

Chapter Seven



Summer of Uncertainty

IN THE WEEKS that followed, Anne of Brittany surprised not just Nicole, but the entire court. There were many who had feared for her life in the days immediately following the king's death. But there was work to be done surrounding the passing of Charles VIII. No longer queen, her uncertain situation sharpened her focus. Anne of Brittany had been raised to rule, as well as to swim the uncertain tides of political change.

The death of yet another of her children had devastated her, but had not stripped her of political power. The death of her husband the king was another thing altogether. Her present status was uncertain. As astute as Louis d'Orléans, soon to be crowned the new king, Anne recognized the need to grasp the reins of whatever political power she had, in order to show her people she was still a force.

The former queen was still Duchess of Brittany. It was a role Charles VIII had not wished her to actively play. He had let her know at the outset of their marriage that he would be the one to manage the lands she had brought him as her marriage dowry.

But with Charles VIII's death, Anne quickly stepped up to take the reins of leadership over her own inherited lands. Within a fortnight of her husband's death, she had sent large bolts of black cloth to all of Brittany's noble families, with instructions on how to mourn the death of the king of France. White had traditionally been the color of mourning, but Anne decided that deep purple or black would be the new colors to wear and to display to mourn the king properly. She had gotten the idea from reports her husband had given her on Milan, from whence came all the newest fashions and designs.

Charles VIII had overseen Brittany himself, but with him gone, and no infant nor children to occupy her time, Anne immediately took over administration of her own lands. In addition, she invited the top Breton noblemen to attend the service she organized to memorialize the dead king on May 15, in Amboise.

The morning of the ceremony dawned glorious and fair. Nicole's father and uncle had arrived, and the court was abuzz with what looked to be amicable relations between the former queen and Louis, Duke d'Orléans, in line to become next king of France. It was rumored that Anne of Brittany would leave for Paris the following day, there to stay for the remainder of the spring and part of the summer, mourning her dead husband and planning her next steps. Charles VIII had left her a large house there, known as the Hotel d'Etampes, a residence traditionally set aside for widowed queens of France. Now it would prove a strategic spot from where she could chart her future.

Nicole had heard from her father that wedding plans were to be delayed. But with Philippe to be married, what difference did it make? Whoever and whenever she married, she would not marry the one she loved, but the one her family thought the best match to further their political and social interests.

Scanning the crowd, Nicole prayed that Gilles de St. Bonnet was not in attendance. Instead, she looked for a blondish-brown-haired head attached to a young slim body. If only she could see those mutable gray-green eyes again, eyes that had sparked blue then sometime gold in the sunlight when they gazed at her a certain way.

Fortunately Madame de Laval was busy: first with the memorial service, then with preparations for the former queen's trip to Paris the following day. She would accompany her, along with other senior members of the court. Nicole and Marie de Volonté would stay behind, lightly chaperoned. Already she looked forward to it. The only dark spot on the horizon was the thought of Philippe being married off. She wished desperately she could see him again before he disappeared forever from her life.

AS ANNE OF BRITTANY passed, Nicole craned her neck to see her noble employer. She had barely seen her since the day of the king's accident. Petite and erect, Anne slowly walked the length of the courtyard from her chambers to the chapel, where the memorial service would be held. Behind her, the tall form of Louis d'Orléans matched her pace, his eyes riveted on the former queen ahead. From what she could see, the future king of France, with his longish aristocratic nose and soulful blue-gray eyes, wasn't bad-looking.

"Where is the wife of the Duke of Orléans?" Nicole asked her father beside her.

"That hunchback? They live apart. I'm sure Louis wants her out of the way," Michel St. Sylvain said, looking over Nicole's head at his brother on her other side.

"Especially now," her uncle agreed.

"Why especially now?" Nicole asked, curious.

"Worry about your own future, not the queen's, *ma petite*," her uncle dismissed her.

"Not the queen anymore, is right. But not for long, if she plays her cards right," Michel St. Sylvain joked.

"Papa, she is mourning, not thinking of playing cards! How can you say that?" Nicole cried, indignant.

"Daughter, do you think Anne of Brittany is so beside herself that she hasn't considered her own future?" He shook his head, looking at her affectionately. "Think again, dear one. The woman who brought you to court is no ninny. She will not relinquish the Crown of France easily."

"Not if there is any other way to keep it on her head," Benoit St. Sylvain added, eyeing Louis d'Orléans behind the former queen, his eyes glued to the tiny female figure he followed.

"Who is that man behind d'Orléans?" He pointed toward the procession.

Michel St. Sylvain strained his neck to see who his brother spoke of. "You mean behind the new king," he corrected him.

"Yes, the one wearing the crest of Orléans."

"That's Gerard d'Orléans," Nicole's father replied. "the duke's cousin, I believe."

"You mean the cousin of the new king, as you pointed out." Benoit St. Sylvain specified, looking meaningfully at his brother.

"Yes. That would be him." Michel St. Sylvain returned his brother's look with one of his own.

"Is he not the one whose wife died in childbirth last year?" Benoit continued.

Nicole's father shrugged. "He may be. I heard talk of it. Why?"

Benoit's voice became lower, "He has not yet remarried, I believe."

"No?" Nicole's father lowered his voice to match his brother's. "Is he betrothed then?"

"Let's find out," Benoit breathed back. Both men glanced at Nicole in the same instant.

"What are you thinking, Uncle Benoit?" Nicole asked, alarmed.

"Shhh, *ma chère*. We think of your future, of what is best for you."

"You think of what is best for our family, not what is best for me," Nicole railed.

Her father's eyes sparked with anger then became icy. "My daughter, what argument do you make? What is best for your family is what is best for you."

"Papa, I am not a horse to be paired off with the most highly-bred stallion," she objected.

"No. You are my daughter, to be paired off with a husband who is most closely allied with your sovereign," Michel St. Sylvain's tone was clipped, as if laying down the law.

But which law was it: the one of the old regime or the one of the new? Nicole wondered. Everything seemed to be changing around her. The only thing that didn't change was that Michel St. Sylvain would always be her father, and her duty would always be to obey him.

"But the man you chose for me is closely allied to the king," Nicole began then paused. "I mean the old king."

"Precisely," her father agreed.

"Precisely," her uncle echoed. He shot his brother another look and as Nicole took it in, a sudden breeze gusted past, lifting the ends of the black silk cape she wore over her shoulders. Change was in the air.