

CHAPTER TWO



AUGUST 1508

Louise de Savoy

Louise de Savoy was fed up. Her life was devoted to looking after her two children, but neither of them obeyed her anymore. First, her son had been nearly killed within days of being taken from her per the king's orders. Now her daughter had rejected the king of England's suit, saying she would never leave France and, besides, Henry VII of England, at age fifty-one, was too old.

There was nothing she could do about Francis, with the king ordering their separation, but what was she to do with her stubborn daughter?

Tucking a stray strand of red hair under her headdress, she rued raising Marguerite in the heady fumes of Europe's new humanist learning. Never had she thought that her own daughter would take it into her head that she would be allowed to have a say in who she was to marry. It was enough to infuriate any mother trying to do the right thing by her child.

"*Maman*, you rejected him yourself! Why would you want me to marry an old man and leave you and Francis behind for a country with bad weather and bad food?" Marguerite railed.

"My daughter, you must think of your position, not of yourself. The higher your position the less you are able to choose. Those closest to the king are most valuable to him in the alliances he seeks to make." She left out the queen. Why mention that backcountry midget who carried herself as if she were Empress of Europe? It was the king her children were kin to, not his insufferable wife.

"Lady Mother, if I am not to choose who I will marry then at least let me choose who I will not." Marguerite stood abruptly, sending her lapdog yelping into the corner.

Louise eyed her firstborn. At sixteen, Marguerite was too tall and too independently-minded: her husband's fault on the first score, hers on the second. She had always promoted the highest education possible for both her children. But she expected them to accede to her wishes in the matter of who they were to marry.

"What is wrong with the king of England? He is older, but he is much grieved of his wife's death. A man who mourns one's wife so dearly has the capacity to love again," Louise argued.

“*Maman*, what exactly do you know about marriage, seeing as you have avoided it all your life?” Marguerite shot back.

“I know enough about marriage to know that marrying well is never a mistake,” Louise retorted. Marrying into France’s ruling House of Valois had been an inarguable step upward, arranged by her guardian, France’s regent at the time. Even at age eleven, she had grasped her good fortune in securing a husband from the royal house that had produced France’s kings since 1328.

“Then why don’t you marry him yourself?” Marguerite asked.

Louise’s face flamed. “What did you hear of that?”

“Only that he asked for you before he asked for me.”

“Where did you hear such a thing?” Indeed, it had been the case, but she would never relinquish her dream of getting her son onto France’s throne. When she was carrying him, the holy man Francis de Paule had told her she would bear a future king. Her life’s goal was to ensure his prophecy came true.

“*Maman*, do you think that word did not get out of the English ambassador’s original offer when he came to court last spring? Why didn’t you take it?” Her daughter’s violet eyes mocked her. “Already, you think yourself a queen. Why not become a real one?”

“It was out of the question.” She would never marry such a stiff, humorless man, even if he was a king. Before becoming Henry VII of England, Henry Tudor had spent the formative years of his youth in that backwater Brittany, from where the queen hailed.

She had heard there had been talk long ago of Anne of Brittany’s father marrying her to him. It would have never worked, as the Breton snob was as supremely self-confident as only those born to wealth and rank could be. Henry Tudor had been insecure and fatherless, a royal outlaw running from Richard III in England with only the thinnest of claims to the English throne.

Louise, too, had grown up insecure and motherless, raised by the previous king’s older sister. Anne de Beaujeu had been France’s most powerful woman from 1483-1491 when she had ruled in Charles VII’s minority. Louise intended to be France’s most powerful woman in her footsteps once her son was on the throne.

“Why so, *Maman*? Why for you, but not for me?” Marguerite pressed, hitting her target as only close family members can do.

“Until your brother ascends the throne, I must guide and protect him. But you have your life ahead of you. Why would you not think to bring further glory to our family by accepting the offer of a king?” Her life’s work was here, molding her precious Caesar into France’s next king.

“For the same reason you wouldn’t. I would never leave you, Francis, or France.”

“Daughter, it is the duty of highborn princesses to travel to foreign lands to make alliances with kings and princes. It has ever been so and ever will be.”

“I’m not going, *Maman*. You must think of another for me.”

“It will be the king who decides on another for you. And it will not be a king since I cannot think of any besides the English one who is looking for a bride at this time.”

“Fine. I do not require a king. I require a man closer to my own age who shares my interests.” Marguerite crossed her arms and gazed over her mother’s head.

“You can be sure that whoever the king decides on for you will be the husband you require,” Louise retorted.

“*Maman*, why is it that a woman has no say in who she is to marry?”

“Do you think your brother had a say in the choice the king made for him? It is not a question of sex, but of rank,” Louise said. “Those in the highest positions are of most value to their rulers. And those are the ones who have less say in the matter.”

“None at all, it would seem.”

“It would seem you have just had a say in this affair by saying no to what would have been a splendid match,” Louise flung back.

“Lady Mother, don’t be ridiculous. We are ‘our trinity’ and ever shall be,” Marguerite said.

Louise’s heart tugged. There was no more powerful phrase for her, except the four words she most lived for: *my son, the king*. “Our trinity” the epithet she had given to her close-knit family of three, came a close second.

Trying not to show her daughter that she had won her point, she held back the tears that threatened to well up. Talk of their trinity was sacred. The rock on which she stood wasn’t the one from above, but the trinity of love she shared with her two children.

“You will still need to marry one day soon,” Louise said, scolding herself for having lost the argument. How vexing to have educated her daughter to the point where the girl presumed to overstep her mother’s authority.

“To a Frenchman, *Maman*. So we may continue ‘our trinity.’” Marguerite smiled the sweetest of smiles. “Nothing must break it up,” she whispered.

Shot in the heart by her daughter’s deft arrow, Louise folded the headstrong girl into her arms. She must not let her see the tears spilling from her eyes.

But as her tears dropped, her mind moved to her next plan. She would bid her contact at court to encourage the king to return to Italy. The more time he spent there, the less chance his wife Anne of Brittany had of producing an heir who would knock her own son from the line of succession.

Releasing Marguerite, Louise hurried from the room. She must find her steward to get a message to Blois.