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Anna of Kleve: Queen of Secrets is Alison Weir's ninth published novel and the fourth in the Six Tudor Queens series about the wives of Henry VIII, which was launched in 2016 to great critical acclaim. The first three books in the series – *Katherine of Aragon: The True Queen*, *Anne Boleyn: A King's Obsession* and *Jane Seymour: The Haunted Queen* were all *Sunday Times* bestsellers.

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Also by Alison Weir

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ALISON WEIR

SIX TUDOR
QUEENS

ANNA OF KLEVE
QUEEN OF SECRETS



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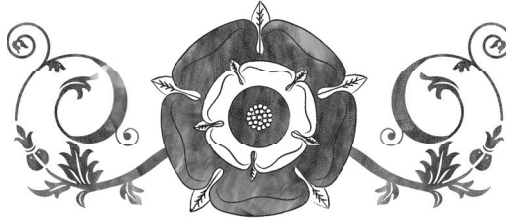
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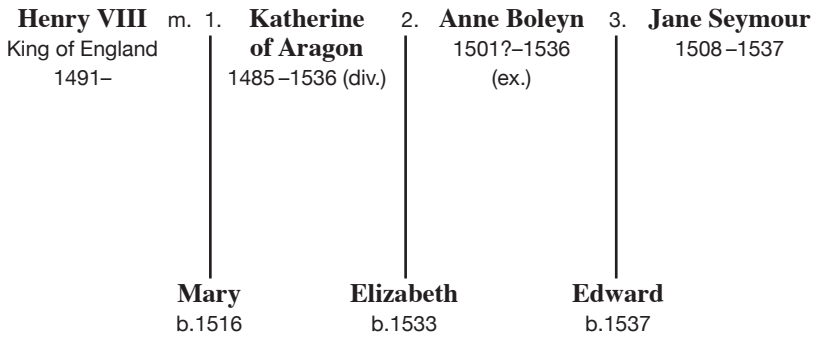
ANNA OF KLEVE
QUEEN OF SECRETS

1539



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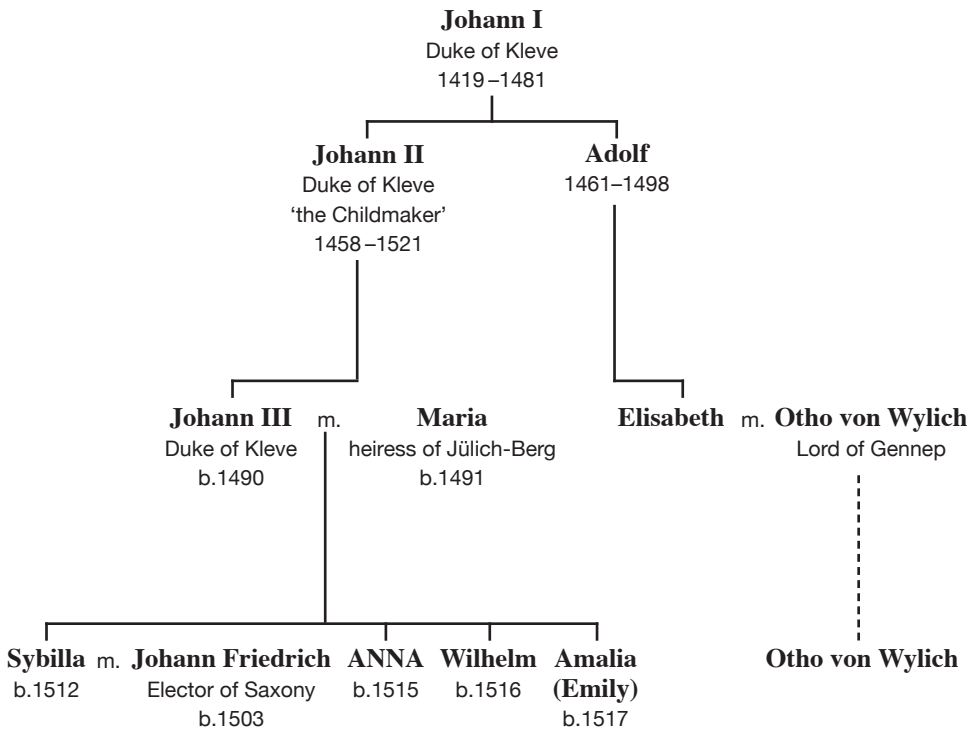
HOUSE OF TUDOR





KLEVE

HOUSE OF LA MARCK



To John and Jo, with all my love.

And to Beth, with thanks for your generous help.

Part One
Princess of Kleve

Chapter 1

1530

Anna peered through the window of the gatehouse, watching the chariot trundling through below, enjoying the rich sensuousness of the new silk gown she was wearing, and conscious of her parents' expectations of her. At fourteen, she should have learned all the domestic graces, and to impress their guests with her virtues.

Every summer, Vater – or Duke Johann III, as his subjects knew him – brought his wife and children here to the Schwanenburg, the great palace that towered on a steep rocky hill, dominating the mighty River Rhine and the fair city of Kleve. Joining them today for a short visit, were Onkel Otho von Wylich, the genial Lord of Gennep, and Tante Elisabeth, who never let anyone forget that she was the granddaughter of Duke Johann I. With them would be Otho, Onkel's bastard son. For all the reputation of the court of Kleve for moral probity, bastards were not unwelcome there. Anna's paternal grandfather, Duke Johann II, had had sixty-three of them; not for nothing had he been nicknamed 'the Childmaker'. He had died when Anna was six, so her memories of him were vague, yet the living testimony to his prodigious fertility was all around her at court and in the great houses of Kleve. It seemed she was related to nearly everyone in the united duchies and counties of Kleve, Mark, Jülich, Berg, Ravensberg, Zutphen and Ravenstein, over which her father ruled.

Duke Johann was lavishly dressed as usual, welcoming his guests as their chariot drew up at the gatehouse – dark hair sleekly cut, fringe and beard neatly trimmed, portly figure swathed in scarlet damask. Anna looked at him affectionately; he did love to make a show of his magnificence. At his command, his wife and children were attired in

rich silks and adorned with gold chains. Anna stood in a row with her younger siblings Wilhelm and Amalia, who was fondly known as Emily in the family. Vater and Mutter had no need to remind their children to make their obeisances, for courtesy had been drummed into them since they had been in their cradles. Nor were they allowed to forget that they were royally descended from the kings of France and England, and were cousins to the mighty Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Vater's overlord. Their awareness of that must be reflected in everything they did.

As young Otho von Wylich stepped down, Anna's heart almost stopped. To her, this cousin by marriage, two years older than she, seemed like a gift from God as he alighted on the cobbles. Oh, he was fair to look at, with his wavy, unruly chestnut locks and his high cheekbones, strong jaw, full lips and merry eyes, and he was charming too as he greeted everyone, displaying the proper deference to his host and hostess, with little of the gaucheness often seen in boys of his age. When he rose from his bow to Anna, his smile was devastating.

She was already betrothed, as good as wed, and had been since the age of eleven. When people addressed her formally, they called her Madame la Marquise, for her future husband was Francis, Marquis of Pont-à-Mousson, eldest son of Antoine, Duke of Lorraine. They had never met – she had not even seen a portrait of him – and although she was always being reminded of her great destiny, the prospect of marriage still seemed unreal. Some of her dowry had already been paid, and she had long expected her wedding to take place as soon as Francis reached marriageable age at fourteen, this very year.

She had been too young for a betrothal ceremony: her consent had been implicit in the contract her father had signed. She had accepted without question the husband chosen for her, having been schooled in her duty from infancy; but now, having seen Otho von Wylich, she wished for the first time that she was not spoken for. She could not drag her eyes away from Otho's engaging smile.

As she struggled to hide the fact that her world had just shifted seismically, Vater led the guests through the majestic Knight's Hall, his serious, craggy features becoming animated as he pointed out the decorative sculptures to Otho.

‘This hall is said to have been built by Julius Caesar,’ he said proudly.

‘I well remember the great ceremonies that took place here,’ Tante Elisabeth said.

Slowly, they processed through the state rooms. Anna was aware only of Otho, standing just inches away, and of his eyes on her.

‘We had these apartments built on the model of the great French chateaux on the Loire,’ Vater boasted, waving a beringed hand at the fine furniture and tapestries. Anna saw her uncle and aunt exchange envious glances. Mutter seemed serenely unaware. All this splendour was no more than her due, for she had been a great heiress, and had brought Vater rich territories and titles. She graced the court of Kleve in a manner that was regal yet humble, as deferential as a woman should be. Both she and Vater were strict in maintaining the elaborate code of etiquette laid down by the dukes in the manner of their Burgundian ancestors; in matters of courtesy and style, the court of Burgundy had led fashionable Christendom for nearly a hundred years now. Mutter and Vater also welcomed new ideas from the magnificent court of France, not far to the west of Kleve, and from Italy, which permeated north by means of visitors travelling up the Rhine. Anna sometimes sensed that Vater’s court was too sophisticated and free-thinking for Mutter’s taste; it seemed much more liberal than the court of Jülich had been. But Mutter would never criticise what went on in Kleve.

When they reached the private apartments, wine was served, the sparkling Elbling that Vater regularly had brought upriver from the vineyards on the Mosel. Onkel Otho and Tante Elisabeth accepted their goblets with alacrity. It was as well that it was not evening, for the rules at court were strict, and all wine, even the Duke’s, was locked away at nine o’clock by his Hofmeister, who took his duties very seriously.

As they sipped from their goblets of finest Venetian glass, the adults talked, stiffly at first, then gradually relaxing, while their children sat silently listening, Anna intensely aware of Otho, who was sitting beside her.

‘Your father has a wondrous palace,’ he said.

‘I hope you will be able to see more of it,’ she replied. She felt sorry for him, for he had no hope of inheriting any great houses, even though

it was no fault of his that he was a bastard. 'But I am sure you live well in Gennep.'

'Not as well as you do here, Anna,' he told her, with another of those devastating smiles, and she thrilled to hear her name on his tongue. 'But I am fortunate. My father and stepmother treat me like their lawful son. They have no other children, you see.'

'But you have friends?'

'Yes, and I have my studies, and an amiable tutor. One day, I will have to make my own way in the world, probably in the Church.'

'Oh, no!' she exclaimed, before she could stop herself. 'I mean, you could surely have a happier life doing something else.'

He grinned. 'You are thinking of the pleasures I would have to give up,' he said, making her blush. 'Believe me, I think of them too. But I have no inheritance, Anna. It will all go to a cousin when my father dies. What else can I do?'

'Vater will find you a post here, or Dr Olisleger, his chancellor, I am sure!'

'How kind you are, Anna,' he murmured. Their eyes met, and she read in his gaze all she could have hoped for. 'I can think of nothing I would like more than being at the court of Kleve. It would mean I could see you more often.'

His words took her breath away. 'Then I will ask for you,' she promised.

She noticed her mother watching them, a slight frown on her face. Vater was warming to his favourite topic. She knew for a certainty that she would hear the name Erasmus before too long. The great humanist scholar was Vater's hero, the man he admired above all others, and whose advice he sought on religious matters.

'Erasmus says the Church is not the Pope, the bishops and the clergy,' he declared. 'It is the whole Christian people.'

Tante Elisabeth looked dubious, while Mutter's expression remained inscrutable. Anna knew Mutter did not agree with Vater on religious matters. Devout as a nun, she was probably wincing inwardly to hear the Holy Father in Rome dismissed as if he were of no importance.

'Erasmus preaches universal peace and tolerance,' Vater went on,

oblivious. ‘There can be no higher ideal than that. It inspires the way I live my life, the way I govern my duchy and my court, and the way I nurture my children.’

‘It is a high ideal,’ Onkel Otho observed, ‘but a dangerous one. Even if he does not intend to, Erasmus encourages those who attack the Church. It’s a short step from that to the heresies of Martin Luther.’

‘Luther speaks sense in many ways,’ Vater countered. ‘There *are* abuses in the Church, and they need to be rectified.’

‘My lord has banned Luther’s works,’ Mutter said quickly.

‘I have indeed, twice,’ Vater confirmed. ‘But some of his protests against the Church are justified. No one should have to pay priests to forgive their sins and save them from Purgatory, and it’s wrong that the princes of the Church live in luxury when our Lord was a simple carpenter. But to deny five of the sacraments is plain heresy.’

‘Your son-in-law would not agree with you,’ Onkel Otho replied.

‘The Elector of Saxony has extreme views,’ Vater said, looking pained, ‘and I fear Sybilla has become infected with them, for a wife is bound to follow her husband. The Elector wants me to join his Schmalkaldic League of German Lutheran princes, but I will never do that.’

‘Yet you allied yourself to him by marriage,’ Onkel Otho persisted. ‘You are linked to the League whether you like it or not.’ Now it was Mutter’s turn to look pained. It must have gone against all her beliefs to see her daughter given to a Protestant.

It seemed an argument was stirring, but just then, the bell at the top of the Johannisturm in the inner courtyard chimed four o’clock, and Mutter seized her opportunity. Anna guessed she did not want her offspring hearing any more talk against the Church and the true faith in which she had nurtured them.

‘Children,’ she said brightly, ‘why don’t you show your cousin Otho around the rest of the castle?’

The young people all jumped to their feet, Anna secretly rejoicing.

‘It will be our pleasure,’ thirteen-year-old Wilhelm said earnestly. Anna knew Otho would soon be receiving a lecture on the architecture of the Schwanenburg and the glorious history of Kleve – and she was

right. As they returned through the state apartments, Wilhelm, who had all the virtues save a sense of humour, humility and empathy with others, started waxing forth on how he had been born here in the Schwanenburg and how rich and prosperous the duchy was.

‘Our father is called Johann the Peaceful, because he rules so wisely,’ he boasted. ‘When he married our mother, she brought him Jülich and Berg, and lands stretching for four thousand miles. When I am duke of Kleve, I will inherit all that, and I will be as wise as my father.’

Anna saw Otho smothering a smile.

‘Otho did not come to hear all this, Bruder,’ she said. ‘It’s a beautiful day, and you’ve been excused lessons for the afternoon.’ She turned to Otho, and felt herself grow hot. ‘Would you like to go up the Schwanenturm? The views are wonderful, and I can tell you all about the legend of Lohengrin.’

‘It’s too warm to climb all those stairs,’ Emily protested, her rosebud lips pursed in a pout.

‘Emily, you are such a lazybones,’ Anna sighed.

‘But I should love to see the views,’ Otho said, his twinkling eyes still on Anna, ‘and the exercise will be good for us.’

‘I think Otho would prefer to see the Spiegelturm,’ Wilhelm said, as if Otho had not spoken. ‘The ducal archives are most interesting.’

‘Oh, Wilhelm, it’s always what *you* want!’ Emily cried.

‘You can take Otho there afterwards,’ Anna said firmly. ‘But first, he wants to see the Schwanenturm.’

‘Then you take him,’ Wilhelm ordered. ‘I will go and look out some things I want to show him.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ Emily said. ‘I can help find them.’

‘You’re just too lazy to climb the stairs,’ Wilhelm scoffed, looking none too pleased at the prospect of his twelve-year-old sister’s company.

‘Come,’ Anna said to Otho. ‘Let’s leave them to their squabbles.’ She led him away before Wilhelm could stop her. She had never known such luck. Her life was hemmed around with rules, ritual, sewing and her mother’s endless vigilance, and the chance of a short time alone with this most handsome youth was beyond her wildest imaginings; it was incredible that it had been afforded her so easily, without any effort

on her part. It was an escapade of which Mutter might well have disapproved, for she had always enjoined that a young lady should never be alone with a man, lest her reputation be compromised. She had never explained exactly how that might happen, though it was clearly a dreadful thing. But Otho did not count, surely? He was family, and he was not much older than Anna.

The mighty Schwanenturm loomed above them, its square shadow falling on the cobbled courtyard. Anna was headily aware of Otho walking just a pace behind her. She was glad she had donned her new red silk gown with its gold bodice embroidered with loops of pearls. She felt beautiful wearing such a dress, with her fair hair loose down her back. Sybilla, whose portrait showed off the slanting eyes and long golden tresses that had captivated the Elector, was the beauty of the family, everyone was agreed on that; but Anna revelled in the thought that she too could look pleasing.

The guards on duty at the door stood to attention as they approached.

‘My ancestor, Duke Adolf, built this tower,’ Anna said, pushing open the heavy door.

‘Allow me,’ Otho said, taking its weight. Anna went ahead, lifting up her gorgeous skirt to ascend the stairs.

‘The old tower fell down about a hundred years ago,’ she went on, trying to conceal her nervousness behind a barrage of facts. ‘Duke Adolf rebuilt it much bigger than before.’

‘It’s certainly high!’ Otho said. ‘These steps go on for ever. Shall we rest for a moment?’

Anna turned on the stairs to see him looking up admiringly at her.

‘You are very pretty,’ he said, ‘and that gown becomes you so well.’ His eyes travelled up appreciatively from her slender waist to the swell of her breasts beneath the velvet bodice.

Thrilled by his praise, she smiled down at him. She could not help herself. She knew she should not be allowing him to say such familiar things to her, or herself to acknowledge them. Yet she was bursting with such joy that she had no will to walk away, or to spoil the moment.

They were slightly breathless by the time they ascended the final flight of stairs leading to the turret at the top of the tower and entered

a narrow, sparsely furnished room with windows at each end. The Turkey carpet must have cost a fortune in its day, but it was now threadbare. Anna crossed to the window overlooking the river. Below, the town of Kleve lay spread out before her, a patchwork of red roofs and spires.

Otho stood right behind her.

‘It is a fair sight,’ he said, looking over her shoulder. She could feel his breath on her ear. ‘So tell me about Lohengrin.’ His voice was like a caress.

Anna tried to focus on the legend she had promised to recount, but her mind was too overwhelmed by this strange, heady feeling. Was this love? She had seen how deeply her parents loved each other, and had learned, from listening to the ladies and maids gossiping, that love could also be a kind of madness that made people act like fools, as if they were out of their senses. It could make you ecstatically happy or desperately sad. And now, standing in this dusty little room, alone with a young man for the first time, she understood what it was to be powerfully attracted to someone. It was a glorious feeling, and frightening too, as if she were being impelled towards something momentous and dangerous, and had not the mastery to stop herself.

But she must! She would soon be a married woman, and had been schooled in absolute loyalty to her husband-to-be.

‘Do you know why this is called the Swan Tower?’ she asked Otho, forcing herself to collect her thoughts and speak. ‘I don’t suppose you hear much about the legends of Kleve in Limburg.’

‘My mother used to tell me stories when I was little,’ he answered, ‘but I have forgotten them mostly.’

‘Above us, on top of the turret, there is a golden weathervane,’ Anna said, a touch breathlessly. ‘It bears the swan that the old counts of Kleve blazoned on their coats of arms, in honour of the Knight of the Swan, the mysterious Lohengrin. See here.’ She turned and drew from her bodice an enamelled pendant. ‘This is my personal device. The two white swans stand for innocence and purity.’ Otho cradled her hand in his as he bent to look in her palm. Suddenly, he kissed her lightly on the wrist. It gave her the most pleasurable jolt.

She was not quite mad – not yet. She had been taught that no virtuous woman would let a man kiss her until he made her his affianced bride. She withdrew her hand, and Otho straightened up.

Her voice shook a little as she continued her story. ‘Lohengrin’s boat was guided by two white swans when he sailed along the Rhine long ago to visit a countess of Kleve named Elsa. She was in deep distress because her husband had died and a tyrant was trying to usurp his place by forcing her to wed him. Lohengrin came to her aid. He overthrew the tyrant and married her.’

Otho’s eyes were shining into hers. ‘If she was as beautiful as another princess of Kleve I could mention – then I take my cap off to Lohengrin.’ His voice sounded a little hoarse.

Anna’s cheeks suddenly felt very hot. She had no idea how to respond to such a compliment.

‘He was a renowned hero,’ she said, struggling to act normally. ‘But on the day after their wedding, he made Elsa promise never to ask his name or his ancestry. Unknown to her, and to all, he was a knight of the Holy Grail and was often sent on secret missions. She agreed, and they lived very happily together, and had three fine sons. They were my ancestors.’

‘You are going to tell me that it all went wrong,’ Otho said.

‘It did. Elsa was desperate to know if her sons would have a great inheritance from their father. She could not contain herself, and asked him the question she had sworn never to ask. When she did, Lohengrin fell into anguish. He tore himself from her arms and left the castle – this very castle. And there, on the river, waiting for him, were the two swans with the boat that had brought him to Kleve. He sailed away in it, and was never seen again.’

Otho was shaking his head, his eyes holding hers. ‘And what happened to Elsa?’

‘She was so overcome with grief for her loss that she died. She had loved Lohengrin so much.’

For the first time, it was dawning on Anna how terrible Elsa’s loss had been. That sad realisation must have been plain on her face, for, without preamble, Otho stepped forward and folded his arms around

her, drawing her close to him. Before she could stop him, he had pressed his lips to hers and touched her tongue with his. It was the strangest thing, at once wonderful and repulsive. She had never dreamed that kissing could be like that, but she knew it was wrong to be doing it. What would her parents think of her?

‘No,’ she said, pulling back.

He held her fast in his embrace. ‘Yes!’ he breathed. ‘Please don’t deny us this pleasure! It can do no harm. You need not fear it.’

‘I might have a baby,’ she protested, and was surprised when he laughed. ‘I might,’ she warned. ‘Mother Lowe told me kissing leads to babies.’

‘And who is Mother Lowe?’ he asked, nuzzling her nose with his as she struggled half-heartedly to free herself.

‘She is my nurse.’

‘Little she knows! You can’t get a baby from kissing. It’s harmless. And you were enjoying it, I could tell.’ He was still holding her tight, grinning at her so engagingly that she felt her knees melt. It was thrilling, talking about such things with a man.

He kissed her again, gently, tenderly this time, and then he was drawing her down on to the carpet, kissing her eyes and stroking her cheeks. His hands strayed elsewhere, and the glorious sensations he was awakening in her drowned out the alarms ringing in her head. He had said there was nothing to fear, and she believed him. He was a guest in her father’s house – a well-brought-up young man who, she could count on it, knew how to behave. And there was a rising, breathless excitement in him that she found infectious.

‘Oh, Anna!’ he murmured, his eyes on hers as he twined her hair around his fingers, his breathing becoming more rapid and tremulous. ‘Let me love you! I will not hurt you.’ His lips closed on hers again, with greater fervour, and then he reached down, pulled her beautiful silk skirts and chemise aside and – to her astonishment – began gently touching her private parts. She did not resist him: she was too far immersed in feelings and sensations she had never dreamed of.

‘As you have lips here,’ he whispered, caressing her mouth with his tongue, ‘so you have them here, for the same purpose.’ His fingertips

moved rhythmically, exploring more boldly, and Anna felt the most exquisite pleasure mounting within her. There was no shock, just surprise at how little she had understood her own body – and no shame. Here it was, the madness of which the women had spoken! Had she lived until now?

What followed was utterly glorious, and she gave herself up to it without further thought, being incapable of reason. A little pain – and then she was ascending to Heaven. As the pleasure mounted, she felt Otho's body spasm. He cried out, and then, as he slowly relaxed on top of her, and inside her, holding her tightly and murmuring incoherent words of love, she was overcome by a wave of unstoppable ecstasy, building and building until she thought she would pass out.

She lay there stunned as he turned his head to face her, and smiled.

'Did you enjoy our kissing, Anna?'

She nodded, thinking how beautiful his eyes were.

'Oh, sweet Anna,' Otho murmured, his lips on hers, 'you loved it, didn't you? I could tell.'

'Yes,' she breathed. 'I never dreamed there could be pleasure like that.' She lay there in his arms, feeling blissful, wanting to prolong the moment for as long as possible.

'This is what God intended for men and women!' he smiled.

'It wasn't wrong, was it?' Her sense of fitness was returning, and with it the awareness that she had been a party to something forbidden.

'Of course not.' He released her and sat up, lacing his hose. 'But let's keep it as our secret. Our parents wouldn't understand. They think such pleasures should be kept for marriage, but I see no harm in enjoying them before.'

Anna began to feel guilty. Carried away on a tide of madness, she had betrayed the precepts drummed into her by her mother. But it had been so beautiful! Why, then, did she feel a creeping sense of dread? It was the fear of being found out, she realised; that was all. How could she regret something that had brought her such joy?

'Can we be married, Anna?' Otho asked, gazing at her longingly.

'Oh, I do wish that!' she cried. 'But I am promised to the Duke of Lorraine's son.' Her voice caught in her throat.

He stared at her. 'I did not know.'

She shook her head. 'It is not what I want, but my father is set on an alliance with Lorraine.' Belatedly, she realised that what she had done with Otho was meant to be saved for marriage; they had stolen what rightfully belonged to Francis.

'Betrothals can be broken,' Otho said.

Anna shook her head. 'I doubt it.' She felt tears welling, and knew her misery must be written plain on her face.

She stood up, tidied herself and moved towards the door.

'Where are you going, *Liebling*?' Otho asked, looking bewildered.

'We should go back. We have been here too long,' she said.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her again, long and yearningly, leaving her in no doubt as to his feelings. They belonged to each other now, and nothing could change that: it was what his lips were saying to her. She was drowning in emotion. She wanted the moment to go on for ever, but made herself break away. She dared not stay alone with him here any longer.

'I love you, Anna,' she heard him whisper.

Ignoring the soreness between her legs, she hastened down the stairs, bereft, and desperate to cry out her sorrow in her chamber, where there would be clean water, soap and towels to remove all trace of her sinfulness, and she could take off the gown of which she had been so proud, but which now bore the stains of her fall from grace. Otho was right. What had passed between them *must* remain a secret; besides, Anna did not have the words to describe what had happened. If her parents found out, *she* would be blamed. She should not have been alone with Otho in the first place, let alone allowed him to kiss her and lie with her. They would say he had dishonoured her, a princess of Kleve, when he was a guest in her father's house. Yet it had not been like that! She had lain with him willingly – and she had been in ecstasy. Otho had said he loved her and had spoken of marriage – yet they could never belong to each other. Tears welled again in her eyes as she emerged from the tower. She prayed the guards would not notice her distress.

'Anna?' Otho cried, behind her. 'Are you all right?'

'The Spiegelturm is over there,' she called back, her voice catching.

‘They’ll be waiting for you. Tell them . . . tell them my head is aching and that I’ve gone to lie down.’

Leaving him standing there, she hastened away to her chamber. Mercifully, it was deserted. Mother Lowe was enjoying her usual afternoon nap.

Crying, Anna unlaced her bodice and sleeves and let her gown fall to the floor, then poured some water from the ewer into the bowl beside it. It was while she was scrubbing herself that she noticed blood on her lawn chemise. Was this the monthly visitation Mutter had warned her about? When Anna had asked why women had to bleed, Mutter had simply said that it was God’s will, and that Anna would learn more about it when she was about to be married. Anna wondered if it had anything to do with what she had done this day.

She changed her chemise and put the soiled one to soak in the bowl of water. What to do about the dress? There was blood on the lining of that too, so she took the damp cloth she had used to wash herself and rubbed it away. Soon, the stain was nearly gone; if you were not looking for it, you would not see it. She laid the damp dress away in the chest, and put on another, of creamy silk banded with crimson. Then she stared at herself in the mirror, checking that no one could see she had been crying. Her eyes looked a bit red, but she could put that down to the headache. And it was true, her head *was* aching, from the burden of love, guilt and desperation she now carried.

When the bell in the tower summoned everyone to supper, she sped down the stairs and arrived in the dining chamber on time. Vater never could abide unpunctuality.

Otho was there already, with Onkel Otho and Tante Elisabeth. She wanted to fly into his arms, but made herself avoid his eyes, aware that he was avidly seeking hers. No one must guess the secret that lay between them.

‘Is your head better, my dear?’ Tante Elisabeth asked her.

‘I am much better, thank you,’ Anna told her.

‘You’ve changed your dress, child,’ Mutter observed.

‘I was too hot in the other one.’ She was praying Otho would not

give them away, by some chance word or glance. Mutter could be sharply observant.

The meal was an ordeal, and she struggled to behave normally, and to eat the choice carp and roasted pork served to her. She dared not think of what had happened earlier, lest her face flame and betray her. It wasn't easy, with Otho sitting so dangerously near to her, looking so handsome, and her stomach churning with love and desire. It took all her inner resources to behave as usual. She did not think anyone noticed anything amiss.

After supper, the Duke's consort of musicians arrived with their trumpets, lutes and harps. Mutter would always have harp music if she could; it was her favourite, and she bestowed one of her rare smiles on the players when the last note had been struck.

'I wish we could dance,' Emily said wistfully, 'or sing.'

Mutter frowned. 'My dear child, you know it is immodest for a woman to dance or sing in public.'

'I know,' muttered Emily gloomily, 'but I do so love music and dancing.'

Tante Elisabeth regarded her with disapproval.

'She inherited her love of music from me,' Mutter said. Elisabeth gave a thin smile.

The men were talking of politics.

'The Emperor has ambitions. He wants the duchy of Guelders for himself,' Vater was saying. 'But it will go to Anna's betrothed.' Anna saw Otho's expression darken, but Vater continued, unheeding. 'Duke Charles is childless, and Francis, as his great-nephew, will inherit. I myself have a claim to Guelders, but I relinquished it as part of the terms of the betrothal contract; I am content that my daughter will be duchess of Guelders.'

Anna struggled to maintain her composure. She most certainly was not content at the prospect. Her imaginary image of Francis had metamorphosed from a courteous, smiling boy into a disapproving, suspicious man.

'The Emperor also has a claim to Guelders, does he not?' Onkel Otho asked.

‘Yes, through his mother,’ Vater told him. ‘But if he presses it, we will be ready for him. Kleve may be part of the Holy Roman Empire, but it is also one of the leading principalities of Germany. We will not let the Emperor dictate to us. We protect our independence. We have our own courts and our own army, and I keep control of our foreign policy.’ Wilhelm was listening avidly.

‘But Charles is very powerful. You would have a fight on your hands,’ Onkel Otho said.

‘Ah, but he might well be going to war with England, if King Henry continues in his attempt to divorce his Imperial Majesty’s Aunt Katherine to marry a courtesan. I count on Charles being too pre-occupied with that, and with the Turks encroaching on his eastern borders, to concern himself with Guelders. I have the means to raise a mighty army.’ The Duke paused as a servant refilled his goblet. ‘I met King Henry of England once, you know. Eight years ago, I visited his kingdom in the train of the Emperor.’

‘What was he like, Vater?’ Wilhelm asked.

‘Handsome. Bombastic. Full of his new title. The Pope had just named him Defender of the Faith for writing a book against Martin Luther.’

The conversation dragged on interminably. There had been no chance of any conversation with Otho, as Wilhelm and Emily were sitting between him and Anna, and now, at precisely nine o’clock, the Hofmeister was arriving to remove the wine, signalling that it was time to retire. It was forbidden to the courtiers to sit up any later, playing cards, drinking or even just chatting, and Vater liked to set a good example.

Everyone bade each other a good night. As Anna was leaving the room, she felt a hand close on hers from behind, pressing something into her palm. She swung round, to see Otho giving her a longing look. Fortunately, no one seemed to have noticed, and she walked on, out of the dining chamber, to receive her parents’ blessings and hasten up to her room.

Only then did she open her hand. She was holding a tiny package wrapped in a scrap of damask; inside was a ring enamelled in red. There

was a note, too. ‘Sweet Anna, please accept this token of my esteem. My family’s coat of arms has a red ring, so it is special to me. I hope you will wear it and think kindly of your servant.’

He had given her his special ring! If only it could have been her betrothal ring! And yet, even though it was not, it still symbolised eternal love.

She dared not keep the note; though it broke her heart to do it, she tore it into tiny pieces and threw them out of the window. But the ring she hid under the loose floorboard in the corner of her bedchamber.

When the von Wyliches left, two days later, Anna was torn between misery at having to bid farewell to Otho and relief at not having to fend off his earnest, covert attempts to speak with her. Once he had gone, taking with him the fear of exposure, she was able to relax, telling herself she must not think of him, for the sake of her sanity; nor did she dare ask her father for a place for him, lest her evident interest in his affairs led to awkward questions. Yet it was unbearably hard to resume the endless routine of her days, which she and Emily spent largely in their mother’s apartments, among the women. Rarely, except at night, in their shared bedchamber, were they alone.

Wilhelm was luckier. From the age of seven, he had received a fine education under Vater’s scholarly councillor, Herr Heresbach, who had been recommended by Erasmus himself. Wilhelm never stopped boasting that Erasmus had dedicated a book to him when he was only five. He was now fluent in Latin and French, whereas Anna and Emily could speak only German. Mutter did not believe in educating women beyond teaching them to read and write.

‘It is immodest for great ladies to be learned,’ she said, often. ‘It is not necessary for you girls to speak any other tongue.’

Anna could not imagine her mother ever succumbing to the kind of passion she herself had experienced. Mutter, whose resemblance to Anna was marked, physically, but not (Anna felt sadly) in many other ways, was too dignified, too serene, too devout. She supervised her daughters almost constantly. Even when Anna and Emily took some

recreation in the fresh air, there she was, following at a distance with her ladies.

‘We are never far from her elbow!’ Emily grumbled as Mutter watched them perambulating the garden, and Anna found herself chafing even more now against such vigilance.

‘The Duchess is a wise lady,’ Mother Lowe chided when, back indoors, the sisters complained about Mutter’s rules. ‘It is rare to see a mother who looks after her children so strictly.’ Mother Lowe was also a lady of great dignity, for all her plumpness, her apple cheeks, and her plaits tight-coiled around each ear. Anna and Emily knew beyond doubt that she loved them, but she colluded with Mutter in constraining them to be modest, chaste and humble. Everything they learned from mother and nurse was intended to mould them into the virtuous future wives of princes; and if they strayed from the narrow path mapped out for them, or fell to daydreaming, well then, Mutter and Mother Lowe would be sure to keep them busy and distracted with religious devotions and needlework. Heaven forbid, Anna prayed, that they ever learned how far she had fallen short of their exhortations!

‘You must be like nuns,’ Mutter enjoined yet again. She was prone to giving little homilies as they sat plying their needles. It was now a week since their guests had left, and Anna wondered, in some alarm, if her mother had noticed her reaction to Otho. ‘You must learn custody of the eyes. Never let them stray where they should not go. Be discreet in your gestures and your expressions.’

Even if she had noticed, Mutter could not know the whole of it, Anna reassured herself, suppressing the guilt that nagged at her constantly. It still surprised her that she had been so heedless of Mutter’s training. Custody of the eyes? She had kept custody of nothing! I am not worthy to be married, she told herself miserably. I am not worthy of my family’s love. If they knew what I really am, they would spurn me, as I deserve.

She said nothing of her unhappiness. She must keep her secret, bearing her joy, her sorrow and her guilt in silence – these were her punishments.

She yearned now for more distractions. Her days were a repetitive

round of prayers, needlework, weaving, cooking and instruction on how to run a great household. At least there was always music to listen to; however, playing and singing were condemned as indecorous. Emily cleverly circumvented that rule. She had a lute hidden amidst the jumble of possessions crammed under her bed, which she would play softly at night or in snatched moments, and she was forever scribbling down the words to songs she had made up. But Anna lacked her temerity and boldness; besides, she could not play any instrument, and certainly she could not sing.

It seemed that her world was forever to be limited to the boundaries of castle and chapel, though occasionally, she and Emily were allowed to entertain guests at dinner with the Duke and Duchess, for in Kleve, parents brought up their daughters to be good hostesses. The guests – who were chosen for them – were invariably humanist scholars, churchmen, or councillors Vater wished to favour. They praised Anna’s charm and graciousness, as Mutter looked on approvingly. She thought she had done well in so virtuously bringing up her daughters.

For all Mutter’s strictness, Anna loved her. She was the rock on which their world was built, their lodestar when things went wrong. The sight of her composed face, the sound of her calm voice, represented all that was good and safe. And her faith was an inspiration.

Like Vater, Mutter was a friend to humanist scholars, but those who were welcomed into her circle, and at her table, were of one mind in opposing the teachings of Martin Luther. Mutter relied for spiritual consolation on her confessor, Father Gerecht, prior of the Charterhouse at Cantave, near her native Jülich. He was a monk of the very strict Carthusian Order, yet, although he had embraced the ascetic, secluded life of his cloister, he had a tender pity and love for those souls still living in the world, and visited court weekly. He had written two tracts against Luther, but there was no hatred in him. Anna loved to hear him preach, because all he spoke of was love.

‘Never lose sight of God’s love for man,’ he enjoined, smiling benevolently at her and Emily as they sat at table with Mutter. ‘You are Christian princesses, and must keep the Sacred Heart of God before you as the subject of special veneration and imitation.’ Anna

tried to do as he counselled, but she was finding as she grew older that the world offered too many distractions – most of which were forbidden to her.

Mutter, of course, was above worldly distractions. Her mission was to make good Catholics of her children. ‘I am always reminding them of the family motto: *Candida nostra fides* – “Our faith is pure”,’ she said, sipping her wine delicately. ‘And so it must be. My husband’s court is a school of this New Learning. It is true that we can learn much from these lately rediscovered texts of ancient Greece and Rome, yet I fear they inspire men to question the teachings of the Church.’

‘A new study of the works of antiquity seemed a marvellous thing a few years back,’ Father Gerecht declared, as fruit was served, ‘but your Grace is right, it has proved dangerous too, for it has indeed led men to question matters of faith and doctrine.’ He looked distressed. ‘Some think the Scriptures should be available for all to read.’ He did not mention the name of Erasmus; he did not need to, for they all knew that Erasmus advocated the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular, and had translated some himself. And it was well known that Vater agreed with him.

Mutter would never criticise Vater, or openly disagree with him. And because Vater loved Erasmus, she would not criticise him either. She just sat there daintily cutting up her food, looking pensive.

Father Gerecht shook his head. ‘If laymen are permitted to read the Scriptures, they may boast that they understand them better than the clergy, who are trained to interpret them and invested at ordination with the spiritual power to do so.’

Wilhelm, listening with interest to the conversation, suddenly spoke. ‘Forgive me, Father, but I have heard it said that not all priests have the learning to interpret Scripture properly for their flock, and that some interpret it selectively for their own ends.’

‘Wilhelm!’ Mutter exclaimed, shocked.

The old monk smiled. ‘Your Grace, it is natural at the boy’s age to question, and if he has heard this, then he needs to hear that it is very rarely the case. There are venal souls in all walks of life, even in the

priesthood, regrettably. But most are devout and conscientious in their calling. Does that satisfy you, my young lord?’

‘Yes, Father.’ Wilhelm did not look convinced.

‘I should hope so,’ Mutter said, severe.

Wilhelm bowed his head.

It would not be long now until Anna’s fifteenth birthday. Her birthday was in September, Emily’s in October, and they always had a joint celebration, usually a staid little supper with their parents and a few choice guests, who would come with felicitations and gifts. At least it was a chance to dress up.

Anna was standing in her chemise in the middle of her chamber, studying the fine garments spread out on her bed. Emily fidgeted impatiently, already dressed in a gown of moss green with a wide black velvet belt and elaborate slashing on the tight sleeves.

‘The black velvet is too sombre, Anna,’ she said.

‘Yes, but it’s my most costly dress.’ Anna bent over a rich pool of crimson velvet. ‘I’ll wear this one. And perhaps my new headdress, with my plaits showing.’ She lifted up the beaded *Stichelchen*; it was beautifully embroidered, with a decorative forecloth of gold.

‘Very fitting, Madame la Marquise,’ Mother Lowe commented, as she bustled into the room with a pile of clean linen for the chest at the bottom of the bed. ‘Now that you are almost a grand old lady of fifteen, you must look the part! But that crimson clashes with your headdress. Why not wear your red silk?’

Anna hesitated. She had not worn the gown since June, and did not want to do so now. It bore an indelible reminder of what had passed between her and Otho, if anyone looked closely enough.

‘No, I think I will wear the black,’ she said quickly. ‘That gold belt with the big buckle will go well with it.’

Mother Lowe laced her into the gown. ‘I do declare, my lady, that you have put on weight,’ she said. ‘I was lacing it tighter last time.’

‘That’s because she likes her *Kuchen* too much,’ Emily scoffed. Anna did not laugh. She had enjoyed no more cakes than normal, yet she was aware that her bust had developed rather rapidly in the past weeks, and

her stomach was rounder. It was all part of becoming a woman, she knew, but she did not want to become fat.

She put on the belt. It was true. Her waistline had thickened. 'I shall have to look to my diet,' she said.

"'Tis common for young ladies of your age to get plump,' Mother Lowe consoled her. 'If you eat less, it will all fall off, mark my words.'

But it didn't. A month later, as the wind was whistling around the towers, the cobbles were slippery with damp russet leaves, and the household were preparing to move to Düsseldorf, as they did every winter, Anna had to face the fact that her belly and breasts were definitely swollen. Could she be ill when she felt very well? And what disease would manifest itself like this?

An awful possibility occurred to her. When the married ladies of her mother's court were *enceinte*, their stomachs swelled up. They would disappear to their estates for some months, then reappear at court, slim as reeds and full of gossip about their new babes. But she could not be *enceinte*. She was not married, for a start, and Otho had assured her that kissing, even the more intimate kind, was harmless. Mother Lowe had just said it wasn't to put her charges off kissing any young man they fancied.

But what if Otho had been wrong? What if kissing was not as harmless as he'd said?

Chapter 2

1530–1531

November came in with mists, and the packing was nearly completed. They would leave Schwanenburg tomorrow.

That night, Anna lay wakeful, her hands on her belly. There was a definite thickening there. And she had to keep hurrying to the close stool.

She got up and knelt down by the bed. Prising up the floorboard, she retrieved Otho's ring. It must go with her; she could not bear to leave it behind. It was all she had of him.

When she got back into bed, sleep still eluded her. Dare she risk consulting one of her father's physicians? Doctors swore an oath not to reveal anything about their patients, but would Dr Schultz account loyalty to his Duke more pressing, morally speaking? And how would Anna ever find the words to tell him what she had done with Otho?

But she had to know what ailed her, otherwise she might die – or, Heaven forbid, have a baby, which was almost worse. She could not keep her symptoms a secret for much longer. Already she was fastening her belts as tight as she dared, and making sure she was clad in her warmest, most voluminous chemises before Mother Lowe arrived each morning to help her dress. Soon, surely, her nurse would notice that something was wrong.

She could not fool Mother Lowe. The very next morning, that redoubtable lady sailed into the room before Anna had had time to get out of bed.

'Hurry up, Madame la Marquise!' she said. 'We have a journey of a hundred miles ahead of us, and your lord father wants to be on the road

as soon as possible, to make the most of the daylight. I'll just pour you some hot water and put your chemise to warm in front of the stove.'

Anna slithered out of bed. Not so long ago, it would not have bothered her to strip and wash in front of her nurse. Turning her back, she lowered her night-rail to her waist, took a clean cloth and began to soap her face and arms, praying that Mother Lowe would not notice the changes in her body.

'Anna, face me!' Mother Lowe's use of her Christian name, as if she were a child again, and the sharpness of her command, left Anna in no doubt that her secret was rumbled. Clutching the damp night-rail to her breasts, she turned. Mother Lowe's face bore such a look of horror that it chilled her.

'Is there something you need to tell me, child?' she stuttered. '*Mein Gott*, I had my suspicions, but I told myself, no, not my Anna, it is not possible. She is a good girl, and innocent of such matters. Anna would not do such a thing. Tell me you have not shamed us all!'

Anna burst into tears. 'I don't know!' she wailed. 'He said it would not be harmful.'

Mother Lowe's hand flew to her mouth. 'He? You had best tell me everything!' She was visibly struggling to regain mastery of herself, but her shock was plain.

Anna hung her head, bracing herself to face the consequences of her wickedness, knowing that this was one thing her nurse could not make better. All the same, as her sorry tale came tumbling out, in fits and starts and clumsy euphemisms, she felt relief at unburdening herself.

While she talked, Mother Lowe dressed her with trembling hands. This would reflect badly on her nurse, Anna realised. Mutter would say she had not properly looked to her charge, or instilled in her a sufficient sense of propriety. And that would not be fair, for Mutter herself had suggested that Anna, Emily and Wilhelm show Otho around the castle. She had not told them to find Mother Lowe, because she had known that Mother Lowe would be napping. And, for all that Mutter herself had drummed into Anna the need to be virtuous, she had failed in her duty too, because she had not told Anna what she must guard against.

‘He was definitely inside you?’ Mother Lowe barked, her cheeks pink.

‘Yes,’ Anna whispered. ‘He told me it was kissing, and harmless.’

‘Harmless my foot! It is what a man and woman do to get a baby. And it looks like you have got one, poor lamb.’ The nurse sighed deeply. ‘What’s to be done, I cannot think. Your lady mother will have to be told.’

‘No!’ Anna cried, suddenly furious with Otho for misleading her – had he done it deliberately? – and devastated at the prospect of Mutter’s shock, her disappointment in her daughter, and the anger that must surely follow.

‘I have no choice,’ Mother Lowe stated firmly. ‘She has to know, so she can decide what to do. But you must leave it to me to tell her, in my own way, to make her understand that, while you acted foolishly and with impropriety, you were taken advantage of by a young scoundrel who should have known better!’

Anna was trembling. She wanted to protest that no, it had not been like that! But she dared not. She needed Mother Lowe on her side.

‘What do you think she will say?’ she whispered.

‘What any mother hearing such news would say!’ the nurse snapped. ‘And you must allow her her righteous fury. But I think I know her well enough to say that, when she has calmed down, she will be just.’

‘Are you going to tell her now?’ Anna faltered.

‘No, child.’ Mother Lowe lifted Anna’s cloak from its peg. ‘We have to be on our way. It’s best to wait until we get to Düsseldorf.’

‘But we won’t be there for three days!’ Anna cried.

‘And there’ll be little privacy on the way. No, it must keep until we arrive, for I need time to think how I’m going to approach your lady mother.’

Never had a journey seemed so long. It was an eternity before the walls, spires and onion domes of the ducal capital appeared in the distance, wreathed in fog.

Anna had been born here, in the palace overlooking the River Rhine, and it was from here that Sybilla had departed to marry the Elector of

Saxony. But today, Anna could not take her usual pleasure in what was normally a happy homecoming. She was too full of dread. As she alighted from the chariot in the outer courtyard, all she could think of was that tonight she would know her fate. She could not imagine what it would be. Would her betrothal be broken? Could they consign her to a nunnery, to live out her days in shame? Worst of all, would her parents disown her? Or – and she began to cherish a golden beacon of hope – would Otho be made to wed her? Maybe things would turn out well after all.

Vater was dismounting, looking up in satisfaction at the two towers flanking the open end of the great courtyard, each surmounted by a cupola. Mutter was directing her maids to see to her personal luggage.

‘You girls, go up to your rooms,’ she told her daughters. ‘And, Anna, do try to look more cheerful. It will be Christmas soon.’

‘Yes, my lady,’ Anna said, forcing a smile, then turning away quickly so that Mutter should not see the tears brimming. By Christmas, she might have been cast out from her family.

She made for the stairs, Emily following, and they ascended to their chambers on the second floor. The sumptuousness of the private apartments, which always struck Anna anew each time she came here, made no impression on her today. She closed the door of her chamber behind her and sank down on a carved settle, choking back her sobs. Her maid came knocking, asking if she should unpack, but Anna sent her away.

She was too restless to read or embroider. She found herself staring out of the window at the grey-tiled roofs of the gallery and loggia below her, which fronted the quayside. In the rooms beneath hers, Mutter would be settling in, unaware that her world was about to be shattered. At the thought of that, Anna wept again.

Supper, as usual, was served to the ducal children in their own chambers. Anna took one look at the *Sauerbraten* and fried spinach before her, and sent it away, feeling nauseous.

‘I am not hungry,’ she told her maid.

She was in a fever of anxiety to discover whether Mother Lowe had

spoken to Mutter yet. It was not until the bell sounded seven o'clock that the nurse came to her chamber, her face grave.

'Your lady mother wants to see you,' she said.

Anna rose shakily, unable to speak. Her throat felt as if it was closing up. She went ahead of Mother Lowe, down the stairs and through the public rooms to the door leading to Mutter's chamber, her legs feeling as if they might give way. The guards stood to attention, raising their crossed pikes. An usher sprang forward and pushed open the door.

'Madame la Marquise de Pont-à-Mousson!' he announced.

Anna walked past him, her eyes searching out her mother's face as she curtseyed.

The Duchess was alone, seated in her usual chair. At her nod, the doors closed behind Anna and Mother Lowe. Anna was utterly shocked to see that Mutter had been crying. Mutter never cried. She offered up her troubles to God, certain that He would succour her. But evidently this trial Anna had inflicted on her was beyond divine help.

'Sit down, Anna,' Mutter said, indicating a stool. Her voice shook. 'You know what this is about. It is too painful for me to reiterate what Mother Lowe has told me, so we will not dwell on that. You must go to confession, do penance and make your peace with God. What concerns *me* is what happens now. Mother Lowe reckons that you are about five months . . .' She gave an involuntary shudder.

'Yes, my lady,' Anna whispered. 'I am so sorry.'

'I am sure you are.' Mutter's voice was tart. 'When I think of all the times I exhorted you to virtue, I could weep. If you had heeded me properly, we would not be having this conversation today. But what's done cannot be undone, however much it grieves us. And Mother Lowe has told me how deeply it has grieved *you*, having to live with the consequences of your sin. I bear in mind your tender years and your innocence. I like to think that you were more sinned against than sinning, as appears to have been the case.'

Anna bowed her head. Such understanding was more than she deserved. She would be eternally grateful to Mother Lowe for giving such a sympathetic account of her transgression.

Now was the moment to plead for her future. ‘My lady,’ she ventured, ‘we were wrong to do what we did, but we love each other. Otho wants to marry me!’

Mutter stared at her. ‘Are you out of your mind, girl? Do you really think that your lord father would marry you off to a bastard?’ Anna had never heard her mother speak so vehemently.

‘But it would avoid disgrace, my lady,’ she whispered.

‘There are other ways of doing that!’ The Duchess shook her head, as if despairing. ‘Anna, heed me. On no account must anyone ever find out that you are with child. Have you told anyone?’

‘No, Madam. But shouldn’t Otho be informed?’

Mutter’s eyes widened in astonishment. ‘Absolutely not! He should be horsewhipped for what he did to you, but it is better that he remains in ignorance of what has come of it. And your father must never know either. It would break his heart . . . as it has broken mine.’ Her voice trembled again. Anna was overcome with remorse – and resentment. She had hurt Mutter badly, yet Mutter was being very unreasonable.

‘So,’ her mother’s voice was brisk again, ‘we will say you are ill, with a humour of the stomach. Mother Lowe tells me your appetite has been poor lately, so maybe others have noticed too. You will go to stay at Schloss Burg, where the air is healthy, and there, in the spring, you will make a full recovery, God willing. Mother Lowe will accompany you, and she will arrange for a midwife to attend you in due course. When . . . when all is over, you can return to court, as if nothing had happened, and no one will be any the wiser.’

‘Yes, Mutter,’ Anna replied dully. Her punishment could have been a lot more severe, and she might even have forfeited her mother’s love, but couldn’t Mutter have been a bit more understanding and exercised her considerable influence to persuade Vater to let Anna marry Otho? How happy she would have been! But now . . .

‘What of the child?’ she asked, playing her last card. ‘It needs a father.’

Mutter’s lips tightened. ‘You should have thought of that! It will be put out to nurse and fostered. None shall know who its parents were. Mother Lowe, you will arrange that while you are at Solingen.’

‘Yes, Madam,’ the nurse nodded.

The Duchess turned to Anna. ‘You may not believe it now, but this is all for the best. All I ask of you is your cooperation and your discretion.’

‘Yes, Madam,’ Anna whispered, unable to contain the tears any longer. ‘Shall I have to confess to Father Gerecht?’ She felt sick at the prospect – and suddenly frightened at the thought of facing what lay ahead without Mutter’s reassuring presence.

‘No. Mother Lowe will arrange for a priest to visit you at Schloss Burg,’ her mother said. ‘Someone who does not know you.’

Despite her resentment, Anna knew she had been very lucky. ‘Madam, I cannot thank you sufficiently for your goodness to me, which I know I do not deserve,’ she said tearfully. ‘I am very sorry to have grieved you so; and I will miss you.’ She sank to her knees, crying hard now, her shoulders heaving, her face in her hands.

A gentle hand rested on her shoulder. She raised her wet face to see Mutter bending over her. ‘I will miss you too, my Anna,’ she said, her voice softer. It came to Anna that her mother’s reserve did not arise so much from disapproval as from sadness. She was holding on to her emotions, as she always did. Anna had not yet mastered that art. She flung her arms about her mother’s waist.

‘Do not forsake me utterly!’ she cried. ‘Please do not cast me out. I would rather die than lose your love.’

Mutter prised her hands away and held them. ‘No one is casting you out, Anna. I am doing what is best for you *because* I love you. Now, go to your chamber, take to your bed and pretend to be ill. And when you are away, we will write to each other and you can let me know how matters are progressing. Go with my blessing, and God keep you.’

Schloss Burg had always been one of Anna’s favourite places; she had spent much of her childhood there. Isolated on its rocky plateau high above the River Wupper, and surrounded by dense forests, the magnificent palace, formerly the chief stronghold of the Duchess Maria’s ancestors, the counts of Berg, was also a favourite abode of the Duke, on account of the good hunting to be had thereabouts, and because

it was perfect for hosting the courtly festivities he loved. In its distant days as a fortress, it had commanded a sound defensive position. Now, it was a cluster of pepperpot towers and pretty black-and-white timbered buildings surrounding a massive donjon. Vater appreciated it for its splendour, the security it afforded his family, and because it was a much healthier place for his children than the city air of Düsseldorf.

Leaning on the arm of Mother Lowe, accompanied only by the maid her nurse had chosen, who had been waiting inside the great arched Zwingertor to greet them, Anna walked slowly across the courtyard, aware of the two knights of her escort watching her with sympathy. Clearly she'd made a convincing show of being ill, and no doubt they thought she had come here in the forlorn hope of prolonging her life. Fortunately, it was now winter and her heavy furred cloak concealed her burgeoning stomach.

She ascended the grand processional stair one slow, careful step at a time, until they reached the public apartments on the first floor and entered the Rittersaal. This vast aisled Knight's Hall had long been used for the great ceremonies of state hosted by the dukes of Kleve, and before them, the counts of Berg. Mutter and Vater had been married in this hall twenty years ago, and Sybilla had been betrothed to the Elector here. Today, fires had been lit in the two elegant French-style fireplaces against their coming, but the room remained chilly, as if it needed warming by the presence of a great throng of people. The candles were unlit, giving the hall a gloomy aspect, and as Anna walked past the stone pillars that supported the lofty beamed ceiling, she shivered from both the cold and a sense of loneliness.

Beyond the Rittersaal were the spacious private suites used by the ducal family. Anna had spent many a day in Mutter's ladies' chamber, the Kemenate, where the women of the family lived when Vater was away. All the windows afforded beautiful views of the spectacular scenery outside. Beyond the Kemenate was the chapel, where, when she was in residence, the Duchess daily observed the liturgy of the Hours, herself reciting the Divine Office, with her children kneeling behind her.

The servants had prepared Anna's bedchamber. The green-tiled stove in the corner had been lit, the feather bed was airing, and floral tapestries had been hung on the walls. Mother Lowe had the little maid, Gerda, hastening to unpack Anna's chests, and soon the room seemed like home again – except that nearly everyone who made Schloss Burg home was missing.

As winter set in, and the child grew and kicked within her, Anna kept mostly to her chamber, looked after by Mother Lowe and Gerda, who had been told her mistress was suffering from a severe dropsy. Whether she suspected the truth, Anna never knew. For all that the girl was an unlettered farmer's daughter, she had a vivid imagination, but she was willing, and very kind to Anna. Hopefully, she did not think to question her betters.

Feeling her baby move for the first time had brought home forcefully to Anna the reality of the child growing inside her. She wept to think it would never know the love of its mother – or its father. She tried not to think of Otho; if she did, she knew she would go mad with longing and misery. He should be here, at her side. It was wrong to keep him in ignorance. It was cruel to make the babe an orphan.

Mother Lowe made discreet enquiries locally, and found an experienced midwife, who was spun a tale about one of the Duchess's married ladies being in an unfortunate predicament, and told that, having obtained permission to seek refuge in the castle, this lady required assistance and absolute discretion, and that the midwife would be paid well for both. Pleased with her good fortune, the midwife had undertaken to find a reputable wet nurse when the time approached. Her own sister was with child and might be able to help; she had had plenty of milk with her last babe. Mother Lowe had visited the midwife's house, and that of her sister, and reported that both were spotlessly clean. Better still, the midwife knew of a family who had lost six infants at birth, one year after the other, and were desperate for a child. The husband, Meister Schmidt, was a prosperous and respected swordsmith, a craftsman with a fine house of timber and stone, and his wife was very devout. The nuns in the cloister of Gräfrath in the

town would take care of the fostering. It was all arranged.

Anna knew she had no choice in the matter. It was for the best, Mutter had said firmly. Anna would never believe it.

Time dragged. The days were spent sewing a layette for the child to take with it to its foster home, or taking gentle exercise, or in prayer. Every week, Anna wrote to her mother, but there was not much to report, except that she was in good health and eating well. The fresh air of Schloss Burg had seen to that. Each day, she walked around the castle precincts, through a postern gate and into the gardens on the steep hillside beyond. They ended in a sheer drop, with the River Wupper far below.

In this hilly fastness, surrounded by forests, it was easy to believe in all the tales she had heard of witches and fairies and ghosts. Gerda held that the castle was haunted, but Mother Lowe was brisk to tell the girl to hush up and forget such nonsense. Expectant mothers, she murmured in Anne's ear, must not be affrighted!

But Anna, desperately in need of some diversion, found herself wanting to know more. Had Gerda seen or heard anything herself?

'No, Madam,' the girl had to admit. 'But my cousin is a groom here, and he once saw a tall black-hooded figure standing by the window in the Rittersaal.'

It could have been me, Anna reflected. Me, in my dark cloak. I am sad enough to haunt this place – a ghost from the present. 'I have never experienced anything odd here,' she said, 'but I do love ghost stories.'

Gerda had a fund of them, to while away the dragging hours. Thrown together as they were, notwithstanding the difference in their rank and station in life, they had become friends. Mother Lowe, normally a stickler for etiquette, did not discourage it. She knew how lonely Anna was, how homesick for her family, and how greatly she needed company. And here was Gerda, about her age, flaxen-haired, cheerful and garrulous. As soon as she had finished her duties, there she was, in Anna's chamber, chattering away. The final weeks of Anna's pregnancy were enlivened by many dark and magical tales.

As the child grew heavier inside her, so the evenings lengthened and the first buds of spring began to unfold. And one morning, in the middle of March, she felt the first pangs of travail.

The midwife, installed with her birthing chair in the castle two weeks earlier, had told her what to expect. Afterwards, she said it had been an easy birth. But nothing had prepared Anna for the force of the contractions, or the pain. It went on for hours and hours. Yet she was young and strong, and bore it well. Only at the last did she feel she could not endure any more – but then, urged to make one final, supreme effort, she felt her child slide into the world, and her ordeal was over.

Mother Lowe laid the tiny infant in her arms, just for a few moments, so that he could receive his mother's blessing before being parted from her for ever. Anna's heart turned over when she saw him; he was perfect, so adorable – and she could see Otho in him. She had never wished for anything as fiercely as she yearned to keep him, but she knew it was out of the question. It was a terrible moment, the worst one of her life, when Mother Lowe came back to take him away. Bravely, Anna swallowed her tears, kissed his sweet head and handed him over.

'His name is Johann,' she whispered, 'after my lord father.'

Left alone, she lay there sobbing, feeling as if half her heart had been torn away.

Mother Lowe came back and found her thus.

'Have it out, my lamb!' she cried. 'There, there. It was for the best, believe me. I have arranged for word of him to be sent to me from time to time, so that you will know he is happy and well. But now, you must look to the future. You have your destiny as a princess to fulfil, and I know you will do so with pride. You have had an easy travail, and your trouble is all behind you. You have been lucky.'

'Lucky?' Anna wept bitterly. 'Not when my arms are aching for my little baby, my *Liebling*! Not when I am missing him so dreadfully. If this is being lucky, what does bad luck feel like?'

As her body healed and her milk dried up, her empty arms continued to ache for the child she had lost. She returned to Düsseldorf fully restored to health, but with her heart bleeding for what might have been. It felt

impossible to resume life as she had known it, for she would never be the same again. And yet, as the months passed, and her secret grief turned to numbness, she began to see the wisdom of Mother Lowe's words. As far as avoiding scandal went, she had indeed been lucky. But she still felt like weeping every time she thought of how different her life could have been had she been allowed to share it with the man she loved and their child.