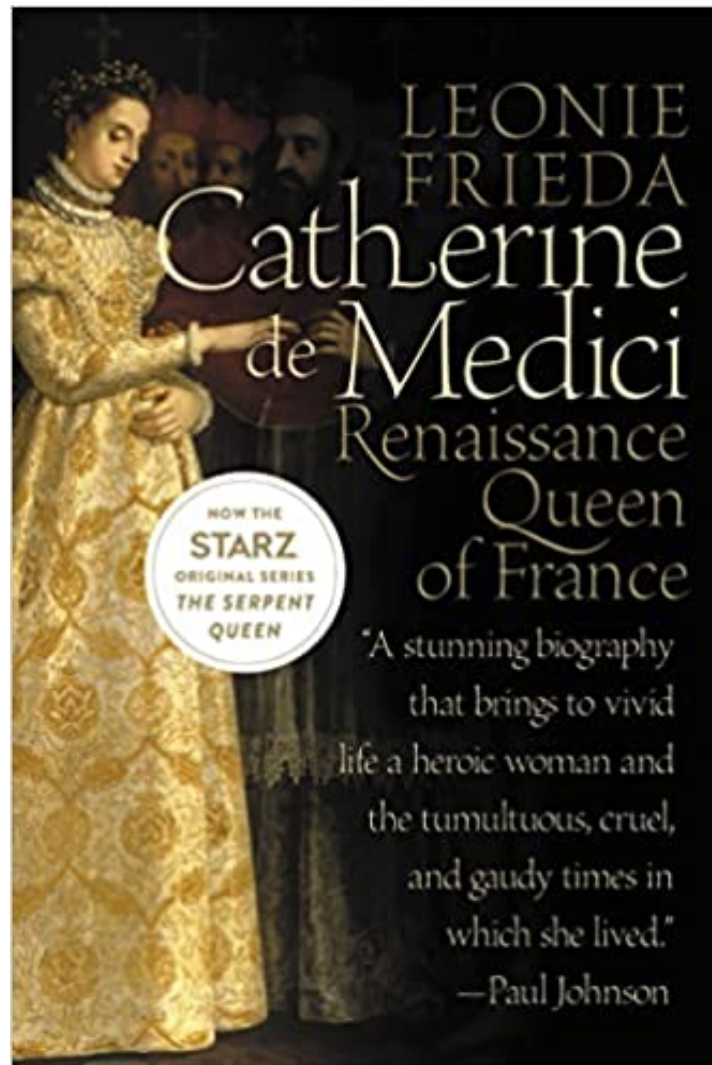


# Catherine De Medici: Renaissance Queen of France

*by*

Leonie Frieda



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## Synopsis

The inspiration for the STARZ original series, *The Serpent Queen*, streaming now! "A beautifully written portrait of a ruthless, subtle and fearless woman fighting for survival and power in a world of gangsterish brutality, routine assassination and religious mania. . . . Frieda has brought a largely forgotten heroine-villainess and a whole sumptuously vicious era back to life. . . . This is *The Godfather meets Elizabeth*." —Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* Poisoner, besotted mother, despot, necromancer, engineer of a massacre: the dark legend of Catherine de Medici is centuries old. In this critically hailed biography, Leonie Frieda reclaims the story of this unjustly maligned queen of France to reveal a skilled ruler battling extraordinary political and personal odds. Based on comprehensive research including thousands of Catherine's own letters, Frieda unfurls Catherine's story from her troubled childhood in Florence to her tumultuous marriage to Henry II of France; her transformation of French culture to her reign as a queen who would use brutality to ensure her children's royal birthright. Brilliantly executed, this enthralling biography goes beyond myth to paint a very human portrait of this remarkable figure.

## Sort review

"A stunning biography, which brings to vivid life a heroic woman and the tumultuous, cruel and gaudy times in which she lived. An outstanding first book by a newcomer to the ranks of English historians." — Paul Johnson "This intelligent and well-researched biography is a worthy testament to Catherine's formidable strength. Catherine de Medici reveals Frieda, a first-time biographer, to be a writer of tremendous skill and talent." — The Observer "As Leonie Frieda relates in this well-researched and immensely readable first biography, from her turbulent home in Florence Catherine found herself presiding over perhaps the nastiest period in all French history. Frieda is much to be praised for painting a wonderfully rich canvas." — London Times "A carefully nuanced portrait. . . [Leonie Frieda] achieves remarkable balance as she freshly interprets Catherine. . . a revealing biography." — Booklist "Leonie Frieda does this remarkable woman full justice. Refusing to play judge, she reveals her to us through the best of means, which is narrative. The skill with which Frieda finds her way through the maze of this confusing period is exemplary. You read on eagerly. An enthralling book." — Literary Review "Riveting and dramatic . . . there is no mistaking the abiding pleasure of this book." — Washington Times "Vivid and entertaining. . . a convincing human portrait against the backdrop of a brutal age." — Wall Street Journal "A smart, revisionist biography. . . [Leonie Frieda] does a splendid job unraveling the maddeningly complex political-religious context of Catherine's time." — Bloomberg News About the Author Leonie Frieda is the author of a bestselling biography of Catherine de Medici and *The Deadly Sisterhood: A Story of Women, Power and Intrigue in the Italian Renaissance*. She lives in London. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights

reserved. Catherine de Medici Renaissance Queen of France By Leonie Frieda HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. Copyright ©2006 Leonie Frieda All right reserved. Chapter One Orphan of Florence She comes bearing the calamities of the Greeks 1519-33 Caterina Maria Romula de Medici was born at around eleven o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, 13 April 1519. Her father, Lorenzo II de Medici, Duke of Urbino, scion of the ruling House of Florence, had married her mother, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, the previous year. This royal-blooded French countess and great heiress made a brilliant catch for the Medici, who were considered by many in France to be merely nouveaux riches merchants. Since their magnificent wedding, hosted by the bride's kinsman, King Francis I of France, and the couple's glorious return to Florence, there had been little cause for celebration. Madeleine's pregnancy, which had been announced in June, progressed well but the young duke, whose health had been poor for some time, had fallen ill in the autumn of 1518. Intermittent high fevers and fears over his condition led to him leaving Florence where the newlyweds had been living in princely state. The duke, probably suffering from syphilis and possibly tuberculosis, moved to the cleaner air of the surrounding countryside to await the birth of his child. By the time he returned to the city for his wife's confinement, he was dying. Immediately after her birth, attendants carried the baby to her bedridden father for inspection. The news that her mother had by now also become very ill was kept from the duke for fear of hastening his decline. The fact that she had borne him a daughter cannot have cheered him much since there would clearly be no further issue from this illustrious couple. In an attempt to brighten the gloomy reality of the baby's sex, a contemporary chronicler applied a sycophantic gloss to the ducal disappointment: he declared that the couple 'have both been as pleased as if it had been a boy'. Due to the illness of both parents, the child's hurriedly organised baptism took place on Saturday, 16 April at the family church of San Lorenzo. With four senior clerics and two noble relations in attendance, the baby received the names Caterina, a Medici family name, Maria, since it was the day of the Holy Virgin, and Romula, after the founder of Fiesole -- although I shall henceforth refer to her throughout as Catherine. On 28 April the duchess breathed her last followed by the duke only six days later on 4 May. The entombment of the couple in the splendid family vault at the church where their baby had so recently been baptised provided a dismal conclusion to their brief marriage. On the day the duke died his friend the poet Ariosto had arrived to condole with him over the death of the duchess. When he discovered that only an orphan child remained of the marriage that had promised a revival of the Medici fortunes he wrote a short ode: 'Verdeggia un solo ramo', dedicating it to the last hope of this pre-eminent merchant dynasty: A single branch, buds and lo, I am distraught with hope and fear, Whether winter will let it blow, Or blight it on the growing bier. Catherine owed her existence to the obsessive Italian territorial ambitions of Francis I of France. Between the fall of the western Roman Empire and its late-nineteenth-century unification, Italy was a patchwork of principalities, duchies, and city-states. Most of these showed a precocious vigour in the arts, technology and trade, making them tempting acquisitions for outsiders. Unlike Florence, they were usually ruled by families descended from famous warriors (known as condottieri); names

like the Sforza of Milan and the Gonzaga of Mantua evoke the mercenary soldiers who carved their fortunes from battle. While a small number of states such as Venice, Genoa and Florence were -- for a time at least independent, by the mid-sixteenth century the majority were ruled either directly or indirectly by Spain. From 1490 until 1559, when Spanish supremacy was established, Italy became the bloody arena where the two Continental superpowers played out their bitter struggle to dominate Europe. Francis I, descended through his great-grandmother from the Visconti of Milan, required a sturdy ally in the peninsula to press his claim for the duchy. Accordingly, he forged an affiance with Pope Leo X, Giovanni de Medici. Unlike popes today, His Holiness was not only Christ's representative on earth, but he also exercised the temporal powers of a monarch as ruler of the Papal States, most of which were in central Italy. The papal tiara was a triple crown that placed the popes above kings and emperors; not only did the papacy hold claim to a huge amount of property throughout the Catholic world (in pre-Reformation England one fifth of the land was held by Rome) but the pope also had the right to legal jurisdiction in Catholic countries and many types of legal cases were referred to the Ecclesiastical Court. To strengthen his agreement with the Medici Pope, Francis decided to arrange the marriage of an orphaned Bourbon heiress, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, to Leo's nephew, Lorenzo de Medici. At Leo's instigation Lorenzo had recently snatched the duchy of Urbino from the della Rovere family.\* For this enterprise the Pope had provided prodigious financial support with monies gained from the creation of thirty new cardinals. In private, Francis felt snobbishly sceptical about Lorenzo's ability to keep the newly acquired fief of Urbino, commenting that he was after all 'only a tradesman' ...Continues...Excerpted from Catherine de Mediciby Leonie Frieda Copyright ©2006 by Leonie Frieda. Excerpted by permission. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher. Excerpts are provided by Dial-A-Book Inc. solely for the personal use of visitors to this web site. Read more

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France, and Henry II's mentor. By Corneille de Lyon. (Musée Condé, Chantilly)<sup>2</sup>François, 2nd Duke of Guise: soldier-statesman who masterminded the 1559 coup. By Clouet (Louvre, Paris)<sup>4</sup>The Catholic Paladin: Henri, 3rd Duke of Guise, 'le balafre', later known as 'The King of Paris'. (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris)<sup>2</sup>Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, leader of the Huguenots. School of Clouet, c. 1550. (Musée Condé, Chantilly)<sup>2</sup>The exquisite Château of Chenonceau.<sup>2</sup>A romanticised portrayal of the 1561 Colloquy of Poissy. (Bibliothèque de l'Histoire du Protestantisme, Paris)<sup>2</sup>Catherine as Queen of France, the image of majesty. (Palazzo Pitti, Florence)<sup>2</sup>A nineteenth-century depiction of the wedding celebrations of Henri de Bourbon, King of Navarre (later Henri IV) and Margot, some days before the Massacre of St Bartholemew.<sup>2</sup>Catherine standing over corpses after the massacre of St Bartholemew. By François Dubois. (Musée des Beaux Arts, Paris)<sup>4</sup>The Valois dynasty ended with the assassination of Henri III in 1589, depicted in this contemporary engraving.<sup>2</sup>The future: Henry IV, King of France and Navarre. (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris)<sup>2</sup>The 'gisants' of Henry II and Catherine at the Cathedral of St Denis.<sup>2</sup>The author and the publishers offer their thanks to the following for their kind permission to reproduce images:<sup>1</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris<sup>2</sup> Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library<sup>3</sup> Scala<sup>4</sup> AKG Images, London

Principal Characters

House of Valois

Francis I, King of France, father-in-law to Catherine de Medici

Marguerite of Angoulême, sister of Francis I, wife of Henri d'Albret, King of Navarre

Dauphin Francis, eldest son of Francis I

Henry II, King of France, second son of Francis I, formerly Duke of Orléans, husband of Catherine de Medici

Marguerite of Valois, sister of Henry II, wife of Emanuel-Philibert, Duke of Savoy

Francis II, King of France, eldest son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici

Charles IX, King of France, third son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici

Henri III, King of France, Duke of Anjou, fourth son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici

Duke of Alençon, youngest son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici

Elisabeth of Valois, daughter of Henry II and Catherine de Medici, wife of Philip II of Spain

Claude of Valois, daughter of Henry II and Catherine de Medici, wife of Charles, Duke of Lorraine

Marguerite of Valois (Margot), daughter of Henry II and Catherine de Medici, wife of Henry IV, King of France

House of Medici

Cosimo the Elder

Lorenzo The Magnificent, grandson of Cosimo the Elder

Guiliano de Medici, brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent

Lorenzo II de Medici, Duke of Urbino, grandson of Lorenzo The Magnificent, Catherine de Medici's father

Madeleine de La Tour d'Auvergne, wife of Lorenzo II, Catherine de Medici's mother

Pope Leo X, son of Lorenzo The Magnificent

Pope Clement VII, Giulio de Medici, illegitimate son of Giuliano de Medici, cousin of Pope Leo X

Alessandro de Medici, Duke of Florence, illegitimate son of Pope Clement VIII

ppolito de Medici, illegitimate nephew of Pope Leo X

Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, distant kinsman of Catherine de Medici

Maria de Medici, granddaughter of Cosimo I, second wife of Henry IV, King of France

Piero Strozzi, nephew of Lorenzo II

Leone Strozzi, younger brother of Piero Strozzi

House of Bourbon

Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre, First Prince of the Blood, father of Henry IV, King of France, husband of Jeanne d'Albret

Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre, wife of Antoine de Bourbon, daughter of Marguerite of Angoulême

Louis de Condé, Prince of the

Blood, younger brother of Antoine de Bourbon Charles, Cardinal de Bourbon, Prince of the Blood, became the pretender Charles X and younger brother of Antoine de Bourbon Henry IV, King of France, son of Antoine de Bourbon and Jeanne d'Albret, husband of (1) Marguerite de Valois (Margot) and (2) Maria de Medici Henri de Condé, Prince of the Blood, son of Louis de Condé House of Habsburg Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, formerly Charles I of Spain Ferdinand I of Austria, Holy Roman Emperor, brother of Charles V Philip II of Spain, son of Charles V, whose wives included Mary I of England and Elisabeth of Valois Maximilian II of Austria, Holy Roman Emperor, son of Ferdinand I Elisabeth of Austria, daughter of Maximilian II, wife of Charles IX House of Tudor Henry VIII, King of England Edward VI, King of England, son of Henry VIII Mary I, Queen of England, daughter of Henry VIII, wife of Philip II of Spain Elizabeth I, Queen of England, daughter of Henry VIII House of Guise Claude, 1st Duke of Guise, son of René, Duke of Lorraine François, 2nd Duke of Guise, eldest son of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise Anna d'Este, (1) wife of François, 2nd Duke of Guise, (2) of the Duke of Nemours Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine, second son of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise Claude, Duke d'Aumale, fifth son of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise Mary of Guise, daughter of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise, wife of James V of Scotland Mary, Queen of Scots, daughter of Mary of Guise and James V of Scotland, wife of Francis II of France Henri, 3rd Duke of Guise, son of François, 2nd Duke of Guise Louis, Cardinal of Guise, brother of Henri, 3rd Duke of Guise Louise de Vaudémont, great-niece of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise, wife of Henri III, King of France House of Montmorency Anne de Montmorency, Constable of France Gaspard de Coligny, nephew of Anne de Montmorency Ôdet, Cardinal de Châtillon, elder brother of Gaspard de Coligny François d'Andelot, youngest brother of Gaspard de Coligny François de Montmorency, eldest son of Anne de Montmorency Henri Damville de Montmorency, second son of Anne de Montmorency Other Duchess d'Étampes, mistress of Francis I Diane de Poitiers, Duchess of Valentinois, mistress of Henry II Count Gabriel de Montgomery, accidental killer of Henry II Cosimo Ruggieri, necromancer to Catherine de Medici Ambroise Paré, court surgeon Michel de L'Hôpital, Catherine de Medici's Chancellor Marie-Catherine de Gondi, Catherine de Medici's closest friend, lady-in-waiting, Treasurer and Administrator of Catherine's buildings Michel de Nostradamus, seer to Catherine de Medici Introduction and Acknowledgements Catherine de Medici has variously been called 'The Maggot from Italy's Tomb', 'The Black Queen' and 'Madame La Serpente'. To many she is the very incarnation of evil. It is, I believe, as mistaken a judgement as it is bigoted. Yet it is not far removed from the overall verdict of history on one of the most remarkable women of the sixteenth century. To the extent that Catherine's name evokes any response today, it is as a Florentine, a patron of the Renaissance, and as a poisoner and intriguer of the stamp of Lucrezia Borgia, with whom she is often confused. Throughout her life her enemies condemned her for her country of origin, described by Thomas Nashe as 'The Academie of man-slaughter, the sporting place of murther, the Apothecary-shop of poison for all Nations'. Insofar as she is connected to any historical event in the public imagination, it is the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris, that infamous act of violence that so stained the name of the House of Valois

and of Catherine in particular. When the admittedly terrible events of 24 August 1572 in Paris are placed in their proper historical context, however, I believe they can be explained in terms of a surgical operation that went wrong rather than an act of premeditated genocide. During the course of her life, this indomitable woman faced a series of personal tragedies and setbacks, and when not being condemned as evil, she is pitied for the seemingly endless series of blows she suffered. Orphaned at birth and imprisoned during childhood, her marriage to Henry of Orléans (later King Henry II of France), whom she loved passionately, caused her years of unhappiness as she was ignored by him in favour of his mistress, the mesmerising Diane de Poitiers. After a decade of childlessness and near-repudiation, Catherine finally produced ten children – who were almost without exception rotten, sickly and corrupt. The sudden death of her husband brought this forty-year-old political neophyte to the centre of power and, forced by necessity, she became the skilful and doughty defender of her dynasty and adopted country. Rather than deeming her evil, it would be equally mistaken to label Catherine as a victim of her terrible circumstances. She was, above all, a courageous survivor and a true product of her times. The life, the character, the personal details, the contradictions, the passions, the strengths, the weaknesses and the sheer guts of this incomparable woman constitute the main thread of my story. Catherine was not guided by religious beliefs, nor by ideological conviction. A sceptic at heart and a pragmatist by nature, neither morals nor remorse encumbered her fight for the survival of her children, her dynasty and France. To understand this complex woman one must recognise that to Catherine these three represented the same thing. After her husband's death, and based on her hitherto silent observation of the political and religious struggles in France, she tried to steer a middle course between the opposing parties. Yet if reason and conciliation failed, she did not hesitate to avail herself of the 'regalian right of summary execution' to preserve the kingdom. I am, of course, not the first person to attempt to tell Catherine's story objectively. I would like to take this opportunity fully to acknowledge the invaluable recent contributions made by M. Ivan Cloulas and Professor Robert Knecht to the canon of Catherine de Medici scholarship. It is only by standing on the shoulders of great historians such as they that biographers can discern the landscape and, in my case, the genetic imperative that led Catherine to advance the interests of her husband and progeny. In her biography of William the Silent, the historian C. V. Wedgwood wrote, 'History is lived forwards but is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only.' This book has been written with that seminal historiographical fact in mind: the reader will be presented with Catherine's often limited political and personal options. How would we, or could we, have acted otherwise? There is much that is absurdly ultra-nationalist about the contempt that many French writers have, until recently, expressed for the Italianborn Queen of France. That she was a woman who wielded power in the name of her feeble sons, was foreign-born but ruled France, and of non-royal blood but nonetheless became Queen, has been enough to condemn her in the eyes of many eighteenth and nineteenth-century French historians. Her constant struggle first to accommodate the



Huguenots and later to contain their threat, culminating in the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew, has damned her in the eyes of both Catholic and Protestant writers and propagandists. There is also much that is factually inaccurate in their melodramatic accounts of Catherine's alleged wickedness, her appetite for vengeance, the quaint tales of her cabinet of poisons and above all a simple but lethal lust for power. I have endeavoured to write a biography that redresses history's almost entirely anti-Catherine bias and objectively sees her for what she was: a woman of intelligence, courage and indefatigable spirit who did her best for her beloved if adopted country when it was – through no fault of hers – beset by a long series of dangers rarely experienced by any nation state before or since. Catherine was a woman of fascinating contradictions, both a pragmatist and an idealist. Despite her own adherence to the Roman Church she approached the differences between Catholic and Protestant as though they could be resolved by sensible discussion. Her surprising capacity for sentimentality was matched by an ability to detach herself ruthlessly when required. Though usually a practical and enlightened woman, she sought solace and guidance from her soothsayers, astrologers and the occult. Her love of the arts, sumptuous grandeur and exploration of new ideas lay alongside her knowledge that behind the curtain of the glorious Court displays that she created, there was also a place for judicious bloodlettings, vendettas and the assassin's dagger. After the death of her adored husband, Henry II, Catherine wore her widow's weeds with pride. As the famous beauties of her 'flying squadron' seduced information from their admirers at Court, Catherine stood, majestic and veiled, her perpetually black-clad figure a stark counterpoint to the nymphs in white. Mysterious and enigmatic when she wanted to be, the Queen Mother exasperated many of her political opponents. The sixteenth century is notable for many reasons, but in particular the number of powerful women who dominated it. Of John Knox's 'monstrous regiment' the most obvious and familiar examples to English readers are Elizabeth I, Mary Tudor and Mary, Queen of Scots. Less well known to us are Marie of Guise, regent of Scotland, Margaret of Austria, regent of the Spanish Netherlands, Margaret of Parma – who also ruled there from 1559 to 1567 – and Juana 'La Loca' (the mad), daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, who inherited the throne of Castile from her mother in 1504. Italy also produced fascinating women such as Isabella d'Este, the beautiful Duchess of Mantua, who played a central cultural role not only in her husband's duchy, but far beyond it too. There is no doubt, however, that by far the most important, notorious and influential Italian woman of this period was Catherine de Medici, daughter of Florence and Queen of France. This book could not have been written without the help and active collaboration of a large number of people who have generously given of their expertise and time with no thought to recompense or reward. I am tremendously grateful to them. Foremost among them is M. Ivan Cloulas, Conservateur Général Honoraire at the Archives Nationales in Paris and his staff. M. Cloulas encouraged me to undertake this project. He and his staff have been unfailingly efficient and courteous. Professor Robert Knecht's superb scholarship and works on Catherine de Medici, King Francis I and sixteenth-century France have proved a huge source of inspiration to me. Along with M. Cloulas and Professor Knecht I

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money and run; and to my parents and family, especially Lil' and Jake, God bless you for everything you have given me. Leonie Frieda October 2003 www.leoniefrieda.com Author's Note

In Italian an apostrophe appears after the 'de' in de' Medici. For ease of reading I have excised it. In this book there is a myriad of Henrys: for ease of reference I have designated Henry II of France with a 'y', the others are spelt in the French manner – Henri.

Prologue

Death of a King

Cursed be the magician who predicted so evilly and so well

June–July 1559

On the late afternoon of Friday, 30 June 1559 a long splinter of wood from a jousting lance pierced the eye and brain of King Henry II of France. The poisonous wound bloated his face, slowly robbing him of sight, speech and reason, and after ten days of suffering he died at the Château des Tournelles in Paris. His death was not only tragic – it would prove calamitous. The jousting had been part of celebrations to mark the signing in April of the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis, which brought to an end France's and Spain's ruinous series of wars over Italy. Many dismayed Frenchmen believed Italy had been given away through the mere stroke of a pen and no one felt this more keenly than Henry's Florentine wife, Catherine de Medici, whose hopes of recovering her lost patrimony vanished with the peace. Yet she took one consolation from the treaty: that her eldest daughter Elisabeth would marry the most eligible parti in Europe, King Philip II of Spain. A further sweetener provided a husband for Henry's spinster sister and Catherine's closest friend, Marguerite, who at the age of thirty-six had been considered practically unmarriageable. She was to wed Philip's ally, Emmanuel-Philibert, Duke of Savoy, a hearty soldier with the unpromising nickname of 'Iron-head'. No time was lost in arranging the weddings. Determined to show Philip that France remained undiminished despite her Italian sacrifice, Henry – although choked with war debts – had borrowed over 1 million écus 'to defray the setting out of these triumphs'.\* A vigorous and robust man, he excelled at the joust and had arranged the five-day contest largely to show off his own skill. Both Henry and Catherine were, not surprisingly, disappointed when Philip – a widower since the recent death of the English Queen, Mary Tudor, the previous year – announced that he would not be coming to Paris himself. Characteristically, the punctilious monarch offered tradition as his explanation, saying, 'Custom demands that the Kings of Spain should not go to fetch their wives but that their wives should be brought to them.'<sup>1</sup> Instead, the groom sent a dismal proxy – the severe soldier-statesman Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba. With the rise of Protestantism in France gravely threatening both the King's authority and the country's unity, Henry had been compelled to make peace with Philip. Early in June, Henry had issued an edict announcing a crusade to rid his realm of 'the Lutheran scum' and while nothing much could be done until the departure of his august guests, he ordered the arrest of several prominent Protestants in Paris. Quickly tried and sentenced to burn at the stake for heresy, their seizure caused a considerable outcry and a stay of execution was given until after the celebrations. The condemned men awaited their fate in the dungeons of Le Châtelet prison in Paris, while nearby in the wide rue Saint-Antoine next to the Château des Tournelles, they could hear the paving stones being pulled up to make way for the jousting lists, and the building of stands for the spectators and triumphal arches emblazoned with the arms of Spain, France and Savoy. Heralds

issued the King's challenge that His Majesty the King of France, his eldest son Francis, the Dauphin, the Duke of Guise and other princes at the French Court were to take on all comers. Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, the English ambassador, reported, 'The King himself, the Dauphin and the nobles . . . do daily assay themselves at the tilt which is like to be very grand and sumptuous.'<sup>2</sup> The Parisians loved a spectacle, but their expectations were confounded when Alba and his suite arrived on 15 June. Spanish fashions had always been austere, but their dark and mean-looking clothes left the French wondering whether a deliberate affront had been intended. A few days later all this was forgotten when Henry welcomed his enemy of yesterday to the Louvre Palace. Emmanuel-Philibert of Savoy came escorted by 150 men gorgeously dressed in crimson doublets, matching shoes and black velvet cloaks embroidered with gold lace. On Thursday, 22 June, the thirteen-year-old Elisabeth of France married Philip of Spain, aged thirty-two, by proxy at Notre-Dame Cathedral. After the wedding a primitive ritual took place. Elisabeth and Alba climbed into the huge state bed – each with one leg naked. As their bare limbs touched and they rubbed their feet together, the marriage was declared consummated. Six days later, on Wednesday 28 June, the jousts began. By Friday, the third day of the tournament, the weather turned hot and heavy. The rue Saint-Antoine enjoyed little shade and a large number of peasants had climbed on to the roofs of the houses to watch the King enter the lists. For weeks the ladies and gentlemen of the Court had been preparing 'their handsome and costly apparel', some wearing the entire value of their estates on their backs.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to dazzle at the celebrations Catherine had ordered 300 lengths of gold and silver cloth from Italy for her gowns; extravagant by nature, she delighted in wearing regal confections. One observer noted that it was hard to say whether the sun or the jewels shone more brightly. The King had never seemed happier. The same cannot be said for his wife. Seated with her son the Dauphin and the lofty figure of her daughter-in-law, Mary, Queen of Scots, Catherine was noticeably anxious.\* The night before she had dreamt that her husband lay stricken on the ground, his face covered in blood.<sup>4</sup> The Queen's unshakeable belief in seers and astrologers gave her every reason to be fearful. In 1552 Luca Guorico, the Italian astrologer of the Medici family, had warned Henry that he must take particular care around his fortieth year to 'avoid all single combat in an enclosed space', lest he risk a wound that could blind or even kill him. Henry was now forty years and four months old. Furthermore, in 1555 Nostradamus had published this prophecy in Centuries, quatrain no. I.XXXV: The young lion will overcome the old, in a field of combat in a single fight. He will pierce his eyes in a golden cage, two wounds in one, he then dies a cruel death. Citing these evil omens, for the old lion could be interpreted as the King and the cage of gold his visor, Catherine had implored her husband not to joust that day. He is even supposed to have remarked to the same man who was accidentally to strike him down, 'I care not if my death be in that manner . . . I would even prefer it, to die by the hand of whoever he might be, so long as he was brave and valiant and that I kept my honour.' Henry's mistress was conspicuously seated surrounded by ladies of the Court. The superb Diane de Poitiers, Duchess of Valentinois, had held the heart of the King since he was a teenager. Now almost sixty years

old, 'Madame' as she was known by all – including the Queen – had lost none of her charms, in his eyes at least, being still 'the lady that I serve'. Cold, remote and elegant, Diane had been widowed in 1531. Since the death of her husband she wore only black and white mourning, knowing how well it became her, particularly beside the dandified courtiers. Catherine, forty years old, plump and dumpy after giving birth to ten children, had long since mastered the 'art of opportune pretending' and, with a few rare exceptions, she had spent the last twenty-six years gracefully not noticing 'Madame's' total enslavement of the husband she pathetically adored. Henry began the day by jousting well. Wearing Diane's colours of black and white, he saw off challenges from the Dukes of Guise and Nemours. Pleased with the horse given to him by Emmanuel-Philibert of Savoy, Henry graciously shouted up to him, 'It is your horse that has helped me tilt well today!' By now the King was tired, but insisted on riding a further course. Catherine sent word asking him not to continue. Irritated, Henry nevertheless replied courteously, 'It is precisely for you that I fight.' Once more he mounted his horse – prophetically named Malheureux – and prepared to tilt against the valiant young captain of his Scottish guard, Gabriel Count de Montgomery.\* As he did so, it is said that a boy in the crowd broke the expectant silence with the cry: 'The King will die!' A few moments later the two men clashed and Montgomery almost knocked Henry from the saddle. It was five o'clock and some spectators rose to leave. The King was good-humoured but wanted his revenge. Although Montgomery had become afraid and begged to be allowed to retire, Henry insisted with the shout: 'It's an order!' Catherine once again asked the King to stop. Ignoring her, he demanded his helmet from the Marshal de Vieilleville, who said, 'Sire, I swear before God that for the last three nights I have dreamt that today, this last day of June, will be fatal for you.'<sup>5</sup> Henry could barely have heard these words because he did not wait for the customary trumpet call that signalled the opening of the course. The two riders thundered towards each other. As they met with a crack of splintering wood, Henry, his arms clinging to the horse's neck, 'had great ado (relying to and fro) to kepe himself on horseback'.<sup>6</sup> The Queen shrieked and with a loud cry the crowd rose to their feet. The two most powerful men in France after the King himself – the Duke de Montmorency and the Duke of Guise – rushed forward to stop Henry from falling out of the saddle. Lowering him to the ground, they removed his armour. They found the visor half open and his face soaked in blood with wooden splinters 'of a good bigness' protruding from his eye and temple. The King was 'very weak . . . almost benumbed . . . he moved neither hand nor fote, but laye as one amazed'.<sup>7</sup> Seeing this, his young opponent begged his sovereign that his head and his hands be cut off, but: 'The good natured King who for his kindness had no equal in his time answered that he was not angry . . . and that he had nothing to pardon, since he had obeyed his King and carried himself like a brave knight.'<sup>8</sup> The crowd pressed round to catch a glimpse of Henry, who was carried away to the Château des Tournelles. Once there, the gates were locked and he insisted on mounting the grand staircase on his feet, but having his head and shoulders supported. It was a miserable procession. The Dauphin, who predictably had fainted, was carried up after the King, followed by Catherine and the most senior nobles. Collapsing on to his bed, Henry

immediately tried to clasp his hands in prayer and strike his chest in contrition for his sins. It was as if he were already preparing for death. 'There was marvellous great lamentation and weeping for him from both men and women,' wrote Throckmorton, and it was feared that the King would not live for many moments longer. The royal surgeons were summoned. Henry's bravery was singular as the doctors tried to remove the splinters. Retching with pain, only once was the unfortunate patient heard to cry out. The usual appalling (by modern standards) remedies were prescribed: he was bled, purged and given an ounce of barley gruel which he promptly vomited, 'refrigeratives applied', the wound was dressed with egg white. After this he sank into a state of feverish semi-consciousness and was attended that night by his wife, the Duke of Savoy and the Duke of Guise's brother, the Cardinal of Lorraine. The King had a 'very evil rest' and at three o'clock in the morning the vigil changed. Taken away to lie down, Catherine seemed in a trance of shock. Savoy had meanwhile summoned Philip II's own surgeon, André Vesalius. The decapitated heads of several criminals who had been executed the day before were brought to the celebrated physician. He and Ambroise Paré (his French counterpart) tried with jagged shards of wood to reproduce the wound on the skulls of the corpses. As they discussed the inconclusive results of their grisly experiments, Henry continued his decline. In brief periods of lucidity he asked for music and dictated a letter to the French ambassador in Rome expressing the hope that the fight so recently begun against the heretics would continue if he recovered. The notable absence of Diane de Poitiers reflected Henry's hopeless condition. 'Madame . . . has not entered the bedchamber since the day of the wound, for fear of being expelled by the Queen,' noted one chronicler.<sup>9</sup> Catherine had shared her entire married life with Diane, but these last moments belonged to her alone. In another part of the château, Diane anxiously waited for news of her lover. Two nights before Henry died an officer came from the Queen, demanding the return of the many jewels belonging to the Crown that Henry had given to his greedy mistress. 'What! Is he dead?' she is said to have asked. 'Not yet, Madame,' he answered, 'but he cannot last long.'<sup>10</sup> Diane replied that as long as there was breath in the King's body she would not lose heart and would obey 'none but him'. On the evening of 4 July the King's temperature rose sharply. Septicæmia had set in. There was talk of trepanning the wound to relieve the pressure and ease his pain, but removal of the bandages revealed such large quantities of pus that the idea was abandoned. Henry was doomed and nothing further could be done but to await his death. This was the event Catherine had dreaded ever since she had married Henry as a fourteen-year-old girl. She had been a passionately devoted, adoring wife. Always fearful of losing him, she and her ladies had worn mourning whenever he had gone off to war. During his martial expeditions, when not constantly writing asking for news of him, she had been at prayer making extravagant offerings, clasping her many amulets and charms to ensure his safe return. Though she had always feared the doom-laden prophecies, she had not prepared herself for this. Alternating between prayers and tears, Catherine hurried from her dying husband to the Dauphin, who lay in bed rocking to and fro, moaning and crying as if unhinged as he knocked his head against the wall. She was finally unable to watch as Henry lost his power of

sight and speech. During his last lucid moments he had told his son to write to Philip of Spain commending his family and his kingdom to his protection. Taking his hands, he said, 'My son, you are going to be without your father but not without his blessing. I pray that you will be more fortunate than I have been.' 'My God! How can I live if my father dies?' cried the Dauphin and promptly fainted again. Some say the King called for Catherine on 8 July and, after urging the Queen to ensure that his sister Marguerite's marriage went ahead, 'he commended to her his kingdom and his children'.<sup>11</sup> The following night the cheerless wedding of Marguerite and the Duke of Savoy duly took place in Elisabeth's room, the Mass said hurriedly in case news of the King's death arrived before it was completed. Catherine was too tormented to attend. The following morning at dawn Henry received extreme unction and at one o'clock that afternoon he died.<sup>12</sup> Years later his daughter, Margot, recalled her father's death as 'the vile blow which deprived our House of happiness and our country of peace'.<sup>13</sup> During the King's last days the most powerful men in the country gathered around their master's bed. They were not, however, united. The Duke de Montmorency, Grand Master and Constable of France, had been Henry's mentor, friend and surrogate father. A military man and a conservative, he was, aside from the Crown and Church, the largest landowner in France, enjoying unquestioned support from his fiefdoms. Although he was a Catholic himself, some of his family had recently become Protestants or Protestant-sympathisers. During the last year of Henry's life the Constable had joined with Diane, the King's mistress, to keep their rivals, the Guise brothers, from power. The two elder Guise brothers, from a cadet branch of the House of Lorraine (a duchy on France's north-eastern border), could also call upon the assistance of many client vassals. The elder – Duke François – was a popular war hero. A brave and distinguished soldier, he had been a favourite of the late King. His brother Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine, a masterly politician and a supreme courtier, was also France's Chief Inquisitor. The pair, both ultra-Catholics and with complementary talents, made a formidable team. Latterly they had fallen out of favour for not supporting the return of France's Italian possessions in the recent treaty. This in turn had brought them more into sympathy with Catherine. Now they expected a central role in the government of the country, not least because they were the uncles of Mary, the sixteen-year-old Queen of Scots, wife of Catherine's feeble eldest son, the Dauphin, and since Henry's death the new Queen of France. To Catherine's intense irritation, Mary had enormous influence over her husband, still a teenager but now King Francis II, and she in turn relied upon her uncles for guidance in matters large and small. Since the accident, Paris had turned from a crowded festive city to a silent place where the overwhelming majority of people were stunned and sorrowful at losing their King. They also rightly feared the political uncertainties that lay before the kingdom. 'The palace has passed from marriage to a morgue,' wrote one observer, and in the streets the common people genuinely mourned their sovereign's passing. The proclamation of King Francis II gave them little reason to feel encouraged. Montmorency and other senior noblemen of the non-Guisard faction stayed with the corpse of the late King as the surgeons removed his heart and entrails for separate burial, and then embalmed his body. All over the Château des

Tournelles altars were set up, and rooms and passages were draped in black. Around the now embalmed body of the King came relays of bishops and other churchmen. The clerics, surrounded by tall candles, knelt and sang psalms for the dead as Henry's room became transformed into a richly decorated chapel with an altar at each end of his bed. On benches covered in silver cloth sat subjects high and low who attended one of six Requiem Masses held daily for the King's soul. Catherine also went to pay reverence to her late husband of nearly twenty-six years. Kneeling before him she bade his body farewell as those remaining at the château began the elaborate forty-day vigil. During this critical period, Constable Montmorency and his party were sidelined as the Guises took over the major offices of state. While Montmorency – whom Francis II loathed – had probably anticipated some loss of power, he could scarcely have imagined the extent to which he would find himself politically marginalised. Indeed, the bickering had already begun before the King was dead; the Guises spoke of impeaching the Constable for not ensuring the King's safety during the jousting, while the old man wandered the corridors, inconsolable at the prospect of losing his master, friend and comrade in arms. Leaving the body of the late King with Montmorency and his allies, the Guises knew they must establish themselves in power before the country had time to react to the tragedy. A serious threat to their hegemony could be anticipated from the First Prince of the Blood, Antoine de Bourbon, and his brothers. The Bourbons, like the Valois, were both descended from the Capet dynasty that had ruled France since the year 987. In 1328 Charles IV 'Le Bel' died without a male heir and the main branch of the Capetians died out, passing the Crown to the Valois, a junior branch of the dynasty. Should Henry's and Catherine's four surviving sons die without male issue the Bourbon family were next in line to the throne. Legally, as the only Princes of the Blood apart from these four Valois princes, the Bourbons would dominate any ruling council. Though Antoine de Bourbon was lazy, selfish and weak-willed, the Guises did not want to take unnecessary risks and decided that the new King should be removed to the Louvre, away from their rivals. Accordingly, Francis and his wife, as well as Catherine's younger children, were gathered together to make the short journey across Paris. The bleak figure, clad in black, of the stricken Dowager Queen then unexpectedly joined the party. She spurned not only the usual white mourning of French queens but the tradition that demanded she remain in seclusion for forty days where her husband had died. Catherine knew that she must now break with custom. Though devastated by her loss, she was essential to the Guises' coup d'état. During her husband's reign Catherine had skilfully kept from openly siding with either the Guise or the Montmorency faction. Maintaining a sweet disposition and good relations with both, she frequently sought their advice and help, disarming them with her appearance of humility. Though they were unaware of it, she detested both parties in almost equal measure. She would not forget their past wrongs, their toadying to Diane de Poitiers and their immense hold over her late husband. They in turn had generally ignored the Queen, badly underestimating her intelligence and hidden pride. Meanwhile, although King Francis II was technically old enough to rule, his obvious weaknesses both physical and mental required a



council to administer the country. To protect her son, her small children and herself, Catherine had to join the Guise brothers' cabal. The Guises did not lack enemies: some were jealous of their wealth and power, some did not share their ultra-Catholicism and some regarded them as foreign usurpers. The brothers needed Catherine to legitimise their position; her presence lent them her implicit sanction. Thus an unspoken compact seems to have been made between the widow and the Guises. The gates of the Château des Tournelles were opened in order to allow the royal carriages to depart for the Louvre and so that the large crowd outside could witness the royal family leaving. Various observers recalled the Duke of Guise carrying one of Catherine's youngest children in his arms, presenting a potent image of fatherly protection for the onlookers. Mary was seen to hang back for a moment to let her mother-in-law enter the coach first but Catherine understood her new place and seemed even to relish it, publicly insisting that the new Queen take precedence. For the first time Catherine was to have a role that belonged exclusively to her. She had had to share her husband with Diane de Poitiers. She had to a large extent shared being Queen of France with Diane; she had even been forced to share the upbringing of her young children with the favourite. Yet her widowhood would be hers alone. For the rest of her days she was to guard it with jealousy. Her life would be dedicated to the memory of Henry and their children, for they were his legacy to France. She would be the guardian of the monarchy and his legend, learning to fashion history according to her needs. After a lifetime obscured behind her mask of supple self-effacement, the forty-year-old Queen Mother shrouded in widow's weeds was taking her first cautious steps towards becoming mistress of France.

Part One  
Orphan of Florence  
She comes bearing the calamities of the Greeks  
1519–33  
Caterina Maria Romula de Medici was born at around eleven o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, 13 April 1519. Her father, Lorenzo II de Medici, Duke of Urbino, scion of the ruling House of Florence, had married her mother, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, the previous year. This royal-blooded French countess and great heiress made a brilliant catch for the Medici, who were considered by many in France to be merely nouveaux riches merchants. Since their magnificent wedding, hosted by the bride's kinsman, King Francis I of France, and the couple's glorious return to Florence, there had been little cause for celebration. Madeleine's pregnancy, which had been announced in June, progressed well but the young duke, whose health had been poor for some time, had fallen ill in the autumn of 1518. Intermittent high fevers and fears over his condition led to him leaving Florence where the newlyweds had been living in princely state. The duke, probably suffering from syphilis and possibly tuberculosis, moved to the cleaner air of the surrounding countryside to await the birth of his child. By the time he returned to the city for his wife's confinement, he was dying. Immediately after her birth, attendants carried the baby to her bedridden father for inspection. The news that her mother had by now also become very ill was kept from the duke for fear of hastening his decline. The fact that she had borne him a daughter cannot have cheered him much since there would clearly be no further issue from this illustrious couple. In an attempt to brighten the gloomy reality of the baby's sex, a contemporary chronicler applied a sycophantic gloss to the ducal disappointment: he declared that the couple 'have both

been as pleased as if it had been a boy'.<sup>1</sup> Due to the illness of both parents, the child's hurriedly organised baptism took place on Saturday, 16 April at the family church of San Lorenzo. With four senior clerics and two noble relations in attendance, the baby received the names Caterina, a Medici family name, Maria, since it was the day of the Holy Virgin, and Romula, after the founder of Fiesole – although I shall henceforth refer to her throughout as Catherine. On 28 April the duchess breathed her last followed by the duke only six days later on 4 May. The entombment of the couple in the splendid family vault at the church where their baby had so recently been baptised provided a dismal conclusion to their brief marriage. On the day the duke died his friend the poet Ariosto had arrived to condole with him over the death of the duchess. When he discovered that only an orphan child remained of the marriage that had promised a revival of the Medici fortunes he wrote a short ode: 'Verdeggia un solo ramo', dedicating it to the last hope of this pre-eminent merchant dynasty: A single branch, buds and lo, I am distraught with hope and fear, Whether winter will let it blow, Or blight it on the growing bier. Catherine owed her existence to the obsessive Italian territorial ambitions of Francis I of France. Between the fall of the western Roman Empire and its late-nineteenth-century unification, Italy was a patchwork of principalities, duchies, and city-states. Most of these showed a precocious vigour in the arts, technology and trade, making them tempting acquisitions for outsiders. Unlike Florence, they were usually ruled by families descended from famous warriors (known as condottieri); names like the Sforza of Milan and the Gonzaga of Mantua evoke the mercenary soldiers who carved their fortunes from battle. While a small number of states such as Venice, Genoa and Florence were – for a time at least – independent, by the mid-sixteenth century the majority were ruled either directly or indirectly by Spain. From 1490 until 1559, when Spanish supremacy was established, Italy became the bloody arena where the two Continental superpowers played out their bitter struggle to dominate Europe. Francis I, descended through his great-grandmother from the Visconti of Milan, required a sturdy ally in the peninsula to press his claim for the duchy. Accordingly, he forged an alliance with Pope Leo X, Giovanni de Medici. Unlike popes today, His Holiness was not only Christ's representative on earth, but he also exercised the temporal powers of a monarch as ruler of the Papal States, most of which were in central Italy. The papal tiara was a triple crown that placed the popes above kings and emperors; not only did the papacy hold claim to a huge amount of property throughout the Catholic world (in pre-Reformation England one fifth of the land was held by Rome) but the pope also had the right to legal jurisdiction in Catholic countries and many types of legal cases were referred to the Ecclesiastical Court. To strengthen his agreement with the Medici Pope, Francis decided to arrange the marriage of an orphaned Bourbon heiress, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, to Leo's nephew, Lorenzo de Medici. At Leo's instigation Lorenzo had recently snatched the duchy of Urbino from the della Rovere family.\* For this enterprise the Pope had provided prodigious financial support with monies gained from the creation of thirty new cardinals. In private, Francis felt snobbishly sceptical about Lorenzo's ability to keep the newly acquired fief of Urbino, commenting that he was after all 'only a tradesman'. It is true that by early-modern standards the

Medici of Florence could not claim any blue-blooded descent, but wise husbandry and steady expansion of the family banking business by the founder Giovanni di Bicci de Medici (1360–1429) had ensured that they were the most prosperous and powerful family in the important city-state of Florence. The Medici originally came from the Mugello, ten miles north of Florence. Although their name and the red balls or palle – varying in number from twelve to six – on a field of gold on their emblem suggested medicine, and they appropriated the martyred physicians Sts Cosmas and Damian as their patron saints, they had always been in commerce, specialising in wool, silk, precious metals, spices and banking.\* They rose to become papal bankers and with the economic opportunities after the decimation of the Black Death in 1348–49 there was much demand for their services. Like his father Giovanni, Cosimo de Medici (1389–1464) was a quiet, unassuming man who did not favour the grandiose way of life of his later descendants, though he did build the most impressive palace yet seen in the city – the Palazzo Medici. Today, although much changed since Cosimo's time, one can still see the formidable defensive walls that once protected Catherine as a young child from a rebellious mob; the solid outer walls reflect the need for protection against the political uncertainties of that age and hide the building's exquisite interiors. Cosimo was learned and philanthropic, and the most significant private patron of the arts of his day, employing Michelozzo, Donatello, Brunelleschi, Paolo Uccello, Filippo Lippi and other leading figures of the early Renaissance. Underlining their importance by patronising the arts, which, from the thirteenth century onwards, became the most visible symbol of Italian wealth and dynamism, the Medici played an indispensable role in the process which produced the Italian Renaissance. Cosimo took the family bank to new heights, opening branches all over Europe, including ones in London, Geneva and Lyons. After a brief period of banishment by rival Florentine factions, who tried but failed to take control of the executive council of the Florentine Republic, the Signoria, Cosimo returned at the people's invitation to become Gonfaloniere (head of the Signoria), a citizen of Florence but in effect the uncrowned ruler of the city-state. He understood the need, in order for commerce to flourish, for political harmony both internally and externally, and used his huge resources to influence matters in favour of his family and Florence. A benevolent dictator with a quiet manner, Cosimo assumed the air of a private citizen but in fact nearly all major decisions were made by him or with his consent. Pope Pius II described him as 'the arbiter of peace and war and the moderator of the laws, not so much a private citizen as the lord of the country . . . he it is who gives commands to the magistrates'.<sup>2</sup> Cosimo was looked upon as a father by many of the Florentines who, after his death, awarded him the affectionate title 'Pater Patriae'. One contemporary called him 'King in everything but name.' Cosimo's grandson Lorenzo (1449–92), known as 'The Magnificent' (the title was given to persons of note who were not of princely blood), was to prove himself truly worthy of the sobriquet. He is perhaps the most famous of the Medici, although it was paradoxically under his charge that the family's commercial fortunes began to decline. He was a poor banker but a superb scholar, poet and collector. History recalls Lorenzo as the extraordinary patron of such great artists as Botticelli, Perugino, Filippino Lippi, the Ghirlandaios

and Verrocchio. His patronage also touched future masters such as Leonardo da Vinci. In his garden at the Palazzo Medici, Lorenzo set up a workshop for sculptors, and it was there that Michelangelo first came to the attention of buyers and artists alike. Lorenzo was a gifted diplomat, a wise politician devoted to the welfare of Florence and above all zealous in his promotion of the Medici family and its supporters. When Pope Innocent VIII heard of Lorenzo's death he is said to have cried out, 'The peace of Italy is at an end!' Lorenzo had three sons; it is said that he called one good, one wise and one a fool. Unfortunately it was the 'fool', Piero the Fatuous (1472– 1503), who was the eldest. Ill suited to rule, Piero found himself and his family quickly ejected from the republic and he later died in exile. His brother Giuliano – 'the good' – worked with Giovanni – 'the wise' – who had become a cardinal at thirteen thanks to his father's intervention, for the only thing that mattered – their eventual return to Florence. They had to plot in penury for they were virtually bankrupt, their fortune taken by usurpers and their properties confiscated by the republic. Giovanni had a good head for intrigue but required patience; it was to be a long wait before events turned in the Medici favour again. Perhaps the family motto, *Le Temps Revient* (Our time will return), gave them courage. It was certainly the moral by which Catherine was later to live her life. In 1512 a league of small Italian states managed temporarily to expel the French from Italy. Unwisely the Gonfaloniere, Piero Soderini, an unremarkable but honest man, had denied the league Florentine support. The league turned upon Florence in revenge for not joining them against the French and Soderini fled with his government. The Medici seized the moment and manoeuvred to regain their lost citizenship as a new regime took power in the Arno city. Soderini was not alone in exile following the return of the Medici. Among the friends and advisers stripped of office in the political purge was a minor official of the Second Chancery, Niccolò Machiavelli. Among other things, Machiavelli travelled on diplomatic missions to leading figures such as the Holy Roman Emperor and Cesare Borgia; he also created a Florentine militia for Soderini and was charged with matters relating to the defence of the republic. But in 1513, languishing in exile and eager to return to power, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, dedicating it to Catherine's father\* in an effort to ingratiate himself with the family. This, Machiavelli's most celebrated work, is a brilliant study on statecraft. The author radically discarded cherished and traditionally held tenets of the virtues that defined a good ruler; instead he boldly and emphatically embraced Realpolitik and argued that to be an effective 'Prince' all means were justifiable for the good of the state. The pragmatism and the ability, when necessary, to step outside normal bounds of morality were not based on Christian or Classical ideals. The goodwill of the people was a necessity, but a ruler must be prepared to earn their respect by using exemplary punishment, or eliminating those who endangered the nation's health. It took some time for the work to surface and make an impact outside Florence but the 'little book' was to bedevil Catherine during the wars of religion and long afterwards as this work, advocating a steely adherence to practical solutions for the good of the state, was quoted (often purposely out of context) by her enemies. They called it Catherine's bible, and it eventually acquired the reputation as a manual for cruel autocrats while the name Machiavelli became

synonymous with scheming, evil and tyranny. On 1 September 1512, after eighteen years of exile, Lorenzo the Magnificent's two surviving sons, Giovanni and Giuliano, made their triumphant return to Florence. With them came Lorenzo's grandson and eventual heir, also called Lorenzo. Unfortunately he had none of the qualities of his grandfather. Spoiled by his doting mother, Alfonsina, he grew into an arrogant, selfish and lazy young man. This pair were not only grasping, but once the Medici returned to power in Florence, the young Lorenzo lived extravagantly and with such strutting grandiosity that he risked losing the affection people still held for his family. Almost immediately after the joyful reinstatement of the Medici in Florence, Julius II died and Giovanni was elected Pope Leo X. He was thirty-seven years of age, overweight, troubled by a stomach ulcer and an agonising anal fistula. His formal entry on horseback into the Vatican was thus not quite the unalloyed pleasure it might have been. Although sitting side-saddle to avoid some of the discomfort, he suffered terribly from the heat and the pain of riding in his condition. Those who stood nearby suffered almost as much from the overpowering and noxious smell emanating from his ulcerous stomach and the infected fistula on his enormous backside.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless Leo's joy was evident to all and the crowd responded with an enthusiastic welcome. While the words he is supposed to have uttered upon his election – 'Now God has given us the papacy. Let us enjoy it!' – are almost certainly apocryphal, enjoy it he did. The glorious painting by Raphael of Leo seated flanked by two cardinals shows us a Renaissance voluptuary. His face is plump, his body plumper, the large pendulous cheeks, bulbous eyes and sensuous lips were strong family traits; unfortunately, some of these were later to be inherited by his great-niece Catherine. Though nepotistic, Leo was far less prey to some of his predecessors' vices, and this enlightened man brought the fruits of his learning to the papacy. He lived in splendour with a huge household; naturally generous, after his years of exile and poverty he now possessed the means to patronise the arts, commission building projects and above all to indulge himself and others. He gave lavish and frequent banquets at which he entertained his guests with novelties, such as tiny birds flying out of pies. He loved comedies and practical jokes. Leo's most serious flaw as Pope was his failure to grasp the critical need for reform of the Church. While this need had existed for some time, it had become acute since the rise of an obscure German monk named Martin Luther. Luther had spoken out against the sale of indulgences, appealing to the Church to rid itself of corruption and criticising the worldliness of the papal court. He believed in 'sola fide' (faith alone) and that man could reach God without the intervention of cleric or sacrament'. Leo called the controversy a monkish squabble', not realising that the touchpaper had been lit for a conflagration that would one day split the Church, tear nations apart and shake the thrones of his great-niece Catherine and her sons. As head of the family and due to his removal to Rome, Leo needed to select a successor to protect the family's position in Florence. It was decided that Giuliano the good' (whom Leo thought far too soft) should help the new Pope in Rome and that their nephew Lorenzo could be left in charge of Florentine affairs, though he had no patience for them and was often in Rome with his uncle, leaving Florentines to feel like a subject state. This was hardly

in the tradition of even the nominal Florentine republic but with a Medici wearing the papal tiara, Leo wisely made it seem that there would be plenty of advantages for the people. In 1515 Giuliano travelled as Leo's emissary to France to congratulate Francis I on his accession to the throne. The King was in a hurry to conquer Milan and take Naples, of which the Pope was suzerain. The two met later the same year at the papal town of Bologna where they signed an agreement that restored relations between the French Church and the papacy. To flatter Leo, the King offered Giuliano the dukedom of Nemours in France and his Aunt Philiberta of Savoy's hand in marriage. In exchange Francis was to have the Italian states of Parma and Piacenza, and the support of the Pontiff regarding his ambitions for Milan and Naples. The marital alliance between the ruling House of France and the merchant Medici was as thrilling to the latter as it was to prove short-lived. Giuliano, Duke of Nemours, died within a year of his marriage, leaving no legitimate heir but only a bastard son named Ippolito. Now all Leo's hopes rested with his nephew Lorenzo. Leo and Francis both wished to continue their alliance despite Giuliano's death, so Lorenzo, by then the Duke of Urbino, became His Holiness's emissary representing the pope at the christening of Francis's first-born son the Dauphin. Leo had been asked to stand godfather to the baby. Some time before the christening, Francis had written to Lorenzo to congratulate him on becoming Duke of Urbino, adding, I intend to help you with all my power. I also wish to marry you off to some beautiful and good lady of noble birth and of my kind, so that the love which I bear you may grow and be strengthened.<sup>4</sup> Once the bride, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, had been selected, it was decided that the marriage should take place soon after the baptism of the Dauphin. The other important matter was the bride's enormous inheritance. Both her mother, Jeanne de Bourbon-Vendôme, a royal princess, and her father, Jean III de la Tour, were dead and she shared their extensive properties in Auvergne, Clermont, Berry, Castres and Languedoc with her sister, the wife of the Scottish Duke of Albany. The Medici needed cash to re-establish themselves firmly in control of Florence, and Madeleine's double dowry of blue blood and gold was gleefully anticipated by the older generation. The good times were back. Lorenzo's appearance in France was so sumptuous, his crimson-clad train so large, his gifts so extravagant, including a vast bed made of tortoiseshell decorated with gems and mother-of pearl, that it seemed as though an eastern potentate had arrived.<sup>5</sup> Lorenzo and his bride-to-be immediately liked the look of each other and matters progressed better than anyone could have hoped. The duke was given the honour of holding the infant heir to France at the baptism at the Château of Amboise on 25 April 1518, and it was there that the wedding took place three days later. The groom was twenty-six years old and the bride just sixteen. At Amboise the inner courtyard was covered with fabulous silk awnings and gorgeous tapestries clothed the walls over the ten days of feasts, banquets, masked balls and ballets. During the day there were tournaments and a mock battle, which must have been fairly realistic since at least two people were killed. Francis knew how to dazzle with his entertainments and seemed particularly anxious to show the Italians, whose culture he so admired, that the French did not lack polish. By the time the couple set off for Florence, where they arrived in September 1518,

Francis had taken Lorenzo on a tour of Brittany and behaved very agreeably towards him. He also awarded the duke the Order of Saint-Michel, the highest order of French chivalry, and a company of gens d'armes (heavy cavalry). There was much to celebrate, especially upon the announcement of the young duchess's pregnancy. The news sent Francis and Leo into raptures of delight. It is not hard to imagine the dismay of both the Pope and the King of France when Lorenzo and Madeleine de Medici, Duke and Duchess of Urbino, both died months later, leaving only a daughter as the living token of their great schemes. To make matters worse, Catherine fell ill in August 1519 when only three months old and for several weeks her life hung in the balance. Yet she survived and by October Leo insisted that the 'duchessina', as the Florentine people fondly called her, could be moved to Rome without risk to her health. Leo had already emphatically refused Francis's request that the child be brought up at the French Court. He sensibly declined to offer up his great-niece as a hostage against the promises he had recently made to Francis, for he was already planning to break them. The circumstances had completely changed, so now must his policies. After wiping away his seemingly tears at the death of his nephew and niece, Leo lost no time in opening secret talks with King Charles of Spain, now Charles V the new Holy Roman Emperor and Francis's mortal enemy.\* By May 1521 Leo was openly allied to Charles, whom he had promised to crown as Emperor and to invest with Naples. When he heard the news, Francis fell into a furious rage at the Pope's betrayal and before long France and the Empire were once again at war. When Catherine was brought to her uncle in Rome, he is said to have greeted the baby with the words: 'She comes bearing the calamities of the Greeks!' After a long and careful look at the baby, however, he declared with satisfaction that she was 'fine and fat'. Leo's first reaction to the disastrous death of Lorenzo and his wife had been to take a resigned and pious stance, saying, God has given. God has taken away.' He now faced a dilemma over whether to hand the family inheritance to the collateral branch of the Medici, whom he had hitherto studiously snubbed and ignored, regarding them as a possible threat to his dynasty, or have the illegitimate members of the senior branch made his heirs. He decided on the latter. He created Catherine Duchess of Urbino and as soon as she was old enough, Leo intended to marry her off to Ippolito, the Duke of Nemours's son, whom he would legitimise. The pair would then become the ruling couple of Florence. There existed another illegitimate boy, Alessandro de Medici, born in 1512, who had been loosely acknowledged as the child of Lorenzo and therefore Catherine's half-brother. It is certain that Alessandro was in fact Cardinal Giulio de Medici's son, though for the sake of expediency he had been attributed to Lorenzo, not least because Giulio himself was not only illegitimate, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent's brother, but a cardinal to boot. Meanwhile Catherine remained in the hands of her grandmother, Alfonsina Orsini. After Orsini's death in 1520 Catherine moved into the care of Lorenzo the Magnificent's daughter, Lucrezia Salviati, and her aunt Clarice Strozzi, the woman who was to become her surrogate mother for the next few years. Both women had married extremely rich bankers and Clarice, a strict and exigent guardian, had young children with whom the little girl could play. The Strozzi cousins became the brothers and sisters the child never had,

and she loved them prodigiously for the rest of their lives. Leo did not live long enough to see his plans for Catherine and Florence come to fruition. Having had an operation on his persistent and troublesome anal fistula in late November 1521, he had decided nevertheless to go out hunting. He caught a chill, weakened quickly and died a few days later on 1 December. Catherine's future now depended upon the Medici maintaining power in Florence without papal prestige and influence to back them. Leo's illegitimate cousin, Cardinal Giulio de Medici, until recently his highly efficient assistant, had hoped to succeed him, but now retreated to Florence with Catherine and the two bastard boys Ippolito and Alessandro. The new Pope was Hadrian VI, formerly Adrian of Utrecht, previously Grand Inquisitor of Spain and Charles V's boyhood tutor (he was nicknamed the Emperor's schoolmaster'). The election of such a severe and pious man from what the Italians considered barbarian northern Europe was a horrid surprise to them. They tried to comfort themselves that at sixty-three years old he might die soon. The French were appalled that someone so close to the Emperor now sat upon the papal throne. Nor was there to be much cheer for the Medici, as Hadrian promptly handed the duchy of Urbino back to its rightful owners, the della Rovere family.\* The Medici even experienced difficulties paying for some of Leo's funeral expenses and a syndicate of leading Florentine families including the Strozzi and the Capponi contributed 27,000 ducats to help meet the costs (the monthly wage for a foot soldier at the time was 2 ducats). As security Giulio used Leo's jewel-encrusted cross worth 18,000 ducats. A document survives describing the most precious stones that adorned it: 'There is a central diamond, four emeralds, two large sapphires and three rubies.' The cross was given for safe keeping to the nuns of a Roman abbey until the eventual discharge of the debt.<sup>6</sup> Although it was not a particularly prosperous time for the Medici, Catherine spent the next two years in comparative peace in Florence living with the two boys, Ippolito and Alessandro, under Cardinal Giulio's careful supervision. In September 1523 Hadrian VI obliged everyone except the Emperor and himself by dying, some said through poison – 450 years were to pass before a non-Italian was elected pope again. On 19 November, having used every blandishment, bribe and promise at his disposal, Leo X's 'ecclesiastical flunkey', Cardinal Giulio de Medici, managed to get himself elected Pope, becoming Clement VII. This half-caste Medici set off for Rome, leaving his stooge, Cardinal Passerini, in charge of Florence nominally on behalf of the minor Ippolito. With Clement as Pope, Catherine became a valuable marriage pawn once more. Even without the Duchy of Urbino, her inheritance still meant she was an important heiress, the properties from her mother alone made her one of the richest young women in Europe.\* To present her in the correct setting, Clement ensured that she lived in state with a princely retinue at the Palazzo Medici. Yet the Florentines grew restless. Despite embezzling huge sums from Florence to pay for his Court and brilliant lifestyle, Leo X had deftly managed the papacy and Florence. Clement VII, who lacked his cousin's dexterous flair, inherited the bitterness that now emerged over Leo's financial misdealings. People also felt unhappy with the all but direct rule from Rome barely and ineptly disguised by Passerini. To complicate matters further, it became clear that Clement did not favour Ippolito as eventual ruler of Florence, but pushed the candidacy of his own son



Alessandro. Nicknamed Il Moro' because of his thick lips, dark skin and curly hair – his mother may have been a Moorish slave woman – Alessandro was growing up to be as vicious and nasty as he was ugly. Meanwhile, as time passed Ippolito had grown into a dashing, handsome and charming young man. Clement VII had been an energetic second-in-command to Leo X and as long as life proceeded along the same lines as before, he had the ability to keep matters under control. This critical period of religious unrest and war, however, required creative initiative and Clement was lost. For much of the 1520s, Francis and Charles were either at war with each other or threatening to fight, while a clamour for Church reforms grew and Lutheranism took hold in many German states within Imperial borders. The Pope lacked the courage to deal decisively with these problems. His half-measures, secret agreements and slippery shifts in policy were to prove disastrous. Clashes between France and the Empire overflowed into Italy once more, with catastrophic results for the benighted peninsula. In 1526 Clement formed part of a league with France, England, Florence and Venice – known as the League of Cognac – to expel the Empire from Italy. Charles V was preoccupied with the Turks who had invaded his eastern borders and had Francis act vigorously and promptly the league could well have trounced him. Yet the French King, who had just been returned from captivity by Charles after his disastrous defeat at the battle of Pavia in 1525, seemed to have lost his touch. He failed to give the league the support it needed, which led to its defeat by the Emperor. This left Clement, Rome, Florence and eventually Catherine at Charles's mercy. At the Emperor's instigation a Roman faction, hostile to Clement, rose up against him and he took refuge in the fortress of Castel Sant' Angelo on the banks of the Tiber, from where he quickly renounced the league. Once freed, he soon found himself under even greater threat. On 6 May 1527 the Imperial troops in northern Italy had marched south and now stood before Rome: unfed, unpaid and in an ugly mood. As Charles did not pay their wages he proved powerless to stop his troops, many of them Lutherans from his own dominions, rampaging through the Eternal City. While Rome was being sacked and pillaged, her craven and luckless Pope fled once again to his redoubt at the Castel Sant' Angelo. He rushed along a passage which led directly to the fortress with his skirts held up for him by the Bishop of Nocera to prevent him from tripping. Once in the formidable circular stronghold he sat besieged. From his bolt-hole Clement could hear the cries of his flock begging for mercy as the Imperial troops ran amok. The soldiers taunted His Holiness from beneath the solid castle walls, promising that they would eat him when finally they breached its defences. They ran in packs, desecrating sacred relics, raping and murdering citizens, lopping off jewelled arms and fingers, destroying ancient monuments and treasures. Some soldiers even dressed themselves in the scarlet robes of murdered cardinals. Clerics, even the most insignificant of them, who did not escape the rabble were held to ransom and in many cases recaptured and ransomed again. Clement's own ransom was set at nearly half a million ducats, a sum greater than his annual income. To raise the money he ordered his goldsmith, Benvenuto Cellini – also besieged with him – to improvise a furnace for melting down the papal tiaras he had managed to take with him. Horses were stabled in St Peter's itself, grotesque mock services were held and the leader

of the many Lutheran despoilers carried a silken cord intended as a noose from which to hang Clement. The iconoclastic plunder of the Holy City outraged the civilised world. It was to take over seven months before the occupying mob were driven from the foetid ruins by hunger and a plague epidemic. As Rome was sacked, an insurrection was mounted in Florence. Aided by the arrival of the Emperor's army, the overthrow of Passerini and the Medicean regime proved easy. Catherine's position now became fraught with uncertainty. By 11 May 1527 news had filtered back to Florence about the horrors taking place in Rome. In the Medici Palace on the via Larga, the eight-year-old girl would have grasped that this was a calamity. Clarice Strozzi, considered by many as the man of the family, proceeded to rave at Passerini, whom she thought incompetent and an unmitigated fool; she also rounded upon Alessandro and Ippolito, calling them unworthy of the Medici name to which they aspired. All the while, a menacing crowd pushed at the palace gates. Passerini and the two boys managed to escape thanks to Clarice's contacts with the new regime, with whom she struck a deal that was promptly reneged on by Passerini. They fled Florence on 17 May. This left Catherine and her aunt to face the mob. The new rulers of Florence boiled with fury when they realised that Alessandro and Ippolito had managed to flee without fulfilling the bargain. Catherine, their remaining hostage, would not be allowed to slip through their hands. It was decided that the child should be taken to the Santa Lucia convent in the via San Gallo, a place known for its antipathy to the Medici family. Clarice stormed in protest at Bernardo Rinuccini leading the large troop escort that had come to take her niece. They were at Poggio a Caiano (a splendid Medici country villa) where she and Catherine had managed to escape from the angry citizens, but Clarice's exhortations availed her little and did not prevent the child from being bundled off for what were to be three hazardous years of semi-incarceration during which her life was under different degrees of threat, depending upon the tergiversations of the political scene. The little girl lived miserably in the Santa Lucia convent, but in December 1527 orders came that she be moved to the convent of Santa-Caterina of Siena, also in Florence. When the French ambassador visited her there he found the place a disease-ridden hovel and insisted that Catherine must be relocated immediately. With the permission of the Signoria (the executive council), the ambassador arranged for the child's transfer to a far more agreeable place, the convent of the Santa-Maria Annunziata delle Murate (literally the walled-in-ones). The journey of a heavily veiled Catherine to the Murate took place at dead of night on 7 December 1527. The walls deprived her of her liberty but they also protected her from the hostile world outside. Hatred now fuelled the Florentine people's mood as they desecrated and damaged all reminders of the Medici. During an angry outburst early in this rebellion Michelangelo's masterpiece, the statue of David, lost its left arm when a stone was thrown at it. If Catherine were to remain a valuable negotiating tool for the Signoria, however, they must see to her well-being. Generally regarded as pro-Medicean, the Murate was a convent which undertook the education of aristocratic young women but also allowed elderly noblewomen to withdraw from the world in some comfort. It appears from records and receipts for alms dating from between 1524 to 1527 and overseen by Cardinal

Armellino, Apostolic Chamberlain for Leo X and then Clement VII, that the convent had been given substantial support by the Medici.<sup>7</sup> One of the nuns recalled Catherine's arrival: 'The magistrates gave her to us and we received her very happily and graciously for the obligation we have to her family. Notwithstanding that she may have been infected by the plague we received her. . . . One evening at two at night the band took her to the gates of the monastery and all the nuns without fear gathered around her, protected by God and Our Lady we received no wound. The Duchessa stayed for three years.'<sup>8</sup> She continued, 'With how much humanity and refined conversation she would talk, [all] could not be said because she had two women who looked after her.'<sup>9</sup>The abbess was Catherine's godmother and she arranged for her to have the spacious and comfortable cell once occupied by a widowed relation and namesake, Caterina Riario de Medici. Spoiled by the nuns, many of whom were themselves of high birth, Catherine had found a corner of calm from the raging world outside and she learned much from these good women. Her graceful deportment, her enchanting manners – later to become such formidable weapons – the ability to charm in conversation and the strength of mind to keep her own counsel can be attributed to this time. One historian wrote, 'At the Murate the Catherine of the wars of religion was formed.' Here too she would have learned all the traditions and ceremonies of the Church for which she always showed reverence. Yet a truly spiritual education seems to have been omitted. One of the nuns, Sister Niccolini, wrote of the 'dear little child . . . with such gracious manners . . . that she made herself loved by all' adding that she was 'so gentle and pleasant that the sisters did all they could to ease her sorrows and difficulties'.<sup>10</sup> Another wrote of the little girl's 'good disposition'.<sup>11</sup> No wonder they felt protective of the 'duchessina'. Death continued to take Catherine's loved ones when her protector and mother figure, Clarice Strozzi, died on 3 May 1528. The French ambassador now became her mainstay and he did what he could to see to her well-being. After a visit he wrote to her uncle, the Duke of Albany, who had been married to Catherine's maternal aunt, Madame, your niece is still in a convent leading a good life, but rarely visited and little regarded by these Florentine signori who would gladly see her in Kingdom Come. She expects you to send her some presents from France for the Seigneur de Ferraris. I can assure you that I have never seen anyone of her age so quick to feel the good and the ill that are done her.'<sup>12</sup>By 1528 the French forces left in Italy had been soundly beaten and Clement decided to make overtures to Charles, saying, 'I have quite made up my mind to become an Imperialist, and to live and die as such.' On 29 June 1529 the Treaty of Barcelona was signed between Clement and Charles. In it, Clement promised to crown Charles Holy Roman Emperor; in return Charles would support the restoration of the Medici to Florence. The coronation did indeed take place at Bologna on 24 February 1530, though Charles V was the last Holy Roman Emperor to be crowned by a pope. The agreement also provided for a marriage between Clement's bastard son Alessandro and Charles V's illegitimate daughter Margaret of Austria. At Cambrai on 3 August 1529 the French signed their own peace with the Empire, known as 'La Paix des Dames' as it was concluded by Francis's mother, Louise of Savoy, and the Emperor's aunt, Margaret, regent of the Netherlands. As

events began to turn in Clement's favour, the extremist People's Party that had replaced the moderates ruling Florence early in the revolt began to wonder if Kingdom Come' might not be the best place for Catherine after all. Her murder would finally deprive the Pope of his marital jewel. In October 1529 Imperial troops led by the Prince of Orange laid harsh and effective siege to the city of Florence. Among others, Michelangelo was drafted by the citizens to protect the city as a military engineer. Plague and famine exacerbated the people's terror and hatred of the Medici, and their efforts to withstand the siege were not helped by traitors from within. It was now that Catherine, who had remained tucked away in the convent, became the focus of attention for the increasingly desperate rebel rulers of the city. One suggestion was that she be lowered naked in a basket, in front of the city walls and thus possibly killed by her own allies' gunfire. There was also talk of leaving the eleven-year-old girl in a military brothel so that any valuable marriage plans by the pontiff would be spoiled for ever. Without making a decision about Catherine's ultimate fate, the council determined that she be removed immediately from the friendly Murate convent, from which they feared she might be liberated without too much difficulty. Thus it was that the Signoria sent Silvestro Aldobrandini with an escort of troops to fetch Catherine late on the evening of 20 July 1530. In the words of one of the nuns: 'They decided to remove her at night and this happened with such tribulation and effort . . . but such force was used by the eight that we had to give her up.'<sup>13</sup> Catherine, certain that she had been condemned to death and that Aldobrandini had come to fetch her for execution, put up a struggle. In preparation the eleven-year-old girl had shorn her hair and donned a nun's habit. Announcing that as a bride of Christ she refused to go quietly, Catherine cried out, 'Holy Mother, I am yours! Let us now see what excommunicated wretch will dare to drag a spouse of Christ from her monastery.'<sup>14</sup> She refused to change out of her nun's clothing, and Aldobrandini brought her through the small streets riding on a donkey, braving a starving and menacing crowd voicing threats and open hatred. The perilous journey proved a formative experience for the young woman as Aldobrandini kept Catherine safe and surrounded by his soldiers until he delivered her to the St Lucia convent. It was here that she had first started life as a captive nearly three years earlier. She never forgot Aldobrandini's goodness to her and when, on 12 August 1530, the siege was lifted and Clement took possession of his native city once more, she interceded for him and succeeded in having his death sentence commuted to exile. Upon her release, Catherine visited the sisters of the Murate and together they celebrated her good fortune. She remained in contact with the order for the rest of her life and wrote to them regularly, sending them money annually and gave them the revenues from one of her properties. Catherine never forgot a kindness any more than she forgave a disservice. All too soon the girl found herself a central feature in Clement's international policy and she moved to Rome where her 'uncle', as he called himself, greeted her with such warmth that the old hypocrite managed to convince one onlooker she is what he loves best in the world'. Another noticed that Catherine seemed emotionally marked by her dreadful time in the hands of her family's enemies: She cannot forget the maltreatment she suffered, and is only too willing to speak of it.' Clement

installed Catherine with Ippolito and Alessandro at Rome's exquisite Palazzo Medici (today the Palazzo Madama and used as the Italian Senate). He wanted her to acquire the veneer and accomplishments necessary for a glorious marriage. Antonio Soriano, the Venetian ambassador, described her physical appearance at the time of her arrival in Rome, writing that she was small of stature, and thin, and without delicate features, but having the protruding eyes peculiar to the Medici family'.<sup>15</sup> Nobody called her beautiful because she was not, but her manners lent her an elegance that her physique lacked. One observer from Milan called her heavy-looking, although he was probably describing her face, adding that she seemed a sensitive child who for her age, shows great spirit and intelligence'. The same man noted that altogether this little girl does not look like she will become a woman for a year and a half yet'. Catherine lived under the care of her great-aunt Lucrezia Salviati (Leo X's sister) and her husband. It is not known how she spent her days but perhaps it was in Rome, a city being rebuilt after the ravages it had endured, that she acquired her love for art in general and architecture in particular. She had the opportunity of watching the greatest artists of the day not only restoring the damaged city but creating new masterpieces to adorn it. She certainly enjoyed access to one of the finest libraries in the world and lived surrounded by the treasures both of antiquity and the Renaissance. In Rome at Clement's Court, too, Catherine became accustomed to the attendant rituals and particular formalities of this way of life. Also during her time in the Eternal City, much to Clement's alarm, Catherine fell under the enchanting spell of Ippolito de Medici. By the spring of 1531 rumours were circulating about the couple and the young man might well have nurtured ambitions of marriage. He cut a tremendous figure. According to contemporary descriptions, spectacularly supported by the famous Titian portrait of him in the dress of an Hungarian horseman, now at the Pitti Gallery in Florence, he was slim and tall with dark good looks. He had a penchant for theatrical adornments, dressing with diamond aigrettes and jewelled scimitars. Ippolito provided the perfect antidote to Catherine's years of loss and suffering. Older than Alessandro, he should by rights have been groomed as the ruler of Florence: the peace Treaty of Barcelona, however, indicated that Clement had other plans. The marriage was agreed between Alessandro and Margaret of Austria, the Emperor's illegitimate daughter, and a new constitution had been drafted by a group of Florentines known as the thirteen reformers of the republic' making the Medici hereditary rulers of the city and finally settling 25 years of political revolutions and instability. With the Emperor's backing, therefore, Ippolito had been bypassed in the succession. He had unwillingly been created a cardinal at the age of twenty but would happily have put his red hat aside, left the Church and married Catherine, taking what he felt was his rightful place as Florence's ruler. After a failed attempt to raise support in the Tuscan capital – where people now rejected further strife and yearned for a return to calm and prosperity – Ippolito, bribed by His Holiness with rich benefices and other gifts in exchange for a promise to agitate no further, found himself packed off to Hungary as Clement's legate in June 1532. Pressing family matters crowded the Pope's agenda. He wished to expedite the implementation of the Treaty of Barcelona; and to see his son Alessandro

properly invested as Duke of Florence and married off to Margaret of Austria. The Signoria was abolished under the new constitution and on 27 April 1532 the Pope's illegitimate son was officially created Duke of Florence. Catherine had been sent to the city to lend legitimacy to the proceedings and for the first time in her life undertook official public duties at Alessandro's side. Observers noted that the thirteen-year-old girl carried herself with admirable dignity and grace. She continued her public role in Florence while awaiting the arrival of Alessandro's bride in April 1533. Apart from enjoying the many and lavish celebrations marking the new duke's confirmation, Catherine also pursued her studies. We know little about her formal education except that she learned Greek, Latin and French; she was also a keen mathematician, an interest that would have coincided well with her later love of astrology. Clement kept her in Florence while he proceeded carefully with marriage talks on her behalf in Rome. Since her birth, Catherine had inevitably been the object of much matrimonial discussion. Even before the revolt in Florence, Clement had been approached by various potential suitors, mainly Italian potentates from families such as the Gonzaga of Mantua, the Este of Ferrara and the della Rovere of Urbino. Now that the Pope enjoyed a far stronger position than formerly he looked for more illustrious offers. Among the earlier candidates was Henry VIII's illegitimate son the Duke of Richmond. Although Sir John Russell, the English ambassador to the Vatican, reported that His Holiness was very well contented to have such an alliance' nothing came of the talks and the duke died a few years later, quite possibly from poisoning. When the Duke of Albany, Catherine's uncle, proposed the candidacy of King James V of Scotland, Clement did not think this offered him any real advantages and worried that the courier service between the two countries might be too costly. The Prince of Orange had briefly been considered as a possible husband until his death while campaigning to retake Florence. The one candidate Clement could not afford to ignore, however, was the Holy Roman Emperor's own preference. Charles backed a marriage between Catherine and Francesco II Sforza, Duke of Milan. Unfortunately for Catherine the duke, a somewhat dim-witted man, prematurely aged at thirty-seven, sick and broken, mainly by the huge sums of money demanded by the Emperor in order to retain his duchy, was not a particularly gleaming matrimonial prospect. In addition Clement feared that by marrying Catherine to Charles's client he would find himself too deep in the Emperor's pocket to be able to free himself if necessary. Another worry for Clement was Charles's request for a general Church Council. The Pontiff feared that this might provoke a schism in the Church. Besides, Clement had never been ordained into the priesthood, thus making him technically ineligible for the papal throne. At this point a giddy proposal arrived from Francis I of France. His ambitions for territories in Italy stirred anew and he required a friendly pope to back them. In 1531, with this in mind, Francis offered Clement his second son, Henry, Duke of Orléans, as a potential husband for Catherine. Early in 1531 Gabriel de Gramont, Bishop of Tarbes, was sent as Francis's envoy to discuss such a marriage. By April a preliminary agreement had been signed by Francis at the Château of Anet (ironically enough the home of Henry's future lover Diane de Poitiers). It stipulated that Catherine would live at the French Court until of an age to

consummate the marriage and secret clauses in the agreement stated that her dowry would include Pisa, Parma, Piacenza, Reggio, Modena and Leghorn. Clement also committed himself to backing French efforts to take Genoa and Milan, and to making a joint attempt to annex Urbino for the young couple. In June 1531 word came back to France that Clement would not after all send Catherine to live at the French Court before her marriage. He was both wary of the wrath he knew this alliance would incur in the Emperor and fearful of a change in French policy once Catherine was already in Francis's hands. His matrimonial ace would thus remain in his own care until the wedding. Clement also stipulated that Catherine's dowry of 100,000 gold écus would include an extra 30,000 écus in exchange for the revenues from her Florentine inheritance. Francis agreed to give Catherine a further 10,000 livres per annum, and she would also enjoy the substantial income that came from her mother's inheritance. As the second son of the mighty King of France, Henry, Duke of Orléans had no shortage of possible brides. The most important of these was Mary Tudor. The possibility of a marriage with Henry VIII's eldest daughter had been marred when the English King tried to have the marriage to her mother, Catherine of Aragon, annulled. Meanwhile Francis concentrated his attentions on Catherine, who could best further his Italian ambitions. Henry of Orléans had been born on 31 March 1519 and, while not expected to inherit the French throne, represented a substantial catch for any royal princess, let alone an Italian duchess without a duchy. Catherine might have been rich but she was emphatically not of royal blood. In January 1533 at Bologna, secret talks were held between Clement and Francis's emissaries. The Pope, terrified that the Emperor would put a stop to the French alliance if he caught wind of it, decided to continue the negotiations regarding a marriage to Francesco I I Sforza, Duke of Milan, as a feint. In fact Charles, certain that Francis would never stoop to marrying his son to a merchant's daughter, generally laughed off the rumours he did hear as preposterous. When he eventually taxed Clement on the matter, the Pope hedged and promised the Emperor that if Francis did prove serious about the marriage then he would contrive to sabotage the talks: 'I know his nature, he [Francis] will want the honour of breaking with me, and this is what I desire.'<sup>16</sup> By the time the marriage was announced later on that same month, Charles could do nothing about it other than be amazed. Clement's finest hour had arrived. He had defied adversity against monstrous odds. He had survived the sack of Rome and was restoring the city. His family had been thrown out of Florence; now they were reinstated in glory. He had, through an alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor, not only re-established his family as rulers of Florence, but managed to place the republic under the rule of his son as its hereditary duke.\* His illegitimate son Alessandro had been created Duke of Florence with the Habsburg potentate's daughter for his duchess. By playing the Emperor off against the King of France, and dazzling the latter with over-optimistic promises of vast territorial gains in the peninsula, he had managed the match between Catherine and Henry of Orléans. He had reconciled the irreconcilable. Albany wrote to Francis that 'His Holiness marvellously desired this marriage.' Clement's simpering evidently amused de Gramont, the French envoy to Rome, who recorded the discussions during which Clement 'kept repeating over and over that

his niece was not worthy of so lofty an alliance but ready nevertheless, for every sacrifice and any concession to secure it'.<sup>17</sup> Clement could not have foreseen that concession and sacrifice were indeed to become the young bride-to-be's most constant companions for what he rightly called the greatest match in the world'.<sup>Two</sup>'The Greatest Match in the World'J'ai reçu la fille toute nue<sup>1515–34</sup>Henry, Duke of Orléans, Catherine de Medici's future husband, was born on 31 March 1519, a fortnight before his intended bride. The second son of 'Le Roi Chevalier', King Francis I, Henry suffered a childhood at least as traumatic as that of his wife-to-be. He lost his mother, the pious and sweet-tempered Queen Claude, who suffered from chronic ill health, at the age of five.\* Not long afterwards he and his elder brother became the innocent victims of their father's worst political and military disaster, his catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Habsburg Empire at the Battle of Pavia in 1525. To understand Henry as a man, as a king and a husband, it is necessary briefly to examine this early drama of Francis's reign. When Francis of Valois-Angoulême, twenty years old and ambitious, became King in 1515 he immediately directed his energies towards conquests in Italy. Showing both courage and resourcefulness, he claimed and won Milan from the Sforza family who were backed by the Empire.\* Francis had ingeniously brought his army, guns and horses across a dangerous and little-used alpine pass into Italy, thereby entirely wrong-footing his enemy. Initial skirmishes and manoeuvres resulted in the decisive battle over Milan at Marignano, on 13–14 September 1515. After his dazzling victory Francis installed himself as Duke of Milan. He had only been King of France for nine months but Marignano, even though he could not know it, was to be the high point of his entire military career. As his predecessors had already discovered, French conquests in Italy were hard to preserve and proved a constant drain in blood and treasure. Francis's success at Marignano also triggered an enduring hostility between himself and the Habsburg King Charles I of Spain. The French King's quests for Italian territory and his enmity against the Habsburg Emperor were the two themes that were to characterise, and to an extent bedevil, his entire reign. After Marignano, Francis became for a while the cynosure of European monarchs; success, it seemed, was his constant companion. In 1515 he allied himself with the Medici Pope Leo X for his support in Italy and unwittingly set in motion the course of events that would bring Catherine to France as his daughter-in-law almost twenty years later. In 1519 King Charles of Spain was unanimously elected Holy Roman Emperor, becoming Charles V. Francis had also put himself forward as a candidate and felt bitter at the humiliating outcome. In 1521 Francis overreached himself and the city of Milan fell to the Emperor's troops the same year. By 1523 France stood virtually alone, England having joined forces with the Empire in a general league against the French. Treason, a failed rebellion against Francis from within his own kingdom, and invasion in both the north and the south of France forced him to act decisively. His army pursued the Imperial invaders southwards into Italy and after a harsh winter in the open laying siege to the city of Pavia where the Imperial troops had holed up, the two sides finally met in battle on 24 February 1525. Numerically the armies were evenly matched and at first the fighting proved inconclusive. For reasons that are still not clear, Francis, probably believing the Imperialists to be



in flight, charged out into the open at the head of his elite bodyguard and cavalry in pursuit of the enemy. It proved a critical error. By pushing forward into exposed terrain he found himself not only between his own guns and the enemy but also at the mercy of over 1000 hidden Imperial arquebusiers, well placed to pick off the distinctive French knights with relative ease. Gradually Francis and his men – who had cut a fantastic swathe through the enemy – found themselves stranded from the rest of their troops and encircled by Imperial soldiers. When his horse was killed beneath him, Francis showed immense personal valour as he continued the now hopeless fight on his feet. Burdened by his heavy armour he managed to hack men down with his sword, as the elite of the French nobility, though inspired by their King's courage, were being decimated around him. Eventually Francis and his surviving nobles were taken prisoner. Not since Agincourt had France lost so many gallant and high-born warriors on the field of battle. Pavia was an unmitigated disaster for her and her King. Orders came to bring Francis to Spain where he would eventually meet his adversary Charles V. He believed strongly in the chivalric code and hoped that by appealing directly to his captor as one regal knight to another he might soften the extreme terms that the Emperor now demanded. The most important item, the Duchy of Burgundy, stood at the head of the list. The duchy had been seized by the French in 1477 at the death of the last duke, Charles the Bold, without leaving a male heir. Although Charles V claimed descent from the Burgundian duke on the female side, his political sense, not his dynastic pride, spurred his claim to Burgundy. The incorporation into the Empire of this rich and fertile duchy that stretched down his western borders with France creating a strategic foothold, would pose an alarming threat to the French. Francis received a royal reception in Barcelona on 19 June, and the crowds roared with excitement as he came out of the cathedral after celebrating mass. People clamoured around the King, begging him to use monarchical healing powers to touch the sick wherever he went. It is hardly surprising that a Venetian observer commented, 'He bears his prison admirably,' adding, 'he is well nigh adored in this country.'<sup>1</sup> After much fêting and excitement Francis arrived in Madrid in the late summer of 1525. Before too long, however, the reality of his situation began to tell. Used to an active outdoor existence, the company of women and all the other essentials that made his life agreeable, Francis proved to be a terrible prisoner after all. He became too depressed to eat, which in turn caused him to fall dangerously ill from an abscess in the nose. Even the Emperor, who had so far avoided meeting the royal hostage, hurried to Francis's sickbed and looked anxiously at his most valuable asset, whose life seemed to be dwindling away. He granted permission for the King's sister Marguerite to come from France to minister to him. After several weeks of serious illness the abscess burst and the King rallied. A Frenchman at Francis's bedside reported back to Paris on 1 October 1525 that 'he has improved steadily . . . Nature has performed all its functions, as much by evacuation above and below as by sleeping, drinking and eating, so that he is now out of danger.'<sup>2</sup> With Francis recovering, peace terms could be worked out. On 14 January 1526, in the Treaty of Madrid, Francis renounced his claim to Milan and various other territories that the Empire had hitherto regarded as its own. To seal their accord the King betrothed himself to marry Charles's widowed

sister, Queen Eleanor of Portugal, who had been waiting at the gloomy Spanish Court for her brother to find her a new husband. Physically, Eleanor had too many of the unfortunate Habsburg traits to be considered anything other than tolerable-looking. Francis – with a few casual gallantries – had charmed the dull, devout and kind-hearted Queen, who had by now completely fallen for him and could hardly believe her good luck when the treaty was agreed. As for Burgundy, Charles would allow no discussion over the duchy. Francis finally consented to relinquish the territory to the Empire, but declared that he must supervise the handover himself. Charles knew that the transfer would be difficult. Realising that the French King's presence would help to smooth the process, he therefore decreed, with justifiably enormous misgivings, that Francis could return home provided he offered sufficient security in his stead. The King's mother and official regent during his captivity, Louise of Savoy, decided that her two eldest grandsons should take their father's place. Thus, out of political necessity, Henry, Duke of Orléans and his elder brother the Dauphin François were doomed to be held hostage in Spain until their father redeemed them by fulfilling the obligations of the treaty. Henry VIII's ambassador John Taylor had been ordered to accompany the party on the long voyage to the rendezvous. Before their departure he saw the two boys and reported to Cardinal Wolsey, 'After dinner I was brought to see the Dauphin, and his brother Harry; both did embrace me, and took me by the hand, and asked me of the welfare of the King's highness. . . . The King's godson [Henry] is the quicker spirit and the bolder, as seemeth by his behaviour.'<sup>3</sup> The two brothers were aged eight and six when they exchanged their beautiful châteaux of Blois and Amboise for a series of increasingly forbidding fortresses in Spain. Accompanied by their grandmother, Louise of Savoy, the two 'goodly children' made the journey southwards in appalling weather to the border between France and Spain. The exchange, for which a strict convention had been agreed, was scheduled to take place at seven o'clock in the morning on 17 March 1526. A ten-mile area had been sealed off around the Bidassoa river which marked the frontier. In the middle of the river floated a large raft, where the royal prisoners must be delivered. At the appointed hour two boats left, each from its respective side. The vessels measured the same size and contained the same number of men, all similarly armed. Outside the sealed-off sector the two boys had embraced members of their family and their household before leaving. One of the noblewomen in their entourage, who were all deeply affected by the departure of the little boys, seemed to show particular concern and tenderness for Henry. Later to become the central figure in his life, it transpired that the kind lady of the court was the 25-year-old Diane de Poitiers. Obviously moved by the children's plight, she kissed the little boy on his forehead, bidding him farewell. As the two boats arrived at the raft and the prisoners awaited the exchange, Charles de Lannoy, the Emperor's viceroy at Naples, declared to Francis, 'Sire, your highness is now free; let him execute what he has promised!' 'All shall be done,' replied the King who turned to his forlorn sons, tearfully embracing them and briefly making the sign of the cross over their heads. Henry and his brother kissed their father's hand, and he climbed into his boat with a promise that he would soon be sending for them. He then set off for the French side of the river. As he arrived on

French soil Francis cried, 'I am King! I am King once again!' At first Henry and his brother the Dauphin were held in 'honourable captivity' at Vitoria in Castile. Waiting for their release, they stayed with Queen Eleanor, who expected to become their stepmother shortly. A good-hearted woman, she took a kindly interest in their welfare. The boys also enjoyed the attentive care of a large French household including their governor, tutor, maître d'hôtel and seventy attendants and servants.<sup>4</sup> Yet it quickly became clear that their father had no intention of honouring the Treaty of Madrid and the boys soon felt the effect of his broken pledges. Before signing the treaty, the King had taken the precaution of telling his emissaries from France that the promises he signed as a captive must be regarded as void since they had been extracted under duress. To modern readers it may appear ruthless that Francis could send his sons away into what he must have known would be a long captivity while he defied the Emperor, but in fact he had very little option. In order to liberate his kingdom from the aftermath of Pavia he had to be able to act as a free man. His mother Louise, suffering from failing health, lacked the authority to deal with matters effectively as regent, surrounding herself with notoriously corrupt advisers only interested in extracting what they could for themselves. Throughout her adult life Louise's abiding passion was her son. She called Francis 'my lord, my King, my son, my Caesar' and had struggled to keep his kingdom intact for him during his imprisonment, braving the people's hostility at his military failures and the unwelcome attentions of foreign predators. Now Charles V found himself facing serious difficulties too. Thwarted by Francis's breach of their agreement, his careful plans had been shattered. Not only was the Treaty of Madrid in tatters, but the impecunious Emperor lacked the money to pay his armies; his German territories were torn with religious strife while the Turks attacked Hungary. No wonder a report from an English envoy at the time described him as being 'full of dumps'.<sup>5</sup> Immediately after his release, Francis tried to stir up support for himself and trouble for the Emperor by creating the League of Cognac on 22 May 1526. Ostensibly the league had been formed 'to ensure the security of Christendom and the establishment of a true and lasting peace', though in reality it was composed of states that feared Imperial domination. It included France, Venice, Florence, the Papacy and the Sforza of Milan. Henry VIII of England also took a place as the league's 'protector'. As a direct response to Francis's actions, the children's 'honourable captivity' now changed abruptly for a cruder confinement. Charged with responsibility for the princes, the Constable of Castile, Don Iñigo Hernandez de Velasco, received orders to move them deeper into Spain.\* They were first moved to a castle near Valladolid. Then, in February 1527, a supposed plot to free the boys and bring them back to France prompted their transfer still further south. Charles ordered the return of some of the children's attendants to France and took his hostages to a castle near Palencia about one hundred miles north of Madrid. By October – with Rome now sacked, Italy engulfed by war and Catherine herself a prisoner at the Murate – Charles gave permission for a brief visit by English emissaries to Henry and his brother. They spoke to the princes' tutor, Benedetto Taglicarno, and reported that he 'could not enough praise the Duke of Orléans of wit, capacity and great will to learn, and of a prudence and gravity passing his age, besides treatable

gentleness and nobleness of mind, whereof daily he avoweth to see great sparks'.<sup>6</sup>In 1529 the Spanish captured and executed a French spy found near Palencia, not far from the princes' castle. Fearing another escape attempt, the Emperor ordered that the boys be moved once again. Their new home, the grim mountain fortress of Pedraza, lay between Madrid and Segovia. Their French suite and attendants had been taken from them some months before their move. Put to work as galley slaves, the unfortunate servants were, according to one account, shipwrecked, captured by pirates and finally sold as white slaves in Tunis where, ironically enough, ten of the forty-one were later liberated by Charles V when he captured the city in 1535. The boys had been left with a sole companion, a French dwarf, to entertain them. Their gaolers, coarse Spanish soldiers, kept them under close watch and cared little for their charges. Reports from a French agent near Pedraza described his two sightings of the boys in July 1529. On the first occasion he saw them led by a Spanish prince to Mass heavily escorted by eighty foot soldiers. He next sighted them surrounded by fifty mounted men on their way out to play. The spy reported that whenever Henry came out he rode a donkey held by two men because of his constant attempts to flee; he also noted that the prince insolently cursed the Spaniards at every opportunity. Meanwhile the international situation began to look promising for the princes' eventual return home. While Francis and the Emperor busied themselves absurdly challenging each other to duels, still locked in their mutual antagonism, both sides, exhausted by war, nonetheless urgently needed to conclude a settlement. To break the impasse, Francis's mother Louise and Charles's aunt Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands, were authorised to carry out talks on behalf of the two rulers, neatly providing the men with a face-saving solution at the same time. 'La Paix des Dames' (the Peace of the Ladies), properly called the Treaty of Cambrai where it was concluded and signed by Louise of Savoy and Margaret of Austria in August 1529, would eventually set the princes free. Its most significant article involved part of Burgundy being yielded to Charles in exchange for the princes; instead they would be released for a ransom of 2 million écus. Charles's sister Eleanor, who had been languishing in despair believing that matters would not be resolved, was still to marry Francis and when 1.2 million écus, the first part of the ransom had been paid to the Emperor, the children and the Queen would be allowed to travel to France. The regent Louise asked for permission to send her usher, M. Bodin, to visit the boys at Pedraza to give them the good tidings of their imminent homecoming. Under heavy guard the man travelled to Castile where, after many delaying tactics by the Spanish, he arrived in September 1529. Bodin's moving account of the meeting describes the hardship and the solitude Henry and his brother the Dauphin Francis had had to endure. After being kept waiting at Pedraza, the usher finally received authorisation to enter the fortress itself where he saw the princes in their small dark cell with walls ten feet thick and iron bars to prevent escape. A small shaft of light came from a window too high to reach and the only furnishings were straw mattresses. When Bodin set eyes upon the two pathetic and shabby boys, he wept. After bowing to them he explained he had come on behalf of the King and to say that they would soon be returning home. The Dauphin turned to his gaoler saying that he had not

understood a word the man had said and wanted him to 'use the language of the country'. The Marquis of Berlanga, entrusted with the princes' security and well-being at Pedraza, retired leaving Bodin with the boys, who then repeated his message in Spanish. Astonished, the usher asked if the Dauphin had forgotten his native tongue. The prince retorted that since his suite had been removed from him he no longer spoke French. At that moment Henry interjected, saying, 'Brother, this is the usher Bodin.' The Dauphin acknowledged that he knew the man and had been feigning his ignorance for the benefit of Berlanga. The two boys then fired excited questions at their visitor, asking about everything at home, their family, the King and their friends. Allowed to withdraw to an adjoining room, the princes rushed to the window for fresh air. Bodin also noticed two small dogs. One of the guards remarked, 'That is the only pleasure which the princes have,' another added, 'You see how the sons of the King your master are treated, with no company but that of the soldiers . . . and neither exercise nor education.' Presumably even the entertaining dwarf had been sent away by this time. The Spaniards, fearful that Bodin might use some sophisticated French sorcery to remove the boys, refused to allow him to measure them (he wished to report their growth to the King), nor was he permitted to give them new clothes in case they possessed magic powers. Bodin shed further tears when he bade farewell to the princes and returned home to report their miserable plight.<sup>7</sup> After many difficulties and postponements, at last the time arrived for Henry and the Dauphin to be exchanged for the gold. One of the principal impediments to the transfer had been Francis's problem in raising the money for his sons' freedom. Extravagant promises to contribute to the ransom had been made by the King's richer subjects, though in the event they only grudgingly produced the money after much prodding. Francis's blunders had been expensive for the kingdom. When the correct amount of écus had finally been collected, inspected and weighed, it was discovered that unscrupulous officials had clipped some of the coinage, so further appeals for funds had to be made. Eventually the gold was ready and once again a strict protocol agreed, noting all the details of how the exchange should take place. The King charged the Grand Master of France and renowned soldier, Anne (pronounced Annay) Baron de Montmorency, with the safety of the gold and its exchange for the prisoners. The Constable of Castile brought his charges to the Bidassoa river accompanied by the Emperor's sister, Eleanor, who had been languishing in a convent waiting in despair for her marriage to Francis.\* The exchange, which had originally been fixed for March 1530, was now to begin on 1 July, almost a year after the peace treaty had been signed at Cambrai. The day before the transfer the Constable of Castile accused Montmorency and the French of a slight to his honour over some trifle. Without a full apology from the French government, he declared that the arrangements for the exchange would be halted. For months Montmorency had been painstakingly fulfilling even the most petty obligations laid down in the agreement; now some self-important Spanish windbag threatened to prolong the business indefinitely. Exasperated, Montmorency offered to give satisfaction in person. Fortunately the Grand Master's reputation as a fierce soldier had the Spaniard offering to set aside his grievance with sudden grace. All was set for the following day. Just before the prisoners left his care, the

Constable of Castile presented Henry and his brother with a pair of horses each, asking them to forgive any wrongs that he might have done them. The Dauphin appeared good-natured, but Henry merely turned his back on his despised erstwhile gaoler and farted. Queen Eleanor and the two boys arrived in France by torchlight on the night of 1 July to be reunited with their father and his Court two days later. Henry, now eleven years old, and the twelve-year-old Dauphin had been prisoners for almost four and a half years. At first sight the boys looked well and they had grown considerably, though soon it became obvious that both children had been deeply affected by their ordeal. Quiet and reserved, their insistence on points of etiquette, their clothes and other details made them seem more Spanish than French. Henry, who had once been described as a lively intelligent boy, had changed into a withdrawn and quiet youth. Their incarceration and all its attendant deprivations had marked both children for life. After the celebrations and receptions were over, Francis soon became impatient with his gloomy sons. He declared, 'The mark of a Frenchman was to be always gay and lively,' adding that he had no time for 'dreamy, sullen, sleepy children'. To add to this, the King now tactlessly showed a marked preference for the princes' younger brother, Charles, Duke of Angoulême. Younger than Henry by one year, Charles greatly resembled his father in looks and his outgoing manner.

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Catherine de Medici during her long widowhood. Painting by François Clouet.  
1 Catherine's husband, King

Henry II, in 1547. After François Clouet. (Musée Condé, Chantilly)<sup>2</sup>Catherine as a young woman, from a portrait in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.<sup>2</sup>Pope Clement VII, c1526, by Sebastiano del Piombo. (Galleria Nazionale de Capodimonte, Naples)<sup>2</sup>King Henry II later in his reign. (Musée Crozatier, Le Puy-en-Velay)<sup>2</sup>The bedroom at the Château d'Anet that Henry II shared with his lifelong mistress Diane de Poitiers.<sup>2</sup>Diane de Poitiers, the legendary beauty. (State Collection, France)<sup>2</sup>Diane de Poitiers as she was more accurately depicted by the court painter François Clouet (Musée Condé, Chantilly)<sup>2</sup>The ubiquitous device adopted by Henry and Diane intertwining their initials. From a panelled door in the Château d'Anet. (École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris)<sup>2</sup>Giorgio Vasari's allegorical portrayal of Catherine and Henry's wedding in 1533. (Palazzo Vecchio, Sala di Clemente VII, Florence)<sup>3</sup>The tournament at which Henry II was mortally wounded by a splintered jousting lance to the eye. By Franz Hagenberg. (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)<sup>2</sup>Catherine with other members of the royal family and senior courtiers attend the deathbed of Henry II.<sup>2</sup>Two of Catherine's architectural triumphs in Paris: the Hôtel de la Reine and the Tuilleries Palace in about 1650, home to every French monarch until Napoleon III. (both engravings by Matthäus Merian the Elder)<sup>4</sup>The young Mary, Queen of Scots, who married Catherine's eldest son the Dauphin Francis.<sup>1</sup>Francis, later King Francis II, as a boy of eight. (School of Clouet, 1552, Musée Condé, Chantilly)<sup>2</sup>One of Catherine's and Henry's children, believed to be Charles. Maximilien (later Charles IX), by Clouet.<sup>2</sup>The magnetic Marguerite of Valois, later known as 'La Reine Margot', also by Clouet (1568).<sup>1</sup>A 'magnificence' in Paris in 1573 in honour of the Polish ambassadors, celebrating Catherine's son Henri III's election as King of Poland. (Uffizi, Florence)<sup>3</sup>Charles IX as King. (School of Clouet, c. 1572, Musée Condé, Chantilly)<sup>2</sup>Hercules, later Francis, Duke of Alençon; the runt of Catherine's litter. By Clouet, 1561.<sup>2</sup>King Philip II of Spain and his wife Elisabeth, Catherine's eldest daughter.<sup>1</sup>Catherine's favourite son, the Duke of Anjou, shortly before his accession as Henri III. By François Ovesnel (Louvre, Paris)<sup>2</sup>The rival factions: Anne de Montmorency, Constable of France, and Henry II's mentor. By Corneille de Lyon. (Musée Condé, Chantilly)<sup>2</sup>François, 2nd Duke of Guise: soldier-statesman who masterminded the 1559 coup. By Clouet (Louvre, Paris)<sup>4</sup>The Catholic Paladin: Henri, 3rd Duke of Guise, 'le balafre', later known as 'The King of Paris'. (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris)<sup>2</sup>Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, leader of the Huguenots. School of Clouet, c. 1550. (Musée Condé, Chantilly)<sup>2</sup>The exquisite Château of Chenonceau.<sup>2</sup>A romanticised portrayal of the 1561 Colloquy of Poissy. (Bibliothèque de l'Histoire du Protestantisme, Paris)<sup>2</sup>Catherine as Queen of France, the image of majesty. (Palazzo Pitti, Florence)<sup>2</sup>A nineteenth-century depiction of the wedding celebrations of Henri de Bourbon, King of Navarre (later Henri IV) and Margot, some days before the Massacre of St Bartholemew.<sup>2</sup>Catherine standing over corpses after the massacre of St Bartholemew. By François Dubois. (Musée des Beaux Arts, Paris)<sup>4</sup>The Valois dynasty ended with the assassination of Henri III in 1589, depicted in this contemporary engraving.<sup>2</sup>The future: Henry IV, King of France and Navarre. (Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris)<sup>2</sup>The 'gisants' of Henry II and Catherine at the Cathedral of St Denis.<sup>2</sup>The author and the publishers

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Principal Characters

House of Valois

Francis I, King of France, father-in-law to Catherine de Medici

Marguerite of Angoulême, sister of Francis I, wife of Henri d'Albret, King of Navarre

Dauphin Francis, eldest son of Francis I

Henry II, King of France, second son of Francis I, formerly Duke of Orléans, husband of Catherine de Medici

Marguerite of Valois, sister of Henry II, wife of Emanuel-Philibert, Duke of Savoy

Francis II, King of France, eldest son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici

Charles IX, King of France, third son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici

Henri III, King of France, Duke of Anjou, fourth son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici

Duke of Alençon, youngest son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici

Elisabeth of Valois, daughter of Henry II and Catherine de Medici, wife of Philip II of Spain

Claude of Valois, daughter of Henry II and Catherine de Medici, wife of Charles, Duke of Lorraine

Marguerite of Valois (Margot), daughter of Henry II and Catherine de Medici, wife of Henry IV, King of France

House of Medici

Cosimo the Elder

Lorenzo The Magnificent, grandson of Cosimo the Elder

Guiliano de Medici, brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent

Lorenzo II de Medici, Duke of Urbino, grandson of Lorenzo The Magnificent, Catherine de Medici's father

Madeleine de La Tour d'Auvergne, wife of Lorenzo II, Catherine de Medici's mother

Pope Leo X, son of Lorenzo The Magnificent

Pope Clement VII, Giulio de Medici, illegitimate son of Giuliano de Medici, cousin of Pope Leo X

Alessandro de Medici, Duke of Florence, illegitimate son of Pope Clement VIII

ppolito de Medici, illegitimate nephew of Pope Leo X

Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, distant kinsman of Catherine de Medici

Maria de Medici, granddaughter of Cosimo I, second wife of Henry IV, King of France

Piero Strozzi, nephew of Lorenzo III

Leone Strozzi, younger brother of Piero Strozzi

House of Bourbon

Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre, First Prince of the Blood, father of Henry IV, King of France, husband of Jeanne d'Albret

Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre, wife of Antoine de Bourbon, daughter of Marguerite of Angoulême

Louis de Condé, Prince of the Blood, younger brother of Antoine de Bourbon

Charles, Cardinal de Bourbon, Prince of the Blood, became the pretender Charles X and younger brother of Antoine de Bourbon

Henry IV, King of France, son of Antoine de Bourbon and Jeanne d'Albret, husband of (1) Marguerite de Valois (Margot) and (2) Maria de Medici

Henri de Condé, Prince of the Blood, son of Louis de Condé

House of Habsburg

Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, formerly Charles I of Spain

Ferdinand I of Austria, Holy Roman Emperor, brother of Charles V

Philip II of Spain, son of Charles V, whose wives included Mary I of England and Elisabeth of Valois

Maximilian II of Austria, Holy Roman Emperor, son of Ferdinand I

Elisabeth of Austria, daughter of Maximilian II, wife of Charles IX

House of Tudor

Henry VIII, King of England

Edward VI, King of England, son of Henry VIII

Mary I, Queen of England, daughter of Henry VIII, wife of Philip II of Spain

Elisabeth I,

Queen of England, daughter of Henry VIII  
House of Guise  
Claude, 1st Duke of Guise, son of René, Duke of Lorraine  
François, 2nd Duke of Guise, eldest son of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise  
Anna d'Este, (1) wife of François, 2nd Duke of Guise, (2) of the Duke of Nemours  
Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine, second son of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise  
Claude, Duke d'Aumale, fifth son of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise  
Mary of Guise, daughter of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise, wife of James V of Scotland  
Mary, Queen of Scots, daughter of Mary of Guise and James V of Scotland, wife of Francis II of France  
Henri, 3rd Duke of Guise, son of François, 2nd Duke of Guise  
Louis, Cardinal of Guise, brother of Henri, 3rd Duke of Guise  
Louise de Vaudémont, great-niece of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise, wife of Henri III, King of France  
House of Montmorency  
Anne de Montmorency, Constable of France  
Gaspard de Coligny, nephew of Anne de Montmorency  
Ôdet, Cardinal de Châtillon, elder brother of Gaspard de Coligny  
François d'Andelot, youngest brother of Gaspard de Coligny  
François de Montmorency, eldest son of Anne de Montmorency  
Henri Damville de Montmorency, second son of Anne de Montmorency  
Other  
Duchess d'Étampes, mistress of Francis I  
Diane de Poitiers, Duchess of Valentinois, mistress of Henry II  
Count Gabriel de Montgomery, accidental killer of Henry II  
Cosimo Ruggieri, necromancer to Catherine de Medici  
Ambroise Paré, court surgeon  
Michel de L'Hôpital, Catherine de Medici's Chancellor  
Marie-Catherine de Gondi, Catherine de Medici's closest friend, lady-in-waiting, Treasurer and Administrator of Catherine's buildings  
Michel de Nostradamus, seer to Catherine de Medici  
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House of Bourbon  
Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre, First Prince of the Blood, father

of Henry IV, King of France, husband of Jeanne d'AlbretJeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre, wife of Antoine de Bourbon, daughter of Marguerite of AngoulêmeLouis de Condé, Prince of the Blood, younger brother of Antoine de BourbonCharles, Cardinal de Bourbon, Prince of the Blood, became the pretender Charles X and younger brother of Antoine de BourbonHenry IV, King of France, son of Antoine de Bourbon and Jeanne d'Albret, husband of (1) Marguerite de Valois (Margot) and (2) Maria de MediciHenri de Condé, Prince of the Blood, son of Louis de CondéHouse of HabsburgCharles V, Holy Roman Emperor, formerly Charles I of SpainFerdinand I of Austria, Holy Roman Emperor, brother of Charles VPhilip II of Spain, son of Charles V, whose wives included Mary I of England and Elisabeth of ValoisMaximilian II of Austria, Holy Roman Emperor, son of Ferdinand IElisabeth of Austria, daughter of Maximilian II, wife of Charles IXHouse of TudorHenry VIII, King of EnglandEdward VI, King of England, son of Henry VIIIMary I, Queen of England, daughter of Henry VIII, wife of Philip II of SpainElizabeth I, Queen of England, daughter of Henry VIIIHouse of GuiseClaude, 1st Duke of Guise, son of René, Duke of LorraineFrançois, 2nd Duke of Guise, eldest son of Claude, 1st Duke of GuiseAnna d'Este, (1) wife of François, 2nd Duke of Guise, (2) of the Duke of NemoursCharles, Cardinal of Lorraine, second son of Claude, 1st Duke of GuiseClaude, Duke d'Aumale, fifth son of Claude, 1st Duke of GuiseMary of Guise, daughter of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise, wife of James V of ScotlandMary, Queen of Scots, daughter of Mary of Guise and James V of Scotland, wife of Francis II of FranceHenri, 3rd Duke of Guise, son of François, 2nd Duke of GuiseLouis, Cardinal of Guise, brother of Henri, 3rd Duke of GuiseLouise de Vaudémont, great-niece of Claude, 1st Duke of Guise, wife of Henri III, King of FranceHouse of MontmorencyAnne de Montmorency, Constable of FranceGaspard de Coligny, nephew of Anne de MontmorencyÔdet, Cardinal de Châtillon, elder brother of Gaspard de ColignyFrançois d'Andelot, youngest brother of Gaspard de ColignyFrançois de Montmorency, eldest son of Anne de MontmorencyHenri Damville de Montmorency, second son of Anne de MontmorencyOtherDuchess d'Étampes, mistress of Francis IDiane de Poitiers, Duchess of Valentinois, mistress of Henry IICount Gabriel de Montgomery, accidental killer of Henry IICosimo Ruggieri, necromancer to Catherine de MediciAmbroise Paré, court surgeonMichel de L'Hôpital, Catherine de Medici's Chancellor Marie-Catherine de Gondi, Catherine de Medici's closest friend, lady-in-waiting, Treasurer and Administrator of Catherine's buildingsMichel de Nostradamus, seer to Catherine de MediciIntroduction and AcknowledgementsCatherine de Medici has variously been called 'The Maggot from Italy's Tomb', 'The Black Queen' and 'Madame La Serpente'. To many she is the very incarnation of evil. It is, I believe, as mistaken a judgement as it is bigoted. Yet it is not far removed from the overall verdict of history on one of the most remarkable women of the sixteenth century.To the extent that Catherine's name evokes any response today, it is as a Florentine, a patron of the Renaissance, and as a poisoner and intriguer of the stamp of Lucrezia Borgia, with whom she is often confused. Throughout her life her enemies condemned her for her country of origin, described by Thomas Nashe as 'The Academie of man-slaughter, the sporting place of murther, the Apothecary-shop of poison for all Nations'. Insofar as she is

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Leonie Frieda  
October 2003  
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Prologue  
Death of a King  
Cursed be the magician who predicted so evilly and so well  
June–July 1559  
On the late afternoon of Friday, 30 June 1559 a long splinter of wood from a jousting lance pierced the eye and brain of King Henry II of France. The poisonous wound bloated his face, slowly robbing him of sight, speech and reason, and after ten days of suffering he died at the Château des Tournelles in Paris. His death was not only tragic – it would prove calamitous. The jousting had been part of celebrations to mark the signing in April of the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis, which brought to an end France's and Spain's ruinous series of wars over Italy. Many dismayed Frenchmen believed Italy had been given away through the mere stroke of a pen and no one felt this more keenly than Henry's Florentine wife, Catherine de Medici, whose hopes of recovering her lost patrimony vanished with the peace. Yet she took one consolation from the treaty: that her eldest daughter Elisabeth would marry the most eligible parti in Europe, King Philip II of Spain. A further sweetener provided a husband for Henry's spinster sister and Catherine's closest friend, Marguerite, who at the age of thirty-six had been considered practically unmarriageable. She was to wed Philip's ally, Emmanuel-Philibert, Duke of Savoy, a hearty soldier with the unpromising nickname of 'Iron-head'. No time was lost in arranging the weddings. Determined to show Philip that France remained undiminished despite her Italian sacrifice, Henry – although choked with war debts – had borrowed over 1 million écus 'to defray

the setting out of these triumphs'.\* A vigorous and robust man, he excelled at the joust and had arranged the five-day contest largely to show off his own skill. Both Henry and Catherine were, not surprisingly, disappointed when Philip – a widower since the recent death of the English Queen, Mary Tudor, the previous year – announced that he would not be coming to Paris himself. Characteristically, the punctilious monarch offered tradition as his explanation, saying, 'Custom demands that the Kings of Spain should not go to fetch their wives but that their wives should be brought to them.'<sup>1</sup> Instead, the groom sent a dismal proxy – the severe soldier-statesman Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba. With the rise of Protestantism in France gravely threatening both the King's authority and the country's unity, Henry had been compelled to make peace with Philip. Early in June, Henry had issued an edict announcing a crusade to rid his realm of 'the Lutheran scum' and while nothing much could be done until the departure of his august guests, he ordered the arrest of several prominent Protestants in Paris. Quickly tried and sentenced to burn at the stake for heresy, their seizure caused a considerable outcry and a stay of execution was given until after the celebrations. The condemned men awaited their fate in the dungeons of Le Châtelet prison in Paris, while nearby in the wide rue Saint-Antoine next to the Château des Tournelles, they could hear the paving stones being pulled up to make way for the jousting lists, and the building of stands for the spectators and triumphal arches emblazoned with the arms of Spain, France and Savoy. Heralds issued the King's challenge that His Majesty the King of France, his eldest son Francis, the Dauphin, the Duke of Guise and other princes at the French Court were to take on all comers. Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, the English ambassador, reported, 'The King himself, the Dauphin and the nobles . . . do daily assay themselves at the tilt which is like to be very grand and sumptuous.'<sup>2</sup> The Parisians loved a spectacle, but their expectations were confounded when Alba and his suite arrived on 15 June. Spanish fashions had always been austere, but their dark and mean-looking clothes left the French wondering whether a deliberate affront had been intended. A few days later all this was forgotten when Henry welcomed his enemy of yesterday to the Louvre Palace. Emmanuel-Philibert of Savoy came escorted by 150 men gorgeously dressed in crimson doublets, matching shoes and black velvet cloaks embroidered with gold lace. On Thursday, 22 June, the thirteen-year-old Elisabeth of France married Philip of Spain, aged thirty-two, by proxy at Notre-Dame Cathedral. After the wedding a primitive ritual took place. Elisabeth and Alba climbed into the huge state bed – each with one leg naked. As their bare limbs touched and they rubbed their feet together, the marriage was declared consummated. Six days later, on Wednesday 28 June, the jousts began. By Friday, the third day of the tournament, the weather turned hot and heavy. The rue Saint-Antoine enjoyed little shade and a large number of peasants had climbed on to the roofs of the houses to watch the King enter the lists. For weeks the ladies and gentlemen of the Court had been preparing 'their handsome and costly apparel', some wearing the entire value of their estates on their backs.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to dazzle at the celebrations Catherine had ordered 300 lengths of gold and silver cloth from Italy for her gowns; extravagant by nature, she delighted in wearing regal confections. One observer noted that it was hard to say whether the

sun or the jewels shone more brightly. The King had never seemed happier. The same cannot be said for his wife. Seated with her son the Dauphin and the lofty figure of her daughter-in-law, Mary, Queen of Scots, Catherine was noticeably anxious.\* The night before she had dreamt that her husband lay stricken on the ground, his face covered in blood.<sup>4</sup> The Queen's unshakeable belief in seers and astrologers gave her every reason to be fearful. In 1552 Luca Guorico, the Italian astrologer of the Medici family, had warned Henry that he must take particular care around his fortieth year to 'avoid all single combat in an enclosed space', lest he risk a wound that could blind or even kill him. Henry was now forty years and four months old. Furthermore, in 1555 Nostradamus had published this prophecy in Centuries, quatrain no. I.XXXV: The young lion will overcome the old, in a field of combat in a single fight. He will pierce his eyes in a golden cage, two wounds in one, he then dies a cruel death. Citing these evil omens, for the old lion could be interpreted as the King and the cage of gold his visor, Catherine had implored her husband not to joust that day. He is even supposed to have remarked to the same man who was accidentally to strike him down, 'I care not if my death be in that manner . . . I would even prefer it, to die by the hand of whoever he might be, so long as he was brave and valiant and that I kept my honour.' Henry's mistress was conspicuously seated surrounded by ladies of the Court. The superb Diane de Poitiers, Duchess of Valentinois, had held the heart of the King since he was a teenager. Now almost sixty years old, 'Madame' as she was known by all – including the Queen – had lost none of her charms, in his eyes at least, being still 'the lady that I serve'. Cold, remote and elegant, Diane had been widowed in 1531. Since the death of her husband she wore only black and white mourning, knowing how well it became her, particularly beside the dandified courtiers. Catherine, forty years old, plump and dumpy after giving birth to ten children, had long since mastered the 'art of opportune pretending' and, with a few rare exceptions, she had spent the last twenty-six years gracefully not noticing 'Madame's' total enslavement of the husband she pathetically adored. Henry began the day by jousting well. Wearing Diane's colours of black and white, he saw off challenges from the Dukes of Guise and Nemours. Pleased with the horse given to him by Emmanuel-Philibert of Savoy, Henry graciously shouted up to him, 'It is your horse that has helped me tilt well today!' By now the King was tired, but insisted on riding a further course. Catherine sent word asking him not to continue. Irritated, Henry nevertheless replied courteously, 'It is precisely for you that I fight.' Once more he mounted his horse – prophetically named Malheureux – and prepared to tilt against the valiant young captain of his Scottish guard, Gabriel Count de Montgomery.\* As he did so, it is said that a boy in the crowd broke the expectant silence with the cry: 'The King will die!' A few moments later the two men clashed and Montgomery almost knocked Henry from the saddle. It was five o'clock and some spectators rose to leave. The King was good-humoured but wanted his revenge. Although Montgomery had become afraid and begged to be allowed to retire, Henry insisted with the shout: 'It's an order!' Catherine once again asked the King to stop. Ignoring her, he demanded his helmet from the Marshal de Vieilleville, who said, 'Sire, I swear before God that for the last three nights I have dreamt that today, this last day of June, will be fatal for you.'<sup>5</sup> Henry could

barely have heard these words because he did not wait for the customary trumpet call that signalled the opening of the course. The two riders thundered towards each other. As they met with a crack of splintering wood, Henry, his arms clinging to the horse's neck, 'had great ado (reling to and fro) to kepe himself on horseback'.<sup>6</sup> The Queen shrieked and with a loud cry the crowd rose to their feet. The two most powerful men in France after the King himself – the Duke de Montmorency and the Duke of Guise – rushed forward to stop Henry from falling out of the saddle. Lowering him to the ground, they removed his armour. They found the visor half open and his face soaked in blood with wooden splinters 'of a good bigness' protruding from his eye and temple. The King was 'very weak . . . almost benumbed . . . he moved neither hand nor fote, but laye as one amazed'.<sup>7</sup> Seeing this, his young opponent begged his sovereign that his head and his hands be cut off, but: 'The good natured King who for his kindness had no equal in his time answered that he was not angry . . . and that he had nothing to pardon, since he had obeyed his King and carried himself like a brave knight'.<sup>8</sup> The crowd pressed round to catch a glimpse of Henry, who was carried away to the Château des Tournelles. Once there, the gates were locked and he insisted on mounting the grand staircase on his feet, but having his head and shoulders supported. It was a miserable procession. The Dauphin, who predictably had fainted, was carried up after the King, followed by Catherine and the most senior nobles. Collapsing on to his bed, Henry immediately tried to clasp his hands in prayer and strike his chest in contrition for his sins. It was as if he were already preparing for death. 'There was marvellous great lamentation and weeping for him from both men and women,' wrote Throckmorton, and it was feared that the King would not live for many moments longer. The royal surgeons were summoned. Henry's bravery was singular as the doctors tried to remove the splinters. Retching with pain, only once was the unfortunate patient heard to cry out. The usual appalling (by modern standards) remedies were prescribed: he was bled, purged and given an ounce of barley gruel which he promptly vomited, 'refrigeratives applied', the wound was dressed with egg white. After this he sank into a state of feverish semi-consciousness and was attended that night by his wife, the Duke of Savoy and the Duke of Guise's brother, the Cardinal of Lorraine. The King had a 'very evil rest' and at three o'clock in the morning the vigil changed. Taken away to lie down, Catherine seemed in a trance of shock. Savoy had meanwhile summoned Philip II's own surgeon, André Vesalius. The decapitated heads of several criminals who had been executed the day before were brought to the celebrated physician. He and Ambroise Paré (his French counterpart) tried with jagged shards of wood to reproduce the wound on the skulls of the corpses. As they discussed the inconclusive results of their grisly experiments, Henry continued his decline. In brief periods of lucidity he asked for music and dictated a letter to the French ambassador in Rome expressing the hope that the fight so recently begun against the heretics would continue if he recovered. The notable absence of Diane de Poitiers reflected Henry's hopeless condition. 'Madame . . . has not entered the bedchamber since the day of the wound, for fear of being expelled by the Queen,' noted one chronicler.<sup>9</sup> Catherine had shared her entire married life with Diane, but these last moments

belonged to her alone. In another part of the château, Diane anxiously waited for news of her lover. Two nights before Henry died an officer came from the Queen, demanding the return of the many jewels belonging to the Crown that Henry had given to his greedy mistress. 'What! Is he dead?' she is said to have asked. 'Not yet, Madame,' he answered, 'but he cannot last long.'<sup>10</sup> Diane replied that as long as there was breath in the King's body she would not lose heart and would obey 'none but him'. On the evening of 4 July the King's temperature rose sharply. Septicæmia had set in. There was talk of trepanning the wound to relieve the pressure and ease his pain, but removal of the bandages revealed such large quantities of pus that the idea was abandoned. Henry was doomed and nothing further could be done but to await his death. This was the event Catherine had dreaded ever since she had married Henry as a fourteen-year-old girl. She had been a passionately devoted, adoring wife. Always fearful of losing him, she and her ladies had worn mourning whenever he had gone off to war. During his martial expeditions, when not constantly writing asking for news of him, she had been at prayer making extravagant offerings, clasping her many amulets and charms to ensure his safe return. Though she had always feared the doom-laden prophecies, she had not prepared herself for this. Alternating between prayers and tears, Catherine hurried from her dying husband to the Dauphin, who lay in bed rocking to and fro, moaning and crying as if unhinged as he knocked his head against the wall. She was finally unable to watch as Henry lost his power of sight and speech. During his last lucid moments he had told his son to write to Philip of Spain commending his family and his kingdom to his protection. Taking his hands, he said, 'My son, you are going to be without your father but not without his blessing. I pray that you will be more fortunate than I have been.' 'My God! How can I live if my father dies?' cried the Dauphin and promptly fainted again. Some say the King called for Catherine on 8 July and, after urging the Queen to ensure that his sister Marguerite's marriage went ahead, 'he commended to her his kingdom and his children'.<sup>11</sup> The following night the cheerless wedding of Marguerite and the Duke of Savoy duly took place in Elisabeth's room, the Mass said hurriedly in case news of the King's death arrived before it was completed. Catherine was too tormented to attend. The following morning at dawn Henry received extreme unction and at one o'clock that afternoon he died.<sup>12</sup> Years later his daughter, Margot, recalled her father's death as 'the vile blow which deprived our House of happiness and our country of peace'.<sup>13</sup> During the King's last days the most powerful men in the country gathered around their master's bed. They were not, however, united. The Duke de Montmorency, Grand Master and Constable of France, had been Henry's mentor, friend and surrogate father. A military man and a conservative, he was, aside from the Crown and Church, the largest landowner in France, enjoying unquestioned support from his fiefdoms. Although he was a Catholic himself, some of his family had recently become Protestants or Protestant-sympathisers. During the last year of Henry's life the Constable had joined with Diane, the King's mistress, to keep their rivals, the Guise brothers, from power. The two elder Guise brothers, from a cadet branch of the House of Lorraine (a duchy on France's north-eastern border), could also call upon the assistance of many client vassals. The elder – Duke François – was a popular war

hero. A brave and distinguished soldier, he had been a favourite of the late King. His brother Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine, a masterly politician and a supreme courtier, was also France's Chief Inquisitor. The pair, both ultra-Catholics and with complementary talents, made a formidable team. Latterly they had fallen out of favour for not supporting the return of France's Italian possessions in the recent treaty. This in turn had brought them more into sympathy with Catherine. Now they expected a central role in the government of the country, not least because they were the uncles of Mary, the sixteen-year-old Queen of Scots, wife of Catherine's feeble eldest son, the Dauphin, and since Henry's death the new Queen of France. To Catherine's intense irritation, Mary had enormous influence over her husband, still a teenager but now King Francis II, and she in turn relied upon her uncles for guidance in matters large and small. Since the accident, Paris had turned from a crowded festive city to a silent place where the overwhelming majority of people were stunned and sorrowful at losing their King. They also rightly feared the political uncertainties that lay before the kingdom. 'The palace has passed from marriage to a morgue,' wrote one observer, and in the streets the common people genuinely mourned their sovereign's passing. The proclamation of King Francis II gave them little reason to feel encouraged. Montmorency and other senior noblemen of the non-Guisard faction stayed with the corpse of the late King as the surgeons removed his heart and entrails for separate burial, and then embalmed his body. All over the Château des Tournelles altars were set up, and rooms and passages were draped in black. Around the now embalmed body of the King came relays of bishops and other churchmen. The clerics, surrounded by tall candles, knelt and sang psalms for the dead as Henry's room became transformed into a richly decorated chapel with an altar at each end of his bed. On benches covered in silver cloth sat subjects high and low who attended one of six Requiem Masses held daily for the King's soul. Catherine also went to pay reverence to her late husband of nearly twenty-six years. Kneeling before him she bade his body farewell as those remaining at the château began the elaborate forty-day vigil. During this critical period, Constable Montmorency and his party were sidelined as the Guises took over the major offices of state. While Montmorency – whom Francis II loathed – had probably anticipated some loss of power, he could scarcely have imagined the extent to which he would find himself politically marginalised. Indeed, the bickering had already begun before the King was dead; the Guises spoke of impeaching the Constable for not ensuring the King's safety during the jousting, while the old man wandered the corridors, inconsolable at the prospect of losing his master, friend and comrade in arms. Leaving the body of the late King with Montmorency and his allies, the Guises knew they must establish themselves in power before the country had time to react to the tragedy. A serious threat to their hegemony could be anticipated from the First Prince of the Blood, Antoine de Bourbon, and his brothers. The Bourbons, like the Valois, were both descended from the Capet dynasty that had ruled France since the year 987. In 1328 Charles IV 'Le Bel' died without a male heir and the main branch of the Capetians died out, passing the Crown to the Valois, a junior branch of the dynasty. Should Henry's and Catherine's four surviving sons die without male issue the Bourbon family were next

in line to the throne. Legally, as the only Princes of the Blood apart from these four Valois princes, the Bourbons would dominate any ruling council. Though Antoine de Bourbon was lazy, selfish and weak-willed, the Guises did not want to take unnecessary risks and decided that the new King should be removed to the Louvre, away from their rivals. Accordingly, Francis and his wife, as well as Catherine's younger children, were gathered together to make the short journey across Paris. The bleak figure, clad in black, of the stricken Dowager Queen then unexpectedly joined the party. She spurned not only the usual white mourning of French queens but the tradition that demanded she remain in seclusion for forty days where her husband had died. Catherine knew that she must now break with custom. Though devastated by her loss, she was essential to the Guises' coup d'état. During her husband's reign Catherine had skilfully kept from openly siding with either the Guise or the Montmorency faction. Maintaining a sweet disposition and good relations with both, she frequently sought their advice and help, disarming them with her appearance of humility. Though they were unaware of it, she detested both parties in almost equal measure. She would not forget their past wrongs, their toadying to Diane de Poitiers and their immense hold over her late husband. They in turn had generally ignored the Queen, badly underestimating her intelligence and hidden pride. Meanwhile, although King Francis II was technically old enough to rule, his obvious weaknesses both physical and mental required a council to administer the country. To protect her son, her small children and herself, Catherine had to join the Guise brothers' cabal. The Guises did not lack enemies: some were jealous of their wealth and power, some did not share their ultra-Catholicism and some regarded them as foreign usurpers. The brothers needed Catherine to legitimise their position; her presence lent them her implicit sanction. Thus an unspoken compact seems to have been made between the widow and the Guises. The gates of the Château des Tournelles were opened in order to allow the royal carriages to depart for the Louvre and so that the large crowd outside could witness the royal family leaving. Various observers recalled the Duke of Guise carrying one of Catherine's youngest children in his arms, presenting a potent image of fatherly protection for the onlookers. Mary was seen to hang back for a moment to let her mother-in-law enter the coach first but Catherine understood her new place and seemed even to relish it, publicly insisting that the new Queen take precedence. For the first time Catherine was to have a role that belonged exclusively to her. She had had to share her husband with Diane de Poitiers. She had to a large extent shared being Queen of France with Diane; she had even been forced to share the upbringing of her young children with the favourite. Yet her widowhood would be hers alone. For the rest of her days she was to guard it with jealousy. Her life would be dedicated to the memory of Henry and their children, for they were his legacy to France. She would be the guardian of the monarchy and his legend, learning to fashion history according to her needs. After a lifetime obscured behind her mask of supple self-effacement, the forty-year-old Queen Mother shrouded in widow's weeds was taking her first cautious steps towards becoming mistress of France.

Prologue  
Death of a King  
Cursed be the magician who predicted so evilly and so well  
June–July 1559  
On the late afternoon of Friday, 30 June 1559 a long splinter of wood from a



jousting lance pierced the eye and brain of King Henry II of France. The poisonous wound bloated his face, slowly robbing him of sight, speech and reason, and after ten days of suffering he died at the Château des Tournelles in Paris. His death was not only tragic – it would prove calamitous. The jousting had been part of celebrations to mark the signing in April of the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis, which brought to an end France's and Spain's ruinous series of wars over Italy. Many dismayed Frenchmen believed Italy had been given away through the mere stroke of a pen and no one felt this more keenly than Henry's Florentine wife, Catherine de Medici, whose hopes of recovering her lost patrimony vanished with the peace. Yet she took one consolation from the treaty: that her eldest daughter Elisabeth would marry the most eligible parti in Europe, King Philip II of Spain. A further sweetener provided a husband for Henry's spinster sister and Catherine's closest friend, Marguerite, who at the age of thirty-six had been considered practically unmarriageable. She was to wed Philip's ally, Emmanuel-Philibert, Duke of Savoy, a hearty soldier with the unpromising nickname of 'Iron-head'. No time was lost in arranging the weddings. Determined to show Philip that France remained undiminished despite her Italian sacrifice, Henry – although choked with war debts – had borrowed over 1 million écus 'to defray the setting out of these triumphs'.\* A vigorous and robust man, he excelled at the joust and had arranged the five-day contest largely to show off his own skill. Both Henry and Catherine were, not surprisingly, disappointed when Philip – a widower since the recent death of the English Queen, Mary Tudor, the previous year – announced that he would not be coming to Paris himself. Characteristically, the punctilious monarch offered tradition as his explanation, saying, 'Custom demands that the Kings of Spain should not go to fetch their wives but that their wives should be brought to them.'<sup>1</sup> Instead, the groom sent a dismal proxy – the severe soldier-statesman Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba. With the rise of Protestantism in France gravely threatening both the King's authority and the country's unity, Henry had been compelled to make peace with Philip. Early in June, Henry had issued an edict announcing a crusade to rid his realm of 'the Lutheran scum' and while nothing much could be done until the departure of his august guests, he ordered the arrest of several prominent Protestants in Paris. Quickly tried and sentenced to burn at the stake for heresy, their seizure caused a considerable outcry and a stay of execution was given until after the celebrations. The condemned men awaited their fate in the dungeons of Le Châtelet prison in Paris, while nearby in the wide rue Saint-Antoine next to the Château des Tournelles, they could hear the paving stones being pulled up to make way for the jousting lists, and the building of stands for the spectators and triumphal arches emblazoned with the arms of Spain, France and Savoy. Heralds issued the King's challenge that His Majesty the King of France, his eldest son Francis, the Dauphin, the Duke of Guise and other princes at the French Court were to take on all comers. Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, the English ambassador, reported, 'The King himself, the Dauphin and the nobles . . . do daily assay themselves at the tilt which is like to be very grand and sumptuous.'<sup>2</sup> The Parisians loved a spectacle, but their expectations were confounded when Alba and his suite arrived on 15 June. Spanish fashions had always been austere, but their dark and mean-looking clothes left the

French wondering whether a deliberate affront had been intended. A few days later all this was forgotten when Henry welcomed his enemy of yesterday to the Louvre Palace. Emmanuel-Philibert of Savoy came escorted by 150 men gorgeously dressed in crimson doublets, matching shoes and black velvet cloaks embroidered with gold lace. On Thursday, 22 June, the thirteen-year-old Elisabeth of France married Philip of Spain, aged thirty-two, by proxy at Notre-Dame Cathedral. After the wedding a primitive ritual took place. Elisabeth and Alba climbed into the huge state bed – each with one leg naked. As their bare limbs touched and they rubbed their feet together, the marriage was declared consummated. Six days later, on Wednesday 28 June, the jousts began. By Friday, the third day of the tournament, the weather turned hot and heavy. The rue Saint-Antoine enjoyed little shade and a large number of peasants had climbed on to the roofs of the houses to watch the King enter the lists. For weeks the ladies and gentlemen of the Court had been preparing ‘their handsome and costly apparel’, some wearing the entire value of their estates on their backs.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to dazzle at the celebrations Catherine had ordered 300 lengths of gold and silver cloth from Italy for her gowns; extravagant by nature, she delighted in wearing regal confections. One observer noted that it was hard to say whether the sun or the jewels shone more brightly. The King had never seemed happier. The same cannot be said for his wife. Seated with her son the Dauphin and the lofty figure of her daughter-in-law, Mary, Queen of Scots, Catherine was noticeably anxious.\* The night before she had dreamt that her husband lay stricken on the ground, his face covered in blood.<sup>4</sup> The Queen’s unshakeable belief in seers and astrologers gave her every reason to be fearful. In 1552 Luca Guorico, the Italian astrologer of the Medici family, had warned Henry that he must take particular care around his fortieth year to ‘avoid all single combat in an enclosed space’, lest he risk a wound that could blind or even kill him. Henry was now forty years and four months old. Furthermore, in 1555 Nostradamus had published this prophecy in Centuries, quatrain no. I.XXXV: The young lion will overcome the old, in a field of combat in a single fight. He will pierce his eyes in a golden cage, two wounds in one, he then dies a cruel death. Citing these evil omens, for the old lion could be interpreted as the King and the cage of gold his visor, Catherine had implored her husband not to joust that day. He is even supposed to have remarked to the same man who was accidentally to strike him down, ‘I care not if my death be in that manner . . . I would even prefer it, to die by the hand of whoever he might be, so long as he was brave and valiant and that I kept my honour.’ Henry’s mistress was conspicuously seated surrounded by ladies of the Court. The superb Diane de Poitiers, Duchess of Valentinois, had held the heart of the King since he was a teenager. Now almost sixty years old, ‘Madame’ as she was known by all – including the Queen – had lost none of her charms, in his eyes at least, being still ‘the lady that I serve’. Cold, remote and elegant, Diane had been widowed in 1531. Since the death of her husband she wore only black and white mourning, knowing how well it became her, particularly beside the dandified courtiers. Catherine, forty years old, plump and dumpy after giving birth to ten children, had long since mastered the ‘art of opportune pretending’ and, with a few rare exceptions, she had spent the last twenty-six years gracefully not noticing ‘Madame’s’ total enslavement of the husband

she pathetically adored. Henry began the day by jousting well. Wearing Diane's colours of black and white, he saw off challenges from the Dukes of Guise and Nemours. Pleased with the horse given to him by Emmanuel-Philibert of Savoy, Henry graciously shouted up to him, 'It is your horse that has helped me tilt well today!' By now the King was tired, but insisted on riding a further course. Catherine sent word asking him not to continue. Irritated, Henry nevertheless replied courteously, 'It is precisely for you that I fight.' Once more he mounted his horse – prophetically named Malheureux – and prepared to tilt against the valiant young captain of his Scottish guard, Gabriel Count de Montgomery.\* As he did so, it is said that a boy in the crowd broke the expectant silence with the cry: 'The King will die!' A few moments later the two men clashed and Montgomery almost knocked Henry from the saddle. It was five o'clock and some spectators rose to leave. The King was good-humoured but wanted his revenge. Although Montgomery had become afraid and begged to be allowed to retire, Henry insisted with the shout: 'It's an order!' Catherine once again asked the King to stop. Ignoring her, he demanded his helmet from the Marshal de Vieilleville, who said, 'Sire, I swear before God that for the last three nights I have dreamt that today, this last day of June, will be fatal for you.'<sup>5</sup> Henry could barely have heard these words because he did not wait for the customary trumpet call that signalled the opening of the course. The two riders thundered towards each other. As they met with a crack of splintering wood, Henry, his arms clinging to the horse's neck, 'had great ado (reling to and fro) to kepe himself on horseback'.<sup>6</sup> The Queen shrieked and with a loud cry the crowd rose to their feet. The two most powerful men in France after the King himself – the Duke de Montmorency and the Duke of Guise – rushed forward to stop Henry from falling out of the saddle. Lowering him to the ground, they removed his armour. They found the visor half open and his face soaked in blood with wooden splinters 'of a good bigness' protruding from his eye and temple. The King was 'very weak . . . almost benumbed . . . he moved neither hand nor fote, but laye as one amazed'.<sup>7</sup> Seeing this, his young opponent begged his sovereign that his head and his hands be cut off, but: 'The good natured King who for his kindness had no equal in his time answered that he was not angry . . . and that he had nothing to pardon, since he had obeyed his King and carried himself like a brave knight'.<sup>8</sup> The crowd pressed round to catch a glimpse of Henry, who was carried away to the Château des Tournelles. Once there, the gates were locked and he insisted on mounting the grand staircase on his feet, but having his head and shoulders supported. It was a miserable procession. The Dauphin, who predictably had fainted, was carried up after the King, followed by Catherine and the most senior nobles. Collapsing on to his bed, Henry immediately tried to clasp his hands in prayer and strike his chest in contrition for his sins. It was as if he were already preparing for death. 'There was marvellous great lamentation and weeping for him from both men and women,' wrote Throckmorton, and it was feared that the King would not live for many moments longer. The royal surgeons were summoned. Henry's bravery was singular as the doctors tried to remove the splinters. Retching with pain, only once was the unfortunate patient heard to cry out. The usual appalling (by modern standards) remedies were prescribed: he was bled, purged and given an

ounce of barley gruel which he promptly vomited, 'refrigeratives applied', the wound was dressed with egg white. After this he sank into a state of feverish semi-consciousness and was attended that night by his wife, the Duke of Savoy and the Duke of Guise's brother, the Cardinal of Lorraine. The King had a 'very evil rest' and at three o'clock in the morning the vigil changed. Taken away to lie down, Catherine seemed in a trance of shock. Savoy had meanwhile summoned Philip II's own surgeon, André Vesalius. The decapitated heads of several criminals who had been executed the day before were brought to the celebrated physician. He and Ambroise Paré (his French counterpart) tried with jagged shards of wood to reproduce the wound on the skulls of the corpses. As they discussed the inconclusive results of their grisly experiments, Henry continued his decline. In brief periods of lucidity he asked for music and dictated a letter to the French ambassador in Rome expressing the hope that the fight so recently begun against the heretics would continue if he recovered. The notable absence of Diane de Poitiers reflected Henry's hopeless condition. 'Madame . . . has not entered the bedchamber since the day of the wound, for fear of being expelled by the Queen,' noted one chronicler.<sup>9</sup> Catherine had shared her entire married life with Diane, but these last moments belonged to her alone. In another part of the château, Diane anxiously waited for news of her lover. Two nights before Henry died an officer came from the Queen, demanding the return of the many jewels belonging to the Crown that Henry had given to his greedy mistress. 'What! Is he dead?' she is said to have asked. 'Not yet, Madame,' he answered, 'but he cannot last long.'<sup>10</sup> Diane replied that as long as there was breath in the King's body she would not lose heart and would obey 'none but him'. On the evening of 4 July the King's temperature rose sharply. Septicæmia had set in. There was talk of trepanning the wound to relieve the pressure and ease his pain, but removal of the bandages revealed such large quantities of pus that the idea was abandoned. Henry was doomed and nothing further could be done but to await his death. This was the event Catherine had dreaded ever since she had married Henry as a fourteen-year-old girl. She had been a passionately devoted, adoring wife. Always fearful of losing him, she and her ladies had worn mourning whenever he had gone off to war. During his martial expeditions, when not constantly writing asking for news of him, she had been at prayer making extravagant offerings, clasping her many amulets and charms to ensure his safe return. Though she had always feared the doom-laden prophecies, she had not prepared herself for this. Alternating between prayers and tears, Catherine hurried from her dying husband to the Dauphin, who lay in bed rocking to and fro, moaning and crying as if unhinged as he knocked his head against the wall. She was finally unable to watch as Henry lost his power of sight and speech. During his last lucid moments he had told his son to write to Philip of Spain commending his family and his kingdom to his protection. Taking his hands, he said, 'My son, you are going to be without your father but not without his blessing. I pray that you will be more fortunate than I have been.' 'My God! How can I live if my father dies?' cried the Dauphin and promptly fainted again. Some say the King called for Catherine on 8 July and, after urging the Queen to ensure that his sister Marguerite's marriage went ahead, 'he commended to her his kingdom and his children'.<sup>11</sup> The

following night the cheerless wedding of Marguerite and the Duke of Savoy duly took place in Elisabeth's room, the Mass said hurriedly in case news of the King's death arrived before it was completed. Catherine was too tormented to attend. The following morning at dawn Henry received extreme unction and at one o'clock that afternoon he died.<sup>12</sup> Years later his daughter, Margot, recalled her father's death as 'the vile blow which deprived our House of happiness and our country of peace'.<sup>13</sup> During the King's last days the most powerful men in the country gathered around their master's bed. They were not, however, united. The Duke de Montmorency, Grand Master and Constable of France, had been Henry's mentor, friend and surrogate father. A military man and a conservative, he was, aside from the Crown and Church, the largest landowner in France, enjoying unquestioned support from his fiefdoms. Although he was a Catholic himself, some of his family had recently become Protestants or Protestant-sympathisers. During the last year of Henry's life the Constable had joined with Diane, the King's mistress, to keep their rivals, the Guise brothers, from power. The two elder Guise brothers, from a cadet branch of the House of Lorraine (a duchy on France's north-eastern border), could also call upon the assistance of many client vassals. The elder – Duke François – was a popular war hero. A brave and distinguished soldier, he had been a favourite of the late King. His brother Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine, a masterly politician and a supreme courtier, was also France's Chief Inquisitor. The pair, both ultra-Catholics and with complementary talents, made a formidable team. Latterly they had fallen out of favour for not supporting the return of France's Italian possessions in the recent treaty. This in turn had brought them more into sympathy with Catherine. Now they expected a central role in the government of the country, not least because they were the uncles of Mary, the sixteen-year-old Queen of Scots, wife of Catherine's feeble eldest son, the Dauphin, and since Henry's death the new Queen of France. To Catherine's intense irritation, Mary had enormous influence over her husband, still a teenager but now King Francis II, and she in turn relied upon her uncles for guidance in matters large and small. Since the accident, Paris had turned from a crowded festive city to a silent place where the overwhelming majority of people were stunned and sorrowful at losing their King. They also rightly feared the political uncertainties that lay before the kingdom. 'The palace has passed from marriage to a morgue,' wrote one observer, and in the streets the common people genuinely mourned their sovereign's passing. The proclamation of King Francis II gave them little reason to feel encouraged. Montmorency and other senior noblemen of the non-Guisard faction stayed with the corpse of the late King as the surgeons removed his heart and entrails for separate burial, and then embalmed his body. All over the Château des Tournelles altars were set up, and rooms and passages were draped in black. Around the now embalmed body of the King came relays of bishops and other churchmen. The clerics, surrounded by tall candles, knelt and sang psalms for the dead as Henry's room became transformed into a richly decorated chapel with an altar at each end of his bed. On benches covered in silver cloth sat subjects high and low who attended one of six Requiem Masses held daily for the King's soul. Catherine also went to pay reverence to her late husband of nearly twenty-six years. Kneeling before him she

bade his body farewell as those remaining at the château began the elaborate forty-day vigil. During this critical period, Constable Montmorency and his party were sidelined as the Guises took over the major offices of state. While Montmorency – whom Francis II loathed – had probably anticipated some loss of power, he could scarcely have imagined the extent to which he would find himself politically marginalised. Indeed, the bickering had already begun before the King was dead; the Guises spoke of impeaching the Constable for not ensuring the King's safety during the jousting, while the old man wandered the corridors, inconsolable at the prospect of losing his master, friend and comrade in arms. Leaving the body of the late King with Montmorency and his allies, the Guises knew they must establish themselves in power before the country had time to react to the tragedy. A serious threat to their hegemony could be anticipated from the First Prince of the Blood, Antoine de Bourbon, and his brothers. The Bourbons, like the Valois, were both descended from the Capet dynasty that had ruled France since the year 987. In 1328 Charles IV 'Le Bel' died without a male heir and the main branch of the Capetians died out, passing the Crown to the Valois, a junior branch of the dynasty. Should Henry's and Catherine's four surviving sons die without male issue the Bourbon family were next in line to the throne. Legally, as the only Princes of the Blood apart from these four Valois princes, the Bourbons would dominate any ruling council. Though Antoine de Bourbon was lazy, selfish and weak-willed, the Guises did not want to take unnecessary risks and decided that the new King should be removed to the Louvre, away from their rivals. Accordingly, Francis and his wife, as well as Catherine's younger children, were gathered together to make the short journey across Paris. The bleak figure, clad in black, of the stricken Dowager Queen then unexpectedly joined the party. She spurned not only the usual white mourning of French queens but the tradition that demanded she remain in seclusion for forty days where her husband had died. Catherine knew that she must now break with custom. Though devastated by her loss, she was essential to the Guises' coup d'état. During her husband's reign Catherine had skilfully kept from openly siding with either the Guise or the Montmorency faction. Maintaining a sweet disposition and good relations with both, she frequently sought their advice and help, disarming them with her appearance of humility. Though they were unaware of it, she detested both parties in almost equal measure. She would not forget their past wrongs, their toadying to Diane de Poitiers and their immense hold over her late husband. They in turn had generally ignored the Queen, badly underestimating her intelligence and hidden pride. Meanwhile, although King Francis II was technically old enough to rule, his obvious weaknesses both physical and mental required a council to administer the country. To protect her son, her small children and herself, Catherine had to join the Guise brothers' cabal. The Guises did not lack enemies: some were jealous of their wealth and power, some did not share their ultra-Catholicism and some regarded them as foreign usurpers. The brothers needed Catherine to legitimise their position; her presence lent them her implicit sanction. Thus an unspoken compact seems to have been made between the widow and the Guises. The gates of the Château des Tournelles were opened in order to allow the royal carriages to depart for the Louvre and so that the large crowd outside could witness the

royal family leaving. Various observers recalled the Duke of Guise carrying one of Catherine's youngest children in his arms, presenting a potent image of fatherly protection for the onlookers. Mary was seen to hang back for a moment to let her mother-in-law enter the coach first but Catherine understood her new place and seemed even to relish it, publicly insisting that the new Queen take precedence. For the first time Catherine was to have a role that belonged exclusively to her. She had had to share her husband with Diane de Poitiers. She had to a large extent shared being Queen of France with Diane; she had even been forced to share the upbringing of her young children with the favourite. Yet her widowhood would be hers alone. For the rest of her days she was to guard it with jealousy. Her life would be dedicated to the memory of Henry and their children, for they were his legacy to France. She would be the guardian of the monarchy and his legend, learning to fashion history according to her needs. After a lifetime obscured behind her mask of supple self-effacement, the forty-year-old Queen Mother shrouded in widow's weeds was taking her first cautious steps towards becoming mistress of France.

Part One  
Part One  
Orphan of Florence  
She comes bearing the calamities of the Greeks  
1519–33  
Caterina Maria Romula de Medici was born at around eleven o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, 13 April 1519. Her father, Lorenzo II de Medici, Duke of Urbino, scion of the ruling House of Florence, had married her mother, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, the previous year. This royal-blooded French countess and great heiress made a brilliant catch for the Medici, who were considered by many in France to be merely nouveaux riches merchants. Since their magnificent wedding, hosted by the bride's kinsman, King Francis I of France, and the couple's glorious return to Florence, there had been little cause for celebration. Madeleine's pregnancy, which had been announced in June, progressed well but the young duke, whose health had been poor for some time, had fallen ill in the autumn of 1518. Intermittent high fevers and fears over his condition led to him leaving Florence where the newlyweds had been living in princely state. The duke, probably suffering from syphilis and possibly tuberculosis, moved to the cleaner air of the surrounding countryside to await the birth of his child. By the time he returned to the city for his wife's confinement, he was dying.\*Immediately after her birth, attendants carried the baby to her bedridden father for inspection. The news that her mother had by now also become very ill was kept from the duke for fear of hastening his decline. The fact that she had borne him a daughter cannot have cheered him much since there would clearly be no further issue from this illustrious couple. In an attempt to brighten the gloomy reality of the baby's sex, a contemporary chronicler applied a sycophantic gloss to the ducal disappointment: he declared that the couple 'have both been as pleased as if it had been a boy'.<sup>1</sup> Due to the illness of both parents, the child's hurriedly organised baptism took place on Saturday, 16 April at the family church of San Lorenzo. With four senior clerics and two noble relations in attendance, the baby received the names Caterina, a Medici family name, Maria, since it was the day of the Holy Virgin, and Romula, after the founder of Fiesole – although I shall henceforth refer to her throughout as Catherine. On 28 April the duchess breathed her last followed by the duke only six days later on 4 May. The entombment of the couple in the splendid family vault at the church

where their baby had so recently been baptised provided a dismal conclusion to their brief marriage. On the day the duke died his friend the poet Ariosto had arrived to condole with him over the death of the duchess. When he discovered that only an orphan child remained of the marriage that had promised a revival of the Medici fortunes he wrote a short ode: 'Verdeggia un solo ramo', dedicating it to the last hope of this pre-eminent merchant dynasty: A single branch, buds and lo, I am distraught with hope and fear, Whether winter will let it blow, Or blight it on the growing bier. Catherine owed her existence to the obsessive Italian territorial ambitions of Francis I of France. Between the fall of the western Roman Empire and its late-nineteenth-century unification, Italy was a patchwork of principalities, duchies, and city-states. Most of these showed a precocious vigour in the arts, technology and trade, making them tempting acquisitions for outsiders. Unlike Florence, they were usually ruled by families descended from famous warriors (known as condottieri); names like the Sforza of Milan and the Gonzaga of Mantua evoke the mercenary soldiers who carved their fortunes from battle. While a small number of states such as Venice, Genoa and Florence were – for a time at least – independent, by the mid-sixteenth century the majority were ruled either directly or indirectly by Spain. From 1490 until 1559, when Spanish supremacy was established, Italy became the bloody arena where the two Continental superpowers played out their bitter struggle to dominate Europe. Francis I, descended through his great-grandmother from the Visconti of Milan, required a sturdy ally in the peninsula to press his claim for the duchy. Accordingly, he forged an alliance with Pope Leo X, Giovanni de Medici. Unlike popes today, His Holiness was not only Christ's representative on earth, but he also exercised the temporal powers of a monarch as ruler of the Papal States, most of which were in central Italy. The papal tiara was a triple crown that placed the popes above kings and emperors; not only did the papacy hold claim to a huge amount of property throughout the Catholic world (in pre-Reformation England one fifth of the land was held by Rome) but the pope also had the right to legal jurisdiction in Catholic countries and many types of legal cases were referred to the Ecclesiastical Court. To strengthen his agreement with the Medici Pope, Francis decided to arrange the marriage of an orphaned Bourbon heiress, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, to Leo's nephew, Lorenzo de Medici. At Leo's instigation Lorenzo had recently snatched the duchy of Urbino from the della Rovere family.\* For this enterprise the Pope had provided prodigious financial support with monies gained from the creation of thirty new cardinals. In private, Francis felt snobbishly sceptical about Lorenzo's ability to keep the newly acquired fief of Urbino, commenting that he was after all 'only a tradesman'. It is true that by early-modern standards the Medici of Florence could not claim any blue-blooded descent, but wise husbandry and steady expansion of the family banking business by the founder Giovanni di Bicci de Medici (1360–1429) had ensured that they were the most prosperous and powerful family in the important city-state of Florence. The Medici originally came from the Mugello, ten miles north of Florence. Although their name and the red balls or palle – varying in number from twelve to six – on a field of gold on their emblem suggested medicine, and they appropriated the martyred physicians Sts Cosmas and Damian as their



patron saints, they had always been in commerce, specialising in wool, silk, precious metals, spices and banking.\* They rose to become papal bankers and with the economic opportunities after the decimation of the Black Death in 1348–49 there was much demand for their services. Like his father Giovanni, Cosimo de Medici (1389–1464) was a quiet, unassuming man who did not favour the grandiose way of life of his later descendants, though he did build the most impressive palace yet seen in the city – the Palazzo Medici. Today, although much changed since Cosimo’s time, one can still see the formidable defensive walls that once protected Catherine as a young child from a rebellious mob; the solid outer walls reflect the need for protection against the political uncertainties of that age and hide the building’s exquisite interiors. Cosimo was learned and philanthropic, and the most significant private patron of the arts of his day, employing Michelozzo, Donatello, Brunelleschi, Paolo Uccello, Filippo Lippi and other leading figures of the early Renaissance. Underlining their importance by patronising the arts, which, from the thirteenth century onwards, became the most visible symbol of Italian wealth and dynamism, the Medici played an indispensable role in the process which produced the Italian Renaissance. Cosimo took the family bank to new heights, opening branches all over Europe, including ones in London, Geneva and Lyons. After a brief period of banishment by rival Florentine factions, who tried but failed to take control of the executive council of the Florentine Republic, the Signoria, Cosimo returned at the people’s invitation to become Gonfaloniere (head of the Signoria), a citizen of Florence but in effect the uncrowned ruler of the city-state. He understood the need, in order for commerce to flourish, for political harmony both internally and externally, and used his huge resources to influence matters in favour of his family and Florence. A benevolent dictator with a quiet manner, Cosimo assumed the air of a private citizen but in fact nearly all major decisions were made by him or with his consent. Pope Pius II described him as ‘the arbiter of peace and war and the moderator of the laws, not so much a private citizen as the lord of the country . . . he it is who gives commands to the magistrates’.<sup>2</sup> Cosimo was looked upon as a father by many of the Florentines who, after his death, awarded him the affectionate title ‘Pater Patriae’. One contemporary called him ‘King in everything but name.’ Cosimo’s grandson Lorenzo (1449–92), known as ‘The Magnificent’ (the title was given to persons of note who were not of princely blood), was to prove himself truly worthy of the sobriquet. He is perhaps the most famous of the Medici, although it was paradoxically under his charge that the family’s commercial fortunes began to decline. He was a poor banker but a superb scholar, poet and collector. History recalls Lorenzo as the extraordinary patron of such great artists as Botticelli, Perugino, Filippino Lippi, the Ghirlandaios and Verrocchio. His patronage also touched future masters such as Leonardo da Vinci. In his garden at the Palazzo Medici, Lorenzo set up a workshop for sculptors, and it was there that Michelangelo first came to the attention of buyers and artists alike. Lorenzo was a gifted diplomat, a wise politician devoted to the welfare of Florence and above all zealous in his promotion of the Medici family and its supporters. When Pope Innocent VIII heard of Lorenzo’s death he is said to have cried out, ‘The peace of Italy is at an end!’ Lorenzo had three sons; it is said that he called one good, one wise and one a fool.

Unfortunately it was the 'fool', Piero the Fatuous (1472– 1503), who was the eldest. Ill suited to rule, Piero found himself and his family quickly ejected from the republic and he later died in exile. His brother Giuliano – 'the good' – worked with Giovanni – 'the wise' – who had become a cardinal at thirteen thanks to his father's intervention, for the only thing that mattered – their eventual return to Florence. They had to plot in penury for they were virtually bankrupt, their fortune taken by usurpers and their properties confiscated by the republic. Giovanni had a good head for intrigue but required patience; it was to be a long wait before events turned in the Medici favour again. Perhaps the family motto, *Le Temps Revient* (Our time will return), gave them courage. It was certainly the moral by which Catherine was later to live her life. In 1512 a league of small Italian states managed temporarily to expel the French from Italy. Unwisely the Gonfaloniere, Piero Soderini, an unremarkable but honest man, had denied the league Florentine support. The league turned upon Florence in revenge for not joining them against the French and Soderini fled with his government. The Medici seized the moment and manoeuvred to regain their lost citizenship as a new regime took power in the Arno city. Soderini was not alone in exile following the return of the Medici. Among the friends and advisers stripped of office in the political purge was a minor official of the Second Chancery, Niccolò Machiavelli. Among other things, Machiavelli travelled on diplomatic missions to leading figures such as the Holy Roman Emperor and Cesare Borgia; he also created a Florentine militia for Soderini and was charged with matters relating to the defence of the republic. But in 1513, languishing in exile and eager to return to power, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, dedicating it to Catherine's father\* in an effort to ingratiate himself with the family. This, Machiavelli's most celebrated work, is a brilliant study on statecraft. The author radically discarded cherished and traditionally held tenets of the virtues that defined a good ruler; instead he boldly and emphatically embraced Realpolitik and argued that to be an effective 'Prince' all means were justifiable for the good of the state. The pragmatism and the ability, when necessary, to step outside normal bounds of morality were not based on Christian or Classical ideals. The goodwill of the people was a necessity, but a ruler must be prepared to earn their respect by using exemplary punishment, or eliminating those who endangered the nation's health. It took some time for the work to surface and make an impact outside Florence but the 'little book' was to bedevil Catherine during the wars of religion and long afterwards as this work, advocating a steely adherence to practical solutions for the good of the state, was quoted (often purposely out of context) by her enemies. They called it Catherine's bible, and it eventually acquired the reputation as a manual for cruel autocrats while the name Machiavelli became synonymous with scheming, evil and tyranny. On 1 September 1512, after eighteen years of exile, Lorenzo the Magnificent's two surviving sons, Giovanni and Giuliano, made their triumphant return to Florence. With them came Lorenzo's grandson and eventual heir, also called Lorenzo. Unfortunately he had none of the qualities of his grandfather. Spoiled by his doting mother, Alfonsina, he grew into an arrogant, selfish and lazy young man. This pair were not only grasping, but once the Medici returned to power in Florence, the young Lorenzo lived extravagantly and with such strutting grandiosity that he

risked losing the affection people still held for his family. Almost immediately after the joyful reinstatement of the Medici in Florence, Julius II died and Giovanni was elected Pope Leo X. He was thirty-seven years of age, overweight, troubled by a stomach ulcer and an agonising anal fistula. His formal entry on horseback into the Vatican was thus not quite the unalloyed pleasure it might have been. Although sitting side-saddle to avoid some of the discomfort, he suffered terribly from the heat and the pain of riding in his condition. Those who stood nearby suffered almost as much from the overpowering and noxious smell emanating from his ulcerous stomach and the infected fistula on his enormous backside.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless Leo's joy was evident to all and the crowd responded with an enthusiastic welcome. While the words he is supposed to have uttered upon his election – 'Now God has given us the papacy. Let us enjoy it!' – are almost certainly apocryphal, enjoy it he did. The glorious painting by Raphael of Leo seated flanked by two cardinals shows us a Renaissance voluptuary. His face is plump, his body plumper, the large pendulous cheeks, bulbous eyes and sensuous lips were strong family traits; unfortunately, some of these were later to be inherited by his great-niece Catherine. Though nepotistic, Leo was far less prey to some of his predecessors' vices, and this enlightened man brought the fruits of his learning to the papacy. He lived in splendour with a huge household; naturally generous, after his years of exile and poverty he now possessed the means to patronise the arts, commission building projects and above all to indulge himself and others. He gave lavish and frequent banquets at which he entertained his guests with novelties, such as tiny birds flying out of pies. He loved comedies and practical jokes. Leo's most serious flaw as Pope was his failure to grasp the critical need for reform of the Church. While this need had existed for some time, it had become acute since the rise of an obscure German monk named Martin Luther. Luther had spoken out against the sale of indulgences, appealing to the Church to rid itself of corruption and criticising the worldliness of the papal court. He believed in 'sola fide' (faith alone) and that man could reach God without the intervention of cleric or sacrament'. Leo called the controversy a monkish squabble', not realising that the touchpaper had been lit for a conflagration that would one day split the Church, tear nations apart and shake the thrones of his great-niece Catherine and her sons. As head of the family and due to his removal to Rome, Leo needed to select a successor to protect the family's position in Florence. It was decided that Giuliano the good' (whom Leo thought far too soft) should help the new Pope in Rome and that their nephew Lorenzo could be left in charge of Florentine affairs, though he had no patience for them and was often in Rome with his uncle, leaving Florentines to feel like a subject state. This was hardly in the tradition of even the nominal Florentine republic but with a Medici wearing the papal tiara, Leo wisely made it seem that there would be plenty of advantages for the people. In 1515 Giuliano travelled as Leo's emissary to France to congratulate Francis I on his accession to the throne. The King was in a hurry to conquer Milan and take Naples, of which the Pope was suzerain. The two met later the same year at the papal town of Bologna where they signed an agreement that restored relations between the French Church and the papacy. To flatter Leo, the King offered Giuliano the dukedom of Nemours in France and his Aunt Philiberta of Savoy's

hand in marriage. In exchange Francis was to have the Italian states of Parma and Piacenza, and the support of the Pontiff regarding his ambitions for Milan and Naples. The marital alliance between the ruling House of France and the merchant Medici was as thrilling to the latter as it was to prove short-lived. Giuliano, Duke of Nemours, died within a year of his marriage, leaving no legitimate heir but only a bastard son named Ippolito. Now all Leo's hopes rested with his nephew Lorenzo. Leo and Francis both wished to continue their alliance despite Giuliano's death, so Lorenzo, by then the Duke of Urbino, became His Holiness's emissary representing the pope at the christening of Francis's first-born son the Dauphin. Leo had been asked to stand godfather to the baby. Some time before the christening, Francis had written to Lorenzo to congratulate him on becoming Duke of Urbino, adding, I intend to help you with all my power. I also wish to marry you off to some beautiful and good lady of noble birth and of my kind, so that the love which I bear you may grow and be strengthened.<sup>4</sup> Once the bride, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, had been selected, it was decided that the marriage should take place soon after the baptism of the Dauphin. The other important matter was the bride's enormous inheritance. Both her mother, Jeanne de Bourbon-Vendôme, a royal princess, and her father, Jean III de la Tour, were dead and she shared their extensive properties in Auvergne, Clermont, Berry, Castres and Louraguais with her sister, the wife of the Scottish Duke of Albany. The Medici needed cash to re-establish themselves firmly in control of Florence, and Madeleine's double dowry of blue blood and gold was gleefully anticipated by the older generation. The good times were back. Lorenzo's appearance in France was so sumptuous, his crimson-clad train so large, his gifts so extravagant, including a vast bed made of tortoiseshell decorated with gems and mother-of pearl, that it seemed as though an eastern potentate had arrived.<sup>5</sup> Lorenzo and his bride-to-be immediately liked the look of each other and matters progressed better than anyone could have hoped. The duke was given the honour of holding the infant heir to France at the baptism at the Château of Amboise on 25 April 1518, and it was there that the wedding took place three days later. The groom was twenty-six years old and the bride just sixteen. At Amboise the inner courtyard was covered with fabulous silk awnings and gorgeous tapestries clothed the walls over the ten days of feasts, banquets, masked balls and ballets. During the day there were tournaments and a mock battle, which must have been fairly realistic since at least two people were killed. Francis knew how to dazzle with his entertainments and seemed particularly anxious to show the Italians, whose culture he so admired, that the French did not lack polish. By the time the couple set off for Florence, where they arrived in September 1518, Francis had taken Lorenzo on a tour of Brittany and behaved very agreeably towards him. He also awarded the duke the Order of Saint-Michel, the highest order of French chivalry, and a company of gens d'armes (heavy cavalry). There was much to celebrate, especially upon the announcement of the young duchess's pregnancy. The news sent Francis and Leo into raptures of delight. It is not hard to imagine the dismay of both the Pope and the King of France when Lorenzo and Madeleine de Medici, Duke and Duchess of Urbino, both died months later, leaving only a daughter as the living token of their great schemes. To make matters worse, Catherine fell

ill in August 1519 when only three months old and for several weeks her life hung in the balance. Yet she survived and by October Leo insisted that the 'duchessina', as the Florentine people fondly called her, could be moved to Rome without risk to her health. Leo had already emphatically refused Francis's request that the child be brought up at the French Court. He sensibly declined to offer up his great-niece as a hostage against the promises he had recently made to Francis, for he was already planning to break them. The circumstances had completely changed, so now must his policies. After wiping away his seemingly tears at the death of his nephew and niece, Leo lost no time in opening secret talks with King Charles of Spain, now Charles V the new Holy Roman Emperor and Francis's mortal enemy.\* By May 1521 Leo was openly allied to Charles, whom he had promised to crown as Emperor and to invest with Naples. When he heard the news, Francis fell into a furious rage at the Pope's betrayal and before long France and the Empire were once again at war. When Catherine was brought to her uncle in Rome, he is said to have greeted the baby with the words: 'She comes bearing the calamities of the Greeks!' After a long and careful look at the baby, however, he declared with satisfaction that she was 'fine and fat'. Leo's first reaction to the disastrous death of Lorenzo and his wife had been to take a resigned and pious stance, saying, 'God has given. God has taken away.' He now faced a dilemma over whether to hand the family inheritance to the collateral branch of the Medici, whom he had hitherto studiously snubbed and ignored, regarding them as a possible threat to his dynasty, or have the illegitimate members of the senior branch made his heirs. He decided on the latter. He created Catherine Duchess of Urbino and as soon as she was old enough, Leo intended to marry her off to Ippolito, the Duke of Nemours's son, whom he would legitimise. The pair would then become the ruling couple of Florence. There existed another illegitimate boy, Alessandro de Medici, born in 1512, who had been loosely acknowledged as the child of Lorenzo and therefore Catherine's half-brother. It is certain that Alessandro was in fact Cardinal Giulio de Medici's son, though for the sake of expediency he had been attributed to Lorenzo, not least because Giulio himself was not only illegitimate, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent's brother, but a cardinal to boot. Meanwhile Catherine remained in the hands of her grandmother, Alfonsina Orsini. After Orsini's death in 1520 Catherine moved into the care of Lorenzo the Magnificent's daughter, Lucrezia Salviati, and her aunt Clarice Strozzi, the woman who was to become her surrogate mother for the next few years. Both women had married extremely rich bankers and Clarice, a strict and exigent guardian, had young children with whom the little girl could play. The Strozzi cousins became the brothers and sisters the child never had, and she loved them prodigiously for the rest of their lives. Leo did not live long enough to see his plans for Catherine and Florence come to fruition. Having had an operation on his persistent and troublesome anal fistula in late November 1521, he had decided nevertheless to go out hunting. He caught a chill, weakened quickly and died a few days later on 1 December. Catherine's future now depended upon the Medici maintaining power in Florence without papal prestige and influence to back them. Leo's illegitimate cousin, Cardinal Giulio de Medici, until recently his highly efficient assistant, had hoped to succeed him, but now retreated to Florence with

Catherine and the two bastard boys Ippolito and Alessandro. The new Pope was Hadrian VI, formerly Adrian of Utrecht, previously Grand Inquisitor of Spain and Charles V's boyhood tutor (he was nicknamed the Emperor's schoolmaster'). The election of such a severe and pious man from what the Italians considered barbarian northern Europe was a horrid surprise to them. They tried to comfort themselves that at sixty-three years old he might die soon. The French were appalled that someone so close to the Emperor now sat upon the papal throne. Nor was there to be much cheer for the Medici, as Hadrian promptly handed the duchy of Urbino back to its rightful owners, the della Rovere family.\* The Medici even experienced difficulties paying for some of Leo's funeral expenses and a syndicate of leading Florentine families including the Strozzi and the Capponi contributed 27,000 ducats to help meet the costs (the monthly wage for a foot soldier at the time was 2 ducats). As security Giulio used Leo's jewel-encrusted cross worth 18,000 ducats. A document survives describing the most precious stones that adorned it: 'There is a central diamond, four emeralds, two large sapphires and three rubies.' The cross was given for safe keeping to the nuns of a Roman abbey until the eventual discharge of the debt.<sup>6</sup> Although it was not a particularly prosperous time for the Medici, Catherine spent the next two years in comparative peace in Florence living with the two boys, Ippolito and Alessandro, under Cardinal Giulio's careful supervision. In September 1523 Hadrian VI obliged everyone except the Emperor and himself by dying, some said through poison – 450 years were to pass before a non-Italian was elected pope again. On 19 November, having used every blandishment, bribe and promise at his disposal, Leo X's 'ecclesiastical flunkey', Cardinal Giulio de Medici, managed to get himself elected Pope, becoming Clement VII. This half-caste Medici set off for Rome, leaving his stooge, Cardinal Passerini, in charge of Florence nominally on behalf of the minor Ippolito. With Clement as Pope, Catherine became a valuable marriage pawn once more. Even without the Duchy of Urbino, her inheritance still meant she was an important heiress, the properties from her mother alone made her one of the richest young women in Europe.\* To present her in the correct setting, Clement ensured that she lived in state with a princely retinue at the Palazzo Medici. Yet the Florentines grew restless. Despite embezzling huge sums from Florence to pay for his Court and brilliant lifestyle, Leo X had deftly managed the papacy and Florence. Clement VII, who lacked his cousin's dexterous flair, inherited the bitterness that now emerged over Leo's financial misdealings. People also felt unhappy with the all but direct rule from Rome barely and ineptly disguised by Passerini. To complicate matters further, it became clear that Clement did not favour Ippolito as eventual ruler of Florence, but pushed the candidacy of his own son Alessandro. Nicknamed 'Il Moro' because of his thick lips, dark skin and curly hair – his mother may have been a Moorish slave woman – Alessandro was growing up to be as vicious and nasty as he was ugly. Meanwhile, as time passed Ippolito had grown into a dashing, handsome and charming young man. Clement VII had been an energetic second-in-command to Leo X and as long as life proceeded along the same lines as before, he had the ability to keep matters under control. This critical period of religious unrest and war, however, required creative initiative and Clement was lost. For much of the 1520s, Francis and Charles were either at war with each

other or threatening to fight, while a clamour for Church reforms grew and Lutheranism took hold in many German states within Imperial borders. The Pope lacked the courage to deal decisively with these problems. His half-measures, secret agreements and slippery shifts in policy were to prove disastrous. Clashes between France and the Empire overflowed into Italy once more, with catastrophic results for the benighted peninsula. In 1526 Clement formed part of a league with France, England, Florence and Venice – known as the League of Cognac – to expel the Empire from Italy. Charles V was preoccupied with the Turks who had invaded his eastern borders and had Francis act vigorously and promptly the league could well have trounced him. Yet the French King, who had just been returned from captivity by Charles after his disastrous defeat at the battle of Pavia in 1525, seemed to have lost his touch. He failed to give the league the support it needed, which led to its defeat by the Emperor. This left Clement, Rome, Florence and eventually Catherine at Charles's mercy. At the Emperor's instigation a Roman faction, hostile to Clement, rose up against him and he took refuge in the fortress of Castel Sant' Angelo on the banks of the Tiber, from where he quickly renounced the league. Once freed, he soon found himself under even greater threat. On 6 May 1527 the Imperial troops in northern Italy had marched south and now stood before Rome: unfed, unpaid and in an ugly mood. As Charles did not pay their wages he proved powerless to stop his troops, many of them Lutherans from his own dominions, rampaging through the Eternal City. While Rome was being sacked and pillaged, her craven and luckless Pope fled once again to his redoubt at the Castel Sant' Angelo. He rushed along a passage which led directly to the fortress with his skirts held up for him by the Bishop of Nocera to prevent him from tripping. Once in the formidable circular stronghold he sat besieged. From his bolt-hole Clement could hear the cries of his flock begging for mercy as the Imperial troops ran amok. The soldiers taunted His Holiness from beneath the solid castle walls, promising that they would eat him when finally they breached its defences. They ran in packs, desecrating sacred relics, raping and murdering citizens, lopping off bejewelled arms and fingers, destroying ancient monuments and treasures. Some soldiers even dressed themselves in the scarlet robes of murdered cardinals. Clerics, even the most insignificant of them, who did not escape the rabble were held to ransom and in many cases recaptured and ransomed again. Clement's own ransom was set at nearly half a million ducats, a sum greater than his annual income. To raise the money he ordered his goldsmith, Benvenuto Cellini – also besieged with him – to improvise a furnace for melting down the papal tiaras he had managed to take with him. Horses were stabled in St Peter's itself, grotesque mock services were held and the leader of the many Lutheran despoilers carried a silken cord intended as a noose from which to hang Clement. The iconoclastic plunder of the Holy City outraged the civilised world. It was to take over seven months before the occupying mob were driven from the foetid ruins by hunger and a plague epidemic. As Rome was sacked, an insurrection was mounted in Florence. Aided by the arrival of the Emperor's army, the overthrow of Passerini and the Medicean regime proved easy. Catherine's position now became fraught with uncertainty. By 11 May 1527 news had filtered back to Florence about the horrors taking place in Rome. In the Medici Palace on the via

Larga, the eight-year-old girl would have grasped that this was a calamity. Clarice Strozzi, considered by many as the man of the family', proceeded to rave at Passerini, whom she thought incompetent and an unmitigated fool; she also rounded upon Alessandro and Ippolito, calling them unworthy of the Medici name to which they aspired. All the while, a menacing crowd pushed at the palace gates. Passerini and the two boys managed to escape thanks to Clarice's contacts with the new regime, with whom she struck a deal that was promptly reneged on by Passerini. They fled Florence on 17 May. This left Catherine and her aunt to face the mob. The new rulers of Florence boiled with fury when they realised that Alessandro and Ippolito had managed to flee without fulfilling the bargain. Catherine, their remaining hostage, would not be allowed to slip through their hands. It was decided that the child should be taken to the Santa Lucia convent in the via San Gallo, a place known for its antipathy to the Medici family. Clarice stormed in protest at Bernardo Rinuccini leading the large troop escort that had come to take her niece. They were at Poggio a Caiano (a splendid Medici country villa) where she and Catherine had managed to escape from the angry citizens, but Clarice's exhortations availed her little and did not prevent the child from being bundled off for what were to be three hazardous years of semi-incarceration during which her life was under different degrees of threat, depending upon the tergiversations of the political scene. The little girl lived miserably in the Santa Lucia convent, but in December 1527 orders came that she be moved to the convent of Santa-Caterina of Siena, also in Florence. When the French ambassador visited her there he found the place a disease-ridden hovel and insisted that Catherine must be relocated immediately. With the permission of the Signoria (the executive council), the ambassador arranged for the child's transfer to a far more agreeable place, the convent of the Santa-Maria Annunziata delle Murate (literally the walled-in-ones'). The journey of a heavily veiled Catherine to the Murate took place at dead of night on 7 December 1527. The walls deprived her of her liberty but they also protected her from the hostile world outside. Hatred now fuelled the Florentine people's mood as they desecrated and damaged all reminders of the Medici. During an angry outburst early in this rebellion Michelangelo's masterpiece, the statue of David, lost its left arm when a stone was thrown at it. If Catherine were to remain a valuable negotiating tool for the Signoria, however, they must see to her well-being. Generally regarded as pro-Medicean, the Murate was a convent which undertook the education of aristocratic young women but also allowed elderly noblewomen to withdraw from the world in some comfort. It appears from records and receipts for alms dating from between 1524 to 1527 and overseen by Cardinal Armellino, Apostolic Chamberlain for Leo X and then Clement VII, that the convent had been given substantial support by the Medici.<sup>7</sup> One of the nuns recalled Catherine's arrival: 'The magistrates gave her to us and we received her very happily and graciously for the obligation we have to her family. Notwithstanding that she may have been infected by the plague we received her. . . . One evening at two at night the band took her to the gates of the monastery and all the nuns without fear gathered around her, protected by God and Our Lady we received no wound. The Duchessina stayed for three years.'<sup>8</sup> She continued, 'With how much humanity and refined



conversation she would talk, [all] could not be said because she had two women who looked after her.<sup>9</sup>The abbess was Catherine's godmother and she arranged for her to have the spacious and comfortable cell once occupied by a widowed relation and namesake, Caterina Riario de Medici. Spoiled by the nuns, many of whom were themselves of high birth, Catherine had found a corner of calm from the raging world outside and she learned much from these good women. Her graceful deportment, her enchanting manners – later to become such formidable weapons – the ability to charm in conversation and the strength of mind to keep her own counsel can be attributed to this time. One historian wrote, 'At the Murate the Catherine of the wars of religion was formed.' Here too she would have learned all the traditions and ceremonies of the Church for which she always showed reverence. Yet a truly spiritual education seems to have been omitted. One of the nuns, Sister Niccolini, wrote of the 'dear little child . . . with such gracious manners . . . that she made herself loved by all' adding that she was 'so gentle and pleasant that the sisters did all they could to ease her sorrows and difficulties'.<sup>10</sup> Another wrote of the little girl's 'good disposition'.<sup>11</sup> No wonder they felt protective of the 'duchessina'. Death continued to take Catherine's loved ones when her protector and mother figure, Clarice Strozzi, died on 3 May 1528. The French ambassador now became her mainstay and he did what he could to see to her well-being. After a visit he wrote to her uncle, the Duke of Albany, who had been married to Catherine's maternal aunt, Madame, your niece is still in a convent leading a good life, but rarely visited and little regarded by these Florentine signori who would gladly see her in Kingdom Come. She expects you to send her some presents from France for the Seigneur de Ferraris. I can assure you that I have never seen anyone of her age so quick to feel the good and the ill that are done her.'<sup>12</sup>By 1528 the French forces left in Italy had been soundly beaten and Clement decided to make overtures to Charles, saying, 'I have quite made up my mind to become an Imperialist, and to live and die as such.' On 29 June 1529 the Treaty of Barcelona was signed between Clement and Charles. In it, Clement promised to crown Charles Holy Roman Emperor; in return Charles would support the restoration of the Medici to Florence. The coronation did indeed take place at Bologna on 24 February 1530, though Charles V was the last Holy Roman Emperor to be crowned by a pope. The agreement also provided for a marriage between Clement's bastard son Alessandro and Charles V's illegitimate daughter Margaret of Austria. At Cambrai on 3 August 1529 the French signed their own peace with the Empire, known as 'La Paix des Dames' as it was concluded by Francis's mother, Louise of Savoy, and the Emperor's aunt, Margaret, regent of the Netherlands. As events began to turn in Clement's favour, the extremist People's Party that had replaced the moderates ruling Florence early in the revolt began to wonder if Kingdom Come' might not be the best place for Catherine after all. Her murder would finally deprive the Pope of his marital jewel. In October 1529 Imperial troops led by the Prince of Orange laid harsh and effective siege to the city of Florence. Among others, Michelangelo was drafted by the citizens to protect the city as a military engineer. Plague and famine exacerbated the people's terror and hatred of the Medici, and their efforts to withstand the siege were not helped by traitors from within. It was now

that Catherine, who had remained tucked away in the convent, became the focus of attention for the increasingly desperate rebel rulers of the city. One suggestion was that she be lowered naked in a basket, in front of the city walls and thus possibly killed by her own allies' gunfire. There was also talk of leaving the eleven-year-old girl in a military brothel so that any valuable marriage plans by the pontiff would be spoiled for ever. Without making a decision about Catherine's ultimate fate, the council determined that she be removed immediately from the friendly Murate convent, from which they feared she might be liberated without too much difficulty. Thus it was that the Signoria sent Silvestro Aldobrandini with an escort of troops to fetch Catherine late on the evening of 20 July 1530. In the words of one of the nuns: 'They decided to remove her at night and this happened with such tribulation and effort . . . but such force was used by the eight that we had to give her up.'<sup>13</sup> Catherine, certain that she had been condemned to death and that Aldobrandini had come to fetch her for execution, put up a struggle. In preparation the eleven-year-old girl had shorn her hair and donned a nun's habit. Announcing that as a bride of Christ she refused to go quietly, Catherine cried out, 'Holy Mother, I am yours! Let us now see what excommunicated wretch will dare to drag a spouse of Christ from her monastery.'<sup>14</sup> She refused to change out of her nun's clothing, and Aldobrandini brought her through the small streets riding on a donkey, braving a starving and menacing crowd voicing threats and open hatred. The perilous journey proved a formative experience for the young woman as Aldobrandini kept Catherine safe and surrounded by his soldiers until he delivered her to the St Lucia convent. It was here that she had first started life as a captive nearly three years earlier. She never forgot Aldobrandini's goodness to her and when, on 12 August 1530, the siege was lifted and Clement took possession of his native city once more, she interceded for him and succeeded in having his death sentence commuted to exile. Upon her release, Catherine visited the sisters of the Murate and together they celebrated her good fortune. She remained in contact with the order for the rest of her life and wrote to them regularly, sending them money annually and gave them the revenues from one of her properties. Catherine never forgot a kindness any more than she forgave a disservice. All too soon the girl found herself a central feature in Clement's international policy and she moved to Rome where her 'uncle', as he called himself, greeted her with such warmth that the old hypocrite managed to convince one onlooker she is what he loves best in the world'. Another noticed that Catherine seemed emotionally marked by her dreadful time in the hands of her family's enemies: 'She cannot forget the maltreatment she suffered, and is only too willing to speak of it.' Clement installed Catherine with Ippolito and Alessandro at Rome's exquisite Palazzo Medici (today the Palazzo Madama and used as the Italian Senate). He wanted her to acquire the veneer and accomplishments necessary for a glorious marriage. Antonio Soriano, the Venetian ambassador, described her physical appearance at the time of her arrival in Rome, writing that she was small of stature, and thin, and without delicate features, but having the protruding eyes peculiar to the Medici family'.<sup>15</sup> Nobody called her beautiful because she was not, but her manners lent her an elegance that her physique lacked. One observer from Milan called her

heavy-looking, although he was probably describing her face, adding that she seemed a sensitive child who for her age, shows great spirit and intelligence'. The same man noted that altogether this little girl does not look like she will become a woman for a year and a half yet'. Catherine lived under the care of her great-aunt Lucrezia Salviati (Leo X's sister) and her husband. It is not known how she spent her days but perhaps it was in Rome, a city being rebuilt after the ravages it had endured, that she acquired her love for art in general and architecture in particular. She had the opportunity of watching the greatest artists of the day not only restoring the damaged city but creating new masterpieces to adorn it. She certainly enjoyed access to one of the finest libraries in the world and lived surrounded by the treasures both of antiquity and the Renaissance. In Rome at Clement's Court, too, Catherine became accustomed to the attendant rituals and particular formalities of this way of life. Also during her time in the Eternal City, much to Clement's alarm, Catherine fell under the enchanting spell of Ippolito de Medici. By the spring of 1531 rumours were circulating about the couple and the young man might well have nurtured ambitions of marriage. He cut a tremendous figure. According to contemporary descriptions, spectacularly supported by the famous Titian portrait of him in the dress of an Hungarian horseman, now at the Pitti Gallery in Florence, he was slim and tall with dark good looks. He had a penchant for theatrical adornments, dressing with diamond aigrettes and jewelled scimitars. Ippolito provided the perfect antidote to Catherine's years of loss and suffering. Older than Alessandro, he should by rights have been groomed as the ruler of Florence: the peace Treaty of Barcelona, however, indicated that Clement had other plans. The marriage was agreed between Alessandro and Margaret of Austria, the Emperor's illegitimate daughter, and a new constitution had been drafted by a group of Florentines known as the thirteen reformers of the republic' making the Medici hereditary rulers of the city and finally settling 25 years of political revolutions and instability. With the Emperor's backing, therefore, Ippolito had been bypassed in the succession. He had unwillingly been created a cardinal at the age of twenty but would happily have put his red hat aside, left the Church and married Catherine, taking what he felt was his rightful place as Florence's ruler. After a failed attempt to raise support in the Tuscan capital – where people now rejected further strife and yearned for a return to calm and prosperity – Ippolito, bribed by His Holiness with rich benefices and other gifts in exchange for a promise to agitate no further, found himself packed off to Hungary as Clement's legate in June 1532. Pressing family matters crowded the Pope's agenda. He wished to expedite the implementation of the Treaty of Barcelona; and to see his son Alessandro properly invested as Duke of Florence and married off to Margaret of Austria. The Signoria was abolished under the new constitution and on 27 April 1532 the Pope's illegitimate son was officially created Duke of Florence. Catherine had been sent to the city to lend legitimacy to the proceedings and for the first time in her life undertook official public duties at Alessandro's side. Observers noted that the thirteen-year-old girl carried herself with admirable dignity and grace. She continued her public role in Florence while awaiting the arrival of Alessandro's bride in April 1533. Apart from enjoying the many and lavish celebrations marking the new duke's

confirmation, Catherine also pursued her studies. We know little about her formal education except that she learned Greek, Latin and French; she was also a keen mathematician, an interest that would have coincided well with her later love of astrology. Clement kept her in Florence while he proceeded carefully with marriage talks on her behalf in Rome. Since her birth, Catherine had inevitably been the object of much matrimonial discussion. Even before the revolt in Florence, Clement had been approached by various potential suitors, mainly Italian potentates from families such as the Gonzaga of Mantua, the Este of Ferrara and the della Rovere of Urbino. Now that the Pope enjoyed a far stronger position than formerly he looked for more illustrious offers. Among the earlier candidates was Henry VIII's illegitimate son the Duke of Richmond. Although Sir John Russell, the English ambassador to the Vatican, reported that His Holiness was very well contented to have such an alliance' nothing came of the talks and the duke died a few years later, quite possibly from poisoning. When the Duke of Albany, Catherine's uncle, proposed the candidacy of King James V of Scotland, Clement did not think this offered him any real advantages and worried that the courier service between the two countries might be too costly. The Prince of Orange had briefly been considered as a possible husband until his death while campaigning to retake Florence. The one candidate Clement could not afford to ignore, however, was the Holy Roman Emperor's own preference. Charles backed a marriage between Catherine and Francesco II Sforza, Duke of Milan. Unfortunately for Catherine the duke, a somewhat dim-witted man, prematurely aged at thirty-seven, sick and broken, mainly by the huge sums of money demanded by the Emperor in order to retain his duchy, was not a particularly gleaming matrimonial prospect. In addition Clement feared that by marrying Catherine to Charles's client he would find himself too deep in the Emperor's pocket to be able to free himself if necessary. Another worry for Clement was Charles's request for a general Church Council. The Pontiff feared that this might provoke a schism in the Church. Besides, Clement had never been ordained into the priesthood, thus making him technically ineligible for the papal throne. At this point a giddy proposal arrived from Francis I of France. His ambitions for territories in Italy stirred anew and he required a friendly pope to back them. In 1531, with this in mind, Francis offered Clement his second son, Henry, Duke of Orléans, as a potential husband for Catherine. Early in 1531 Gabriel de Gramont, Bishop of Tarbes, was sent as Francis's envoy to discuss such a marriage. By April a preliminary agreement had been signed by Francis at the Château of Anet (ironically enough the home of Henry's future lover Diane de Poitiers). It stipulated that Catherine would live at the French Court until of an age to consummate the marriage and secret clauses in the agreement stated that her dowry would include Pisa, Parma, Piacenza, Reggio, Modena and Leghorn. Clement also committed himself to backing French efforts to take Genoa and Milan, and to making a joint attempt to annex Urbino for the young couple. In June 1531 word came back to France that Clement would not after all send Catherine to live at the French Court before her marriage. He was both wary of the wrath he knew this alliance would incur in the Emperor and fearful of a change in French policy once Catherine was already in Francis's hands. His matrimonial ace would thus remain in his

own care until the wedding. Clement also stipulated that Catherine's dowry of 100,000 gold écus would include an extra 30,000 écus in exchange for the revenues from her Florentine inheritance. Francis agreed to give Catherine a further 10,000 livres per annum, and she would also enjoy the substantial income that came from her mother's inheritance. As the second son of the mighty King of France, Henry, Duke of Orléans had no shortage of possible brides. The most important of these was Mary Tudor. The possibility of a marriage with Henry VIII's eldest daughter had been marred when the English King tried to have the marriage to her mother, Catherine of Aragon, annulled. Meanwhile Francis concentrated his attentions on Catherine, who could best further his Italian ambitions. Henry of Orléans had been born on 31 March 1519 and, while not expected to inherit the French throne, represented a substantial catch for any royal princess, let alone an Italian duchess without a duchy. Catherine might have been rich but she was emphatically not of royal blood. In January 1533 at Bologna, secret talks were held between Clement and Francis's emissaries. The Pope, terrified that the Emperor would put a stop to the French alliance if he caught wind of it, decided to continue the negotiations regarding a marriage to Francesco II Sforza, Duke of Milan, as a feint. In fact Charles, certain that Francis would never stoop to marrying his son to a merchant's daughter, generally laughed off the rumours he did hear as preposterous. When he eventually taxed Clement on the matter, the Pope hedged and promised the Emperor that if Francis did prove serious about the marriage then he would contrive to sabotage the talks: 'I know his nature, he [Francis] will want the honour of breaking with me, and this is what I desire.'<sup>16</sup> By the time the marriage was announced later on that same month, Charles could do nothing about it other than be amazed. Clement's finest hour had arrived. He had defied adversity against monstrous odds. He had survived the sack of Rome and was restoring the city. His family had been thrown out of Florence; now they were reinstated in glory. He had, through an alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor, not only re-established his family as rulers of Florence, but managed to place the republic under the rule of his son as its hereditary duke.\* His illegitimate son Alessandro had been created Duke of Florence with the Habsburg potentate's daughter for his duchess. By playing the Emperor off against the King of France, and dazzling the latter with over-optimistic promises of vast territorial gains in the peninsula, he had managed the match between Catherine and Henry of Orléans. He had reconciled the irreconcilable. Albany wrote to Francis that 'His Holiness marvellously desired this marriage.' Clement's simpering evidently amused de Gramont, the French envoy to Rome, who recorded the discussions during which Clement 'kept repeating over and over that his niece was not worthy of so lofty an alliance but ready nevertheless, for every sacrifice and any concession to secure it'.<sup>17</sup> Clement could not have foreseen that concession and sacrifice were indeed to become the young bride-to-be's most constant companions for what he rightly called the greatest match in the world'.  
One Orphan of Florence  
She comes bearing the calamities of the Greeks  
1519–33  
Caterina Maria Romula de Medici was born at around eleven o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, 13 April 1519. Her father, Lorenzo II de Medici, Duke of Urbino, scion of the ruling House of Florence, had married her mother, Madeleine de la Tour

d'Auvergne, the previous year. This royal-blooded French countess and great heiress made a brilliant catch for the Medici, who were considered by many in France to be merely nouveaux riches merchants. Since their magnificent wedding, hosted by the bride's kinsman, King Francis I of France, and the couple's glorious return to Florence, there had been little cause for celebration. Madeleine's pregnancy, which had been announced in June, progressed well but the young duke, whose health had been poor for some time, had fallen ill in the autumn of 1518. Intermittent high fevers and fears over his condition led to him leaving Florence where the newlyweds had been living in princely state. The duke, probably suffering from syphilis and possibly tuberculosis, moved to the cleaner air of the surrounding countryside to await the birth of his child. By the time he returned to the city for his wife's confinement, he was dying.\*Immediately after her birth, attendants carried the baby to her bedridden father for inspection. The news that her mother had by now also become very ill was kept from the duke for fear of hastening his decline. The fact that she had borne him a daughter cannot have cheered him much since there would clearly be no further issue from this illustrious couple. In an attempt to brighten the gloomy reality of the baby's sex, a contemporary chronicler applied a sycophantic gloss to the ducal disappointment: he declared that the couple 'have both been as pleased as if it had been a boy'.<sup>1</sup> Due to the illness of both parents, the child's hurriedly organised baptism took place on Saturday, 16 April at the family church of San Lorenzo. With four senior clerics and two noble relations in attendance, the baby received the names Caterina, a Medici family name, Maria, since it was the day of the Holy Virgin, and Romula, after the founder of Fiesole – although I shall henceforth refer to her throughout as Catherine. On 28 April the duchess breathed her last followed by the duke only six days later on 4 May. The entombment of the couple in the splendid family vault at the church where their baby had so recently been baptised provided a dismal conclusion to their brief marriage. On the day the duke died his friend the poet Ariosto had arrived to condole with him over the death of the duchess. When he discovered that only an orphan child remained of the marriage that had promised a revival of the Medici fortunes he wrote a short ode: 'Verdeggia un solo ramo', dedicating it to the last hope of this pre-eminent merchant dynasty: A single branch, buds and lo, I am distraught with hope and fear, Whether winter will let it blow, Or blight it on the growing bier. Catherine owed her existence to the obsessive Italian territorial ambitions of Francis I of France. Between the fall of the western Roman Empire and its late-nineteenth-century unification, Italy was a patchwork of principalities, duchies, and city-states. Most of these showed a precocious vigour in the arts, technology and trade, making them tempting acquisitions for outsiders. Unlike Florence, they were usually ruled by families descended from famous warriors (known as condottieri); names like the Sforza of Milan and the Gonzaga of Mantua evoke the mercenary soldiers who carved their fortunes from battle. While a small number of states such as Venice, Genoa and Florence were – for a time at least – independent, by the mid-sixteenth century the majority were ruled either directly or indirectly by Spain. From 1490 until 1559, when Spanish supremacy was established, Italy became the bloody arena where the two Continental superpowers played out

their bitter struggle to dominate Europe. Francis I, descended through his great-grandmother from the Visconti of Milan, required a sturdy ally in the peninsula to press his claim for the duchy. Accordingly, he forged an alliance with Pope Leo X, Giovanni de Medici. Unlike popes today, His Holiness was not only Christ's representative on earth, but he also exercised the temporal powers of a monarch as ruler of the Papal States, most of which were in central Italy. The papal tiara was a triple crown that placed the popes above kings and emperors; not only did the papacy hold claim to a huge amount of property throughout the Catholic world (in pre-Reformation England one fifth of the land was held by Rome) but the pope also had the right to legal jurisdiction in Catholic countries and many types of legal cases were referred to the Ecclesiastical Court. To strengthen his agreement with the Medici Pope, Francis decided to arrange the marriage of an orphaned Bourbon heiress, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, to Leo's nephew, Lorenzo de Medici. At Leo's instigation Lorenzo had recently snatched the duchy of Urbino from the della Rovere family.\* For this enterprise the Pope had provided prodigious financial support with monies gained from the creation of thirty new cardinals. In private, Francis felt snobbishly sceptical about Lorenzo's ability to keep the newly acquired fief of Urbino, commenting that he was after all 'only a tradesman'. It is true that by early-modern standards the Medici of Florence could not claim any blue-blooded descent, but wise husbandry and steady expansion of the family banking business by the founder Giovanni di Bicci de Medici (1360–1429) had ensured that they were the most prosperous and powerful family in the important city-state of Florence. The Medici originally came from the Mugello, ten miles north of Florence. Although their name and the red balls or palle – varying in number from twelve to six – on a field of gold on their emblem suggested medicine, and they appropriated the martyred physicians Sts Cosmas and Damian as their patron saints, they had always been in commerce, specialising in wool, silk, precious metals, spices and banking.\* They rose to become papal bankers and with the economic opportunities after the decimation of the Black Death in 1348–49 there was much demand for their services. Like his father Giovanni, Cosimo de Medici (1389–1464) was a quiet, unassuming man who did not favour the grandiose way of life of his later descendants, though he did build the most impressive palace yet seen in the city – the Palazzo Medici. Today, although much changed since Cosimo's time, one can still see the formidable defensive walls that once protected Catherine as a young child from a rebellious mob; the solid outer walls reflect the need for protection against the political uncertainties of that age and hide the building's exquisite interiors. Cosimo was learned and philanthropic, and the most significant private patron of the arts of his day, employing Michelozzo, Donatello, Brunelleschi, Paolo Uccello, Filippo Lippi and other leading figures of the early Renaissance. Underlining their importance by patronising the arts, which, from the thirteenth century onwards, became the most visible symbol of Italian wealth and dynamism, the Medici played an indispensable role in the process which produced the Italian Renaissance. Cosimo took the family bank to new heights, opening branches all over Europe, including ones in London, Geneva and Lyons. After a brief period of banishment by rival Florentine factions, who tried but failed to take control of the

executive council of the Florentine Republic, the Signoria, Cosimo returned at the people's invitation to become Gonfaloniere (head of the Signoria), a citizen of Florence but in effect the uncrowned ruler of the city-state. He understood the need, in order for commerce to flourish, for political harmony both internally and externally, and used his huge resources to influence matters in favour of his family and Florence. A benevolent dictator with a quiet manner, Cosimo assumed the air of a private citizen but in fact nearly all major decisions were made by him or with his consent. Pope Pius II described him as 'the arbiter of peace and war and the moderator of the laws, not so much a private citizen as the lord of the country . . . he it is who gives commands to the magistrates'.<sup>2</sup> Cosimo was looked upon as a father by many of the Florentines who, after his death, awarded him the affectionate title 'Pater Patriae'. One contemporary called him 'King in everything but name.' Cosimo's grandson Lorenzo (1449–92), known as 'The Magnificent' (the title was given to persons of note who were not of princely blood), was to prove himself truly worthy of the sobriquet. He is perhaps the most famous of the Medici, although it was paradoxically under his charge that the family's commercial fortunes began to decline. He was a poor banker but a superb scholar, poet and collector. History recalls Lorenzo as the extraordinary patron of such great artists as Botticelli, Perugino, Filippino Lippi, the Ghirlandaios and Verrocchio. His patronage also touched future masters such as Leonardo da Vinci. In his garden at the Palazzo Medici, Lorenzo set up a workshop for sculptors, and it was there that Michelangelo first came to the attention of buyers and artists alike. Lorenzo was a gifted diplomat, a wise politician devoted to the welfare of Florence and above all zealous in his promotion of the Medici family and its supporters. When Pope Innocent VIII heard of Lorenzo's death he is said to have cried out, 'The peace of Italy is at an end!' Lorenzo had three sons; it is said that he called one good, one wise and one a fool. Unfortunately it was the 'fool', Piero the Fatuous (1472– 1503), who was the eldest. Ill suited to rule, Piero found himself and his family quickly ejected from the republic and he later died in exile. His brother Giuliano – 'the good' – worked with Giovanni – 'the wise' – who had become a cardinal at thirteen thanks to his father's intervention, for the only thing that mattered – their eventual return to Florence. They had to plot in penury for they were virtually bankrupt, their fortune taken by usurpers and their properties confiscated by the republic. Giovanni had a good head for intrigue but required patience; it was to be a long wait before events turned in the Medici favour again. Perhaps the family motto, *Le Temps Revient* (Our time will return), gave them courage. It was certainly the moral by which Catherine was later to live her life. In 1512 a league of small Italian states managed temporarily to expel the French from Italy. Unwisely the Gonfaloniere, Piero Soderini, an unremarkable but honest man, had denied the league Florentine support. The league turned upon Florence in revenge for not joining them against the French and Soderini fled with his government. The Medici seized the moment and manoeuvred to regain their lost citizenship as a new regime took power in the Arno city. Soderini was not alone in exile following the return of the Medici. Among the friends and advisers stripped of office in the political purge was a minor official of the Second Chancery, Niccolò Machiavelli. Among other things, Machiavelli travelled on diplomatic missions



to leading figures such as the Holy Roman Emperor and Cesare Borgia; he also created a Florentine militia for Soderini and was charged with matters relating to the defence of the republic. But in 1513, languishing in exile and eager to return to power, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, dedicating it to Catherine's father\* in an effort to ingratiate himself with the family. This, Machiavelli's most celebrated work, is a brilliant study on statecraft. The author radically discarded cherished and traditionally held tenets of the virtues that defined a good ruler; instead he boldly and emphatically embraced Realpolitik and argued that to be an effective 'Prince' all means were justifiable for the good of the state. The pragmatism and the ability, when necessary, to step outside normal bounds of morality were not based on Christian or Classical ideals. The goodwill of the people was a necessity, but a ruler must be prepared to earn their respect by using exemplary punishment, or eliminating those who endangered the nation's health. It took some time for the work to surface and make an impact outside Florence but the 'little book' was to bedevil Catherine during the wars of religion and long afterwards as this work, advocating a steely adherence to practical solutions for the good of the state, was quoted (often purposely out of context) by her enemies. They called it Catherine's bible, and it eventually acquired the reputation as a manual for cruel autocrats while the name Machiavelli became synonymous with scheming, evil and tyranny. On 1 September 1512, after eighteen years of exile, Lorenzo the Magnificent's two surviving sons, Giovanni and Giuliano, made their triumphant return to Florence. With them came Lorenzo's grandson and eventual heir, also called Lorenzo. Unfortunately he had none of the qualities of his grandfather. Spoiled by his doting mother, Alfonsina, he grew into an arrogant, selfish and lazy young man. This pair were not only grasping, but once the Medici returned to power in Florence, the young Lorenzo lived extravagantly and with such strutting grandiosity that he risked losing the affection people still held for his family. Almost immediately after the joyful reinstatement of the Medici in Florence, Julius II died and Giovanni was elected Pope Leo X. He was thirty-seven years of age, overweight, troubled by a stomach ulcer and an agonising anal fistula. His formal entry on horseback into the Vatican was thus not quite the unalloyed pleasure it might have been. Although sitting side-saddle to avoid some of the discomfort, he suffered terribly from the heat and the pain of riding in his condition. Those who stood nearby suffered almost as much from the overpowering and noxious smell emanating from his ulcerous stomach and the infected fistula on his enormous backside.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless Leo's joy was evident to all and the crowd responded with an enthusiastic welcome. While the words he is supposed to have uttered upon his election – 'Now God has given us the papacy. Let us enjoy it!' – are almost certainly apocryphal, enjoy it he did. The glorious painting by Raphael of Leo seated flanked by two cardinals shows us a Renaissance voluptuary. His face is plump, his body plumper, the large pendulous cheeks, bulbous eyes and sensuous lips were strong family traits; unfortunately, some of these were later to be inherited by his great-niece Catherine. Though nepotistic, Leo was far less prey to some of his predecessors' vices, and this enlightened man brought the fruits of his learning to the papacy. He lived in splendour with a huge household; naturally generous,

after his years of exile and poverty he now possessed the means to patronise the arts, commission building projects and above all to indulge himself and others. He gave lavish and frequent banquets at which he entertained his guests with novelties, such as tiny birds flying out of pies. He loved comedies and practical jokes. Leo's most serious flaw as Pope was his failure to grasp the critical need for reform of the Church. While this need had existed for some time, it had become acute since the rise of an obscure German monk named Martin Luther. Luther had spoken out against the sale of indulgences, appealing to the Church to rid itself of corruption and criticising the worldliness of the papal court. He believed in 'sola fide' (faith alone) and that man could reach God without the intervention of cleric or sacrament'. Leo called the controversy a monkish squabble', not realising that the touchpaper had been lit for a conflagration that would one day split the Church, tear nations apart and shake the thrones of his great-niece Catherine and her sons. As head of the family and due to his removal to Rome, Leo needed to select a successor to protect the family's position in Florence. It was decided that Giuliano the good' (whom Leo thought far too soft) should help the new Pope in Rome and that their nephew Lorenzo could be left in charge of Florentine affairs, though he had no patience for them and was often in Rome with his uncle, leaving Florentines to feel like a subject state. This was hardly in the tradition of even the nominal Florentine republic but with a Medici wearing the papal tiara, Leo wisely made it seem that there would be plenty of advantages for the people. In 1515 Giuliano travelled as Leo's emissary to France to congratulate Francis I on his accession to the throne. The King was in a hurry to conquer Milan and take Naples, of which the Pope was suzerain. The two met later the same year at the papal town of Bologna where they signed an agreement that restored relations between the French Church and the papacy. To flatter Leo, the King offered Giuliano the dukedom of Nemours in France and his Aunt Philiberta of Savoy's hand in marriage. In exchange Francis was to have the Italian states of Parma and Piacenza, and the support of the Pontiff regarding his ambitions for Milan and Naples. The marital alliance between the ruling House of France and the merchant Medici was as thrilling to the latter as it was to prove short-lived. Giuliano, Duke of Nemours, died within a year of his marriage, leaving no legitimate heir but only a bastard son named Ippolito. Now all Leo's hopes rested with his nephew Lorenzo. Leo and Francis both wished to continue their alliance despite Giuliano's death, so Lorenzo, by then the Duke of Urbino, became His Holiness's emissary representing the pope at the christening of Francis's first-born son the Dauphin. Leo had been asked to stand godfather to the baby. Some time before the christening, Francis had written to Lorenzo to congratulate him on becoming Duke of Urbino, adding, I intend to help you with all my power. I also wish to marry you off to some beautiful and good lady of noble birth and of my kind, so that the love which I bear you may grow and be strengthened.'<sup>4</sup> Once the bride, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, had been selected, it was decided that the marriage should take place soon after the baptism of the Dauphin. The other important matter was the bride's enormous inheritance. Both her mother, Jeanne de Bourbon-Vendôme, a royal princess, and her father, Jean III de la Tour, were dead and she shared their extensive properties in Auvergne, Clermont, Berry,

Castres and Louraguais with her sister, the wife of the Scottish Duke of Albany. The Medici needed cash to re-establish themselves firmly in control of Florence, and Madeleine's double dowry of blue blood and gold was gleefully anticipated by the older generation. The good times were back. Lorenzo's appearance in France was so sumptuous, his crimson-clad train so large, his gifts so extravagant, including a vast bed made of tortoiseshell decorated with gems and mother-of-pearl, that it seemed as though an eastern potentate had arrived.<sup>5</sup> Lorenzo and his bride-to-be immediately liked the look of each other and matters progressed better than anyone could have hoped. The duke was given the honour of holding the infant heir to France at the baptism at the Château of Amboise on 25 April 1518, and it was there that the wedding took place three days later. The groom was twenty-six years old and the bride just sixteen. At Amboise the inner courtyard was covered with fabulous silk awnings and gorgeous tapestries clothed the walls over the ten days of feasts, banquets, masked balls and ballets. During the day there were tournaments and a mock battle, which must have been fairly realistic since at least two people were killed. Francis knew how to dazzle with his entertainments and seemed particularly anxious to show the Italians, whose culture he so admired, that the French did not lack polish. By the time the couple set off for Florence, where they arrived in September 1518, Francis had taken Lorenzo on a tour of Brittany and behaved very agreeably towards him. He also awarded the duke the Order of Saint-Michel, the highest order of French chivalry, and a company of gens d'armes (heavy cavalry). There was much to celebrate, especially upon the announcement of the young duchess's pregnancy. The news sent Francis and Leo into raptures of delight. It is not hard to imagine the dismay of both the Pope and the King of France when Lorenzo and Madeleine de Medici, Duke and Duchess of Urbino, both died months later, leaving only a daughter as the living token of their great schemes. To make matters worse, Catherine fell ill in August 1519 when only three months old and for several weeks her life hung in the balance. Yet she survived and by October Leo insisted that the 'duchessina', as the Florentine people fondly called her, could be moved to Rome without risk to her health. Leo had already emphatically refused Francis's request that the child be brought up at the French Court. He sensibly declined to offer up his great-niece as a hostage against the promises he had recently made to Francis, for he was already planning to break them. The circumstances had completely changed, so now must his policies. After wiping away his seemingly tears at the death of his nephew and niece, Leo lost no time in opening secret talks with King Charles of Spain, now Charles V the new Holy Roman Emperor and Francis's mortal enemy.\* By May 1521 Leo was openly allied to Charles, whom he had promised to crown as Emperor and to invest with Naples. When he heard the news, Francis fell into a furious rage at the Pope's betrayal and before long France and the Empire were once again at war. When Catherine was brought to her uncle in Rome, he is said to have greeted the baby with the words: 'She comes bearing the calamities of the Greeks!' After a long and careful look at the baby, however, he declared with satisfaction that she was 'fine and fat'. Leo's first reaction to the disastrous death of Lorenzo and his wife had been to take a resigned and pious stance, saying, 'God has given. God has taken away.' He now

faced a dilemma over whether to hand the family inheritance to the collateral branch of the Medici, whom he had hitherto studiously snubbed and ignored, regarding them as a possible threat to his dynasty, or have the illegitimate members of the senior branch made his heirs. He decided on the latter. He created Catherine Duchess of Urbino and as soon as she was old enough, Leo intended to marry her off to Ippolito, the Duke of Nemours's son, whom he would legitimise. The pair would then become the ruling couple of Florence. There existed another illegitimate boy, Alessandro de Medici, born in 1512, who had been loosely acknowledged as the child of Lorenzo and therefore Catherine's half-brother. It is certain that Alessandro was in fact Cardinal Giulio de Medici's son, though for the sake of expediency he had been attributed to Lorenzo, not least because Giulio himself was not only illegitimate, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent's brother, but a cardinal to boot. Meanwhile Catherine remained in the hands of her grandmother, Alfonsina Orsini. After Orsini's death in 1520 Catherine moved into the care of Lorenzo the Magnificent's daughter, Lucrezia Salviati, and her aunt Clarice Strozzi, the woman who was to become her surrogate mother for the next few years. Both women had married extremely rich bankers and Clarice, a strict and exigent guardian, had young children with whom the little girl could play. The Strozzi cousins became the brothers and sisters the child never had, and she loved them prodigiously for the rest of their lives. Leo did not live long enough to see his plans for Catherine and Florence come to fruition. Having had an operation on his persistent and troublesome anal fistula in late November 1521, he had decided nevertheless to go out hunting. He caught a chill, weakened quickly and died a few days later on 1 December. Catherine's future now depended upon the Medici maintaining power in Florence without papal prestige and influence to back them. Leo's illegitimate cousin, Cardinal Giulio de Medici, until recently his highly efficient assistant, had hoped to succeed him, but now retreated to Florence with Catherine and the two bastard boys Ippolito and Alessandro. The new Pope was Hadrian VI, formerly Adrian of Utrecht, previously Grand Inquisitor of Spain and Charles V's boyhood tutor (he was nicknamed the Emperor's schoolmaster'). The election of such a severe and pious man from what the Italians considered barbarian northern Europe was a horrid surprise to them. They tried to comfort themselves that at sixty-three years old he might die soon. The French were appalled that someone so close to the Emperor now sat upon the papal throne. Nor was there to be much cheer for the Medici, as Hadrian promptly handed the duchy of Urbino back to its rightful owners, the della Rovere family.\* The Medici even experienced difficulties paying for some of Leo's funeral expenses and a syndicate of leading Florentine families including the Strozzi and the Capponi contributed 27,000 ducats to help meet the costs (the monthly wage for a foot soldier at the time was 2 ducats). As security Giulio used Leo's jewel-encrusted cross worth 18,000 ducats. A document survives describing the most precious stones that adorned it: 'There is a central diamond, four emeralds, two large sapphires and three rubies.' The cross was given for safe keeping to the nuns of a Roman abbey until the eventual discharge of the debt.<sup>6</sup> Although it was not a particularly prosperous time for the Medici, Catherine spent the next two years in comparative peace in Florence living with the two boys, Ippolito and Alessandro, under

Cardinal Giulio's careful supervision. In September 1523 Hadrian VI obliged everyone except the Emperor and himself by dying, some said through poison – 450 years were to pass before a non-Italian was elected pope again. On 19 November, having used every blandishment, bribe and promise at his disposal, Leo X's 'ecclesiastical flunkey', Cardinal Giulio de Medici, managed to get himself elected Pope, becoming Clement VII. This half-caste Medici set off for Rome, leaving his stooge, Cardinal Passerini, in charge of Florence nominally on behalf of the minor Ippolito. With Clement as Pope, Catherine became a valuable marriage pawn once more. Even without the Duchy of Urbino, her inheritance still meant she was an important heiress, the properties from her mother alone made her one of the richest young women in Europe.\* To present her in the correct setting, Clement ensured that she lived in state with a princely retinue at the Palazzo Medici. Yet the Florentines grew restless. Despite embezzling huge sums from Florence to pay for his Court and brilliant lifestyle, Leo X had deftly managed the papacy and Florence. Clement VII, who lacked his cousin's dexterous flair, inherited the bitterness that now emerged over Leo's financial misdealings. People also felt unhappy with the all but direct rule from Rome barely and ineptly disguised by Passerini. To complicate matters further, it became clear that Clement did not favour Ippolito as eventual ruler of Florence, but pushed the candidacy of his own son Alessandro. Nicknamed 'Il Moro' because of his thick lips, dark skin and curly hair – his mother may have been a Moorish slave woman – Alessandro was growing up to be as vicious and nasty as he was ugly. Meanwhile, as time passed Ippolito had grown into a dashing, handsome and charming young man. Clement VII had been an energetic second-in-command to Leo X and as long as life proceeded along the same lines as before, he had the ability to keep matters under control. This critical period of religious unrest and war, however, required creative initiative and Clement was lost. For much of the 1520s, Francis and Charles were either at war with each other or threatening to fight, while a clamour for Church reforms grew and Lutheranism took hold in many German states within Imperial borders. The Pope lacked the courage to deal decisively with these problems. His half-measures, secret agreements and slippery shifts in policy were to prove disastrous. Clashes between France and the Empire overflowed into Italy once more, with catastrophic results for the benighted peninsula. In 1526 Clement formed part of a league with France, England, Florence and Venice – known as the League of Cognac – to expel the Empire from Italy. Charles V was preoccupied with the Turks who had invaded his eastern borders and had Francis acted vigorously and promptly the league could well have trounced him. Yet the French King, who had just been returned from captivity by Charles after his disastrous defeat at the battle of Pavia in 1525, seemed to have lost his touch. He failed to give the league the support it needed, which led to its defeat by the Emperor. This left Clement, Rome, Florence and eventually Catherine at Charles's mercy. At the Emperor's instigation a Roman faction, hostile to Clement, rose up against him and he took refuge in the fortress of Castel Sant' Angelo on the banks of the Tiber, from where he quickly renounced the league. Once freed, he soon found himself under even greater threat. On 6 May 1527 the Imperial troops in northern Italy had marched south and now stood before Rome: unfed, unpaid and in an ugly mood. As Charles did

not pay their wages he proved powerless to stop his troops, many of them Lutherans from his own dominions, rampaging through the Eternal City. While Rome was being sacked and pillaged, her craven and luckless Pope fled once again to his redoubt at the Castel Sant' Angelo. He rushed along a passage which led directly to the fortress with his skirts held up for him by the Bishop of Nocera to prevent him from tripping. Once in the formidable circular stronghold he sat besieged. From his bolt-hole Clement could hear the cries of his flock begging for mercy as the Imperial troops ran amok. The soldiers taunted His Holiness from beneath the solid castle walls, promising that they would eat him when finally they breached its defences. They ran in packs, desecrating sacred relics, raping and murdering citizens, lopping off bejewelled arms and fingers, destroying ancient monuments and treasures. Some soldiers even dressed themselves in the scarlet robes of murdered cardinals. Clerics, even the most insignificant of them, who did not escape the rabble were held to ransom and in many cases recaptured and ransomed again. Clement's own ransom was set at nearly half a million ducats, a sum greater than his annual income. To raise the money he ordered his goldsmith, Benvenuto Cellini – also besieged with him – to improvise a furnace for melting down the papal tiaras he had managed to take with him. Horses were stabled in St Peter's itself, grotesque mock services were held and the leader of the many Lutheran despoilers carried a silken cord intended as a noose from which to hang Clement. The iconoclastic plunder of the Holy City outraged the civilised world. It was to take over seven months before the occupying mob were driven from the foetid ruins by hunger and a plague epidemic. As Rome was sacked, an insurrection was mounted in Florence. Aided by the arrival of the Emperor's army, the overthrow of Passerini and the Medicean regime proved easy. Catherine's position now became fraught with uncertainty. By 11 May 1527 news had filtered back to Florence about the horrors taking place in Rome. In the Medici Palace on the via Larga, the eight-year-old girl would have grasped that this was a calamity. Clarice Strozzi, considered by many as the man of the family', proceeded to rave at Passerini, whom she thought incompetent and an unmitigated fool; she also rounded upon Alessandro and Ippolito, calling them unworthy of the Medici name to which they aspired. All the while, a menacing crowd pushed at the palace gates. Passerini and the two boys managed to escape thanks to Clarice's contacts with the new regime, with whom she struck a deal that was promptly reneged on by Passerini. They fled Florence on 17 May. This left Catherine and her aunt to face the mob. The new rulers of Florence boiled with fury when they realised that Alessandro and Ippolito had managed to flee without fulfilling the bargain. Catherine, their remaining hostage, would not be allowed to slip through their hands. It was decided that the child should be taken to the Santa Lucia convent in the via San Gallo, a place known for its antipathy to the Medici family. Clarice stormed in protest at Bernardo Rinuccini leading the large troop escort that had come to take her niece. They were at Poggio a Caiano (a splendid Medici country villa) where she and Catherine had managed to escape from the angry citizens, but Clarice's exhortations availed her little and did not prevent the child from being bundled off for what were to be three hazardous years of semi-incarceration during which her life was under different degrees of threat,

depending upon the tergiversations of the political scene. The little girl lived miserably in the Santa Lucia convent, but in December 1527 orders came that she be moved to the convent of Santa-Caterina of Siena, also in Florence. When the French ambassador visited her there he found the place a disease-ridden hovel and insisted that Catherine must be relocated immediately. With the permission of the Signoria (the executive council), the ambassador arranged for the child's transfer to a far more agreeable place, the convent of the Santa-Maria Annunziata delle Murate (literally the walled-in-ones'). The journey of a heavily veiled Catherine to the Murate took place at dead of night on 7 December 1527. The walls deprived her of her liberty but they also protected her from the hostile world outside. Hatred now fuelled the Florentine people's mood as they desecrated and damaged all reminders of the Medici. During an angry outburst early in this rebellion Michelangelo's masterpiece, the statue of David, lost its left arm when a stone was thrown at it. If Catherine were to remain a valuable negotiating tool for the Signoria, however, they must see to her well-being. Generally regarded as pro-Medicean, the Murate was a convent which undertook the education of aristocratic young women but also allowed elderly noblewomen to withdraw from the world in some comfort. It appears from records and receipts for alms dating from between 1524 to 1527 and overseen by Cardinal Armellino, Apostolic Chamberlain for Leo X and then Clement VII, that the convent had been given substantial support by the Medici.<sup>7</sup> One of the nuns recalled Catherine's arrival: 'The magistrates gave her to us and we received her very happily and graciously for the obligation we have to her family. Notwithstanding that she may have been infected by the plague we received her. . . . One evening at two at night the band took her to the gates of the monastery and all the nuns without fear gathered around her, protected by God and Our Lady we received no wound. The Duchessina stayed for three years.'<sup>8</sup> She continued, 'With how much humanity and refined conversation she would talk, [all] could not be said because she had two women who looked after her.'<sup>9</sup> The abbess was Catherine's godmother and she arranged for her to have the spacious and comfortable cell once occupied by a widowed relation and namesake, Caterina Riario de Medici. Spoiled by the nuns, many of whom were themselves of high birth, Catherine had found a corner of calm from the raging world outside and she learned much from these good women. Her graceful deportment, her enchanting manners – later to become such formidable weapons – the ability to charm in conversation and the strength of mind to keep her own counsel can be attributed to this time. One historian wrote, 'At the Murate the Catherine of the wars of religion was formed.' Here too she would have learned all the traditions and ceremonies of the Church for which she always showed reverence. Yet a truly spiritual education seems to have been omitted. One of the nuns, Sister Niccolini, wrote of the 'dear little child . . . with such gracious manners . . . that she made herself loved by all' adding that she was 'so gentle and pleasant that the sisters did all they could to ease her sorrows and difficulties'.<sup>10</sup> Another wrote of the little girl's 'good disposition'.<sup>11</sup> No wonder they felt protective of the 'duchessina'. Death continued to take Catherine's loved ones when her protector and mother figure, Clarice Strozzi, died on 3 May 1528. The French ambassador now became her mainstay

and he did what he could to see to her well-being. After a visit he wrote to her uncle, the Duke of Albany, who had been married to Catherine's maternal aunt, Madame, your niece is still in a convent leading a good life, but rarely visited and little regarded by these Florentine signori who would gladly see her in Kingdom Come. She expects you to send her some presents from France for the Seigneur de Ferraris. I can assure you that I have never seen anyone of her age so quick to feel the good and the ill that are done her.'<sup>12</sup>By 1528 the French forces left in Italy had been soundly beaten and Clement decided to make overtures to Charles, saying, I have quite made up my mind to become an Imperialist, and to live and die as such.' On 29 June 1529 the Treaty of Barcelona was signed between Clement and Charles. In it, Clement promised to crown Charles Holy Roman Emperor; in return Charles would support the restoration of the Medici to Florence. The coronation did indeed take place at Bologna on 24 February 1530, though Charles V was the last Holy Roman Emperor to be crowned by a pope. The agreement also provided for a marriage between Clement's bastard son Alessandro and Charles V's illegitimate daughter Margaret of Austria. At Cambrai on 3 August 1529 the French signed their own peace with the Empire, known as 'La Paix des Dames' as it was concluded by Francis's mother, Louise of Savoy, and the Emperor's aunt, Margaret, regent of the Netherlands. As events began to turn in Clement's favour, the extremist People's Party that had replaced the moderates ruling Florence early in the revolt began to wonder if Kingdom Come' might not be the best place for Catherine after all. Her murder would finally deprive the Pope of his marital jewel. In October 1529 Imperial troops led by the Prince of Orange laid harsh and effective siege to the city of Florence. Among others, Michelangelo was drafted by the citizens to protect the city as a military engineer. Plague and famine exacerbated the people's terror and hatred of the Medici, and their efforts to withstand the siege were not helped by traitors from within. It was now that Catherine, who had remained tucked away in the convent, became the focus of attention for the increasingly desperate rebel rulers of the city. One suggestion was that she be lowered naked in a basket, in front of the city walls and thus possibly killed by her own allies' gunfire. There was also talk of leaving the eleven-year-old girl in a military brothel so that any valuable marriage plans by the pontiff would be spoiled for ever. Without making a decision about Catherine's ultimate fate, the council determined that she be removed immediately from the friendly Murate convent, from which they feared she might be liberated without too much difficulty. Thus it was that the Signoria sent Silvestro Aldobrandini with an escort of troops to fetch Catherine late on the evening of 20 July 1530. In the words of one of the nuns: 'They decided to remove her at night and this happened with such tribulation and effort . . . but such force was used by the eight that we had to give her up.'<sup>13</sup>Catherine, certain that she had been condemned to death and that Aldobrandini had come to fetch her for execution, put up a struggle. In preparation the eleven-year-old girl had shorn her hair and donned a nun's habit. Announcing that as a bride of Christ she refused to go quietly, Catherine cried out, 'Holy Mother, I am yours! Let us now see what excommunicated wretch will dare to drag a spouse of Christ from her monastery.'<sup>14</sup> She refused to change out of her nun's clothing, and Aldobrandini



brought her through the small streets riding on a donkey, braving a starving and menacing crowd voicing threats and open hatred. The perilous journey proved a formative experience for the young woman as Aldobrandini kept Catherine safe and surrounded by his soldiers until he delivered her to the St Lucia convent. It was here that she had first started life as a captive nearly three years earlier. She never forgot Aldobrandini's goodness to her and when, on 12 August 1530, the siege was lifted and Clement took possession of his native city once more, she interceded for him and succeeded in having his death sentence commuted to exile. Upon her release, Catherine visited the sisters of the Murate and together they celebrated her good fortune. She remained in contact with the order for the rest of her life and wrote to them regularly, sending them money annually and gave them the revenues from one of her properties. Catherine never forgot a kindness any more than she forgave a disservice. All too soon the girl found herself a central feature in Clement's international policy and she moved to Rome where her 'uncle', as he called himself, greeted her with such warmth that the old hypocrite managed to convince one onlooker she is what he loves best in the world'. Another noticed that Catherine seemed emotionally marked by her dreadful time in the hands of her family's enemies: She cannot forget the maltreatment she suffered, and is only too willing to speak of it.' Clement installed Catherine with Ippolito and Alessandro at Rome's exquisite Palazzo Medici (today the Palazzo Madama and used as the Italian Senate). He wanted her to acquire the veneer and accomplishments necessary for a glorious marriage. Antonio Soriano, the Venetian ambassador, described her physical appearance at the time of her arrival in Rome, writing that she was small of stature, and thin, and without delicate features, but having the protruding eyes peculiar to the Medici family'.<sup>15</sup> Nobody called her beautiful because she was not, but her manners lent her an elegance that her physique lacked. One observer from Milan called her heavy-looking, although he was probably describing her face, adding that she seemed a sensitive child who for her age, shows great spirit and intelligence'. The same man noted that altogether this little girl does not look like she will become a woman for a year and a half yet'. Catherine lived under the care of her great-aunt Lucrezia Salviati (Leo X's sister) and her husband. It is not known how she spent her days but perhaps it was in Rome, a city being rebuilt after the ravages it had endured, that she acquired her love for art in general and architecture in particular. She had the opportunity of watching the greatest artists of the day not only restoring the damaged city but creating new masterpieces to adorn it. She certainly enjoyed access to one of the finest libraries in the world and lived surrounded by the treasures both of antiquity and the Renaissance. In Rome at Clement's Court, too, Catherine became accustomed to the attendant rituals and particular formalities of this way of life. Also during her time in the Eternal City, much to Clement's alarm, Catherine fell under the enchanting spell of Ippolito de Medici. By the spring of 1531 rumours were circulating about the couple and the young man might well have nurtured ambitions of marriage. He cut a tremendous figure. According to contemporary descriptions, spectacularly supported by the famous Titian portrait of him in the dress of an Hungarian horseman, now at the Pitti Gallery in Florence, he was slim and tall with dark good

looks. He had a penchant for theatrical adornments, dressing with diamond aigrettes and jewelled scimitars. Ippolito provided the perfect antidote to Catherine's years of loss and suffering. Older than Alessandro, he should by rights have been groomed as the ruler of Florence: the peace Treaty of Barcelona, however, indicated that Clement had other plans. The marriage was agreed between Alessandro and Margaret of Austria, the Emperor's illegitimate daughter, and a new constitution had been drafted by a group of Florentines known as the thirteen reformers of the republic' making the Medici hereditary rulers of the city and finally settling 25 years of political revolutions and instability. With the Emperor's backing, therefore, Ippolito had been bypassed in the succession. He had unwillingly been created a cardinal at the age of twenty but would happily have put his red hat aside, left the Church and married Catherine, taking what he felt was his rightful place as Florence's ruler. After a failed attempt to raise support in the Tuscan capital – where people now rejected further strife and yearned for a return to calm and prosperity – Ippolito, bribed by His Holiness with rich benefices and other gifts in exchange for a promise to agitate no further, found himself packed off to Hungary as Clement's legate in June 1532. Pressing family matters crowded the Pope's agenda. He wished to expedite the implementation of the Treaty of Barcelona; and to see his son Alessandro properly invested as Duke of Florence and married off to Margaret of Austria. The Signoria was abolished under the new constitution and on 27 April 1532 the Pope's illegitimate son was officially created Duke of Florence. Catherine had been sent to the city to lend legitimacy to the proceedings and for the first time in her life undertook official public duties at Alessandro's side. Observers noted that the thirteen-year-old girl carried herself with admirable dignity and grace. She continued her public role in Florence while awaiting the arrival of Alessandro's bride in April 1533. Apart from enjoying the many and lavish celebrations marking the new duke's confirmation, Catherine also pursued her studies. We know little about her formal education except that she learned Greek, Latin and French; she was also a keen mathematician, an interest that would have coincided well with her later love of astrology. Clement kept her in Florence while he proceeded carefully with marriage talks on her behalf in Rome. Since her birth, Catherine had inevitably been the object of much matrimonial discussion. Even before the revolt in Florence, Clement had been approached by various potential suitors, mainly Italian potentates from families such as the Gonzaga of Mantua, the Este of Ferrara and the della Rovere of Urbino. Now that the Pope enjoyed a far stronger position than formerly he looked for more illustrious offers. Among the earlier candidates was Henry VIII's illegitimate son the Duke of Richmond. Although Sir John Russell, the English ambassador to the Vatican, reported that His Holiness was very well contented to have such alliance' nothing came of the talks and the duke died a few years later, quite possibly from poisoning. When the Duke of Albany, Catherine's uncle, proposed the candidacy of King James V of Scotland, Clement did not think this offered him any real advantages and worried that the courier service between the two countries might be too costly. The Prince of Orange had briefly been considered as a possible husband until his death while campaigning to retake Florence. The one candidate Clement could not afford to

ignore, however, was the Holy Roman Emperor's own preference. Charles backed a marriage between Catherine and Francesco II Sforza, Duke of Milan. Unfortunately for Catherine the duke, a somewhat dim-witted man, prematurely aged at thirty-seven, sick and broken, mainly by the huge sums of money demanded by the Emperor in order to retain his duchy, was not a particularly gleaming matrimonial prospect. In addition Clement feared that by marrying Catherine to Charles's client he would find himself too deep in the Emperor's pocket to be able to free himself if necessary. Another worry for Clement was Charles's request for a general Church Council. The Pontiff feared that this might provoke a schism in the Church. Besides, Clement had never been ordained into the priesthood, thus making him technically ineligible for the papal throne. At this point a giddy proposal arrived from Francis I of France. His ambitions for territories in Italy stirred anew and he required a friendly pope to back them. In 1531, with this in mind, Francis offered Clement his second son, Henry, Duke of Orléans, as a potential husband for Catherine. Early in 1531 Gabriel de Gramont, Bishop of Tarbes, was sent as Francis's envoy to discuss such a marriage. By April a preliminary agreement had been signed by Francis at the Château of Anet (ironically enough the home of Henry's future lover Diane de Poitiers). It stipulated that Catherine would live at the French Court until of an age to consummate the marriage and secret clauses in the agreement stated that her dowry would include Pisa, Parma, Piacenza, Reggio, Modena and Leghorn. Clement also committed himself to backing French efforts to take Genoa and Milan, and to making a joint attempt to annex Urbino for the young couple. In June 1531 word came back to France that Clement would not after all send Catherine to live at the French Court before her marriage. He was both wary of the wrath he knew this alliance would incur in the Emperor and fearful of a change in French policy once Catherine was already in Francis's hands. His matrimonial ace would thus remain in his own care until the wedding. Clement also stipulated that Catherine's dowry of 100,000 gold écus would include an extra 30,000 écus in exchange for the revenues from her Florentine inheritance. Francis agreed to give Catherine a further 10,000 livres per annum, and she would also enjoy the substantial income that came from her mother's inheritance. As the second son of the mighty King of France, Henry, Duke of Orléans had no shortage of possible brides. The most important of these was Mary Tudor. The possibility of a marriage with Henry VIII's eldest daughter had been marred when the English King tried to have the marriage to her mother, Catherine of Aragon, annulled. Meanwhile Francis concentrated his attentions on Catherine, who could best further his Italian ambitions. Henry of Orléans had been born on 31 March 1519 and, while not expected to inherit the French throne, represented a substantial catch for any royal princess, let alone an Italian duchess without a duchy. Catherine might have been rich but she was emphatically not of royal blood. In January 1533 at Bologna, secret talks were held between Clement and Francis's emissaries. The Pope, terrified that the Emperor would put a stop to the French alliance if he caught wind of it, decided to continue the negotiations regarding a marriage to Francesco II Sforza, Duke of Milan, as a feint. In fact Charles, certain that Francis would never stoop to marrying his son to a merchant's daughter, generally laughed off the

rumours he did hear as preposterous. When he eventually taxed Clement on the matter, the Pope hedged and promised the Emperor that if Francis did prove serious about the marriage then he would contrive to sabotage the talks: 'I know his nature, he [Francis] will want the honour of breaking with me, and this is what I desire.'<sup>16</sup> By the time the marriage was announced later on that same month, Charles could do nothing about it other than be amazed. Clement's finest hour had arrived. He had defied adversity against monstrous odds. He had survived the sack of Rome and was restoring the city. His family had been thrown out of Florence; now they were reinstated in glory. He had, through an alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor, not only re-established his family as rulers of Florence, but managed to place the republic under the rule of his son as its hereditary duke.\* His illegitimate son Alessandro had been created Duke of Florence with the Habsburg potentate's daughter for his duchess. By playing the Emperor off against the King of France, and dazzling the latter with over-optimistic promises of vast territorial gains in the peninsula, he had managed the match between Catherine and Henry of Orléans. He had reconciled the irreconcilable. Albany wrote to Francis that 'His Holiness marvellously desired this marriage.' Clement's simpering evidently amused de Gramont, the French envoy to Rome, who recorded the discussions during which Clement 'kept repeating over and over that his niece was not worthy of so lofty an alliance but ready nevertheless, for every sacrifice and any concession to secure it'.<sup>17</sup> Clement could not have foreseen that concession and sacrifice were indeed to become the young bride-to-be's most constant companions for what he rightly called the greatest match in the world.

Two 'The Greatest Match in the World' J'ai reçu la fille toute nue<sup>1515–34</sup> Henry, Duke of Orléans, Catherine de Medici's future husband, was born on 31 March 1519, a fortnight before his intended bride. The second son of 'Le Roi Chevalier', King Francis I, Henry suffered a childhood at least as traumatic as that of his wife-to-be. He lost his mother, the pious and sweet-tempered Queen Claude, who suffered from chronic ill health, at the age of five.\* Not long afterwards he and his elder brother became the innocent victims of their father's worst political and military disaster, his catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Habsburg Empire at the Battle of Pavia in 1525. To understand Henry as a man, as a king and a husband, it is necessary briefly to examine this early drama of Francis's reign. When Francis of Valois-Angoulême, twenty years old and ambitious, became King in 1515 he immediately directed his energies towards conquests in Italy. Showing both courage and resourcefulness, he claimed and won Milan from the Sforza family who were backed by the Empire.\* Francis had ingeniously brought his army, guns and horses across a dangerous and little-used alpine pass into Italy, thereby entirely wrong-footing his enemy. Initial skirmishes and manoeuvres resulted in the decisive battle over Milan at Marignano, on 13–14 September 1515. After his dazzling victory Francis installed himself as Duke of Milan. He had only been King of France for nine months but Marignano, even though he could not know it, was to be the high point of his entire military career. As his predecessors had already discovered, French conquests in Italy were hard to preserve and proved a constant drain in blood and treasure. Francis's success at Marignano also triggered an enduring hostility between himself and the Habsburg King Charles I of Spain.

The French King's quests for Italian territory and his enmity against the Habsburg Emperor were the two themes that were to characterise, and to an extent bedevil, his entire reign. After Marignano, Francis became for a while the cynosure of European monarchs; success, it seemed, was his constant companion. In 1515 he allied himself with the Medici Pope Leo X for his support in Italy and unwittingly set in motion the course of events that would bring Catherine to France as his daughter-in-law almost twenty years later. In 1519 King Charles of Spain was unanimously elected Holy Roman Emperor, becoming Charles V. Francis had also put himself forward as a candidate and felt bitter at the humiliating outcome. In 1521 Francis overreached himself and the city of Milan fell to the Emperor's troops the same year. By 1523 France stood virtually alone, England having joined forces with the Empire in a general league against the French. Treason, a failed rebellion against Francis from within his own kingdom, and invasion in both the north and the south of France forced him to act decisively. His army pursued the Imperial invaders southwards into Italy and after a harsh winter in the open laying siege to the city of Pavia where the Imperial troops had holed up, the two sides finally met in battle on 24 February 1525. Numerically the armies were evenly matched and at first the fighting proved inconclusive. For reasons that are still not clear, Francis, probably believing the Imperialists to be in flight, charged out into the open at the head of his elite bodyguard and cavalry in pursuit of the enemy. It proved a critical error. By pushing forward into exposed terrain he found himself not only between his own guns and the enemy but also at the mercy of over 1000 hidden Imperial arquebusiers, well placed to pick off the distinctive French knights with relative ease. Gradually Francis and his men – who had cut a fantastic swathe through the enemy – found themselves stranded from the rest of their troops and encircled by Imperial soldiers. When his horse was killed beneath him, Francis showed immense personal valour as he continued the now hopeless fight on his feet. Burdened by his heavy armour he managed to hack men down with his sword, as the elite of the French nobility, though inspired by their King's courage, were being decimated around him. Eventually Francis and his surviving nobles were taken prisoner. Not since Agincourt had France lost so many gallant and high-born warriors on the field of battle. Pavia was an unmitigated disaster for her and her King. Orders came to bring Francis to Spain where he would eventually meet his adversary Charles V. He believed strongly in the chivalric code and hoped that by appealing directly to his captor as one regal knight to another he might soften the extreme terms that the Emperor now demanded. The most important item, the Duchy of Burgundy, stood at the head of the list. The duchy had been seized by the French in 1477 at the death of the last duke, Charles the Bold, without leaving a male heir. Although Charles V claimed descent from the Burgundian duke on the female side, his political sense, not his dynastic pride, spurred his claim to Burgundy. The incorporation into the Empire of this rich and fertile duchy that stretched down his western borders with France creating a strategic foothold, would pose an alarming threat to the French. Francis received a royal reception in Barcelona on 19 June, and the crowds roared with excitement as he came out of the cathedral after celebrating mass. People clamoured around the King, begging him to use monarchical healing powers to touch the

sick wherever he went. It is hardly surprising that a Venetian observer commented, 'He bears his prison admirably,' adding, 'he is well nigh adored in this country.'<sup>1</sup> After much fêting and excitement Francis arrived in Madrid in the late summer of 1525. Before too long, however, the reality of his situation began to tell. Used to an active outdoor existence, the company of women and all the other essentials that made his life agreeable, Francis proved to be a terrible prisoner after all. He became too depressed to eat, which in turn caused him to fall dangerously ill from an abscess in the nose. Even the Emperor, who had so far avoided meeting the royal hostage, hurried to Francis's sickbed and looked anxiously at his most valuable asset, whose life seemed to be dwindling away. He granted permission for the King's sister Marguerite to come from France to minister to him. After several weeks of serious illness the abscess burst and the King rallied. A Frenchman at Francis's bedside reported back to Paris on 1 October 1525 that 'he has improved steadily . . . Nature has performed all its functions, as much by evacuation above and below as by sleeping, drinking and eating, so that he is now out of danger.'<sup>2</sup> With Francis recovering, peace terms could be worked out. On 14 January 1526, in the Treaty of Madrid, Francis renounced his claim to Milan and various other territories that the Empire had hitherto regarded as its own. To seal their accord the King betrothed himself to marry Charles's widowed sister, Queen Eleanor of Portugal, who had been waiting at the gloomy Spanish Court for her brother to find her a new husband. Physically, Eleanor had too many of the unfortunate Habsburg traits to be considered anything other than tolerable-looking. Francis – with a few casual gallantries – had charmed the dull, devout and kind-hearted Queen, who had by now completely fallen for him and could hardly believe her good luck when the treaty was agreed. As for Burgundy, Charles would allow no discussion over the duchy. Francis finally consented to relinquish the territory to the Empire, but declared that he must supervise the handover himself. Charles knew that the transfer would be difficult. Realising that the French King's presence would help to smooth the process, he therefore decreed, with justifiably enormous misgivings, that Francis could return home provided he offered sufficient security in his stead. The King's mother and official regent during his captivity, Louise of Savoy, decided that her two eldest grandsons should take their father's place. Thus, out of political necessity, Henry, Duke of Orléans and his elder brother the Dauphin François were doomed to be held hostage in Spain until their father redeemed them by fulfilling the obligations of the treaty. Henry VIII's ambassador John Taylor had been ordered to accompany the party on the long voyage to the rendezvous. Before their departure he saw the two boys and reported to Cardinal Wolsey, 'After dinner I was brought to see the Dauphin, and his brother Harry; both did embrace me, and took me by the hand, and asked me of the welfare of the King's highness. . . . The King's godson [Henry] is the quicker spirit and the bolder, as seemeth by his behaviour.'<sup>3</sup> The two brothers were aged eight and six when they exchanged their beautiful châteaux of Blois and Amboise for a series of increasingly forbidding fortresses in Spain. Accompanied by their grandmother, Louise of Savoy, the two 'goodly children' made the journey southwards in appalling weather to the border between France and Spain. The exchange, for which a strict convention had been agreed, was

scheduled to take place at seven o'clock in the morning on 17 March 1526. A ten-mile area had been sealed off around the Bidassoa river which marked the frontier. In the middle of the river floated a large raft, where the royal prisoners must be delivered. At the appointed hour two boats left, each from its respective side. The vessels measured the same size and contained the same number of men, all similarly armed. Outside the sealed-off sector the two boys had embraced members of their family and their household before leaving. One of the noblewomen in their entourage, who were all deeply affected by the departure of the little boys, seemed to show particular concern and tenderness for Henry. Later to become the central figure in his life, it transpired that the kind lady of the court was the 25-year-old Diane de Poitiers. Obviously moved by the children's plight, she kissed the little boy on his forehead, bidding him farewell. As the two boats arrived at the raft and the prisoners awaited the exchange, Charles de Lannoy, the Emperor's viceroy at Naples, declared to Francis, 'Sire, your highness is now free; let him execute what he has promised!' 'All shall be done,' replied the King who turned to his forlorn sons, tearfully embracing them and briefly making the sign of the cross over their heads. Henry and his brother kissed their father's hand, and he climbed into his boat with a promise that he would soon be sending for them. He then set off for the French side of the river. As he arrived on French soil Francis cried, 'I am King! I am King once again!' At first Henry and his brother the Dauphin were held in 'honourable captivity' at Vitoria in Castile. Waiting for their release, they stayed with Queen Eleanor, who expected to become their stepmother shortly. A good-hearted woman, she took a kindly interest in their welfare. The boys also enjoyed the attentive care of a large French household including their governor, tutor, maître d'hôtel and seventy attendants and servants.<sup>4</sup> Yet it quickly became clear that their father had no intention of honouring the Treaty of Madrid and the boys soon felt the effect of his broken pledges. Before signing the treaty, the King had taken the precaution of telling his emissaries from France that the promises he signed as a captive must be regarded as void since they had been extracted under duress. To modern readers it may appear ruthless that Francis could send his sons away into what he must have known would be a long captivity while he defied the Emperor, but in fact he had very little option. In order to liberate his kingdom from the aftermath of Pavia he had to be able to act as a free man. His mother Louise, suffering from failing health, lacked the authority to deal with matters effectively as regent, surrounding herself with notoriously corrupt advisers only interested in extracting what they could for themselves. Throughout her adult life Louise's abiding passion was her son. She called Francis 'my lord, my King, my son, my Caesar' and had struggled to keep his kingdom intact for him during his imprisonment, braving the people's hostility at his military failures and the unwelcome attentions of foreign predators. Now Charles V found himself facing serious difficulties too. Thwarted by Francis's breach of their agreement, his careful plans had been shattered. Not only was the Treaty of Madrid in tatters, but the impecunious Emperor lacked the money to pay his armies; his German territories were torn with religious strife while the Turks attacked Hungary. No wonder a report from an English envoy at the time described him as being 'full of dumps'.<sup>5</sup> Immediately after his release, Francis tried to

stir up support for himself and trouble for the Emperor by creating the League of Cognac on 22 May 1526. Ostensibly the league had been formed 'to ensure the security of Christendom and the establishment of a true and lasting peace', though in reality it was composed of states that feared Imperial domination. It included France, Venice, Florence, the Papacy and the Sforza of Milan. Henry VIII of England also took a place as the league's 'protector'. As a direct response to Francis's actions, the children's 'honourable captivity' now changed abruptly for a cruder confinement. Charged with responsibility for the princes, the Constable of Castile, Don Iñigo Hernandez de Velasco, received orders to move them deeper into Spain.\* They were first moved to a castle near Valladolid. Then, in February 1527, a supposed plot to free the boys and bring them back to France prompted their transfer still further south. Charles ordered the return of some of the children's attendants to France and took his hostages to a castle near Palencia about one hundred miles north of Madrid. By October – with Rome now sacked, Italy engulfed by war and Catherine herself a prisoner at the Murate – Charles gave permission for a brief visit by English emissaries to Henry and his brother. They spoke to the princes' tutor, Benedetto Taglicarno, and reported that he 'could not enough praise the Duke of Orléans of wit, capacity and great will to learn, and of a prudence and gravity passing his age, besides treatable gentleness and nobleness of mind, whereof daily he avoweth to see great sparks'.<sup>6</sup>In 1529 the Spanish captured and executed a French spy found near Palencia, not far from the princes' castle. Fearing another escape attempt, the Emperor ordered that the boys be moved once again. Their new home, the grim mountain fortress of Pedraza, lay between Madrid and Segovia. Their French suite and attendants had been taken from them some months before their move. Put to work as galley slaves, the unfortunate servants were, according to one account, shipwrecked, captured by pirates and finally sold as white slaves in Tunis where, ironically enough, ten of the forty-one were later liberated by Charles V when he captured the city in 1535. The boys had been left with a sole companion, a French dwarf, to entertain them. Their gaolers, coarse Spanish soldiers, kept them under close watch and cared little for their charges. Reports from a French agent near Pedraza described his two sightings of the boys in July 1529. On the first occasion he saw them led by a Spanish prince to Mass heavily escorted by eighty foot soldiers. He next sighted them surrounded by fifty mounted men on their way out to play. The spy reported that whenever Henry came out he rode a donkey held by two men because of his constant attempts to flee; he also noted that the prince insolently cursed the Spaniards at every opportunity. Meanwhile the international situation began to look promising for the princes' eventual return home. While Francis and the Emperor busied themselves absurdly challenging each other to duels, still locked in their mutual antagonism, both sides, exhausted by war, nonetheless urgently needed to conclude a settlement. To break the impasse, Francis's mother Louise and Charles's aunt Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands, were authorised to carry out talks on behalf of the two rulers, neatly providing the men with a face-saving solution at the same time. 'La Paix des Dames' (the Peace of the Ladies), properly called the Treaty of Cambrai where it was concluded and signed by Louise of Savoy and Margaret of Austria in



August 1529, would eventually set the princes free. Its most significant article involved part of Burgundy being yielded to Charles in exchange for the princes; instead they would be released for a ransom of 2 million écus. Charles's sister Eleanor, who had been languishing in despair believing that matters would not be resolved, was still to marry Francis and when 1.2 million écus, the first part of the ransom had been paid to the Emperor, the children and the Queen would be allowed to travel to France. The regent Louise asked for permission to send her usher, M. Bodin, to visit the boys at Pedraza to give them the good tidings of their imminent homecoming. Under heavy guard the man travelled to Castile where, after many delaying tactics by the Spanish, he arrived in September 1529. Bodin's moving account of the meeting describes the hardship and the solitude Henry and his brother the Dauphin Francis had had to endure. After being kept waiting at Pedraza, the usher finally received authorisation to enter the fortress itself where he saw the princes in their small dark cell with walls ten feet thick and iron bars to prevent escape. A small shaft of light came from a window too high to reach and the only furnishings were straw mattresses. When Bodin set eyes upon the two pathetic and shabby boys, he wept. After bowing to them he explained he had come on behalf of the King and to say that they would soon be returning home. The Dauphin turned to his gaoler saying that he had not understood a word the man had said and wanted him to 'use the language of the country'. The Marquis of Berlanga, entrusted with the princes' security and well-being at Pedraza, retired leaving Bodin with the boys, who then repeated his message in Spanish. Astonished, the usher asked if the Dauphin had forgotten his native tongue. The prince retorted that since his suite had been removed from him he no longer spoke French. At that moment Henry interjected, saying, 'Brother, this is the usher Bodin.' The Dauphin acknowledged that he knew the man and had been feigning his ignorance for the benefit of Berlanga. The two boys then fired excited questions at their visitor, asking about everything at home, their family, the King and their friends. Allowed to withdraw to an adjoining room, the princes rushed to the window for fresh air. Bodin also noticed two small dogs. One of the guards remarked, 'That is the only pleasure which the princes have,' another added, 'You see how the sons of the King your master are treated, with no company but that of the soldiers . . . and neither exercise nor education.' Presumably even the entertaining dwarf had been sent away by this time. The Spaniards, fearful that Bodin might use some sophisticated French sorcery to remove the boys, refused to allow him to measure them (he wished to report their growth to the King), nor was he permitted to give them new clothes in case they possessed magic powers. Bodin shed further tears when he bade farewell to the princes and returned home to report their miserable plight.<sup>7</sup> After many difficulties and postponements, at last the time arrived for Henry and the Dauphin to be exchanged for the gold. One of the principal impediments to the transfer had been Francis's problem in raising the money for his sons' freedom. Extravagant promises to contribute to the ransom had been made by the King's richer subjects, though in the event they only grudgingly produced the money after much prodding. Francis's blunders had been expensive for the kingdom. When the correct amount of écus had finally been collected, inspected and weighed, it was discovered that

unscrupulous officials had clipped some of the coinage, so further appeals for funds had to be made. Eventually the gold was ready and once again a strict protocol agreed, noting all the details of how the exchange should take place. The King charged the Grand Master of France and renowned soldier, Anne (pronounced Annay) Baron de Montmorency, with the safety of the gold and its exchange for the prisoners. The Constable of Castile brought his charges to the Bidassoa river accompanied by the Emperor's sister, Eleanor, who had been languishing in a convent waiting in despair for her marriage to Francis.\* The exchange, which had originally been fixed for March 1530, was now to begin on 1 July, almost a year after the peace treaty had been signed at Cambrai. The day before the transfer the Constable of Castile accused Montmorency and the French of a slight to his honour over some trifle. Without a full apology from the French government, he declared that the arrangements for the exchange would be halted. For months Montmorency had been painstakingly fulfilling even the most petty obligations laid down in the agreement; now some self-important Spanish windbag threatened to prolong the business indefinitely. Exasperated, Montmorency offered to give satisfaction in person. Fortunately the Grand Master's reputation as a fierce soldier had the Spaniard offering to set aside his grievance with sudden grace. All was set for the following day. Just before the prisoners left his care, the Constable of Castile presented Henry and his brother with a pair of horses each, asking them to forgive any wrongs that he might have done them. The Dauphin appeared good-natured, but Henry merely turned his back on his despised erstwhile gaoler and farted. Queen Eleanor and the two boys arrived in France by torchlight on the night of 1 July to be reunited with their father and his Court two days later. Henry, now eleven years old, and the twelve-year-old Dauphin had been prisoners for almost four and a half years. At first sight the boys looked well and they had grown considerably, though soon it became obvious that both children had been deeply affected by their ordeal. Quiet and reserved, their insistence on points of etiquette, their clothes and other details made them seem more Spanish than French. Henry, who had once been described as a lively intelligent boy, had changed into a withdrawn and quiet youth. Their incarceration and all its attendant deprivations had marked both children for life. After the celebrations and receptions were over, Francis soon became impatient with his gloomy sons. He declared, 'The mark of a Frenchman was to be always gay and lively,' adding that he had no time for 'dreamy, sullen, sleepy children'. To add to this, the King now tactlessly showed a marked preference for the princes' younger brother, Charles, Duke of Angoulême. Younger than Henry by one year, Charles greatly resembled his father in looks and his outgoing manner. Two 'The Greatest Match in the World' J'ai reçu la fille toute nue 1515–34 Henry, Duke of Orléans, Catherine de Medici's future husband, was born on 31 March 1519, a fortnight before his intended bride. The second son of 'Le Roi Chevalier', King Francis I, Henry suffered a childhood at least as traumatic as that of his wife-to-be. He lost his mother, the pious and sweet-tempered Queen Claude, who suffered from chronic ill health, at the age of five.\* Not long afterwards he and his elder brother became the innocent victims of their father's worst political and military disaster, his catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Habsburg Empire at the Battle of Pavia in 1525. To understand Henry as a

man, as a king and a husband, it is necessary briefly to examine this early drama of Francis's reign. When Francis of Valois-Angoulême, twenty years old and ambitious, became King in 1515 he immediately directed his energies towards conquests in Italy. Showing both courage and resourcefulness, he claimed and won Milan from the Sforza family who were backed by the Empire.\* Francis had ingeniously brought his army, guns and horses across a dangerous and little-used alpine pass into Italy, thereby entirely wrong-footing his enemy. Initial skirmishes and manoeuvres resulted in the decisive battle over Milan at Marignano, on 13–14 September 1515. After his dazzling victory Francis installed himself as Duke of Milan. He had only been King of France for nine months but Marignano, even though he could not know it, was to be the high point of his entire military career. As his predecessors had already discovered, French conquests in Italy were hard to preserve and proved a constant drain in blood and treasure. Francis's success at Marignano also triggered an enduring hostility between himself and the Habsburg King Charles I of Spain. The French King's quests for Italian territory and his enmity against the Habsburg Emperor were the two themes that were to characterise, and to an extent bedevil, his entire reign. After Marignano, Francis became for a while the cynosure of European monarchs; success, it seemed, was his constant companion. In 1515 he allied himself with the Medici Pope Leo X for his support in Italy and unwittingly set in motion the course of events that would bring Catherine to France as his daughter-in-law almost twenty years later. In 1519 King Charles of Spain was unanimously elected Holy Roman Emperor, becoming Charles V. Francis had also put himself forward as a candidate and felt bitter at the humiliating outcome. In 1521 Francis overreached himself and the city of Milan fell to the Emperor's troops the same year. By 1523 France stood virtually alone, England having joined forces with the Empire in a general league against the French. Treason, a failed rebellion against Francis from within his own kingdom, and invasion in both the north and the south of France forced him to act decisively. His army pursued the Imperial invaders southwards into Italy and after a harsh winter in the open laying siege to the city of Pavia where the Imperial troops had holed up, the two sides finally met in battle on 24 February 1525. Numerically the armies were evenly matched and at first the fighting proved inconclusive. For reasons that are still not clear, Francis, probably believing the Imperialists to be in flight, charged out into the open at the head of his elite bodyguard and cavalry in pursuit of the enemy. It proved a critical error. By pushing forward into exposed terrain he found himself not only between his own guns and the enemy but also at the mercy of over 1000 hidden Imperial arquebusiers, well placed to pick off the distinctive French knights with relative ease. Gradually Francis and his men – who had cut a fantastic swathe through the enemy – found themselves stranded from the rest of their troops and encircled by Imperial soldiers. When his horse was killed beneath him, Francis showed immense personal valour as he continued the now hopeless fight on his feet. Burdened by his heavy armour he managed to hack men down with his sword, as the elite of the French nobility, though inspired by their King's courage, were being decimated around him. Eventually Francis and his surviving nobles were taken prisoner. Not since Agincourt had France lost so many gallant and high-born warriors on

the field of battle. Pavia was an unmitigated disaster for her and her King. Orders came to bring Francis to Spain where he would eventually meet his adversary Charles V. He believed strongly in the chivalric code and hoped that by appealing directly to his captor as one regal knight to another he might soften the extreme terms that the Emperor now demanded. The most important item, the Duchy of Burgundy, stood at the head of the list. The duchy had been seized by the French in 1477 at the death of the last duke, Charles the Bold, without leaving a male heir. Although Charles V claimed descent from the Burgundian duke on the female side, his political sense, not his dynastic pride, spurred his claim to Burgundy. The incorporation into the Empire of this rich and fertile duchy that stretched down his western borders with France creating a strategic foothold, would pose an alarming threat to the French. Francis received a royal reception in Barcelona on 19 June, and the crowds roared with excitement as he came out of the cathedral after celebrating mass. People clamoured around the King, begging him to use monarchical healing powers to touch the sick wherever he went. It is hardly surprising that a Venetian observer commented, 'He bears his prison admirably,' adding, 'he is well nigh adored in this country.'<sup>1</sup> After much fêting and excitement Francis arrived in Madrid in the late summer of 1525. Before too long, however, the reality of his situation began to tell. Used to an active outdoor existence, the company of women and all the other essentials that made his life agreeable, Francis proved to be a terrible prisoner after all. He became too depressed to eat, which in turn caused him to fall dangerously ill from an abscess in the nose. Even the Emperor, who had so far avoided meeting the royal hostage, hurried to Francis's sickbed and looked anxiously at his most valuable asset, whose life seemed to be dwindling away. He granted permission for the King's sister Marguerite to come from France to minister to him. After several weeks of serious illness the abscess burst and the King rallied. A Frenchman at Francis's bedside reported back to Paris on 1 October 1525 that 'he has improved steadily . . . Nature has performed all its functions, as much by evacuation above and below as by sleeping, drinking and eating, so that he is now out of danger.'<sup>2</sup> With Francis recovering, peace terms could be worked out. On 14 January 1526, in the Treaty of Madrid, Francis renounced his claim to Milan and various other territories that the Empire had hitherto regarded as its own. To seal their accord the King betrothed himself to marry Charles's widowed sister, Queen Eleanor of Portugal, who had been waiting at the gloomy Spanish Court for her brother to find her a new husband. Physically, Eleanor had too many of the unfortunate Habsburg traits to be considered anything other than tolerable-looking. Francis – with a few casual gallantries – had charmed the dull, devout and kind-hearted Queen, who had by now completely fallen for him and could hardly believe her good luck when the treaty was agreed. As for Burgundy, Charles would allow no discussion over the duchy. Francis finally consented to relinquish the territory to the Empire, but declared that he must supervise the handover himself. Charles knew that the transfer would be difficult. Realising that the French King's presence would help to smooth the process, he therefore decreed, with justifiably enormous misgivings, that Francis could return home provided he offered sufficient security in his stead. The King's mother and official regent during his captivity, Louise of Savoy,

decided that her two eldest grandsons should take their father's place. Thus, out of political necessity, Henry, Duke of Orléans and his elder brother the Dauphin François were doomed to be held hostage in Spain until their father redeemed them by fulfilling the obligations of the treaty. Henry VIII's ambassador John Taylor had been ordered to accompany the party on the long voyage to the rendezvous. Before their departure he saw the two boys and reported to Cardinal Wolsey, 'After dinner I was brought to see the Dauphin, and his brother Harry; both did embrace me, and took me by the hand, and asked me of the welfare of the King's highness. . . . The King's godson [Henry] is the quicker spirit and the bolder, as seemeth by his behaviour.'<sup>3</sup> The two brothers were aged eight and six when they exchanged their beautiful châteaux of Blois and Amboise for a series of increasingly forbidding fortresses in Spain. Accompanied by their grandmother, Louise of Savoy, the two 'goodly children' made the journey southwards in appalling weather to the border between France and Spain. The exchange, for which a strict convention had been agreed, was scheduled to take place at seven o'clock in the morning on 17 March 1526. A ten-mile area had been sealed off around the Bidassoa river which marked the frontier. In the middle of the river floated a large raft, where the royal prisoners must be delivered. At the appointed hour two boats left, each from its respective side. The vessels measured the same size and contained the same number of men, all similarly armed. Outside the sealed-off sector the two boys had embraced members of their family and their household before leaving. One of the noblewomen in their entourage, who were all deeply affected by the departure of the little boys, seemed to show particular concern and tenderness for Henry. Later to become the central figure in his life, it transpired that the kind lady of the court was the 25-year-old Diane de Poitiers. Obviously moved by the children's plight, she kissed the little boy on his forehead, bidding him farewell. As the two boats arrived at the raft and the prisoners awaited the exchange, Charles de Lannoy, the Emperor's viceroy at Naples, declared to Francis, 'Sire, your highness is now free; let him execute what he has promised!' 'All shall be done,' replied the King who turned to his forlorn sons, tearfully embracing them and briefly making the sign of the cross over their heads. Henry and his brother kissed their father's hand, and he climbed into his boat with a promise that he would soon be sending for them. He then set off for the French side of the river. As he arrived on French soil Francis cried, 'I am King! I am King once again!' At first Henry and his brother the Dauphin were held in 'honourable captivity' at Vitoria in Castile. Waiting for their release, they stayed with Queen Eleanor, who expected to become their stepmother shortly. A good-hearted woman, she took a kindly interest in their welfare. The boys also enjoyed the attentive care of a large French household including their governor, tutor, maître d'hôtel and seventy attendants and servants.<sup>4</sup> Yet it quickly became clear that their father had no intention of honouring the Treaty of Madrid and the boys soon felt the effect of his broken pledges. Before signing the treaty, the King had taken the precaution of telling his emissaries from France that the promises he signed as a captive must be regarded as void since they had been extracted under duress. To modern readers it may appear ruthless that Francis could send his sons away into what he must have known would be a long captivity while he defied the

Emperor, but in fact he had very little option. In order to liberate his kingdom from the aftermath of Pavia he had to be able to act as a free man. His mother Louise, suffering from failing health, lacked the authority to deal with matters effectively as regent, surrounding herself with notoriously corrupt advisers only interested in extracting what they could for themselves. Throughout her adult life Louise's abiding passion was her son. She called Francis 'my lord, my King, my son, my Caesar' and had struggled to keep his kingdom intact for him during his imprisonment, braving the people's hostility at his military failures and the unwelcome attentions of foreign predators. Now Charles V found himself facing serious difficulties too. Thwarted by Francis's breach of their agreement, his careful plans had been shattered. Not only was the Treaty of Madrid in tatters, but the impecunious Emperor lacked the money to pay his armies; his German territories were torn with religious strife while the Turks attacked Hungary. No wonder a report from an English envoy at the time described him as being 'full of dumps'.<sup>5</sup> Immediately after his release, Francis tried to stir up support for himself and trouble for the Emperor by creating the League of Cognac on 22 May 1526. Ostensibly the league had been formed 'to ensure the security of Christendom and the establishment of a true and lasting peace', though in reality it was composed of states that feared Imperial domination. It included France, Venice, Florence, the Papacy and the Sforza of Milan. Henry VIII of England also took a place as the league's 'protector'. As a direct response to Francis's actions, the children's 'honourable captivity' now changed abruptly for a cruder confinement. Charged with responsibility for the princes, the Constable of Castile, Don Iñigo Hernandez de Velasco, received orders to move them deeper into Spain.\* They were first moved to a castle near Valladolid. Then, in February 1527, a supposed plot to free the boys and bring them back to France prompted their transfer still further south. Charles ordered the return of some of the children's attendants to France and took his hostages to a castle near Palencia about one hundred miles north of Madrid. By October – with Rome now sacked, Italy engulfed by war and Catherine herself a prisoner at the Murate – Charles gave permission for a brief visit by English emissaries to Henry and his brother. They spoke to the princes' tutor, Benedetto Taglicarno, and reported that he 'could not enough praise the Duke of Orléans of wit, capacity and great will to learn, and of a prudence and gravity passing his age, besides treatable gentleness and nobleness of mind, whereof daily he avoweth to see great sparks'.<sup>6</sup> In 1529 the Spanish captured and executed a French spy found near Palencia, not far from the princes' castle. Fearing another escape attempt, the Emperor ordered that the boys be moved once again. Their new home, the grim mountain fortress of Pedraza, lay between Madrid and Segovia. Their French suite and attendants had been taken from them some months before their move. Put to work as galley slaves, the unfortunate servants were, according to one account, shipwrecked, captured by pirates and finally sold as white slaves in Tunis where, ironically enough, ten of the forty-one were later liberated by Charles V when he captured the city in 1535. The boys had been left with a sole companion, a French dwarf, to entertain them. Their gaolers, coarse Spanish soldiers, kept them under close watch and cared little for their charges. Reports from a French agent near Pedraza described his

two sightings of the boys in July 1529. On the first occasion he saw them led by a Spanish prince to Mass heavily escorted by eighty foot soldiers. He next sighted them surrounded by fifty mounted men on their way out to play. The spy reported that whenever Henry came out he rode a donkey held by two men because of his constant attempts to flee; he also noted that the prince insolently cursed the Spaniards at every opportunity. Meanwhile the international situation began to look promising for the princes' eventual return home. While Francis and the Emperor busied themselves absurdly challenging each other to duels, still locked in their mutual antagonism, both sides, exhausted by war, nonetheless urgently needed to conclude a settlement. To break the impasse, Francis's mother Louise and Charles's aunt Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands, were authorised to carry out talks on behalf of the two rulers, neatly providing the men with a face-saving solution at the same time. 'La Paix des Dames' (the Peace of the Ladies), properly called the Treaty of Cambrai where it was concluded and signed by Louise of Savoy and Margaret of Austria in August 1529, would eventually set the princes free. Its most significant article involved part of Burgundy being yielded to Charles in exchange for the princes; instead they would be released for a ransom of 2 million écus. Charles's sister Eleanor, who had been languishing in despair believing that matters would not be resolved, was still to marry Francis and when 1.2 million écus, the first part of the ransom had been paid to the Emperor, the children and the Queen would be allowed to travel to France. The regent Louise asked for permission to send her usher, M. Bodin, to visit the boys at Pedraza to give them the good tidings of their imminent homecoming. Under heavy guard the man travelled to Castile where, after many delaying tactics by the Spanish, he arrived in September 1529. Bodin's moving account of the meeting describes the hardship and the solitude Henry and his brother the Dauphin Francis had had to endure. After being kept waiting at Pedraza, the usher finally received authorisation to enter the fortress itself where he saw the princes in their small dark cell with walls ten feet thick and iron bars to prevent escape. A small shaft of light came from a window too high to reach and the only furnishings were straw mattresses. When Bodin set eyes upon the two pathetic and shabby boys, he wept. After bowing to them he explained he had come on behalf of the King and to say that they would soon be returning home. The Dauphin turned to his gaoler saying that he had not understood a word the man had said and wanted him to 'use the language of the country'. The Marquis of Berlanga, entrusted with the princes' security and well-being at Pedraza, retired leaving Bodin with the boys, who then repeated his message in Spanish. Astonished, the usher asked if the Dauphin had forgotten his native tongue. The prince retorted that since his suite had been removed from him he no longer spoke French. At that moment Henry interjected, saying, 'Brother, this is the usher Bodin.' The Dauphin acknowledged that he knew the man and had been feigning his ignorance for the benefit of Berlanga. The two boys then fired excited questions at their visitor, asking about everything at home, their family, the King and their friends. Allowed to withdraw to an adjoining room, the princes rushed to the window for fresh air. Bodin also noticed two small dogs. One of the guards remarked, 'That is the only pleasure which the princes have,' another added, 'You see how the

sons of the King your master are treated, with no company but that of the soldiers . . . and neither exercise nor education.' Presumably even the entertaining dwarf had been sent away by this time. The Spaniards, fearful that Bodin might use some sophisticated French sorcery to remove the boys, refused to allow him to measure them (he wished to report their growth to the King), nor was he permitted to give them new clothes in case they possessed magic powers. Bodin shed further tears when he bade farewell to the princes and returned home to report their miserable plight.<sup>7</sup> After many difficulties and postponements, at last the time arrived for Henry and the Dauphin to be exchanged for the gold. One of the principal impediments to the transfer had been Francis's problem in raising the money for his sons' freedom. Extravagant promises to contribute to the ransom had been made by the King's richer subjects, though in the event they only grudgingly produced the money after much prodding. Francis's blunders had been expensive for the kingdom. When the correct amount of écus had finally been collected, inspected and weighed, it was discovered that unscrupulous officials had clipped some of the coinage, so further appeals for funds had to be made. Eventually the gold was ready and once again a strict protocol agreed, noting all the details of how the exchange should take place. The King charged the Grand Master of France and renowned soldier, Anne (pronounced Annay) Baron de Montmorency, with the safety of the gold and its exchange for the prisoners. The Constable of Castile brought his charges to the Bidassoa river accompanied by the Emperor's sister, Eleanor, who had been languishing in a convent waiting in despair for her marriage to Francis.\* The exchange, which had originally been fixed for March 1530, was now to begin on 1 July, almost a year after the peace treaty had been signed at Cambrai. The day before the transfer the Constable of Castile accused Montmorency and the French of a slight to his honour over some trifle. Without a full apology from the French government, he declared that the arrangements for the exchange would be halted. For months Montmorency had been painstakingly fulfilling even the most petty obligations laid down in the agreement; now some self-important Spanish windbag threatened to prolong the business indefinitely. Exasperated, Montmorency offered to give satisfaction in person. Fortunately the Grand Master's reputation as a fierce soldier had the Spaniard offering to set aside his grievance with sudden grace. All was set for the following day. Just before the prisoners left his care, the Constable of Castile presented Henry and his brother with a pair of horses each, asking them to forgive any wrongs that he might have done them. The Dauphin appeared good-natured, but Henry merely turned his back on his despised erstwhile gaoler and farted. Queen Eleanor and the two boys arrived in France by torchlight on the night of 1 July to be reunited with their father and his Court two days later. Henry, now eleven years old, and the twelve-year-old Dauphin had been prisoners for almost four and a half years. At first sight the boys looked well and they had grown considerably, though soon it became obvious that both children had been deeply affected by their ordeal. Quiet and reserved, their insistence on points of etiquette, their clothes and other details made them seem more Spanish than French. Henry, who had once been described as a lively intelligent boy, had changed into a withdrawn and quiet youth. Their incarceration and all its



attendant deprivations had marked both children for life. After the celebrations and receptions were over, Francis soon became impatient with his gloomy sons. He declared, 'The mark of a Frenchman was to be always gay and lively,' adding that he had no time for 'dreamy, sullen, sleepy children'. To add to this, the King now tactlessly showed a marked preference for the princes' younger brother, Charles, Duke of Angoulême. Younger than Henry by one year, Charles greatly resembled his father in looks and his outgoing manner.

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The Rival Queens: Catherine de' Medici, Her Daughter Marguerite de Valois, and the Betrayal that Ignited a Kingdom

## What people say about this book

Patsy, "Great book.. Story, historical pictures super."

Aglia, "Great Biography of a Maligned and Misunderstood Renaissance Queen. Leonie Frieda has written a tremendous biography of a much maligned Renaissance queen. Catherine De Medici has been blamed for many of the ills experienced by France after the death of her husband, Henry II. How much complicity she had in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre is still a subject of debate. Leonie Frieda states that she did have some culpability. However, she also makes it clear that Catherine made many efforts to make peace with the Huguenots before and after the event. Something that history seems to have neglected. Catherine's entire reign has been defined by that one event. There was much more to this remarkable renaissance queen. She was a woman of her times and ahead of her time. She received an education far beyond what was considered respectable for a woman. She cultivated the arts, poetry and architecture. And yet, she is considered the "Queen of poisons" because several of her enemies seemed to conveniently die (of poison ?). Above all, she was a mother to her children. What is interesting about her is that while she was never affectionate with her children, she loved and protected them. She made sure all of them married well. That was important during the Renaissance. A woman was defined by her marriage. Catherine was no different. Most of her early life was defined by her marriage to Henry II. She didn't come into her own until after his death when she became regent for her son, Francis. This is a period when she flourished. Up until that point, she remained the dutiful and submissive queen. She may well have owed that position to Diane De Poitiers, Henry II's mistress. Catherine remained childless for the first nine years of her marriage. That would have been a legitimate legal reason for an annulment. With Diane's urging (?), Henry kept Catherine and they eventually went on to have ten children. Catherine's relationship with her sons makes for absorbing reading. Three sons lived to become king of France and in Henry III's case, Poland. Her daughters did not achieve the same success of their mother. Although, Margot achieved equal notoriety. This is a wonderful biography as well as history of Renaissance France. I highly recommend it."

pyramidcvv, "An informative read for Renaissance history buffs. I highly recommend this book to people who want to know more about the Medici family and its illustrious member who became the Queen of France. Catherine de Medici had 10 children: three became French kings, one became Queen of Spain (as wife of Philip II). Her youngest son was a serious candidate to wed England's Queen Elizabeth. The Queen Mother was a lavish spender who insisted on mounting extravagant "magnificences" in total disregard for France's precarious financial state. She would even impose taxes on the ever-suffering populace to finance her exercises of excess. She formed her own company of scantily clad dancing girls ("the flying squadron") which proved quite popular. Catherine was not a hardcore religious type (like Spain's Philip II) but attended

Mass regularly. She was not threatened by the rise of Protestantism and sought to meet their demands by peaceful means. She was superstitious: when a seer predicted the death of her husband King Henry II at a tournament, she begged him not to compete (he did anyway and was killed in an accident). She presided over eight Wars of Religion: civil wars between Protestants fighting for their right to worship freely, and Catholics trying to keep the country from splitting apart. The author discusses Catherine's many diplomatic efforts to resolve the difficulties peacefully. But treacherous behavior among hardcore Huguenots eventually hardened her attitude, culminating in the disastrous Massacre of St Bartholomew of 1572, which killed as many as 30,000 men, women, and children all over France. Catherine loved architecture, ate heartily (she was fat), and was an enthusiastic horseback rider. She adored her husband Henry II even though he preferred to spend his time with a mistress. She worshipped her son King Henri III, a transvestite who frequently ignored his royal duties to spend time with his young male companions ("mignons"). Catherine was not what contemporary thinkers would call a "good mother." While she worshipped Henri, she ignored her other children. At the outset of the Massacre of 1572, she put her daughter Margot in mortal danger by allowing her to stay at the Louvre, even though the building was about to be overrun by assassins. Years later, Catherine even proposed "eliminating" Margot in order to allow her husband Henri of Navarre to marry a woman who was more capable of bearing children. I would not call this a "sympathetic" biography. While the author emphasizes Catherine's diplomatic efforts, the Queen Mother clearly lived up to the Medicis' darker reputation by approving numerous political assassinations. This book is full of interesting information, and also contains several full-color illustrations."

sally tarbox, "no mother in history has done more to promote her children at whatever cost to herself, themselves & their times'. Brilliantly researched yet always readable biography, Frieda takes us from Catherine's inauspicious start as 'orphan of Florence' to a marriage where she always played second fiddle to her husband's mistress, Diane de Poitiers. The story really takes off after Catherine becomes a widow comparatively early. With the heir still a child, Catherine assumes regency...and from then on her life seems to be composed largely of coping with the endless and complex discord of 16th century Europe. Wars between principalities; the lead up to (and horrible consequences of) the Wars of Religion; efforts to keep the papacy on side; dynastic marriages; political factions and towards the end her sons (an unpromising lot) plotting against each other. Frieda's skill here lies in keeping it all (relatively) comprehensible and readable. I was left feeling that Catherine was a most pragmatic and unsentimental woman; notably when she sent her daughter Margot to her marital chamber as the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre was beginning ('My mother replied that, God willing, I would come to no harm, but in any case I must go for fear of wakening their suspicions') and yet in her impossible situation could she have done much better? Very interesting read"

Linda Peace, "Heavy going.. This is a learned and hefty tome which most members of my book group (it was my choice) either didn't attempt or only read part of it before giving up. I got to the end and enjoyed it in many ways. The most notable finding for me was that Catherine de Medici was not Lucrezia Borgia. My brain getting at cross purposes again. The worst thing about it is the huge numbers of dramatis personae - really difficult to keep tabs on. I will read it again and see if I can get a better handle on the people - however it is a hard-hitting account not only of the politics of the time, but also of the horrible health issues that marred Catherine's family and which must have held for virtually all the population of Europe at the time. Interesting."

Jean D. Andrews, "Very interesting and informative book. This book kept me busy for quite a long time. It is very very interesting, but it takes some time to work out who exactly her ten children were.. 3 evidently survived either not at all or for a very short time. The sixteenth century was just as turbulent in France as it was in England (possibly more so) and the same problems of Protestant versus Catholic existed there, though I am not sure that England suffered anything as violent as the massacre of St. Bartholomew. Well worth reading if you have been enthralled by the Tudors, because this book will give you insight into the general European scene."

M. Baerends, "fantastic!. What a superb & witty book! This is history how it should be written. Nothing but praise for this absolute pageturner. Here is a book that educates the reader on an interesting period in French history, from the good times of her father in law Francis I to the bloody mess that followed the accidental death of her husband Henry II (who was pierced through the head with a lance during a tournament), and over which she and various of her disfunctional children presided. Striking exactly the right balance between good narrative and real history, with the right amount of understanding for the main character but without being overly apologetic, I cannot commend this book highly enough."

Rowena F, London, "A detailed and thorough read. I enjoyed this lengthy book. It delved into well into Catherine's life. The author did well in showing what hoops she jumped through and her fierce love and passion for keeping her children on the throne."

The book by Leonie Frieda has a rating of 5 out of 4.4. 486 people have provided feedback.

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