not quite understood what that meant, but then Grandmother was Irish and a little fey and often said some startling things. Everyone tolerated it because she had been a great heiress and one of the chief sources of the family fortunes.

Anne propped up the mirror on a chest and twirled in front of it. She did look good in the green gown, which made her waist seem so
slender. The dark colour became her too. The only thing that was wrong was the cut of the sleeves, which were tight to the wrist and did not cover the deformity of which she was always so painfully aware. She was forever curling it into her palm, the little finger of her right hand, so that none should see the tiny extra nail. If only she could have a gown with hanging sleeves that would cover it! But Mother said it was foolish to worry about such a little thing. It was not a little thing to Anne, and it had loomed larger than ever since the day when Mary, bested in one of their interminable arguments, had called it a witch’s mark.

Anne pushed the hateful memory aside. She would not dwell on it on this beautiful late-summer day. She had a free hour before her lesson with the chaplain, and was determined to waste not a minute of it. In a trice she had summoned her maid, changed into her everyday worsted, descended the stairs and crossed the stone drawbridge across the castle moat; then she picked up her skirts and ran through the gardens into the meadows by the River Eden, where she loved to wander.

From here she had a grand view of moated Hever Castle, her family’s seat, and the lush wooded Kentish countryside that cradled it. But of greater interest was the sight of her beloved brother George lying sprawled in the grass, twanging his lute, his dark brown hair tousled, his clothes crumpled.

‘They are looking for you indoors,’ she told him, kneeling down. ‘You should be at your books. You’ll be beaten if you don’t go back.’

George grinned up at her. ‘I had an idea for a song. Listen!’

He played well for a boy of nine, and his composition had the sophistication one would have expected from someone far older. He was gifted, this brother of hers. He could make his mark as a musician if he did not carve out a career at court, as their father expected.

They had always been close, Anne and George. They looked alike and thought alike.

‘I know, I know – I can’t spend my days making music and writing poetry,’ he sighed, mimicking Father’s voice.

‘Much good it would do you! And in the end you would not be satisfied. It would never be enough for you. So stop playing truant. Father Davy is livid.’
For all her mock reproof, she felt sorry for George. She knew how deeply it gnawed at him, being the youngest of three sons. It was sixteen-year-old Thomas who would inherit Hever and all their father’s lands and wealth – and it was Thomas who, to George’s envy, had been sent to the household of the mighty Duke of Buckingham at nearby Penshurst to learn courtly manners and the martial arts, which would befit him for the glorious future that awaited him. And then there was clever Henry, twelve years old and destined for the university at Oxford, since Father had decided to dedicate him to the Church – and save himself the burden of having to provide for him. There had been other sons too, but they slept in St Peter’s Church, to their mother’s great grief. Anne had never got used to the appalling sight of her tiny dead siblings lying in their cradles, all decked out in macabre finery, to receive the final prayers and farewells of their family.

Lady Boleyn doted on George, her youngest, more than she did on Thomas and Henry. But in George’s breast there burned a fierce resentment against his older brothers. Unlike them, he must make his own way in the world. Father reminded him of it often.

Given her rivalry with Mary, and George’s envy of their older brothers, Anne often felt that it was a case of her and George, the two youngest Boleyns, against the world. Because she did not have looks and he was not the heir, they had pulled together since they were very little. Some took them for twins.

‘Come on!’ she commanded, pulling him up, and together they raced back to the castle.

Father Davy was waiting for them as they sped across the courtyard and tumbled into Father’s new entrance hall. Their tutor was a rotund little man with a merry face and cheeks rosy as apples.

‘Ah, you’ve deigned to grace us with your presence,’ he said to George. ‘And mightily timely too, for we’ve just had word that your father is expected home this evening, and we wouldn’t want to greet him with the news that you’re in disgrace, would we?’

‘No, Father Davy.’ George was trying to look contrite.

‘Mistress Anne, you may join us,’ Father Davy said. ‘You can set an example to this young knave.’
'Where’s Mary?’ George asked, rolling his eyes.

‘Reading,’ said Father Davy. ‘I have given her a book on kings and queens. It will improve her mind.’ It was no secret that he had almost given up on Mary.

Anne followed them into the private parlour used by the family in the evenings, and sat down at the oak table. She knew she was fortunate, being a girl, to receive a good education. Father had very advanced ideas, but then he was always concerned that his children should do well in life – which, of course, would reflect favourably on him. Accomplished in foreign tongues himself – which was why he had been away these last weeks at the court of the Regent of the Netherlands at Mechlin in the Duchy of Burgundy – he was particularly anxious that his sons and daughters become proficient too.

Anne struggled with French, despite excelling at everything else. Mary was good at French, but dismal in all other respects. Anne could compose passable poetry and songs, thanks to Father Davy being a famous composer of church music and a gifted teacher. Mary battled, murdering her lute; it did not help that she was tone deaf. Anne danced gracefully; Mary galumphed about the floor. Anne sang like a lark; Mary’s voice was flat. But Mary had the looks, everyone said, so it didn’t matter that she was an idiot. Most men would not see beyond her beauty and the dowry Father could give her. Thus it did not matter that, when the time for lessons arrived, she was rarely to be found.

Most of the daughters of the local gentry in the Boleyns’ circle could barely wield a pen, Anne reflected, as her quill traced her graceful Italianate hand across the paper. Today’s exercise was composing a letter in French, which was a challenge, but she was determined to persevere. She enjoyed learning for its own sake, and revelled in the praise Father Davy lavished on her.

From the kitchens nearby they could hear a great clatter and commotion. The household was preparing for the return of its master, and Mother would be giving orders and inspecting the cooking pots, much to the cook’s ill-concealed annoyance. There would be a feast tonight, Anne thought happily.

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Dressed in the new green gown, Anne stole a peep at the great hall, where the tables had been beautifully laid with snowy-white linen. The best silver was set out on the high table above the great gilt salt, with polished pewter on the lower trestles set at right angles to it. Banks of greenery trailed along the centre of the boards, interspersed with candles and ewers of wine. Hever was a small castle, and the hall not large compared to some she had seen, but it was sufficiently grand for an up-and-coming diplomat and favourite of the King, with its great stone fireplace and imposing carved screen. The early evening sunshine cast a golden glow through the tall windows set high in the thick walls, reflecting its jewel-like glints on the impressive display of family plate on the buffet and the expensive wall hangings. Father liked to impress his neighbours with his wealth. They were all coming tonight: the Wyatts from Allington, the Sackvilles from Buckhurst Park and the Hautes from Ightham Mote.

Normally the family dined in the parlour, seated at the long polished table. It was a cosy room, its walls adorned with wainscots of oak and painted friezes, and hung with another of the costly tapestries of which Father was inordinately proud. But that was all familiar and commonplace; feasting in the great hall was an occasion, and Anne was impatient for it to begin.

Father was home, and she had been summoned to see him in his study before dinner. There he sat, in his high carved chair, nodding as she made her curtsey: the man who had dominated her life for as long as she could remember, whose lightest word was law to his family and servants, and to whom Anne and her brothers and sister had been brought up to render unconditional obedience. When she and Mary married, their husbands would take over his role. It had been drummed into them both that women were weak creatures and should always be subject to the wise dominion of men.

When Sir Thomas Boleyn was at home, the household revolved around him, but that was a rare occurrence. When he was not abroad using the diplomatic skills that had so endeared him to King Henry, he was usually at court, building on his reputation as a jouster and courtier
and all-round good fellow. At thirty-four, he was still a handsome and agile man, and sat a horse superbly. He was outstandingly learned – it seemed to his children that he knew everything – and even the great Dutch scholar Erasmus had dedicated two books to him. Thanks to these virtues he had risen high and fast in royal service, becoming one of King Henry’s best friends and jousting partners, and never tired of reminding everyone of it. He had been knighted at the King’s coronation, three years earlier, and then appointed Esquire of the Body to the monarch.

‘It is a most sought-after post,’ he was prone to boasting, ‘for it brings me into daily contact with the King. I enjoy great influence. I have His Grace’s ear.’ He would gleefully expand on the patronage he was in a position to exercise. Anne understood that there were many people who wanted Sir Thomas Boleyn to ask the King for favours, and that they were ready to pay him a lot of money to do that.

She was pleased to see Father’s pugnacious face broaden into a wolfish smile as she rose from her curtsey. ‘I have some good news,’ he said. ‘The Regent Margaret was most interested to hear of your accomplishments and has offered to take you into her household as one of her eighteen maids-of-honour. It is a signal favour, much sought after.’

‘Me, sir?’ Anne echoed. ‘Surely Mary . . . ?’

‘I know, it is highly unusual for the younger sister to be advanced before the elder, and Mary speaks good French. But,’ and he gave Anne a calculating look, ‘I believe that you have what it takes to succeed at court and be a credit to me. Besides, I have other plans for Mary. And the Regent specially asked for you.’

Anne felt excitement bubbling up.

‘When am I to go, sir?’ she breathed, envisaging the glorious palaces, the fine gowns, the glittering lords and ladies, the Regent smiling as she made her obeisance with everyone looking on.

‘Next spring,’ her father said, and the bubble burst. That was months away. ‘There will be many preparations to make. Your mother will know what is required. I’d rather it be you than the Devil who makes work for idle hands.’ He and Mother barely spoke to each other unless they had to.
‘You must work hard at your French,’ he went on. ‘You will complete your education at the court of Burgundy. There is no finer place, for it offers many opportunities for a young girl of good birth, and is universally well regarded. You will be well placed to attract a marriage that will advance the interests of our family. I hope you appreciate your good fortune.’

‘Oh, yes, sir!’ Anne exclaimed. It was almost too much to take in.

‘I would remind you that the competition for places in the Regent’s household is fierce, and there are many who are ready to offer substantial financial inducements to secure the honour of an appointment for their daughters. Each one of her filles d’honneur must know how to dress fashionably, be accomplished at dancing and singing, and be able to entertain her mistress and important visitors with witty conversation – and she must understand how to conduct herself when in attendance on the Regent in public and on state occasions.’ Father leaned forward in his chair, his rugged face intent. ‘It was for such an opportunity as this that I provided you and Mary with a good education, although much Mary has profited from it. But you, Anne . . . you will shine. And I have no doubt that the considerable outlay required of me to provide you with suitable court attire will be well spent.’

‘Yes, Father. Thank you, Father.’

‘You may go. It’s nearly time for dinner.’

Anne sped upstairs, still buzzing with excitement, to the chamber she shared with Mary, whom she found fastening around her neck the gold pendant in the shape of a bull that she always wore on important occasions. The girls had been given one each by their father; the bull was his family’s heraldic emblem, and a pun on its name.

Mary leaned into the mirror. Her black eyes, with their alluring slant, were watching Anne’s reflection.

Anne was savouring her news, wondering how to break it to Mary with maximum impact. She could no longer contain herself. ‘I’m going to court!’ she announced.

Mary swung round, shock and fury in her face. ‘You?’ she shrilled. ‘But – but I am the elder.’
‘Father knows that, but the Regent asked for me.’
‘The Regent?’
‘I am summoned to the court of the Netherlands to serve her. It is a
great honour to be asked. Father said so.’
‘But what of me?’ Mary’s lovely face was flushed with outrage. ‘Am I
not to go too?’
‘No. Father said he has other plans for you.’
‘What plans?’ Mary hissed.
‘I don’t know. He didn’t say. Why don’t you ask him?’
‘I will! He cannot pass me over like this.’
But he had. Anne hugged that delicious knowledge to herself.
For the first time in her life, it felt good to be the younger and less
beautiful sister.

Elizabeth Howard, Lady Boleyn, unravelled the bolt of tawny velvet
and held it up against Anne.
‘It suits you,’ she said. The mercer standing respectfully at her side
beamed. ‘We’ll have this one, and the good black, the yellow damask
and the crimson tinsel. Pray send your bill, Master Johnson.’
‘Very good, my lady, very good,’ the merchant replied, gathering up
the fabrics that had been rejected and withdrawing from the parlour.
‘I’m glad the Regent gave us good notice,’ Mother said. ‘It allows us
time to get these gowns made up. You should be grateful that your
father has made such generous provision for you.’ She tilted her
daughter’s chin upwards and smiled at her. ‘You have fine eyes, and
innate grace,’ she said. ‘You will do well and make me proud.’ Anne’s
heart was full. She loved her mother more than anyone else in the
world.

Elizabeth Howard herself was dark in colouring, but her long
Howard face was rounded with generous lips and fine eyes. In youth
she had been a celebrated beauty, and the poet laureate, Master Skelton,
had dedicated verses to her, likening her charms to those of the gorgeous
Cressida of Troy. It was Mother’s little conceit. Her great conceit was
her pride in her aristocratic lineage. She let no one forget that she came
of the noble House of Howard, and it was no secret that, had her family
not been in royal disfavour at the time, plain Thomas Boleyn, as he then was, could never have aspired to marry her, even though his grandsire was the Earl of Ormond. But with her father stripped of his titles and not long released from the Tower for fighting on the wrong side in the battle that had put the late King Henry on the throne, her chances of making a decent marriage had been slender; and so she had permitted herself to be tied to a young and ambitious man whose recent ancestors had been in trade.

But thanks to that, the Boleyns were rich. By dint of their business acumen and by marrying wealthy heiresses, they had steadily acquired wealth and lands. Anne’s great-grandfather, Sir Geoffrey, had been a mercer like the fellow who had recently departed with his wares, but he had risen to be Lord Mayor of London and been knighted. That was the way one made good in the world, and it was new and able men such as the Boleyns, rather than the old nobility, who were now favoured by the young King Henry.

But for all that Father had done – and was still doing – to make himself a suitable husband in the eyes of his high-and-mighty in-laws, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind, even her children’s, that Mother had married beneath her.

‘You will be the equal of any of the other maids,’ she said to Anne now. ‘You can be justly proud of your Howard ancestry. Remember, we Howards are descended from King Edward Longshanks and from all the English monarchs back to William the Conqueror, so you have royal blood in your veins and must be worthy of it.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Anne said, bobbing a curtsey. She walked slowly back to her bedchamber, thinking on what Lady Boleyn had said. She was deeply proud of her heritage, especially now that the Howards had been rehabilitated and were firmly back in favour at court. In the long gallery she paused before a portrait of Grandfather Howard, the Earl of Surrey. She was in awe of this just and honest aristocrat, the head of the family, and of his son, whose picture was further along – Uncle Thomas, her mother’s brother, a stern-faced, no-nonsense soldier and courtier. She had only a few memories of his wife, the aunt for whom she herself had been named, but she could never forget that the late
Princess Anne of York had been daughter to King Edward IV and sister to the present King’s mother. It made King Henry her own cousin, in a sort of way.

Anne had long been aware that any love her parents might have had for each other in the beginning had long since died, for they avoided each other as much as possible. It was easy to understand why Mother looked down on Father. What was more difficult to comprehend was why Father treated Mother, that highly prized bride, with ill-disguised contempt.

It disturbed Anne that Mother had once been compared to the Trojan beauty Cressida. For, having pledged her undying love for Prince Troilus, Cressida, cruelly captured by the Greeks, had treacherously betrayed him with the heroic Diomedes. Father Davy had read them the story when they had studied the Greek myths.

‘Her name has become a byword for a faithless woman,’ the good friar had said. Anne stifled a gasp. Clearly he did not know what Skelton had written of her mother. The five of them – Tom and Henry had been at home then – had looked at one another, appalled.

Yet Anne had never heard of any hint of a blemish on Mother’s reputation. Lady Boleyn presided over her household with competent authority, and preferred country life to the teeming existence of the court, although she did sometimes go there when needed as an occasional lady-in-waiting to Queen Katherine.

At home Anne and Mary helped Mother in her still room, where they made comfits and jams while she distilled sweet waters or prepared medicines and poultices from the herbs they had gathered in the gardens.

‘It is essential that you both learn the skills that will enable you to run a great house,’ she was always reminding them. ‘A lady should keep her servants busy not only by precept, but by example.’ But if Anne might happen to glance up from what she was doing, she would occasionally surprise Mother with her hands idle, a faraway look on her face and a tune playing on her smiling lips, as if she had withdrawn into a secret life. And again she would wonder if her mother had a lover.

*
The months that she had envisaged dragging sped by. Expensive tutors were engaged to give her and Mary advanced instruction in singing and dancing, skills that Anne acquired easily and enjoyed.

‘Bravo!’ cried the tutor, as she twirled and leapt and skipped in branles, farandoles and basse dances. It came easily to her, as if she had been born to it. Mary, who was all arms and legs at awkward angles, would glower at her. Father had not revealed what his plans for Mary were, and Anne now doubted that he had any, while Mary’s angry jealousy simmered and often bubbled over. Thrown together as the sisters were, it did not make for a peaceful existence.

Sir Thomas, however, was impervious. Anne was to go into the world as his ambassador, a walking testimonial to his greatness. If there was any talent that might be useful at court, she was to acquire it. Father Davy was deputed to enhance her musical skills.

‘You have a true voice,’ he said, and Anne thrilled to hear it, for his praise was never won lightly.

He also encouraged Anne and George’s love of poetry. The two of them would sit together for hours composing and transcribing verses and binding them into books. Father Davy told Anne she had a rare talent for it, especially for a woman. He refrained from remarking on how Mary thought that cow rhymed with low.

In these months in which her wardrobe was being prepared, Anne became an expert embroiderer. She made bilments to edge necklines and hoods, quilted sleeves and pouches, and decorated her lawn night-rails in bright scarlets and greens. She discovered the pleasure of enhancing her clothes with novel details: a border here, a contrasting colour there, and – always – long hanging sleeves to hide her extra nail. Her nurse, Mrs Orchard, a plump, motherly soul who had been with her since birth and was to accompany her as chaperone on her journey, did all the plain sewing, stitching and hemming under-smocks and petticoats. As the weeks went by, the pile of finished garments stowed in Anne’s new travelling chest grew and grew.

In the autumn, Father returned to the court of the Netherlands, leaving Mother in charge of the preparations for Anne’s departure.

‘Remember,’ he said to Anne before he left, ‘your task is to perfect
the attributes that will secure you a good marriage. I have had you educated to that purpose, and to instil virtue.' Father was very zealous on virtue. He was always warning his daughters of the dire consequences – mostly for him – if they fell from it. They were his assets – his jewels, as he liked to put it – and their success was essential to him.

In these last months at Hever, Anne found herself resenting the dull routine. She longed for her escape into the glamorous world of courts. She and Mary found their chief excitement in putting on their best gowns and, escorted by a groom and a maid, riding the three miles into nearby Edenbridge for the market that was held there every Thursday, just to show off their finery. When they were not at lessons or sewing, they played cards, or visited the houses of neighbours with their mother – and fought constantly over silly things until Lady Boleyn lost patience and sent them to their rooms to cool down.

Their existence was dominated by the unchanging round of the seasons. That autumn of 1512 was heralded as usual by Michaelmas, soon followed by Harvest-tide, when St Peter’s Church by the castle was filled with ears of wheat and hymns of thanksgiving. That was the grease season, when all the local gentry went hunting. Father had ensured that Anne and Mary were both competent horsewomen, and they were allowed to participate in the chase or go hawking in the company of their neighbours. In the evenings they savoured the rich game from their bag, served on thick bread trenchers saturated with meat juices.

On wet days they took their exercise in the long gallery above the great hall, a new-fangled improvement to the castle that Father had decided he must have. Up and down his daughters walked, past the pictures and hangings that adorned the walls, bickering and gossiping and occasionally slapping and pinching each other.

As autumn fell, fires and braziers were lit, and the castle was filled with the sweet aroma of beeswax candles. The three young Boleyns played cards, dice and chess in the flickering light, or teased each other with riddles, before tumbling into their feather beds. On many nights Anne lay awake, with the damask bed curtains pulled back and the
moonlight glinting on the diamond-paned windows, imagining the glittering life to come in the magnificent court that lay miles across the sea in another land.

Hard on the heels of All Souls, when the nights were dark and ghosts were said to walk in the woodland that faced the castle, came the season of Advent, followed by the Christmas and Twelfth Night celebrations. Before Anne knew it, it was Candlemas, then Lady Day – and soon it would be May Day, when she and Mary always observed the ancient custom of rising early to bring in the May blossoms.

With the May came Father, back from the Netherlands.

It was time, at last, for her to depart.
Chapter 2

1513–1514

Anne found the sea voyage exhilarating; she stood on the deck, bracing herself against the brisk spring breeze and the choppieness of the waves, and watched the chalk cliffs of Dover receding into the distance. She kept thinking of Father’s last proud embrace, Mother’s tearful kiss, Mary not bothering to hide her jealousy, and George – bless him – struggling not to cry. She had almost cried herself, knowing that she would miss them all, especially Mother and George. She allowed herself a brief moment of sadness, then turned resolutely to Sir John Broughton, a knight of Westmorland with whom her father had become acquainted at court. Sir John was travelling to Bruges on business, and had offered to extend his journey so that he could escort her to Mechlin. He was about thirty, fresh-faced, with curly red hair and a broad northern accent.

‘I am honoured to have charge of such a charming young lady,’ he had said, bowing, then he’d helped Anne and Mrs Orchard to mount their horses, given instructions to the grooms responsible for the wagon bearing their luggage, and led them over the drawbridge and away to the south. Throughout the journey to the coast he had been the epitome of courtesy and good company, selecting the best inns at which to lodge overnight, demanding the choicest food, and entertaining the two ladies with witty stories. The weather had been fine and they had made excellent progress. At Dover Sir John had commandeered good cabins for Anne and Mrs Orchard in the ship that was to take them across the English Channel, and he had accompanied them whenever they took the air on deck.

From her father and Sir John, Anne had learned a great deal about
the lady she was soon to serve. Margaret of Austria was the only daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian – a wily old fox if ever there was one, her father had said – by his late wife Mary, the Duchess of Burgundy. It was through their marriage that the Burgundian Netherlands had come to the House of Habsburg. Margaret had once had a brother, the Archduke Philip, a young man of such beauty that he had been known as Philip the Handsome.

‘He married the Queen of Castile, but he died young, and Queen Juana, who had loved him fiercely, went mad with grief and was deemed unfit to rule,’ Sir John explained as they sat at dinner at the captain’s table in his oak-panelled dining room in the sterncastle. ‘Her father, King Ferdinand of Aragon, took over the government of Castile in her name, and the Emperor appointed the Archduchess Margaret, Duchess of Savoy, as his regent in Burgundy and the Netherlands, in Philip’s place, and entrusted her with the upbringing of Juana’s children, including her heir, the Infante Charles of Spain, although in Burgundy they call him the Archduke. You will meet them soon, I’m sure.’

‘What happened to Queen Juana?’ Anne asked, her curiosity piqued by this sad tale.

Sir John frowned. ‘There are many tales about her. It is said that she refused to give up her husband’s body for burial, dragging it around Spain with her for months and ordering her servants to open the coffin so that she could gaze on the corpse and kiss and embrace it. In the end they forced her to relinquish it so that it could be interred, and she was sent to a convent to be cared for by the nuns.’

Anne shuddered. You would have to be mad to do such horrible things. They were the stuff of nightmares.

‘I feel sorry for her children,’ she said, sipping her wine. ‘Do you think she will ever get better?’

Sir John frowned again. ‘There are reports that she is not even ill, but was shunted aside so that her father could seize power in Castile. With Juana shut away and her son only thirteen, there is no one else to rule that kingdom.’

‘But that’s dreadful!’ Anne cried. ‘If she is not mad, then she should
be restored to her throne. Surely her own father would not treat her so terribly.’

‘When kingdoms are at stake, Mistress Anne, human feelings count for nothing,’ Sir John observed. ‘But Queen Juana might well be mad, as most people think.’

‘God send that she is,’ Anne said. ‘It is better for her not to be aware that she has lost her husband, her children and her crown.’

‘She is still queen. When he is of age, her son will become joint monarch with her.’

‘How I pity her.’ Anne laid down her knife and rose to her feet. She did not want to hear any more about tragic Queen Juana or the ruthlessness of kings.

Thanks to the frisky wind, the crossing passed quickly, and soon they were sailing along the Zwin Channel to Bruges. Anne was agog to see the bustling city with its wondrous churches, its soaring belfry in the vast market square, its pretty canals and tall red-brick houses, so unlike the timbered thatched cottages of England. In the busy streets, well-dressed merchants jostled with foreigners of all nations, and there was a general air of prosperity. She was surprised when Sir John told her that Bruges was a dying port.

‘The Zwin Channel is silting up. Soon this prosperity will dwindle.’

She stared at him. ‘What will happen to these people?’

‘They are resourceful. They will find a way to preserve their valuable trading links, especially with England. And Bruges is famous for its art – there are many great painters working here. Did you know that William Caxton published the first printed book in this city?’

‘Did he?’ There were several books from Caxton’s London press at Hever; she had read them all. Not so long ago, Father Davy had told her, all books had been written by hand. It was a marvellous age she lived in, she thought.

Anne would have loved to linger in Bruges, but Sir John quickly completed his business and said they must press on to Ghent. They travelled on horseback across flat country that seemed strange after the sweeping hills of the Weald of Kent and was criss-crossed by canals and
dykes and avenues of tall trees. After Ghent they turned eastwards, and before long they could see a tall tower in the distance.

‘That’s Mechlin,’ Sir John said. ‘The capital of Burgundy. And that tower belongs to St Rumbold’s Cathedral. You can see it for miles.’

Anne felt a thrill of anticipation. As they drew nearer to the city, myriad spires came into view around the great church, and clusters of red roofs. They were nearly there. In a matter of hours, please God, she would be making her debut at the court of Burgundy and being presented to the Regent.

‘I’ll be glad of a rest,’ Mrs Orchard sighed. ‘We’ve been in the saddle for days, it seems, and now you and I have to go all the way back, Sir John. I hope we find a decent inn tonight, and that Anne gets a fine lodging.’ Anne eyed her impatiently. Who wanted to rest when one could be plunging into the pleasures of court life? But then Mrs Orchard was old – she must be at least thirty – and there was grey in her brown hair.

‘The Regent is famous for keeping a good house,’ Sir John told them. ‘You will be well accommodated, Mistress Anne. And you will quickly master French here. It is the language of this court.’

When they had skirted the walls and ridden through the massive gateway of the Winketpoort, Anne saw that Mechlin was much like the other Netherlandish cities she had passed through, with its wide market square, tall houses and magnificent churches. Presently they were clattering along the Korte Maagdenstraat and drawing to a halt before an imposing archway.

‘This is the Hof van Savoye, the palace of the Regent,’ Sir John said, as the guards waved them through. Anne gasped. They were in a vast rectangular courtyard surrounded by splendid facades on all sides, mostly built in the ubiquitous red brick of the Netherlands; there were graceful open arcades at ground level, tall mullioned windows and a steep pitched roof with dormer rooms.

‘The Regent is a great builder.’ Sir John pointed to a wing covered in scaffolding and crawling with workmen. ‘It will be years before this place is finished.’

‘I love it!’ Anne breathed. ‘I have never seen anything like it.’
‘You certainly wouldn’t in England,’ Sir John agreed, as they dismounted.

An officer wearing black and yellow livery was approaching. Sir John made the introductions and Anne was invited to follow the man, who would take her to her lodgings. It was time to bid farewell to Sir John and Mrs Orchard. Anne was sorry that the moment of parting had come, for she had grown used to Sir John’s merry company and come to appreciate his care for her and his wide knowledge of the world. And while she found her nurse’s fussing irritating, she was fond of her.

Sir John bowed and kissed her hand. ‘May God keep you, Mistress Anne, and send you joy.’

Mrs Orchard hugged her; there were tears in her eyes. ‘Take care, my little mistress,’ she enjoined. Then they both mounted their horses, Sir John doffed his hat and they disappeared through the gatehouse.

‘Come!’ the man in livery said, in his heavily accented English. He led Anne into the palace, taking her through chambers of breathtaking magnificence. She gaped. Beside such splendour, Hever was a barn. She understood now why her father was so often away at court. She had never imagined great staircases like these, or galleries filled with such paintings, so lifelike and colourful. Gifted artists had brought Madonnas, saints and angels to life so skilfully that it seemed they might step out of their frames and breathe.

The *filles d’honneur* were accommodated in a dorter on the second floor, within the steep dormer roof. Save for Gerda, a little Dutch maid who had been assigned to attend her, it was empty when Anne arrived and she thankfully threw off her travelling cloak, sinking down on the bed with red woollen hangings that had been assigned her, one of eighteen that lined the long room end-to-end, like a series of wooden boxes. She had been told that she might rest a while and unpack her clothes before someone came to present her to the Regent. But she was too excited to rest. As soon as her baggage had been delivered, she opened her chest and pulled out the yellow gown bordered with black silk, which had been made in the Regent’s colours, as a compliment. She had been longing for this moment.
She bade Gerda unlace her travelling gown and help her strip down to her smock. Then she held up her arms so that the square-necked gown could be lifted over her head and laced up at the back. The feel of the silk was sensuous, and she loved the hanging sleeves, and the long court train that from now on would be obligatory. Her hair she left loose, falling to her hips. Now she was ready! She sat there fidgeting, waiting for the summons to her new mistress.

The Archduchess Margaret of Austria, Dowager Duchess of Savoy and Regent of the Netherlands, was entirely unlike the beautiful princess gowned in cloth of gold and laden with jewels Anne had envisaged. As she rose from her curtsey, she was astonished to see that the chair of estate beneath the rich velvet canopy was occupied by a little woman in black swathed in a white widow’s wimple and chin barbe – and that this daughter of the mighty Emperor Maximilian had a face that could only be called homely, with unusually full lips and a heavy, pointed jaw.

Those lips were smiling, however, and the next thing that struck Anne was the warmth the Regent exuded.

‘Welcome to my court, Mademoiselle Boleyn,’ she said, speaking in French, and Anne did her best to reply in the same language, tripping over her tongue as she answered polite questions about her journey and whether she was comfortable in her lodging.

‘Admirable!’ twinkled the Regent. ‘And I am honoured by the colours of your pretty gown. But I think that Monsieur Semmonet will have his work cut out. It is he who will be teaching you how to speak French properly.’ Anne blushed as Margaret indicated a middle-aged bearded gentleman in scholar’s robes, who bowed when he heard his name.

‘Consider my court your home, child,’ the Regent went on, still smiling. ‘I hope I will treat you in such a way that you shall be quite satisfied with me. Now you may join your fellow filles d’honneur.’

Touched and reassured by the warm welcome, Anne went to sit on the floor with the seventeen other fortunate young ladies – many from the greatest families in the land – who had been singled out for the high
honour of serving at the court of Burgundy. They were all in their early teens, and all expensively dressed. Some smiled at her, some stared at her gown; a few – she felt – looked haughtily down their noses.

In the dorter that night, they clustered around, gabbling excitedly and indicating that she open her chest and pull out her clothes for their inspection. Some, she was gratified to see, were impressed – others, to her dismay, dismissive.

‘C’est provinciale!’ sneered a tall girl, fingering the crimson tissue, which had been cut in the English fashion.

‘Non, Marie, c’est jolie!’ a blonde maiden with rosy cheeks retorted, smiling at Anne. Marie shrugged.

Soon they lost interest and began chattering in rapid French of things about which Anne knew nothing. She realised that, as the only English girl among them, she would always be a little set apart.

Not that it bothered her too greatly, even in her first few days at Mechlin. There were other young ladies ready to be her friend besides the blonde girl, whose name was Isabeau, and as she worked hard at her French under the vigilant tutelage of Monsieur Semmonet, and grew more fluent, communicating with her peers was easier and she became more accepted.

The tutor – who seemed to have unlimited talents – also schooled Anne and the other filles d’honneur in deportment and dancing, and instructed them in manners and the art of conversation, a talent much encouraged by the Regent, who deemed it essential for anyone who wanted to succeed at her court. Every day Monsieur Semmonet would choose a different situation they might encounter, and they would act out their responses in the most courteous way. Anne found herself addressing imaginary princes and discoursing with them on music and painting and poetry. She could hardly imagine it happening.

It was instructive to wait with the other filles d’honneur upon the Regent as she sat in council, kneeling unobtrusively in a group on the floor and trying to understand the commands and directives Margaret issued from her seat at the head of the table, or deciphering the advice given her by the worthy, solid men who deferred to her. Clearly they respected her wisdom and judgements. Anne was so keen
to learn more about how a woman ruled that she redoubled her efforts to be proficient at French.

After just a week, the Regent sent for her. ‘I have written to your father to tell him that I am delighted with you,’ she said, ‘and to thank him for sending you to me. He could not have given me a present more welcome. I have told him that I find in you so fine a spirit, and such perfect courtesy for a young lady of your years, that I am more beholden to him for sending you than he can be to me for receiving you.’

Anne exhaled in relief and happiness. She had feared she might be admonished for the many small mistakes she had made in trying to do and learn all that was expected of her. To see the Regent smiling so broadly and to be enfolded in her wholesome embrace was more than she could ever have hoped for. She sank to her knees, full of gratitude.

‘My pleasure is only to serve your Highness,’ she declared with fervour.

How very fortunate she was, not only to be serving a kind and affectionate mistress, but also to have come to a court that led the rest of northern Christendom in manners, art and learning.

‘This is a princely school and a place of high culture and advanced civilisation,’ Monsieur Semmonet told her and her fellow pupils. ‘All scholars are welcome here.’ Anne soon discovered that the Regent, who was rarely without a book in her hand, was especially devoted to something called ‘the New Learning’, which meant the recently re-discovered texts of ancient Greece and Rome. There were ripples of excitement when the famous humanist scholar Erasmus visited Mechlin. Anne was privileged to be in attendance on the Regent that day, and she listened enthralled as this learned man with his ready wit and wise, sensitive face talked about his plan to make pure Latin and Greek translations of the Scriptures. She was stunned to realise that the Bible used in churches was not in its original form. How exciting it would be to read Erasmus’s translations and know the truth.

More shocking was his attack on the extent of corruption within the Church, for at home Holy Mother Church was always spoken of with the greatest reverence. Yet to hear Erasmus talk was revelatory. As Anne
listened to his passionate exposure of the degeneration of Rome, the avarice of priests and the worldliness of the clergy, she began to see a deal of truth in the great man’s criticisms.

In the little leisure time she had, her newborn thirst for knowledge drew her to the Regent’s wondrous library, where she and her companions had been permitted the free run of the numerous manuscripts, missals, music books and printed volumes. There were racy tales by Boccaccio, the delightful fables of Aesop, the blushingly erotic poems of Ovid, and heavy works of philosophy by Boethius and Aristotle, among many others. Anne’s favourites were the collections of verse expressing devotion and love. She read them avidly. It helped her to write better poems of her own.

She was leafing through a brightly illuminated bestiary one day when her eye caught a pile of books at the other end of the table. The arms of the Regent were stamped on the tooled leather binding. Curious, she got up to see what they were, and discovered, to her astonishment, that they had been written by a woman. She had thought that only men wrote books. But this Christine de Pizan, who had lived over a hundred years ago, had been no milksop maid, and had had some pithy things to say about the way men treated women. Anne’s eyes widened when she read: ‘Not all men share the opinion that it is bad for women to be educated. But it is very true that many foolish men have claimed this because it displeased them that women knew more than they did.’ She had never heard anyone voice such an opinion.

She had been devouring the book for an hour when the Regent walked into the library. She smiled when she saw Anne, who had risen and sketched a hasty curtsey, and took the book from her.

‘Ah, Mademoiselle Boleyn. I see that you have discovered my favourite writer.’

‘Your Highness, what she writes is extraordinary.’

‘You think so?’

‘Madame, this Christine de Pizan would have laughed at my father’s insistence that men, by the natural law of things, are cleverer than women.’ Anne took back the book and opened it at a passage she had marked with a ribbon. “Just as women’s bodies are softer than men’s,
so their understanding is sharper,” she read aloud. “If it were customary to send little girls to school and teach them the same subjects as are taught to boys, they would learn just as fully and would understand the subtleties of all arts and sciences. As for those who state that it is thanks to a woman, the Lady Eve, that man was expelled from paradise, my answer to them would be that man has gained far more through Mary than he ever lost through Eve.”

Margaret nodded sagely, opening another volume. ‘I like the passage where she asks, “How many women are there who, because of their husbands’ harshness, spend their weary lives in the bond of marriage in greater suffering than if they were slaves among the Saracens?” Not that my poor late husband was cut of that cloth. But most astonishing of all are her views on female rulers. “The wives of powerful noblemen must be highly knowledgeable about government, and wise – in fact, far wiser than most other such women in power. The knowledge of a noblewoman must be so comprehensive that she can understand everything. Moreover, she must have the courage of a man.”’

No wonder the Regent favoured Christine de Pizan’s works. They were something that every woman of rank should read – and heed. Was it possible that women really could be the equals of men?

Anne was at her happiest when she was in the company of the Regent, who was so approachable that she found herself asking Margaret for her views on women, the Bible and a hundred other things she had learned about in this exciting new world. Margaret always answered her with humour and wisdom.

‘Ah, la petite Boleyn, you are right to ask if women should be the equals of men. But it is not often given to women to shape their destiny, or to rule as I do. My late mother-in-law, Queen Isabella of Castile, was a queen in her own right, but hers too was a rare example. It is up to us women to show men that we are just as capable as they are.’

‘We could not lead armies into battle, madame,’ Isabeau piped up, and the others giggled, but the Regent silenced them by raising her hand. ‘Isabella did,’ she said. ‘She did not fight, of course, but she was an inspiration. And that, ladies, is what we must all aspire to be. We
want men to admire us for our courage, our characters and our intellect, not just our beauty.’ It thrilled Anne to hear her say this.

She soon discovered why the Regent always wore black.

‘Many call her the Dame de Deuil,’ Gerda said one morning as she was brushing Anne’s hair.

‘The Lady of Mourning? How sad. But why?’

‘It is in perpetual memory of her husband, the Duke of Savoy. He died nine years ago.’

Anne had seen a portrait of him hanging in the palace, a romantic young man with the face of an angel framed with long fair hair. It must have been terrible to lose so beautiful a husband so early. The Regent was only thirty-three.

In the weeks after her arrival, Anne had been surprised to hear Margaret of Austria speak freely to her women of her past. ‘Do you know, I was given in marriage three times?’ she said to Anne just two days after the conversation with Gerda. They were sewing in her tapestry-hung chamber, the other filles d’honneur ranged about, heads bent over their needles. ‘I was married in childhood to the Dauphin, and was brought up at the court of France, but when I was eleven they found a better match for him, and so I was annulled and sent home. I was more angry than sad.’ She smiled at the memory. ‘Then I was married, to Juan, Prince of Asturias, the heir to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. He was young and handsome, and I was happy, but he died just months after we were wed, leaving me with child.’ A shadow clouded her normally cheerful countenance. ‘My little girl died at birth. I had to leave her in Spain when I returned to the Netherlands.’

‘I am sorry, madame,’ Anne commiserated.

‘She is with God,’ the Regent said, her voice suddenly brisk. ‘He has her safe in His keeping. And I found love again, with my Philibert. He adored me. I helped him rule his duchy of Savoy. I made myself respected throughout Christendom. Alas, we had but two years together – such a short time to be happy. And then he went hunting boar in the sweltering sunshine, got overheated and drank cup after cup of iced water. He died in agony.’ She laid down her needlework and gazed into
the distance, as if seeing the man who had been lost to her. ‘And that, _la petite_ Boleyn, is why I have vowed never to remarry. Wherever one loves, one risks loss. Never forget it.’

Erasmus was just one of many guests who enjoyed the Regent’s famed hospitality. Often she was joined at table by the artists, men of letters, philosophers and musicians whom she patronised. The evenings were enlivened by concerts of the polyphonic music she loved, or her guests would be treated to a personal tour of her prized collection of paintings by the great master Jan van Eyck – paintings of exceptional richness, colour and beauty. Anne was often present on these occasions, captivated by the sparkling conversation, the exchanges of ideas, the soaring harmonies and the glorious works of art. It was a world she could never have conjured up in her wildest dreams, and it was entrancing to be a part of it. She did not miss her home and family at all – apart, of course, from Mother and George, who wrote to her frequently, lamenting her absence.

Her life was not all ceremony and study. The Regent threw feasts and banquets; she hosted soirées and dances; she loved hunting; she presided over tournaments; and she positively encouraged the play of what she called courtly love.

‘It is an essential aspect of chivalry,’ she told her _filles d’honneur_. ‘You are all of an age to start finding men attractive. One of the reasons your parents placed you at my court is that they hope I will find you good husbands.’ Anne could sense a frisson rippling through her companions, and her own excitement building. At twelve years old – old enough now to be wed – she was becoming aware of her budding figure and the admiring glances of the young men of the Regent’s court. Already she was learning how to flash her dark eyes, swish her skirt or sway her hips to effect, and beginning to understand the infinite possibilities of dalliance.

She listened avidly as the Regent explained about courtly love.

‘It is quite permissible for gentlemen, even married ones, to pay their addresses to you,’ she said. ‘They may express their devotion and even their passion. It is for you to have mastery over them, and in that sense
the title of mistress is an honourable one. But it is never permissible for
you to allow any man to go beyond the bounds of propriety. And you
must keep your suitor guessing, and at arm’s length, for men do not
value what is easily obtained. Even the lightest kiss is a great favour, you
understand. The greatest jewel you possess is your honour, and no
husband wants a wife whose reputation has been besmirched in any
way, however fair a face or rich a dowry she has. Never forget it, young
ladies!’

‘At least we’re allowed to kiss them,’ a pert girl on Anne’s left
murmured.

The Regent had heard her. ‘No, Etienne de la Baume, it is up to
you when – or if – you allow them to kiss you. A gentlewoman must at
all times take care not to forget who she is, or the honour of her family,
or their hopes for her future. And it is up to us ladies to rein in and
civilise the lusts of men.’ She hid a smile at their smothered giggles.
‘You may flirt, you may encourage, you may even bestow favours – to a
point – but the ultimate prize is your virtue, which is the greatest gift
you will bring to your husband.’

Anne had read much of love in the poems and romances she had
devoured, but she had never received such salutary and sensible advice.
She had thought that men were omnipotent in matters of love and
marriage – certainly Father thought he was – but now it seemed that
women could be in control, even of men’s lusts – a subject of which she
knew little. The prospect of enjoying mastery over the opposite sex
excited her. All of a sudden she realised that she had unsuspected power
within her grasp.

The next time a court gallant bowed and paid her a compliment,
she smiled sweetly and turned away, as if it did not matter – although
it did, for the young man was handsome. When, later, he engaged
her in conversation and then led her out to the dance floor, she looked
up from under her dark eyelashes and regarded him as if pearls of
wisdom were tumbling from his lips – and then made sure that she
danced the next time with someone else. Her evasions seemed to work.
The Regent was right – always the gentlemen came back, more ardent
than before.
She did not look for more than flirtations. She was not yet thirteen, after all. It was just a highly enjoyable and novel game, far removed from the strictures of her father and the dull round of life at Hever. The world was opening out to her, abundant with new ideas and unexpected delights.

Above all, she desired to emulate the mistress she had come to love and revere. She made the Regent’s tastes and pleasures her own, in the surety that all the knowledge and talents she was so pleasantly acquiring would befit her to grace any court, as Father had wished. Whenever the Regent praised Anne’s dancing skills, the songs she composed, or her skill with a lute, her cup ran over. Above all, she was learning to think independently. Whereas at home she had been expected to accept unquestioningly the wisdom and decrees of her elders, in Mechlin she found that it was permissible, even encouraged, to have ideas of her own, and to think for herself.

She also became aware of the power of display. What you wore sent out important messages to people who mattered, be they princes or suitors. The watchword was magnificence. And so she discovered the joys of further enhancing her limited wardrobe, for new court gowns were dreadfully expensive, which was why Father had provided only six. But with a length of ribbon here and a well-placed jewel there, plus a few strategic stitches to transform the high square neckline into the wider and more revealing French style, which was the height of fashion at the Regent’s court, they could be made to look different and eye-catching. It was the way you wore your clothes that mattered. If you stepped out as if you felt beautiful and elegant, others might just believe it.

It was the same with your looks. Anne was fascinated by people’s faces. She knew that her own long, narrow face with its pointed chin did not conform to the current ideal of beauty, but she was learning that a charming smile and a ready wit, with that sideways gaze under the eyelashes, had in itself the power to attract.

Anne shared some of her lessons with the Regent’s nephews and nieces, the orphaned children of Philip the Handsome and Juana the Mad. She had come to know the eldest, the Archduke Charles, a little
— but only a little, because he was a reserved, self-contained boy, young for his thirteen years, forever ailing of one complaint or another, but always standing on his dignity.

He was the strangest-looking person Anne had ever seen, for in him the pointed Habsburg jaw was so pronounced that he could not close his mouth properly or eat without difficulty. But no one ever mentioned it. The Regent doted on the boy, and fussied over his education. He had the best tutors, who were turning him, Anne thought, into a pious little despot, but it had to be admitted that he was clever, and brilliant at learning foreign tongues. And he was a very important young man indeed, for he was Archduke of Austria by birth and the heir to the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. He was also too grand to take much notice of an insignificant English fille d’honneur, until the day came when Monsieur Semmonet instructed him to practise the pavane with her.

Clearly reluctant, but remembering his manners, the awkward youth bowed before Anne and stretched out his hand. As the musicians began playing, she placed hers in his loose, unwilling grip, and they moved forward at the required stately pace, one step to every two beats, and then sideways.

‘There is no need to lift your train, Mademoiselle Anne,’ the tutor reproved. ‘This is a dance performed at high court ceremonies and even in nunneries on clothing days. It is slow and dignified.’

The Archduke Charles kept sniffing. Anne was sure that he was conveying his disdain for her. She turned to him, furious.

‘Does your Highness have a cold? If so, here is my handkerchief.’ And she thrust the delicate square of fine linen at him.

The sagging jaw dropped at her presumption. ‘I thank you, mademoiselle,’ Charles said, in icy tones, taking the handkerchief as if it were a dead rat.

‘I pray that your Highness recovers soon,’ she replied sweetly. The dance was resumed.

She wondered if he would complain to the Regent of her boldness, yet Margaret of Austria continued to show her as much kindness as was ever her wont. But the Archduke Charles made it clear that he
now held Anne in high disfavour, and she saw no point, for her part, in trying to win his friendship – ugly, priggish boy that he was.

That summer and autumn Anne heard of the victories that King Henry and his allies, the Emperor Maximilian and King Ferdinand of Aragon, had won over the French. The names of Tournai and Thérouanne, the towns he had taken, were on all lips, and much mirth was had at the expense of King Louis’s troops, who, seeing an English army bearing down on them, had spurred their horses and fled.

‘It is aptly called the Battle of the Spurs,’ the Regent laughed. ‘La petite Boleyn, you have every reason to be proud of your King and countrymen.’

‘Madame, the glory also belongs to the Emperor, your Highness’s illustrious father,’ Anne said.

Margaret of Austria patted her hand. ‘How very kind. Now, ladies, I have a surprise for you. We are to journey to Lille, to meet the victors.’

Anne joined the others in a chorus of eager approval.

Pennants and standards fluttered colourfully in the light October breeze as the Regent’s great cavalcade made its stately way westwards from Mechlin to Lille, which could not be far off now. Word had been passed back through the ranks that the Emperor Maximilian and the King of England were waiting to greet Margaret of Austria at Tournai, and would then accompany her to Lille.

The filles d’honneur were seated in two gilded chariots, chattering gaily as they rode in the wake of their mistress and the Archduke Charles. Anne was as excited as the rest at the prospect of setting eyes on King Henry, who by all accounts was an extraordinarily handsome and valiant young man. In the opinion of all the young ladies he was a hero too, for trouncing the hated French. The campaigning season was over now, but everyone was sure that next year would see King Louis finally beaten.

The Regent had generously given all her filles d’honneur bolts of rich fabrics to make gowns for the occasion. Anne’s was a wine-red damask
with a raised black velvet pile. She had never owned such a sumptuous gown. Having it made had taken most of her quarter’s wages, but it had been worth the outlay.

The gates of Tournai were in sight, and Anne craned her neck to see a great concourse of people and soldiers awaiting them. As they drew nearer, two imposing figures in front caught the eye: both were tall, both had a kingly carriage, and both were magnificently attired in velvet and cloth of gold. The Emperor was immediately recognisable from the portraits the Regent kept of her father – there was the large, high-bridged nose, the firm chin, the haughty mien, the sparse grey locks. Maximilian had an arresting presence, but he looked decrepit beside the man standing next to him. If an artist had wanted to paint a picture of Youth and Age, he could not have found better subjects. For Henry of England was blooming with vitality.

And that, Anne thought, disappointed, was all that could be said for him. He too had a high-bridged nose and firm chin, but his fresh face had little otherwise to recommend it. His eyes were narrow, his mouth prim and ungenerous. He had a mass of reddish hair, broad shoulders and a manly bearing, but had he not been a king, she would not have given him a second glance. Those who had praised him were mere flatterers. Even Father – never given to flights of fancy – had said he was handsome in the sight of ladies, and had spoken nothing but good of him. He would – he had done very well at this King’s hands, and was accounted his friend.

As the Regent dismounted to be greeted by her father and King Henry, and her ladies and filles d’honneur clambered out of their chariots and formed a train behind her, Anne’s eyes lighted on the man who stood behind the English monarch. They could have been brothers, for the likeness between them was striking, yet in this face the firm nose, pursed lips and narrow eyes were striking. By his rich dress, this gentleman was a nobleman; where the King was clean-shaven, he had a luxuriant chestnut beard.

‘Your Highness, may I present my good friend Charles Brandon, Viscount Lisle?’ Anne heard King Henry say, in a surprisingly high-pitched voice. The handsome man stepped forward and bowed low over
the Regent’s outstretched hand, which she seemed to withdraw with some difficulty. As Lord Lisle rose, his bold eyes met hers and Anne saw her cheeks flush.

The city fathers now came forward to welcome Margaret of Austria. Her delight was unfeigned when they presented her with a set of tapestries depicting scenes from Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies*. They could not have chosen a better gift. Anne was eager to see the tapestries when they were unrolled.

Escorted by the Emperor and the King, the Regent rode at the head of her vast company into Tournai as church bells rang out triumphantly and crowds swarmed in the streets. That night there was a lavish feast in the Bishop’s Palace. The Regent was seated between the King and Viscount Lisle, and Anne, from her place well below the high table, watched as the handsome lord flirted and laughed with her mistress.

Later, as they were preparing her for bed, Margaret was much animated, singing the praises of the English Viscount.

‘Never since my dear Duke died have I ever met a man to whom I felt attracted,’ she confided, as her hair was being brushed. ‘I feel I am no longer a lady of mourning but a lady with possibilities.’

Anne and her fellow *filles d’honneur* stared at each other, amazed. Their mistress had sworn a vow never to remarry!

The Regent smiled at them. ‘I know what you are thinking. But am I not allowed a little pleasure? Think you I do not know the rules of this game of love?’

There was more to it than that, Anne learned. Within two days gossip was rife that Lord Lisle had proposed marriage. The Regent said nothing; she just kept on smiling her secret smile and making out that the whole business was an elaborate play. It was what happened in courts, she said. But seeing her together with Lord Lisle, you would have thought they were lovers in every sense. When he jousted against the King, both of them resplendent in purple velvet trappings, Margaret of Austria gave him her scarf as a favour, rising from her seat on the high stand to bind it to his lance. Then she watched, hand to her mouth, her breathing tense, as the courses were run and the spears broken. In the end a tie was declared; the King and his companions
rode around the tiltyard in triumph, doing great reverence to the ladies.

That night Anne was present at the sumptuous banquet hosted by King Henry in honour of the Regent and the Archduke Charles, who – miserable boy – looked as if he would rather be anywhere else. After his aunt frowned at him, he made an effort to be sociable, but it was obvious that King Henry was having to work hard with him.

Course after course was served – there must have been a hundred dishes, Anne reckoned – and the food was wonderful. After the banquet, at a sign from their mistress, Anne and the other young ladies rose with her and danced for the company, stepping out to the sound of vielles, shawms and sackbuts in a stately *basse* dance and then proceeding to a livelier almain, which got the audience tapping their feet and clapping. It was obvious that the Regent was showing off her skills for the benefit of Lord Lisle, but suddenly King Henry was casting off his doublet and shoes and whirling her around in his stockinged feet, leaping like a stag, much to the amusement of his friend and the whole company.

After that, he and Viscount Lisle and several other lords and gentlemen disappeared for a time, and when they returned, wearing gowns and bonnets of cloth of gold, they performed a masquerade, in which they danced and sang. Afterwards, they cast off their outer costumes and distributed them among the ladies. It was King Henry himself who handed his cap to a giggling Anne, who had drunk rather too much of the good Rhenish wine.

‘And who are you, fair maiden?’ the King asked. He was drunk too. She could smell it on his breath. Close up, he looked younger than his twenty-two years, and his fair skin was rosy and sheened with sweat. His blue eyes glittered in the candlelight. Still she could not perceive what it was that women saw in him.

‘Your Grace, I am Anne Boleyn,’ she said, executing the elegant curtsey she had now perfected. ‘My father, Sir Thomas, serves you as ambassador.’ She placed the golden bonnet at a jaunty angle on her head above her pearl-netted caul.

‘It becomes you,’ the King complimented her. ‘Will you do me the pleasure of dancing with me, Mistress Anne?’
Anne curtseyed again, and he led her in a lively branle, both of them leaping and kicking as the courtiers formed a circle around them and clapped.

‘Bravo!’ cried the Regent, who was standing close to Viscount Lisle. ‘Bravo, Harry!’ echoed the Viscount.

As the music drew to a close, the King bowed, thanked Anne and turned away. Later she saw him dancing with Étienne de la Baume. She watched as his eyes held Étienne’s, and saw him bend and kiss her on the lips. Anne frowned. Surely this was forbidden? Henry had a wife and queen, and no business to be playing the game of courtly love in this manner.

She thought no more of it, for she herself was swept away into another dance by one of the young officers of the Regent’s court, and then by many other gallants, until it was near dawn, when spiced wine and wafers were served to the company, the King bade farewell to his guests, and Anne went unwillingly to bed.

The next morning, after the Regent had risen late and was breakfasting on beef and manchet bread, she fell to discussing with her ladies the events of the previous evening. Lord Lisle featured prominently in her praise of the festivities, and well he might, Anne thought, for she had never left his side. The bells of St Rumbold’s might soon be pealing in celebration of a wedding!

‘You partnered the King well, Mademoiselle Anne,’ the Regent said. ‘Thank you, madame.’

The Regent turned to Étienne. ‘You, young lady, overstepped the bounds of propriety. King Henry is a married man.’

Étienne’s pretty face was flaming.

‘Some hold that love has nothing to do with marriage,’ Margaret of Austria said. ‘Since marriages are often arranged, people do look elsewhere for love. It is proper for a married lady to accept the addresses of a knight or suitor, even someone far below her in rank, and some allow that it is permissible for a married man to acknowledge a lady as his mistress. But neither should go further than compliments, dancing, conversation and perhaps holding hands. I trust that is understood,’ she said, looking at Étienne.
'Yes, madame,’ the girl whispered.
Later, when they were alone in the dorter, she exhaled in relief.
‘I could have lost my position!’ she told Anne.
‘You should have thought of that before,’ Anne said. ‘Letting the King kiss you in public was madness. It’s your reputation that’s at stake, not his.’
‘Who do you think you are, Mistress High-and-Mighty?’ Etiennette hissed. ‘I love him, and he loves me, and what we do is none of your business.’
‘He loves you? Tomorrow he will be gone from here, back to England, and you will never see him again.’
‘I know.’ Etiennette crumpled, her eyes brimming with tears. ‘He told me last night that he would always care for me, and that when I marry I should let him know, and he will send me ten thousand crowns for my dowry.’
‘How will you explain that to your husband?’ Anne retorted.
Etiennette ignored the question. ‘I don’t care. I love him.’
There was no reasoning with her. She was a silly, deluded girl.

That night, unable to sleep after another day packed with entertainments and a magnificent farewell dinner, Anne became aware of a figure moving stealthily in the gloom of the dorter. Heavens, it looked like a young lad wearing the English King’s livery of green and white, although the room was so dark that it was hard to tell what colour it was. Anne concluded that the youth had been smuggled in by one of the filles d’honneur, but then the door clicked open, admitting a shaft of moonlight, and in its beam she could see plainly the face of Etiennette de la Baume, dressed up as a page, and determinedly sneaking away – no doubt to meet her royal lover.

Thank God the King would soon be gone. He was to blame. He had no business trying to seduce a young lady of good family; it was unforgivable, especially in one who enjoyed showing himself to the world as a chivalrous knight. How could anyone esteem such a dishonourable man so highly?

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'Lord Lisle took a ring from me,’ the Regent said, as she preceded her attendants into her bedchamber after yet another banquet. ‘He would not give it back. I told him he was a thief.’

They stared at her.

‘It really does seem that the handsome lord means to marry me,’ she went on, her tone unusually flat. ‘And King Henry is pressing for the match. He has not ceased to remind me of its advantages.’

‘But your Highness is not sure?’ one of the older women asked.

‘No, Jacoba.’ Margaret sank down on the bench at the end of her bed. ‘In truth, I am in turmoil, not knowing what to do. Our ambassadors tell me there is gossip about this marriage all over Europe. It seems that many have us wed already! People are making wagers about it. It’s awful – and embarrassing.’

Anne thought that the Regent should marry the captivating Brandon. They were a well-matched pair, and she had given every appearance of being smitten with him. And it would put an end to the rumours.

‘What prevents your Highness from accepting his suit?’ asked Jacoba, who was close to their mistress.

‘A lot of people do not think it a fit match for me. It is being said that King Henry has made a nobleman out of a stableman. Even Erasmus disapproves – he wrote and told me so. And I do not know what my father the Emperor will say. My marrying an Englishman may preclude my ruling here, and I would not give that up easily.’

‘But your Highness loves Lord Lisle?’

Margaret flushed. ‘I do not know. I like him very much. He has such grace in his person – I have rarely seen any gentleman who can match him. King Henry urges the match, and warns me that I should decide soon, since he fears that my father may force me into marriage with another. I think he dreads my allying myself with one of England’s enemies. But I told him that my father would do no such thing, and promised him only that I would not enter into any other marriage this year. And Lord Lisle has vowed that he will never marry another, but will remain all his life my humble servant. Maybe it was just the play of love; I must not be seduced by words. Now I must to bed. I have much to think about.’
Henry of England went home, the Regent continued to speak fondly of Lord Lisle, and Etienneeti emerged subdued but unscathed from her midnight liaison. The months that followed passed pleasantly – and quickly – at the palaces of Mechlin, Lille and the Regent’s summer retreat of La Veure near Brussels.

Speculation continued to rage as to whether or not she would marry Lord Lisle – or my lord the Duke of Suffolk, as he now was, having been ennobled after his return to England. Anne kept hoping that they would make a match of it, for the Duke was a jovial fellow, and with such a man at the helm, life at the court of Burgundy would be even more lively and pleasurable than it was already. And he had many eligible young men in his retinue whom he might bring with him. Not that Anne was in any hurry to be wed – she was too busy enjoying herself – but she did love the innocent flirtations that were now so much a part of her life.

She had no wish to end up like Etienneeti, whose father had arranged for her to marry a rich old man of sixty-two. Anne had heard Etienneeti weeping at night; she had listened to her fruitless protests to the Regent, who had looked sad, but said that she could not override the will of a father. Anne had watched a tearful Etienneeti take up quill and paper and write to King Henry, reminding him of his promise to give her a dowry. She had witnessed the girl droop with disappointment as the weeks passed and no reply came.

There was much talk of weddings in the air. The Archduke Charles was now fourteen, and of an age to be married. For six years he had been betrothed to King Henry’s sister Mary, who was said to be a great beauty. Much joy she will have of him, Anne thought. He looked as happy as if they had been planning his funeral. But he, like Etienneeti, had no choice in the matter. His bride would soon be crossing the sea, as sure as doom, and he must do his duty. God pity the poor princess who must endure such a husband.

They were at La Veure, an exquisite turreted palace surrounded by a lake and a vast hunting park, enjoying the summer sunshine and embroidering Etienneeti’s beautiful silk wedding gown, when the blow fell.
For some weeks Anne had been hearing talk of a rift between King Henry and his allies, the Emperor and King Ferdinand. She had given it little thought, being more preoccupied with refurbishing her clothes in the latest French style, or discussing love and art with her mistress, or learning the latest dance steps and polishing her French, in which she was now almost fluent.

It did not dawn on her until afterwards that preparations for the Archduke’s wedding had come to a standstill. She only realised that something was amiss when Isabeau asked the Regent if the Archduke and his wife would be having their own establishment.

‘The Princess is not to come here after all,’ Margaret of Austria said, her cheerful face suddenly clouding. ‘King Henry has broken her betrothal.’

Two dozen needles were stilled or suspended in mid-air as the ladies and filles d’honneur looked up in surprise.

‘Apparently His Grace of England feels that his allies have not kept faith with him, but have betrayed him by making peace with the French. He is to make a new treaty with King Louis.’

Anne resumed her stitching. This had little to do with her. She hoped the Regent would not think badly of her for being the subject of a king who had suddenly become unfriendly to the Emperor her father.

Thankfully Margaret continued to treat her with the same affection and kindness she had always shown her. Despite the difference in their ranks and ages, they had become friends; it was a friendship that Anne prized above almost everything else.

But then came the day when the Regent sent for Anne to attend her in the little gallery overlooking the lake. She had a letter in her hand.

‘Mademoiselle Anne, I have heard from your father. He has sent two gentlemen to escort you home to England.’

Home to England? It could not be true!

‘No, madame!’ Anne cried, horrified. Surely the Regent could make Father understand that her place was here, at her court. But Margaret was raising a hand to silence her.

‘Let me finish,’ she reproved gently. ‘Your father has found a new place for you. The Princess Mary is to marry King Louis. Yes, I see you
are as shocked as I am. Another young girl being tied to an old husband. Ah, but it is the way of the world, la petite Boleyn! And for compensation, the delightful Mary will be Queen of France. You and your sister are to serve her. She has asked for you both, and naturally your father could not refuse. As for me, I will be deeply sad to lose you. But I think you have benefited from your time here, and been happy. Your French is now excellent, and you have a certain polish about you. Your father will be pleased, I know. It is what he sent you to me for. Now all he desires is that you conduct yourself worthily when you go to the French court, and I have no doubt that you will do that very well.’

It was too much to comprehend at once. All Anne could think of was that she was to leave this brilliant court and the mistress she loved. She knew nothing of the Princess Mary, and had no desire to go to France.

The Regent was regarding her with sympathy.

‘I had to leave my homeland three times,’ she said. ‘I was sent to France, to Spain, and then to Savoy. The French court is magnificent. It is famed for its art and its culture. You will like it, I promise you. This is an excellent opportunity for you, being given the chance to serve the Queen of France. Do not despise it. And who knows, maybe one day we will meet again, ma petite.’ There were tears in the Regent’s eyes now; it was obvious that she was putting on a brave face to enable Anne to do as she was bid.

‘So, I will write to your father,’ she continued briskly, ‘and tell him that his request is granted. Now go and make ready. And you also can send him a letter, telling him how pleased you are at your good fortune.’

Anne dragged her footsteps as she made her way back to the dorter. Everything in her path reminded her that she would soon be leaving the glories and familiar sights of this beautiful palace. Worst of all, she would be cut off from the Regent. She wanted to weep and rage at her father. She did not believe that the Princess Mary would have asked for her; why should she ask for someone she had never met? No, Father had boasted of her – and her sister Mary, although Heaven knew why – and the Princess had been persuaded to appoint them maids-of-honour.
The dorter was, mercifully, empty, so she threw herself headlong on her bed and gave herself up to a torrent of tears. Later, when she had cried herself out and washed her face, she wrote, with gritted teeth, to Father. It was hard to be civil to him when he had ruined her life. All she could think of was the inevitable parting from the Regent. How hard it would be not to give way to weeping and to conduct herself as courtesy demanded.

But when the time came to leave, it was Margaret of Austria who wept and could not bear to release Anne from her embrace.