

‘So much more fun than
another Boleyn book’ *INDEPENDENT*

The Empress

MEG CLOTHIER



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Historical Note

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About the Book

Constantinople, 1179

Princess Agnes of France is thirteen when she marries the heir to Byzantium, an empire unmatched in wealth, power – and glamour.

But once she sets foot in the Queen of Cities, a decadent world where dazzling luxury masks unspeakable cruelty, she realises that her husband is a deluded mother's boy with mighty enemies and treacherous allies.

Welcome to the City

As emperors rise and fall, Agnes learns to play the City's game – until she falls for a handsome rebel and finds that love is the most perilous game of all.

Glittering parties in marble palaces soon give way to bloody revolution, shipwreck and exile and Agnes discovers there is no limit to what she will do to survive.

A world in flames

Only when crusading knights from her homeland attack the City does she finally understand what is truly worth fighting for.

Also by Meg Clothier

The Girl King

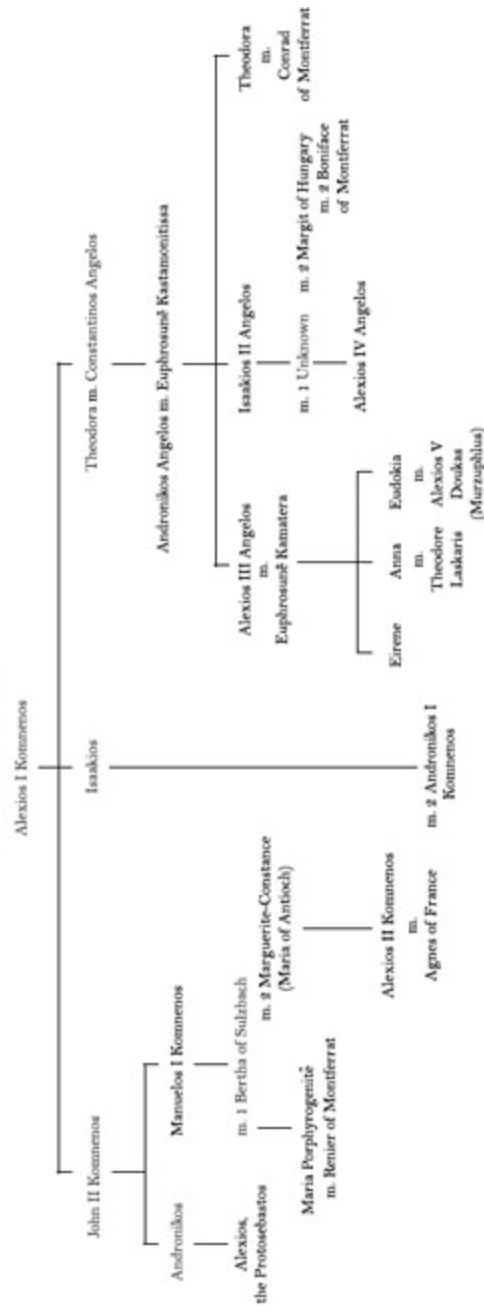
The Empress

Meg Clothier

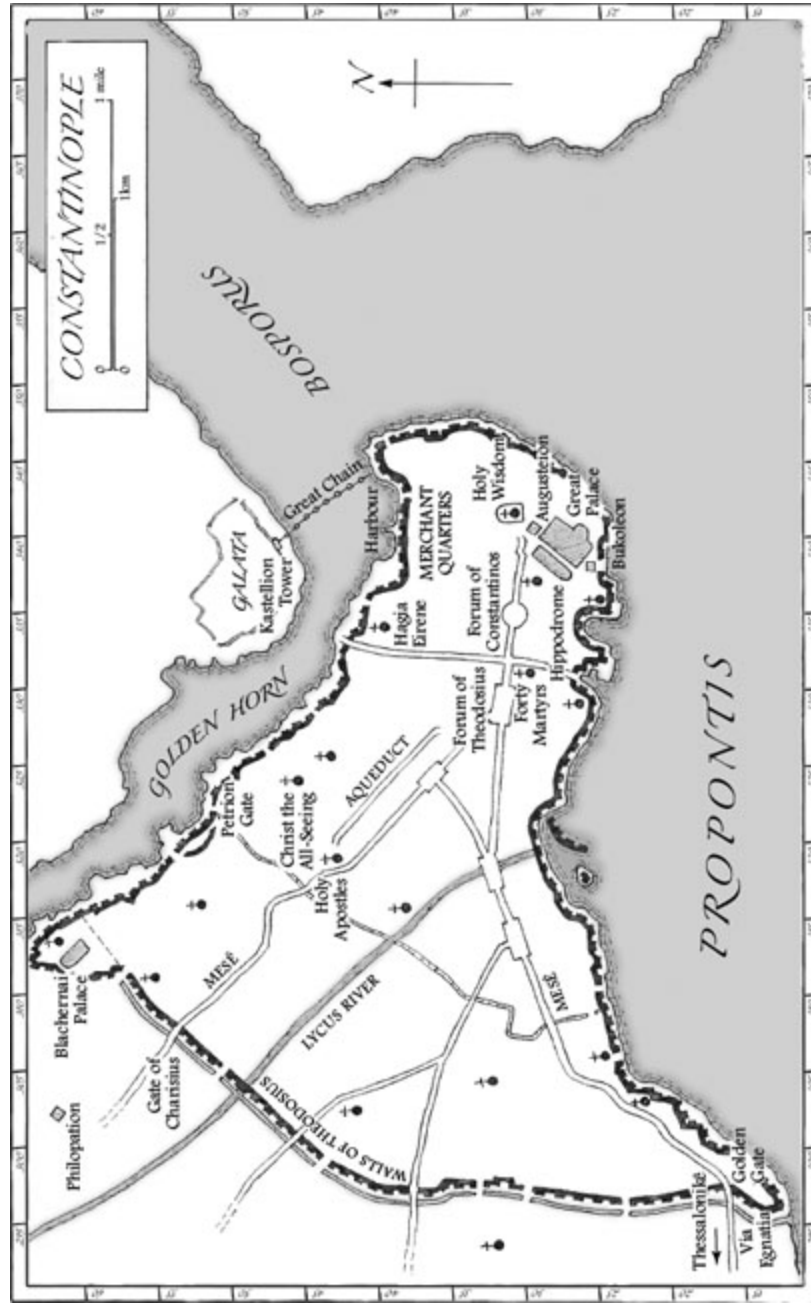


For my parents

FAMILY TREE



This is a highly selective diagram showing the Komnenos and Angelos families only insofar as they relate to *The Empress*. Many siblings and spouses are missing, especially from older generations. The people in fainter type do not appear in the book.



The First Emperor

It is 6,650 years – give or take a few – since God made the world.

Two men, both squarely in their prime, both more than a little drunk, are sitting side by side in the Blachernai Palace in the Queen of Cities.

It is dead night.

Outside, marble columns glimmer, ghosts in the moonlight, but inside, thousands of candles and the best Thracian wine have turned everything dazzling bright. Golden mosaics dance about the walls, flame-haired girls whirl and bob, swords flash and disappear down throats and big cats roar as they leap through rings of fire.

The host of this great feast is Manuelos Komnenos, the most powerful man in the world. His guest's name is Louis, and he rules a little kingdom far away in the west.

Louis wants grain and guides, so that he and his soldiers of the Cross, camped in their thousands beyond the City's walls, can journey east and south to wage holy war. Manuelos wants them gone. They are wild, uncivilised; they are trouble. But they are fellow Christians – of a sort – and must be treated with care.

Servants refill their glasses.

'I thought you'd be a lumbering barbarian,' says Manuelos.

'And I thought you'd be a snake-tongued snob,' replies Louis.

The men laugh and talk of their troubles and their triumphs, of the men they have fought, the women they have loved. They talk of friendship and the future. Manuelos leans forward and grasps Louis's arm.

'When I am blessed with a son, I want no wife for him but a daughter of yours. What do you say?'

'I say you do me great honour,' answers Louis.

'Swear to it?'

'I swear.'

Hands clasp. And together they toast their unborn children's happiness.

The night ends, and the next day Louis straps on his sword and travels onwards to fulfil the promise he made to God.

Many years pass.

Manuelos's wife bears him two daughters - one lives, one dies. He marries again. Again he waits. And when he has all but given up hope, when he is all but an old man, a son is born, a son who survives the fevers of childhood and reaches his fifteenth year.

That is when the emperor in Constantinople sends word to the king of France and asks for a daughter.

The spring of 1179

'I'M GOING TO be queen of the world,' Agnes sang to herself.

She stopped.

'No, not a stupid queen. Much, much better than a queen. Empress. Empress of the whole wide world.'

She skipped a little further.

'Empress of the City. *Basilissa tou . . . tou . . .*' The Greek her father had always insisted she learn, without ever quite explaining why, stuck in her mouth. She stamped her foot to make the words come.

' . . . *tou Poleôs.*'

She started to chant the phrase, the s's sizzling on her tongue. She swung her arms out, whirling in circles until the gardens around her blurred, green grass, grey stones, green, grey, green-grey. Then a flash of red and gold. She fell over.

Henri and Little Louis were standing there. Laughing. She stood up, brushed the dust from her dress and stuck her nose into the air.

'You won't be laughing when you hear what I've got to tell you.'

'You always say that and then it's always nothing,' said Louis.

'No, I don't.'

'Yes, you do.'

'No, I . . . Shut up. Don't argue. Show a little respect to your elders.'

It was a sore point. The three of them were almost exactly the same age – thirteen, twelve and eleven, on the brink of adulthood – but she was the king's youngest daughter and

they were his oldest grandsons, and that made her their aunt.

‘That’s what I say to respect,’ said Louis with a vigorous hand gesture that made Henri snigger.

Agnes had no idea what it meant, but she guessed he’d learnt it in the stables, so she clapped her hands to her mouth and shrieked.

‘Don’t be disgusting, Louis! I’ll tell my father, I shall, I swear I shall.’

She turned and started to run back to the palace – although not quite as fast as she could. She didn’t want to look unladylike, not today of all days, and she certainly didn’t want to see her father again. He was grumpy and had hair coming out of his ears. But he was the king, and the boys would be whipped raw if he found out they’d been teasing her, his treasure.

‘Don’t, Ness, please don’t. Come on. Please.’ They each had hold of one of her hands and were trying to drag her away from the garden gate. She tilted her head back so she could look down on them, and decided they were pleasingly penitent.

‘Please who?’

‘Please, Agnes. Please, Aunt.’

She smiled a little cat smile, gracious in victory.

‘All right. I won’t. Just this once. Little boys,’ she tutted, knowing it would enrage them – and knowing they were powerless to do anything about it. ‘Now, aren’t you going to ask me what I’ve got to tell you?’

An emphatic *no* was forming on Louis’s lips, but Henri thumped him. ‘Go on then, tell us.’

‘I’m going to be empress in the east,’ she said, the words coming out less sedately than she might have liked.

‘What? No you’re not,’ gasped Louis.

‘Yes I am.’

‘No you’re not.’

‘I am, I am. Father just told me. It’s all arranged.’

Henri gawped. 'You're going to marry the Greek emperor? The actual real one?'

'No, ignoramus. He's already married. And he's older than Father. No, I'm going to marry his son. His only son, Alexios,' she said, caressing every syllable of his name as lovingly as one of her pet doves. 'Young, handsome, brave Alexios. It'll be the most perfect wedding the world has ever seen. And then, when his father dies, which won't be that long, Alexios will be emperor and I shall rule by his side.'

An image, as lovely as it was fuzzy, wafted through her mind. A pair of silver thrones surrounded by blue sea and white marble. Thousands upon thousands of people gazing up at her, all whispering the same thing. *What a beautiful couple.* She turned to her husband. Chestnut curls lapped about his golden crown. He took her hand, his blue eyes – no, she corrected herself, his *brown* eyes melting . . .

'Pah,' said Louis. 'The Greeks. They're tricksters and sh-sh —' the word fought its way out '—charlatans.'

'That's right,' Henri weighed in. 'They know everything about the price of gold and nothing about the weight of iron. They couldn't even fight the Saracens without our help. They're—'

'Shut up, Hee-haw,' she said, using his mother's pet name for him that made him mad as a wasp. 'Just because you're jealous—'

'Jealous? I'm not jealous.'

'Not jealous that I'm going to be grander and richer than your father – than *my* father – and every prince and comte and duc put together? Not jealous that I'm going to live in the greatest city there'll ever be? I'll live in a golden palace and eat off golden plates . . .' she wasn't sure about that, but as she spoke, it became true in her mind, 'and I'll have hundreds of servants just to sing me songs while I bathe and a pet nightingale and a pet leopard and . . .'

But before she could decide what else she needed in her menagerie, she clamped her mouth shut. It was too late.

‘Pride is a grievous sin, sister.’

Her brother, Philip, had crept up behind them. He had florid cheeks and a thrusting chest and was duller than he had any right to be. But whatever she thought of him, he was their father’s long-awaited son, the first child of his third marriage, the heir, the golden youth, and she knew better than to argue with him.

‘Forgive me, brother,’ she said, bobbing her head. ‘I am so honoured to be able to serve our father with this match that I forgot myself.’

The two boys struggled to compose their faces. Philip became more pompous and preachy by the day – that was something they could all agree on.

‘It *is* a very great honour, Agnes. A daughter’s first duty to her family is to marry early and to marry well.’

‘Yes, brother. We are so grateful that you are here to remind us that duty must always be at the forefront of our minds.’

She rolled her eyes at Louis and Henri from under her downcast lashes, making the laughter explode from them. Her brother’s gloved hand lashed out and cuffed them both over the head.

‘Don’t snigger like kitchen boys. What are you doing here anyway? You’re too old to be playing with girls. Where’s your tutor? Go on, away with you.’

They darted off over the stones, leaving brother and sister alone. Philip began to pace before her, slow and measured, rubbing his face – probably to remind her that he now had to shave every morning. A lecture was clearly on its way.

‘You should not encourage those boys to follow you about.’

‘I don’t encourage them, brother. Is it my fault they love to plague me?’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘I’m sure I don’t.’

But she did, of course she did. Boys always wanted to be near her, however cruel she was to them. She'd always known that. Men were the same – except she was never cruel to them.

Philip grew sterner, his voice more pulpit-like. 'Your face, sister, is not a face I would wish a sister of mine to have.'

'This is the face God gave me, brother. Surely you do not think his plan was at fault?'

'I would not have you proud.'

'So you said, brother.'

She had not lifted her eyes from the ground all the while he spoke, and it was clearly starting to annoy him. He took her by the shoulders.

'I wish they had not asked for you. I wish my father had said no . . .'

She wondered, briefly, why they had asked for her. Had they heard how beautiful she was? She was beautiful. Everyone said so. One of her uncles said she was probably nearly as beautiful as Helen of Troy. Lucky woman. Combing her hair while the swords of thousands of men crashed outside the city walls. It would have been better, of course, if Alexios had sailed west and stolen her away. But, she thought, you can't have everything.

'Sister, sister, are you listening to me?'

'Of course, brother.'

'The Greeks' city is a dangerous place. It is bloated with sin. Rank with luxury. Their ways are not our ways. Constantinople is not Paris. It is full of half-men and fallen women.'

'Have we no such women here?'

'No, none.' He looked sharply at her. 'None. Not one.'

He was shaking his head and so she shook hers as well. But all she could think was that she liked the sound of the City very, very much indeed. What was Blois, what was Champagne, what was Paris itself? Nothing. What was Constantinople? Everything.

Theo pulled up his breeches, relieved that it was over. Only then did he brave a proper look at the woman on the bed. She was smiling up at him – rather affectionately, he thought. That didn't seem quite right. She ought to look ravaged or ravished, sated or satisfied – at least a little bit tired. But she was already getting up, smoothing down her dress and pulling up her leg coverings. There was nothing else she needed to do. Even her hair was still more or less tidy.

What was she saying? He understood Latin all right. He'd spent enough time with his father in the frontier lands to the west to mean he'd grown up speaking it as well as the Greek of the empire, but she spoke a funny quacking dialect and had rolled her eyes when he'd tried a few basic words of proper Latin on her.

She ran a finger down his cheek and then – embarrassingly – patted his behind. *Run along*. She was telling him it was time to go. She twitched her fingers. *Where's my money?* He paid up and left.

At least the rate of exchange for his City coins was good here. He could never have bought a youngish woman with all her teeth for that little money within sight of the Hagia Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom. That was one advantage of Paris, which otherwise was the filthiest, most godforsaken, scrappiest little outpost that had ever misguidedly considered itself civilised.

He hadn't expected much, but as the imperial embassy journeyed through the outlying woods, he was surprised they could be so close to a city and yet find themselves in land so wild. Slowly, little houses climbed out of the mud, but it was hard to work out where pigpens ended and human living began. He thought of the neat fields that ringed the City and the lines of carefully pruned fruit trees that grew in the shadow of the great water road from the north.

The Frankish king's halls crouched on a stub of island in the middle of the river that mouldered through the town. That made good enough sense from a defensive point of view, but the river was so narrow that imperial sappers would be able to bridge it in a day – if the emperor ordered it. But why would he ever do that? He lived in splendour amidst the light and glory of the City. Who in their right mind would waste time trying to conquer Paris?

Theo sniffed as he crossed the river, a sluggish ditch compared to the Bosphorus, so vast and alive, and cursed the day his father had sent him on this expedition. Not that he had anyone but himself to blame. Himself and drink.

Mikhail, his father's aide who was meant to keep an eye on him at camp, had got him tipsy – well, more like blind drunk, if he was honest – and promised to pay for his first legover. By the time they'd reeled to the fringes of the camp where the cheapest women congregated, probably half the garrison was on their tail, fighting over who would get to watch the great general's only boy *pop*.

His memory of the night was hazy, but he definitely remembered a huge pair of bosoms, an extraordinary sweet, meaty smell and cheering and clapping coming from all sides – and from inside his head. He had buried his face in the woman in front of him and started to fight open his clothes – but then he'd choked and gasped as somebody grabbed his collar and hauled him off. His father had got wind of it.

Alexios Branas was much too experienced a general to say anything to any of the soldiers involved. Their fear, lingering for days afterwards, would have been plenty bad enough. But with his son, it was a different matter.

Badly done, Theo.

Yes, sir.

Can't have the men laughing because they've seen my son trying – and, let's be frank, failing – to stuff his prick into the camp's favourite whore, can we?

Theo had opened his mouth.

Silence!

Yes, sir.

Partly my fault, though, isn't it?

Sir?

His father said he'd been neglecting him, said it was time to make amends, which sounded ominous.

You're my son, not a camp rat. Let's have a look at you. When did I last see you? No, don't answer. That was a rhetorical question. You don't know what that is? That's the problem. You, boy, need a little polish.

Theo had tried to tell him he was fine as he was, that he was just going to be a soldier, but his father had cut him short.

Just a soldier? There's no such thing. Generals have to be politicians. Politicians have to be generals.

He'd started to say that politicians were shit sacks, but his father held up his hand for silence.

You're arguing with me, and that won't do. When a boy tries to argue with his father, it's time for him to go elsewhere fast.

His father wrote some letters, sounded out some friends, and a few months later Theo found himself the youngest, lowliest member of the embassy that was bound west to collect the Frankish girl for Manuelos's boy.

What's wrong with a girl from the City, Father?

The west's power is waxing, son. A little honour, like this marriage, will go a long way.

Theo quickened his pace through the streets – he was late for the big introduction, the unveiling, the presentation, whatever they were calling it – and decided his father would be a lot less worried about the west if he'd actually seen Paris.

Agnes clutched her father's arm as the Greek delegation sauntered into the back of the hall. She knew he liked to feel

strong when she was around, but for once she was glad to cling on to something. She was nervous – not the veneer of sweet timidity she had decided would be appropriate, but actually agonisingly nervous, like her stomach was a pond of jumping frogs.

She'd been fine getting ready, keeping her maids in order, considering her hair, selecting her clothes. She'd been fine, too, when her mother appeared in the looking glass behind her, tweaked a curl that did not need tweaking, told her not to be scared and dropped a white veil over her face. And she'd still been fine as she waited with her father in the little antechamber at the side of the hall. She'd even remembered to order her chair to be moved a little further from the fire. She wanted to make a good impression – better, she wanted them to be awestruck – and that wouldn't happen if she had a bright red face.

A footman stuck his head round the door and bowed to the king.

'They're all here, majesty.'

Her father nodded, and together they walked into the hall. That was when she saw them. And that was when the frogs came alive in her stomach.

If this is how the men dress, what, pray, do their women look like?

Her relatives dressed in leathers that smelt of dogs and horses. Their spurs clanked and their breeches creaked and they never, ever seemed to wash unless they were covered head to toe in mud. But the robes of the men in front of her swooped to the floor like waterfalls. What wasn't trimmed with fur was patterned with silk, what wasn't stitched in gold was spun in silver. It wasn't just the stuff their clothes were made from, it was the way they wore them, the way they stood, easy as angels on a cloud, and watched her approach.

Her father stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders, protective and possessive.

‘My lords,’ he began, speaking the high Latin of God and government, ‘I introduce my beloved daughter, Agnes.’

He reached forward and lifted her veil. She chanced one look, soft, fleeting, a hind darting into hiding, before her father replaced it. Through the gauze she saw a few of the men exchange the briefest of glances.

She’d hoped for rather more than that.

‘Murzuphlus, Murzuphlus – did you see her?’

Theo had arrived too late and was now chasing after the delegation, who were doubtless on their way to some draughty hall to eat another revolting meal of boiled tripe and overripe wine. The young man he was shouting at turned round and waited for him in the corridor.

‘Stop calling me that.’

Murzuphlus gripped him by the scruff of the neck, but Theo knew he wasn’t really angry and wriggled away.

‘It’s a great name – makes you stand out. Go on, tell me, did you see her?’

Murzuphlus raised one of the preposterously bushy eyebrows that had earned him his nickname and wagged a finger at Theo.

‘And where were you?’

‘Oh, you know, seeing the sights. Come on. You got a peek, right? So go on, tell me, warts and all. Does she have warts? Or was she all dew-on-roses?’

In truth, he didn’t really care, but he liked making Murzuphlus laugh. Also, he was probably still a little bit tipsy.

‘Theodore Branas, is that a speech fitting to an envoy of the emperor? You insult our charming hosts.’

‘Not one in a hundred of them can speak a civilised language. They’ll think I’m conversing with you on matters of divinity.’

He put his hands together, furrowed his brows earnestly and spoke not the street tongue real people used, but his

very best old Greek.

‘Tell me, sirrah, the question is to me most vexatious. Doth she ripen?’

And he made two cupping gestures with his hands in front of his chest – unmistakable in any language. Unfortunately, his audience had expanded to include a party of Frankish boys come to bid them to supper, and Theo was neither quick nor subtle enough not to look extremely caught.

The boys squared up to him. Theo was glad he had Murzuphlus – a few years older than him and well built – by his side. None of the Franks looked older than eighteen, but he didn’t want to take them on by himself. Four to two would be fine. But then he turned and saw that it was actually four to one. Murzuphlus was backing away, grinning and mouthing something.

You’re on your own, mate.

Theo stood his ground – not that he had much choice. He was surrounded, his back against a stone wall. His father would have a thing or two to say to him about being caught outnumbered in a narrow, unlit corridor.

‘What were you saying?’ demanded one of the Franks.

‘Me no understand,’ Theo replied.

‘Yes he bloody does. I’ve seen him talk well enough to haggle with whores,’ said another.

‘A joker. Come on. What were you saying?’

There was no need to confess that he’d been insulting their princess.

‘My lords – my friends, I should say – my companion and I were discussing the differing and contrasting architectural merits of the spire—’ he pointed his hands ‘—and the dome,’ he said, repeating his lascivious gesture as learnedly as he could. ‘Do you perhaps have any views?’

They hesitated. They couldn’t possibly believe him, but they’d lost the momentum needed to pick a fight in their king’s halls. Theo might have been able to turn his back and walk away, but he couldn’t resist a final sally.

‘For myself, I favour the more generous proportions of the dome . . .’

They charged.

Agnes had worked out long ago that a plea to feed the doves – *they are the holiest of birds, Mama* – was the only way to make sure she had time to think things through. Her maids only ever accompanied her as far as the herb garden, scared of the scratching claws, the sudden wings and the dark, sticky smell.

She stood scattering small handfuls of grain about her feet while the sky darkened overhead. Soon she would have to go to bed. She would say her prayers, lie still while they tucked her blankets around her, watch them blow out her candle. Then she would curl up and listen to the sounds of the feasting below. A feast in her honour, and she couldn’t go.

The birds took flight with a great whoosh.

A boy – a Greek boy – had tumbled over the hedge and was staring about him. He caught sight of her and grinned, then threw himself into the seed bin and closed the lid over his head.

‘What are you doing? Get out right now.’

She wrenched the lid open and a cheerful face appeared.

‘Greetings, fair one. My enemies are close behind me. I beg you, keep me hidden. A kiss shall be your reward.’ He winked, and pulled the lid back down.

She was about to tell him exactly what his reward would be when a hullabaloo of running and shouts swept towards her and a gang of court boys careered into the enclosure, puffing, panting, overexcited, with Little Louis and Henri cantering in their wake.

‘Where is he?’

‘Which way’d he go?’

‘Which way did who go?’ she asked.

‘Some Greek who needs to be taught a lesson.’

‘A lesson in what?’

‘Manners.’

Her birds cawed down crossly from their perches in the dovecote. Agnes smiled and pointed.

‘In there.’

But before they could move, the lid burst open and the boy was out and running. He dodged behind her and grabbed her shoulders, using her as a shield against the others.

‘Get off me, all of you,’ she shrieked.

The court boys, better used to her temper, retreated. The Greek boy edged backwards, dragging her with him.

‘Definitely no kiss for you, traitor,’ he hissed in her ear.

He pinched her cheek, quite hard, scrabbled up the wall of the dovecote and disappeared. Agnes rubbed at her face in disgust. *Boys*. Greek, French, they were all the same. *Idiots*. She stalked back to the palace counting the days until she’d be on her way.

Alexios, she was sure, would be different.

The summer of 1179

IT WAS THE third day at sea, and Agnes was sick – very, very sick.

She wanted to go up on deck and at least be sick in the bright air, but then everyone would see her, and she would rather feel like this every day for the rest of her life than have a single one of the Greeks see how hideous she was. She hadn't looked in a glass, but she could feel her hair clinging lank to her temples and taste the stench in her mouth.

The boat lurched once more and her insides followed. But there was nothing left to come – certainly not food, not even the watery green fluid that had appeared when everything else had gone. She retched hopelessly, again and again, until her throat burned.

Finally, in the middle of offering up passionate promises to God, her stomach so cramped and shrunken that she could only lie curled up in a ball, she tumbled into a deep sleep. The thwack of the boat falling off the back of the storm waves, the shouts of the crewmen, the thump of feet overhead might have found their way into her dreams, but they did not disturb her.

When she woke, either a few minutes or many hours later, the yawing no longer tore her body to pieces. Instead it cocooned her, caressed her, as if she too were a little boat bobbing on the waves.

She opened her eyes cautiously. A gouging pain tore at her belly and she tensed, waiting to be sick again. Then she realised that it was monstrous, overwhelming hunger.

Somebody had strung a slab of netting across her bunk to stop her being bucked on to the floor while she slept, but her hands were too cold and stupid to unpick the knots that kept it in place. She worried at them, cursing under her breath, then gave up and wormed through the minuscule gap at the head end. Groping about, she found a dress to pull over her – she sniffed – rather rank undergarments, and looked about for her cloak. It was draped over her maid, a bundle of misery lying at her feet. She whisked it off her and wrapped it round her own shoulders. The body did not move, but at the creak of the door it stirred and groaned up at her.

‘Wait, my lady, I must attend you . . .’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Blanche,’ said Agnes. ‘You can’t even stand up.’

She shut the door behind her. It was dim below decks, but her nose detected the smell of bread baking and fat rendering. Her tongue tingled. Bracing herself against jutting bits of wood, clinging to stray bits of rope, she stumbled down a passageway until she saw a shape, burlier than any blacksmith, huddled over a spitting pot in a little cubbyhole that must serve as the ship’s kitchen.

The man grunted when she asked for food, grunted again when he handed her a sloppy bowl of stew and dumplings, and grunted a third time when she asked how to get out of this miserable underworld and up into the light of day.

‘Do you not speak a civilised tongue?’ she snapped.

He shook his head, grinned and leered all at once and opened his mouth to reveal – nothing. Where his tongue should have been, there was only a darkening stump and a graveyard of teeth.

‘Oh,’ she said, backing away. ‘Well at least you could point. You’ve got hands, haven’t you?’

He grinned again and jabbed towards a ladder with his ladle. Now that she looked, she could see half a dozen stripes of light where the planks met overhead. It was hard

negotiating each rung with the food in one hand and her skirts tussling with her feet, harder still to push the hatch up with her head – but it was worth it. It opened like a window on to heaven, a blessed blast of pure light and strong-scented sea air.

She placed her bowl on deck so she could climb out, but it immediately slid away towards the side of the boat, crashed into the side and tipped over. A wave broke over the bow and washed what was left into the gunnels and overboard.

She gave a howl of frustration, then the boat seemed to trip and lose its footing and she might have followed her breakfast into the Middle Sea had two hands not clamped hold of the hem of her cloak.

‘Let me go!’

The hands, obligingly, removed themselves, but immediately the boat butted a wave and she had to save herself by grabbing the nearest thing, which turned out to be a heavy sea coat. She looked up and saw the traces of two black eyes and an unmistakably broken nose in the middle of a familiar face. It was the boy from the dovecote.

‘They got you, then?’

‘They got me,’ he nodded.

A shout came from the raised deck at the back of the boat where four crewmen were braced against the steering oars. Another man, the captain, was stomping towards them, gesticulating and bawling in what sounded like Greek, but ragged and rotten.

‘Get that *something something* princess off my *something something* deck or I’ll *something* her *something* neck.’

The boy’s eyes widened and he looked at her more closely.

‘So you’re our precious cargo.’

He might have been about to say more, but the captain was now leaning over them, wanting to know why the boy wasn’t doing what he was *something something* well told.

‘Instantly, good sir,’ said the boy, unruffled. ‘The noble captain, gracious lady, although rightly delighted to see you up and about, begs leave to warn you—’

‘Don’t think I can’t understand what you all say, because I can,’ she said – admittedly in Latin. She wasn’t ready to risk her dignity speaking Greek, not yet.

She realised she was still clinging on to the boy’s coat and lunged for one of the banks of ropes holding up the mast. He followed her.

‘I hope you can’t understand. Not the way he talks. Come on – I’d better get you down below.’

‘I shan’t go.’

‘You must. He’s not joking. It really is dangerous up here,’ and as if to underline what he was saying, the wind whipped his hat from his head and sent it spinning into the froth and spume behind them. His hair was a deep, rich red, almost luminescent against the grey sea and sky.

‘I can see that for myself,’ she told him, ‘but I’m not setting foot in that vile pit until it’s been scrubbed clean.’

‘Then you’ll have to do it yourself. Everybody’s sick in their bunks or sailing the boat.’

‘Fine. I’ll stay up here.’

‘All right. But somewhere the captain can’t see you. Tell you what, we’ll go and sit in the lee of the chicken coop. It’s sort of dry there.’

‘We?’

‘Yes, *we*. You’ve nearly drowned twice already.’

‘I can’t sit alone with you.’

‘Course you can.’

‘But protocol . . .’

‘Even protocol gets overlooked sometimes. Specially in storms – not that this really counts as a storm, just a bit of a gale. Come on. I promise I won’t tell your husband.’

She gaped. ‘You? You know my husband?’

‘You’re surprised?’

‘But he is the emperor’s son, and you, you are . . .’