

## Catherine

The French Court was bursting with noblemen and women, from every respected family in Europe. They'd brought with them their servants and lady's maids, along with friends deemed appropriate for the event. King Henry II of France was renowned for his lavish events, particularly when they revolved around him. This occasion, his birthday, was to be a grand affair, with no expense spared.

The grounds were scattered with marquees. Flags displaying the crests of the most respected families hung from masts between them. Guests, dressed in all their finery, wove in and out of the tents, admiring the food and entertainment on offer. Targets were situated for only the most gifted of men to flaunt their skills in archery. Tables were heavily laden with freshly caught game. The bread was still warm, barely out of the oven and the multitude of fruit presented was impressive to say the least.

At the heart of it all stood the jousting arena. Stable-boys and servants rushed to prepare the King's favourite horse for the tournament which would take place later in the day. It was a much-anticipated affair, with many speculating who the King would choose to joust. Some hoping to be picked were already practicing, dressed in full armour with feathers sprouting from their helmets. Each horse wore a caparison decorated in its riders' colours – a show of honour.

The sound of lutes played throughout court, reaching Queen Catherine's chambers and causing her lip to curl.

"Is *she* there already?" she addressed her lady's maid, Isabelle. Her breath hitched slightly as she spoke, as Isabelle pulled sharply at the ribbon on her corset.

Catherine's ladies had been carefully chosen by the Queen herself. They became known as the Flying Squadron and were held in particularly high favour. Whenever Catherine wanted information, she'd send one of these women to bed an easy target and tempt him into revealing his secrets. This kept her entertained, whilst Henry was otherwise engaged.

"Yes, ma'am," Isabelle replied.

Catherine's fists clenched, then quickly relaxed. As the King's wife, she had to support him, no matter how many women he may balance upon his tackle.

It seem the whole town had been up since sunrise in preparation for the day – not that it mattered. Henry would be distracted from not only people, but from his duties as king. Catherine doubted he would even notice her arrival. Regardless, she had picked out a dress that was sure to turn heads.

With golden embroidered flowers down the sleeves, a full and sweeping skirt and a lace ruff around her neck, her intentions were clear. Unfortunately, there were others with the same agenda.

As Catherine was continuing to fail in her duty of producing an heir, Henry's interest in her had drifted elsewhere, in particular to Diane de Poitiers. Diane was the King's mistress and strode about court as if she were queen. She had more power over Henry than he would care to admit, much to the disapproval of many of his advisors. Henry doted on her. He'd never looked at Catherine the way that he looked at Diane.

The dread that Catherine felt in the pit of her stomach became almost unbearable when she thought of the day ahead of her. It would be a day of smiling politely and nodding at politics she wasn't supposed to understand. She would have to control her disgust, whilst men spoke of her ladies as though they were prey.

However, her greatest struggle would be pretending that Diane didn't exist. Catherine had no doubt in her mind that Henry would make a big show of his affections towards his mistress. Catherine had never felt more ashamed than when she entered a room, not on her husband's arm where she was supposed to be, but walking behind him and Diane. There were only so many people she could order to death for their whispers, before there was no one left in court. The words shared behind closed doors were an unstoppable force. Not that Henry cared. He had his wench and his wife – something for pleasure and the womb that was supposed to house an heir.

As the morning progressed and the time for a public appearance neared, the knot in the Queen's stomach grew only tighter. She was led across the grounds in a trance, wishing to be anywhere else. The time she had spent imprisoned in Italy as a child was more pleasurable than this day was about to be. Occasions such as this were always the hardest to bear. At least in court she could hide herself away.

Catherine stood in the entrance to the jousting arena. King Henry wasn't hard to spot, lounging on his throne, Diane perched on his lap, a bunch of grapes in one hand and one of her breasts in the other.

Catherine felt her face flush, then Isabelle's hand on her arm.

"Come, ma'am. Let us sit." She guided the Queen to her seat.

Catherine avoided looking at her husband and his mistress' smug expression. Diane was twenty years older than them both, which had led Catherine to initially presume that Diane would know better than to meddle in royal affairs. It seemed this hadn't been the case, as years after her first

arrival in court, Diane was still very much present. It had become evident that she preferred power over a respectable reputation. Following the death of her first husband, her virtue was no longer something that mattered. She had already been spoiled.

Henry finished his grapes and looked around, perhaps for more to eat, or another girl to seduce. This was when he noticed Catherine. A broad smile stretched across his face and he lifted Diane off his lap.

“Ah, my dear wife,” he said, opening his arms as if to embrace Catherine. It was an ostentatious gesture, most likely for the benefit of others. He must have thought better of this, however, as he instead took her hand and kissed it.

“My king,” Catherine bowed her head.

“Aren’t you going you to wish your *king* a happy birthday?” Diane called from behind Henry. She stood beside the throne, a maid fixing her hair.

Catherine sent her a scathing look and Diane smiled. How she enjoyed irritating the younger woman, who was so easy to tease.

A fierce fire burned through Catherine’s veins. But, she bit her tongue and smiled politely, “Happy Birthday, Henry.”

Henry wasn’t finished playing, it seemed, as he chuckled and said, “Say it as if you mean it, dear.”

This was a fight in which Catherine was in no mood to pick, neither did she want to create a scene. She said no more and curtsied, taking a seat on her throne.

Henry turned his attention to the jousting arena, watching for anyone who could become a potential opponent. Horses, women and politics remained his main concerns. Diane placed a hand on Henry’s shoulder, as she too gazed across the grounds.

Catherine’s interest in jousts was minimal. How she wished she could have faked sickness. However, she stayed and permitted herself to let her mind wander. She and Henry had been married for six years now and she was yet to fall pregnant. Rumours were beginning to spread about her fertility and, of course, no blame was to fall on Henry. It was entirely Catherine’s fault and she was almost certain that Diane had spread the lies, or at aided them. Another way to gain the King’s favour.

As Diane's status grew, the pressure on Catherine did so as well. There was already a whisper of potential divorce and remarriage. The most important task as a queen and she couldn't complete it. It was her desperation that had sent her mind to a dark place.

Catherine had heard that the occult was practiced in secret in court, with one man in particular at the forefront of these rumours – Nostradamus. He was an astrologer, physician and a fabled seer. It was said that he knew of charms used upon women to assist in fertility. Catherine was well aware of the risk if it was discovered that she had any involvement with dark magic, but she had a duty to fulfil and would use any means necessary to do so.

"Ma'am?" Isabelle touched her mistress' arm.

Catherine had been silent for some time. Isabelle's voice jolted her back into reality. She shook her head. What was she thinking? Dark magic? It was absurd. She turned her focus back to the tournament, fully prepared to abandon her plan all together.