

THE KIKKI TRIESTE TRILOGY
BOOK TWO



*De Subtilitate Signorum et
Eorumque Interpretatione
quodammodo
falsis et vana quae
solent dignis fieri et
212 Jun*

THE
FRENCH QUEEN'S
CURSE

*Poit faire ainsi qu'il vult
faire les deux en un seul*

In Queen Margot's Gardens

• JULIETTE LAUBER •

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First Publication May 2022

Indies United Publishing House, LLC

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Cover Design: John Simoudis

Cover Production: Nick Zelinger/NZGraphics.com

Front Cover Design: Original Portrait of Marguerite de Valois, Age 16, by François Clouet ~ public domain

Author's Photo: Juliette Lauber

ISBN: 978-1-64456-464-6 [Hardcover]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-465-3 [Paperback]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-466-0 [Mobi]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-467-7 [ePub]

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022936249



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

P.O. BOX 3071

QUINCY, IL 62305-3071

indiesunited.net

Praise for *The French Queen's Curse*

"A thrilling and mysterious fantasy saga filled with action and drama" - *Literary Titan*

"Cunningly plotted, filled with suspense and unexpected moments. Masterfully written" - *The Book Commentary*

"Juliette Lauber has fashioned a heady, passionate novel, both complex and illuminating. She carries us back in time to ancient matriarchal origins and tracks how they have been covered over repeatedly by the violence of the patriarchy. Importantly, she shows how the struggle continues in our times, how events of today might well be manipulated by these dark forces of the past. Kikki is a canny and sympathetic heroine striving to utilize her High Priestess powers for the good. Her partner, Torres, grounded in this world, is a perfect foil. And beautiful, innocent Queen Margot! Was ever a monarch more ill-served? It's thrilling to read how Kikki works to restore her to her proper place and set the world aright. I was swept away by *The French Queen's Curse*." *NC Heikin, award winning filmmaker and playwright*

"Historical mystical fiction fanatics will devour this novel. A feminist DaVinci Code." *Lola Lorber, writer and doula*

For the Mother Goddess, and for Sarah Lovett, who embodies her, whose wisdom and support brought this novel to the light.

And for Paris, one of the great loves of my life. She has always enriched me.

The Kikki Trieste Trilogy
Book Two

THE
FRENCH QUEEN'S
CURSE



In Queen Margot's Gardens

JULIETTE LAUBER



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

Pour moi, l'on ne me disait rien de tout ceci.
Marguerite de Valois, *Memoires*

-On the Saint-Bartholomew's Day Massacre
They told me nothing about it.

PROLOGUE



Outside Paris Winter 1572

In a small clearing deep in a wintry forest, a veiled figure knelt near the embers of a dying campfire. The last remnants of orange flames flickered and leapt like fingers of fire reaching for her dark robes. The woman leaned towards the flame, her young beautiful face drawn taut by determination. A strong hint of defiance showed through the flush in her cheeks. Her hands pressed together in a gesture of prayer or perhaps hope, and then she backed away. The fire hissed and crackled in answer.

With swift movement of long delicate fingers, Marguerite de Valois swept back her veil and lifted her face to the stormy moonlit sky, revealing the regal profile and porcelain skin of a young woman of royal lineage. A great beauty. She took a deep breath exhaling ghostly vapors and then reached inside her cloak.

Through luminous yet fiery dark eyes, tears streamed down her pale cheeks as she drew out a long-stemmed red rose. Her lips softened as she kissed velvety petals. She raised her head towards the sky and gazed fervently upon the moon and then cast the rose into the flames. An offering to the Twin Moon Goddesses of Greek mythology, Artemis and Hecate.

She whispered a prayer to invoke the ancient déesses who protected women like her. An homage to the fierce Sumerian Inanna, Goddess and Queen of Heaven and Earth and Mother Goddess—worshipped by the great ancient civilization of Mesopotamia millennia ago. All one in the Goddess.

Marguerite uttered a final prayer to her secret protectors. For though she was “Catholic” for appearances, for religious correctness at the French Court, her true loyalties were with the Goddess.

She rose and bowed low, pressing her hands together again. She whispered a last litany. As she backed away, she crossed her arms across her belly. Once more she lifted her face heavenward and threw both arms high, reaching for the moon. She hesitated, unsteady on her feet,

yet sure of her path, sure as she was that she was one with the Greek Goddess Aphrodite—the one the Romans called Venus.

“Come, then, Your Grace,” her companion whispered, “Cover yourself. We must go. It will soon be dawn.” In the near distance, the awaiting horses neighed and snorted.

At last, Marguerite wrapped her hooded robe around herself and turned from the fire. Linking arms with her friend, she hurried through the forest to the carriage. Away from love, from Paris. Though it pained her greatly to part with her newborn daughter, she had to take her to safety. Away from her Mother and the King, the grave dangers at the royal court of France.

She wrapped the tiny infant more tightly in her blanketed arms and knew her heart would break once more at losing her. She steeled herself. She had no choice. To stay was certain death for her daughter. She shuddered with terror.

“Hurry!” her friend whispered. “Do not worry, we will get to the Convent of the Daughters. Their friends and yours will help us along the way.”

The soldier crouched in the forest at the edge of the clearing, watching in silence. He did not move until they had gone and he heard the sure sound of the horses’ hooves clattering on the hardened icy road that led through the forest. Then he mounted his horse and followed the carriage, keeping a safe distance. He rode out of sight, skirting the trees, hidden.

He stopped and pulled the reins up short for a moment and looked upwards. Fast-moving dark clouds scudded across the face of the moon. The night was fading to a slate gray dawn sky. He glanced back, towards home, the great city of Paris, peering down the narrow road, watching out for unwanted company. He saw no one. *Tant mieux.*

In the very far distance, he could make out the twin Gothic towers of the great Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris, just barely visible, silhouetting the predawn sky by divine ordinance. No other landmark penetrated the city’s permanent layer of smoke from ever-burning winter fires.

Seeing no other soul on the road, he clicked his tongue against his teeth and urged his horse silently ahead, following the carriage just as it disappeared around a bend.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and large drops of freezing rain pelted the rider. The heavens opened, and it poured.

He smiled. Snow had been predicted. But it was too warm yet. God was with him. It would be easier to follow the heretical whore and her

accompanying witches in the downpour that muffled sounds. Though he wouldn't mind a good blizzard. That would slow the carriage down—but not him.

He whipped his stallion sharply, kept his keen blue eyes on the carriage and began to count the ways he would spend the gold promised by his King and his other benefactor, Queen Mother Catherine de Medici.

For he was confident that he would find her, though his brethren in God would also lay chase, for the bounty offered by the queen was generous. He would win this dangerous game and bring her and her damned child back in chains. God was on the side of the righteous.

“Long live King Charles IX of Valois, who serves by divine right for the One and Only True Catholic God!” He thrust his sword high and shouted into the rain. “In the name of the Knights of the Holy Sword of God!”



Chapter 1



Paris, December 2015

Véronique “Kikki” Trieste stood at the French paned door and stared down at the River Seine, chilled to the bone even in her long white robe. The staccato of a barge hitting the fast-running water under the nearby bridge, the Pont Royal, had awakened her at three a.m. from a haunting yet familiar nightmare of a bloody massacre centuries ago.

Paris’s beloved River Seine was a peculiar gray-green dotted with golden halos from the overhanging soft yellow lights on Quai Voltaire. On the bridge, they glowed only dimly in the thick fog—lanterns hanging midair.

From the floor-to-ceiling windows that fronted her penthouse apartment on Quai Voltaire, Kikki had a perfect view of this ancient center of the City of Light—just like Voltaire, who had lived and died in this very building. Directly across from the Louvre and the early seventh-century Pavillon de Flore, an inspiring, majestic building at the end of the Louvre’s long main gallery. Once part of the Palais des Tuileries, it was named for Flora, Roman Goddess of Flowers and Spring. The pavilion had been burned and rebuilt—it, too, was rife with ghosts.

She parted further the heavy red velvet curtains, fingering their luxuriant softness as she opened the terrace door a crack and peered up at the sky. The waxing moon shone bright and insistent, breaking through dense clouds and fog. She smiled. Still in her vigil, she whispered thanks to the twin Greek Moon Goddesses, Hecate and Artemis.

She sniffed the cold damp air and sensed the oncoming snow. That would be a welcome change from the perpetual *grisaille* (a flat damp gray) that hung over the Île de France from late fall to early spring. Paris’s dirty little secret.

Kikki knew that, Gaia—Mother Earth and Nature, would have her way. Weather changed rapidly as she spewed forth her wrath onto those who violated her planet.

Still, she thought, a snowy Winter Solstice and a full moon aligned perfectly for this important week to come. The prehistoric *Minoan Snake Goddess* that she and her lover Pepe Torres had uncovered on a deadly weekend in Santorini in August was to be exhibited at the Louvre on Friday, the very day of the Solstice—December 21, five days from now.

The Snake Goddess was sacred to the beliefs of the great matriarchal Minoans of Crete, and as early as 1600 BCE, the precious treasure was carried to their sister colony on Santorini—or Thera as it was known in ancient times—where Kikki had discovered her four thousand years later.

The Snake Goddess remained the sacred icon of the Mother Goddess from whom all were birthed—the Holy Grail of the Divine Feminine, revered by scholars and historians alike—entrusted to keepers of the Goddess lineage, like Kikki.

On the longest night of the year, the Wheel of Life would turn once more as Light and Darkness—matriarchal lineage pitted against patriarchy—battled beneath the full power of the Moon Goddesses. Timing the priceless Snake Goddess Premier Gala Exhibition on that very same night, at the world's most illustrious museum, would magnify her invincible power. The convergent alchemy would blast open an immense energetic portal just as battle was pitched—in the Goddess's favor, surely.

But nothing could be certain, and Kikki's psychic antennae were on high alert. Was she ready? Were they all?

She glanced at the table next to her *récamier*, eyes fixed on the small replica of the Snake Goddess. She remembered the first time she held the dusty ceramic goddess in her hands. *Déjà vu*. She smelled the damp stench of the cave, and her hands became warm, as though holding ancient earth. She struggled not to go back to that moment.

The statue on her table began to glow so that Kikki saw her features and felt her power: Our Lady of the Beasts—tiny, a mere eight inches in height—radiating a path of light through ancient earth. Strong arms extended clutching vipers. A tiny waist and beehive skirt of the Queen Bee Cult worshipped by the Minoans and ancient peoples of the Aegean. On her head, a mythical beast, both cat and owl. The vipers—symbols of retribution and warning. More importantly, she was a symbol of fertility and rebirth.

Kikki felt drawn to pick up the statue, but as she stepped towards it, she lost her footing on her long robe and bumped against the table. The Snake Goddess tumbled to the carpet, scattering books and papers.

Kikki cried out—then became silent. Her gaze shifted towards the bedroom at the back of the apartment where Torres lay sleeping. Had she disturbed her lover? She could just see his tousled black hair through

the partially open door. She waited, holding her breath, willing him not to awake. In solitude, she could gather her energy and ground herself.

When she was satisfied that he still slept, she leaned to pick up the goddess and began to straighten the scattered papers. Her cold hands scooped up a film script she'd been studying for a new client, a challenging project that she had begun working on when she returned only a few weeks ago to her legal and business affairs practice after a break. No coincidence in Kikki's mind, the film was also the subject of the book she'd been reading even before the project crossed her desk.

Now, she put the script aside and studied that novel—the source of her nightmares and recent visions. *La Reine Margot* by Alexandre Dumas, its colorful cover depicting the young queen on her *récamier*, dressed in a white satin nightdress. She held close in her arms a man, Joseph de Boniface, Seigneur de la Mole, a dashing, dark-haired, blue-eyed young man from Provence dressed in black velvet with a purple cape, grasping a leather pouch with an urgent message from Huguenot leaders for Henri, King of Navarre. A soldier bearing a musket loomed over them, threatening death, while Margot held him off. She sheltered La Mole, the gravely wounded Huguenot seeking refuge on that murderous night. A man who would become Margot's lover.

Kikki shivered and a spike of pain hit her left temple as her eyes took in the images.

Her pupils dilated as she watched the beautiful young queen, Marguerite de Valois, lift in *bas relief* from the book cover. As the image hovered, blood from the wounded man began to stain the white robe Kikki wore.

Damnit, she swore silently. Not now. Please the Goddess, not now.

Light-headed, she hurried to the window and opened it an inch. Her temple throbbed, and she took a deep breath of biting cold air, hoping to ward off one of the otherworldly visions that she so often experienced.

Predictably, her present efforts were in vain. She felt deep in her soul the magnetic pull of the waxing moon and approaching portal of darkness of the Wheel of the Year that came with the Winter Solstice. An irresistible pull to other worlds in the darkest time of the entire year.

Dark brown eyes wide and pupils round black moons, she watched the Seine transform to a scarlet river rushing towards the sea. Mangled bodies, severed heads and limbs floated and bobbed as ravens cawed and pecked at human remains. Screams of the dying and mortally wounded filled the night. The potent chemical scent of blood invaded her nostrils. She gagged and gripped the curtains.

The nightmare that had awakened her returned as a vision, a force

greater than her strong but fast-fading will to prevent it.

She smelled the stench of filthy, sewer ridden streets of sixteenth-century Paris and saw with crystal clarity the Seine, all filled with the blood of slaughtered Huguenot Protestants and other unfortunate souls caught in the massacre that began that eve of Saint-Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1572—during the wedding feast of Marguerite de Valois to her Protestant cousin, Henri de Bourbon, King of Navarre.

An apocalyptic horror born of a singularly duplicitous and nefarious plot of Marguerite's mother, the Queen Regent, Catherine de Medici—widely known as Madame la Serpente, the Black Queen.

By the time the scourge was over, some seventy thousand souls had been slaughtered throughout the whole of France. That was Kikki's last conscious thought before she succumbed to the vision and shifted to otherworldly realities in time, space and dimension. She was drawn, as in her nightmare, but more real in vision where she literally entered that past life and that terrifying night.

Even while the bloody images flashed in Technicolor, Kikki looked down upon her long ivory silk peignoir as it transformed into that royal white nightdress now stained with darkest red blood.

Kikki became Marguerite de Valois, sister of Charles IX, King of France. She was trapped inside her apartments in the Louvre—once a fortress with moat and keeps—a prison and an impenetrable citadel to defend the great city. Converted by her father King Henri II to a Renaissance palace home of kings in the sixteenth century. Still a cold and dark place.

Her hated and treacherous mother—the mother who had forced her to marry for political power—for the dynasty and for her mother's insatiable need to control. Unholy and demonic was such a mother.

A twisted attempt to reconcile religious enemies. Or so her mère had said. To foil Margot's true love for the son of the Duc de Guise—a powerful enemy to the throne and the House of Valois of which Margot was born. And to bring the Protestant kingdom of Navarre into the bosom of France.

How Margot missed her father, Henri II. He would have told Margot about the impending horror and not left her to defend herself. He might have taken control to prevent it. Tears filled her eyes.

Her own mother had used her as a pawn in a hideous plot. She, the smartest, most educated and gifted of ten children born to provide an heir. Her mother would make sure she, Margot, had no voice.

She stood peering out through a heavy velvet draped window,

helpless and horrified. Her own mother had put her in mortal danger and not warned her.

At eleven that night, the tocsin (warning bell) rang out in the royal parish church, Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, signaling a frenzy of killing. Men carrying white flags bearing the Catholic cross and brandishing flaming torches of death stormed the streets below.

They shouted her brother, the king's orders—Kill them all! “Tue! Tue! Tuez-les tous!”

Hearing each bell resound with growing dread. Eternally damned on the eve of her wedding. Dark eyes wide with terror and tears. She was only nineteen years old and forever cursed by blood.

As quickly as she had experienced the vision, Kikki slammed back to the present. She sat abruptly on the edge of the powder blue velvet *récamier* a few feet from the windows.

Kikki focused on the Snake Goddess and took deep breaths to ground herself after experiencing moments of Margot and her complicated life—now recalling the image lifting from the book cover, Margot literally stained by the blood of La Mole that night.

Margot became his protectress, and theirs became a legendary love affair—until the evil Medici queen ordered his death and made Margot witness.

Kikki reached for Dumas's book, *La Reine Margot*, and she let her mind skim through Margot's story like the lawyer and historian that she was: Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre and of France, nicknamed Margot, was a woman known at once as rebel queen and depraved whore. She was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant queens of France. Historians called her implacably perspicacious and one of the great minds of the sixteenth century.

She lived in one of the most turbulent and deadly centuries of the Renaissance. One of both extreme luxury and great poverty, marked by seven deadly religious wars that took the lives of more than three million people. A century in which ten queens ruled France. Among them, Margot was one of the most formidable. Her story fascinated Kikki.

Margot was ever tenacious in the face of impossible obstacles. A strong woman in a family of hypocrites. More educated than any of her sickly royal brothers, she was cultured—an advocate—like Kikki—a diplomat, a poet, fluent in multiple languages. She was a *devotée* of Plutarch, the Greek philosopher who spent his last thirty years as a priest at Delphi.

Throughout her life, she ceaselessly battled for her rightful place and

voice as queen of France. She outlived her arch enemies, prime among them her mother, Catherine de Medici, the Black Queen. Margot was sixty-two when she died.

A passionate woman always looking for love. Only love could cleanse the blood that had cursed her. The *sang real* of a family that had betrayed her repeatedly throughout her life.

Kikki understood Margot's dilemma, though her own quest came in a very different context. She glanced at Torres. Could she make herself vulnerable to his love and still walk her own path as a strong, independent woman, fight for the return of the matriarchy and the Goddess? Would it really work, or would it divide her loyalties?

Kikki wasn't worried about family betrayal or royal blood. She was a modern American woman. The times were very different. Instinctively, she knew that the undeniable depth of their love created a mixing of blood. An alchemy. Would she too lose her voice and power?

Kikki and Torres had a new home in Paris in an early eighteenth-century building on the Rive Gauche, just where Margot had finally built her sumptuous palace and gardens upon her triumphant return to the capitol after eighteen years in exile. With calculated pleasure, Margot had chosen land on the Rive Gauche, directly across the Seine from the Louvre, home of Henri IV and his new queen, Marie de Medici.

Her one-time husband had banished her to a lonely mountain fortress in desolate Usson, deep provincial France, for the better part of her life. The king who had silenced her voice as queen of France and who plotted with her family and sent assassins to hunt her.

Margot's luxurious gardens had extended as far as the Quai Voltaire and rue de Beaune, an area known now as the Carré des Antiquaires where Kikki and Torres lived.

What fated irony, Kikki thought, that they had chosen to make a home in one of Paris's oldest *quartiers*, center of a richly woven piece of antiquity and history.

The cruel turn of events on Santorini had cursed her Hotel Atlantis. Kikki fled what was to be an island haven from her busy Paris life, and returned to Paris for solace and peace. Only to be dogged by yet another curse—that of an ancient queen—the ghost of Margot, on the four-hundredth anniversary of her death.

How eerily connected. Kikki shivered.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blowing through old radiator pipes startled her. She cried out and then quickly covered her mouth.

She made herself still. A curtain rustled and dim light drifted from the front window to their bedroom at the back of the large apartment.

Through the open door, she studied her lover, sprawled on their bed. Stretched naked the full length of his lean, muscled, six-foot-three frame, one olive skinned arm trailed off the sheets. His black hair shaded his face and those piercing ebony eyes she so loved. She thought him asleep.

The curtain settled. Kikki watched a trail of dust rise along the rose-colored flocked wallpaper and then vanish into the rococo ceiling molding. Was it the ghost of Voltaire, who occasionally visited or a spirit less welcome? A shapeshifter from the patriarchy—the ghost of the Black Queen, Catherine de Medici, *peut-être*?

Kikki quivered. The *quartier* was rife with ghosts, lost souls trapped in darkness. The eighteenth-century building on the Quai stood over an underground maze of tunnels that headquartered the Northern Resistance during World War II, in use during Margot's time and long before. They had served as the wine caves of the king and the *caserne* (barracks) of the Royal Guard. D'Artagnan, the famed musketeer, had lived a block away on the Quai with easy access to the Louvre when the Sun King, Louis XIV, summoned.

Paris was riddled with a spider's web of tunnels. By far the most gruesome—the Catacombes, burial ground and mass grave of bones for millions of Parisians—some six million in all. Since the late 1700s, when some long-forgotten quarries had collapsed taking buildings and people with them. The efficient city fathers had combined the quarries with the remains of a stinking cemetery nearby—and *voilà*—the ghostly Catacombes.

The curious could wander that macabre labyrinth through alleys stacked with wall-to-wall skeletons. Hundreds of thousands of hollow-socketed skulls kept vigil over the living—drawing them to darkness in silent cacophony. Beware lost souls.

“Uh. Yes, this morning.” Natalia said quietly.

“Well, good. You are probably tired from the moon—” Kikki studied Natalia’s face. Her eyes were bright, and she had a moon look about her. Though she was visibly tired, her face was full at the same time. As if—

“Why the moon?”

“It’s nearly full. A very intense week—”

“You can say that again!” She relaxed and began to feel comfortable with Kikki. “Would love to have a glass of wine with you again at that lovely Voltaire café.”

“That was fun, Natalia.” It had been a good beginning to a very disastrous evening. Kikki felt a spike of jealousy and told herself to chill. Far more important matters were at stake.

Kikki’s attention shifted, drawn to the door adjacent to them that lead out to the private Chapelle de l’Enfant Jésus and then to the street. Almost as soon as she focused on it, the door creaked open. A bitter wind blew through the tiny chapel. The tall tapers flickered close to the wick, nearly extinguishing the light, leaving both women mesmerized by the fading flames.

On the wind blew an unmistakable perfume. Kikki, catching the whiff of Margot’s rich scent, turned away from Natalia and pulled her coat more tightly about her.

Kikki alone could see Margot—Natalia appeared frozen in time and space, while Margot stood earthly real—as though Kikki might touch the queen herself.

She wore formal clothes, reserved for official royal occasions of the Valois court, at her regal best in a red satin dress with stiff wide skirts, a high lace ruff and bellowing sleeves. Luminous pearls encircled her long slender neck and her décolletée revealed porcelain skin. The Queen in full battle regalia.

“You must deliver a message for me.”

“Aren’t you able to do that—as a being who stretches past time and dimensions?” Kikki insisted.

“I cannot do so. It would be dangerous if my voice were to be heard by any other soul than you. And it is not yet time.”

That same frustrating question that had been plaguing Kikki. When would it be time?

“They are closing in. We must be ready.”

“How can we fight them? Help me, for the Goddess’s sake, in whatever time and place you exist. How am I to save the Snake Goddess, Paris and those I love, to lead the battle, if you don’t share all you know. You are Marguerite de Valois!”

“You will know and be guided. You have been so far. But do not show your knowledge. You must plot and be cunning—as I always had to be. I will be with you in spirit, but I cannot expose myself.”

Margot whispered, “Hear me now. For this is most urgent. Speak to Natalia for me. She cannot see or hear me. You are my vessel, and I need you to be my medium.”

“And what is the message?”

Margot didn’t answer.

Just then, a draft flooded the chapel. Margot fled, skirts flying archly behind. Dark stains marred the fabric of her elegant gown—fresh blood that flowed from her like a river onto the floor of the old cathedral.

Kikki gasped, covering her mouth. She took a breath and called forth protection, her heartbeat marking seconds while she waited to see if more dark energy would manifest. But almost as quickly, she felt the air warm slightly in the chapel. She and Natalia were safe for the moment.

How could she begin to tell Natalia about Margot, to relay a message from a ghost? And what was it? She would have to put it into its context of a dark battle against the omnipresent and oppressive patriarchy. To do that, Kikki would have to remove her own mask and share secrets with this young woman she barely knew.

Natalia seemed a very earthly woman, hardly suited for Kikki’s ethereal world. She was well educated in history, archaeology and cultural customs. If Kikki remembered their conversation at the Voltaire correctly, she had an MBA. She was a businesswoman. Her uncle had schooled her well—in, among other things, trafficking black market antiquities. Natalia was in league with Victor. She was a plant on Torres’s committee—and his mark.

So, how and why should Kikki trust her? But Margot was insistent and urgent. She slipped her hand under her coat, reaching for her talisman. The rose crystals. They were warm.

It was truly time. Kikki took a leap of faith.

“Natalia, listen, I have to talk to you about something—”

“Sure,” Natalia said uneasily, worried it might have to do with her faded passion for Torres.

Kikki, watching the other woman closely, said, “It has nothing to do with my lover and your—err—evening with him.”

“Oh, well, that’s a relief!” Natalia laughed nervously. “Glad we got

that elephant out of the room. But are you a mind reader?”

“Something like that. I—how can I put this—I have this other—persona—that is in many ways quite the opposite of being my lawyer ‘self’ who operates in a logical business world—if one can call it that.”

Natalia grinned. “It has its own logic and culture.”

“True enough.” Spit it out, Kikki told herself. Trust yourself and Margot. “I am able to see in other dimensions and times. They used to call it ‘having the gift of sight.’”

“You are psychic? A medium or something?” Natalia met Kikki’s dark eyes, sending a message of reassurance. She could tell that Kikki was on edge, and she, Natalia, wanted to hear more from this enigmatic yet bewitching woman.

“Yes, something like that. But more, I am fiercely devoted to the ancient wisdom of the Divine Feminine, the Ancient Goddess in all of her manifestations—a matriarchal worldview.”

“I’m with you on that one. So, you are a kind of High Priestess? Makes sense, even as a lawyer, you counsel and keep secrets. I can sense that you are wise.”

Kikki felt the tension in her shoulders ease.

“Thank you. And yes, I am a High Priestess, though I thought I had given that up—”

“Fascinating. I can see that in you. Please, don’t be nervous. Do go on. We hardly know each other, but it feels as though we were destined to meet.”

Natalia realized that she was not at all surprised by what Kikki said and curious to hear more. It resonated with her own deep feelings, ones that she most often stifled for the sake of carrying on, being tough and making a name in her business.

“Natalia, I hope you will not be alarmed when I tell you that I have a message for you from someone not of this world.”

Silently, Kikki asked Margot, “*What is it you want to tell her? I beg—*” She was interrupted by Natalia.

“What do you mean? A ghost?” She smiled wryly. “From my mother, I bet. That candle is for her. I really could use her guidance right now.”

“Oh?”

Natalia said in a hushed secretive tone, “My mother was a novitiate in a convent. She fell in love with a priest, and they both left their orders—*et voilà*—I was born. My mother never said, but I think they both felt a huge guilt and nearly gave me to the convent so that I could be adopted. I’m not sure I have this story straight, but possibly one of the nuns—a midwife—delivered me when my mother went into early labor. Maybe

even in the convent itself—not sure. That might be the romantic version I made up.” She giggled nervously.

Natalia wondered why she was telling this woman she hardly knew, whose lover she had coveted and whose priceless Snake Goddess she was meant to steal, about her secret past.

“So, that’s why,” Natalia said in a shaky voice. “I always come here when I am in Paris and light a candle in this chapel for her, hoping that she will talk to me.” Tears filled her eyes. “I shouldn’t have told you that. It’s my cross to bear. Not that I believe in any of that. But Saint-Sulpice is different, don’t you find? It’s a haven for all of us.”

“What an incredible story.” Kikki’s lips curved into a smile. “Why wouldn’t it be true? Sounds right to me.”

And then a searing pain in her left temple caused Kikki to buckle over, holding her head in her hands.

“Are you all right, Kikki?” Natalia stood and hurried to her.

Kikki did not hear Natalia. When she looked up, Margot was there again. Kikki knew that as before, Natalia couldn’t see or hear Margot.

This time she was dressed in a nun’s robes of the sixteenth century.

Kikki pleaded silently, *“What is the message I am to give her?”*

Margot’s head was bowed, and she carried the same baby in her arms that Kikki had seen in her vision on the Quai.

“Don’t you see what it is?” she whispered.

Kikki closed her eyes and fell into deep trance. She watched in cinematic flashes a series of frames forming a whole. The tumultuous carriage ride through Rambouillet forest at night fleeing Paris. Exile. The young woman in long dark robes, face hidden, standing before a bonfire in prayer. A rose offering. A tiny little girl held tight in the young woman’s arms. The awaiting carriage. Margot.

The scene shifted, and Kikki became Gillonne. The baby cried. Margot was crying. They stood just inside the wooden gate of the stone walls of a convent. Through the window, she saw old vineyards and a potager—a kitchen garden.

When Kikki opened her eyes again, Margot was there, dressed in a nun’s robes. She held an infant girl.

Next to them sat Natalia. The likeness was uncanny. Sparkling eyes, elegant nose, oval face and full heart shaped lips.

“What is it?” Natalia whispered urgently. “You’re frightening me. Tell me, please.”

Kikki focused on the candles. They flickered and their flames rose. Suddenly, the organ sounded deep resonating chords that echoed throughout the cathedral.

Kikki, at last, understood the gravity of Margot's message to Natalia.

She caught Natalia's eyes. In a voice from another time and place, Kikki spoke.

"Natalia, you are a descendant of a very old and royal lineage. The one living heir of Queen Marguerite de Valois. The last of a dynasty thought to have been extinguished centuries ago. Legacy of La Reine Marguerite and her *sang real*. You are the only daughter of the House of Valois."

Kikki took a deep breath and then whispered, "And your life is in great danger."

Acknowledgments



I am grateful and fortunate to so many people who have supported, inspired and kept me going during the long years of bringing this book to the light—who have been there for me when I was on the verge; read early drafts and encouraged with praise and notes. A huge amount of gratitude:

~ to my extraordinary publishers, Indies United Publishing House and their authors, especially Lisa Orban and Lisa Towles;

~ to Sarah Lovett, my brilliant editor, amazing author and dear friend, who midwived this book through many drafts while also keeping me relatively sane;

~ to my family: my beloved parents, Ferd and Eileen, who continue to inspire; to my sister and brothers and their beautiful families for believing in, and supporting me always;

~to John Simoudis for friendship and a gorgeous cover design; Jack Arnold for a beautiful website; Nick Zellinger for brilliant final cover production; and, Jennifer Marshall for her excellent proofing.

Merci infiniment to wonderful friends on both sides of the Atlantic who have enriched my life with their love, friendship and company, so important in the solitary life of a novelist, and more so during a pandemic. Enormous thanks:

~to Stephen Thomas, Cynthia Miller, Barbara Grygutis, Paula Van Ness, Alán Huerta and the late wonderful Minnette Burgess, Heather Jones, John Jannetto and Eleni Sakeller of New Zealand, each of whom have been singularly steadfast friends from Tucson, who stood by me and cheered me on;

~to Katia Davis, muse and priestess, Lynn Perry, who brought me Greek goddesses, Ana Matiella, a constant positive and inspiring author, Muriel Fariello, Barbara Seiler, who share my love of Paris, Jess, Ryan and Rob for taking me in at the Bobcat Inn, Santa Fe, Kim Pentecost and Bobbie

Martin, extraordinary healers who literally kept the darkness at bay, Stephanie Jourdan, brilliant astrologer, Dovie Wingard who read the first draft, Lola Lorber, lovely goddess daughter, James Egan, for generous advice and support, Johanna Baldwin, Guadalupe goddess, Russ Stratton, Stephanie Denkowicz, for all things archeological and about Egypt, Liliana Morales, Claire Chinoy, Karen Fischer for Spain and flamenco, Laurie Robinson, for travel and France, Kat King who read first pages; to friends re-found, Becky, Jill, Carole, Kathy and the gang.

In Paris:

~to NC Heikin, film goddess, for excellent notes and abiding friendship, Robert Pepin for his support and faith in books, Christophe Vessier, Merlin of magical forests, who always believed, Judith Weber, Hotel des Marronniers, Marie-José, Hotel de Lille, Malek & Abdel at Proxi, rue de Beaune, Mohamet “Nicolas” Chaid, Gabrielle Laroche for her friendship and boutiques of beautiful antiques featured in the novel, Amélie Laroche, a shining light, Kim Coston for always encouraging, Brigitte de Cirugeda for our long friendship, for dear David Fischer who inspired, Rob Watson for early reads; the owners and staff at Les Antiquaires, rue du Bac, the Ricards, Éric and Flora, the Voltaire, Catherine, Thierry, Pascal and Regis, the Picots and new owners;

And to the inspiring Carré des Antiquaires where I have been privileged to live.

In Oia, Santorini:

~to Alexis Zervas, the late Takis at Ether Sunset everyone at Ammoudi, especially Katina’s, Katina and Vangelis, Sunset Taverna, Mary Kay and Niko at Gassapiko, Maria “Baba Vida”, Mihales of Santorini Mou.



Finally, my humble gratitude to the Mother Goddess and to my muse, Margot, for this incredible journey through her life and times.

Author's Note



In Queen Margot's Garden

This novel is a labor of love. It's been my passion, borne of my romance with Paris and her history, the City of Light and Love, with Marguerite de Valois as my spirited and insistent muse.

Having lived for many years in Europe, mostly Paris, in 1993 I found myself living in the 17th century gardens of La Reine Margot's one-time Rive-Gauche palace. Much like my alter ego, Kikki Trieste, I was literally haunted by the spirit of Queen Margot who compelled me to share her untold story. She put her quill in my hand. She came up time and again through the old tunnels under the 17th century building where I lived and insisted that I listen and give her voice.

She spurred me to do intense research. A student of history, thanks to my father, I read all I could about her life, France, Europe, Paris and the Valois Court in the tumultuous 16th century.

I studied Margot's *Memoires*, written while she was imprisoned. Not only was she a female author in a man's world, she was one of the inventors of the genre of memoir.

She haunted and inspired me to re-envision a story that has not been told about the complex, iconic woman that was Marguerite de Valois.

She was with me, haunting, yet somehow comforting, when wandering Saint-Germain along storied streets—rue de Seine, rue de Buci, rue Jacob, rue Bonaparte, the Institut de France, the Pont des Arts, Pont Neuf and the Palais des Beaux-Arts. There, where were once her palace with its extensive gardens and inside, the Chapelle des Louanges.

While I was sipping a glass of wine in the *quartier* at the Voltaire, Bar Bac or Les Antiquaires, she whispered in my ear. Walking along the Seine near the Pont Royal, at the bottom of rue de Beaune, rue du Bac and Quai Voltaire, she accompanied me, as I gazed at the ever-changing river, the Louvre and Pavillon de Flore. I felt her tap me on the shoulder, whispering urgently. Her scent enveloped me – a peculiarly strong musky rose.

Ever the *flâneuse*, when I wandered the Jardin des Tuileries or the Jardin du Palais Royal, she took my hand. As I strolled the courtyards of the Louvre, her ephemeral presence was often visible to me in the Cour Carrée, as I gazed at the *Salle des Caryatides* and *Venus de Milos* through tall windows in the crepuscule of dusk—the magical liminal time. The *Salle des Caryatides* where a 16 year old Marguerite de Valois had her debut ball.

Her spirit accompanied me when I strolled through the Jardin du Luxembourg to pay homage to the queens, *Les Reines et Femmes Illustrées*, behind the Luxembourg Palace.

And she demanded, “*Why am I not among these queens of France at Marie de Medici’s palace? I was a Queen of France. And godmother to her son, King Louis XIII.*”

Even when I was swimming in the silky waters of the caldera with the Sea Priestesses in the Aegean, Santorini, she followed me, urging me not to stop writing until I had told her story.

And so finally I did—so that her voice might be heard anew in our pivotal time when women seek agency, as she did 400 years ago—as did her contemporary, Elizabeth I, a queen who fought to rule without a husband or a male heir, defying patriarchal boundaries of the High Renaissance.

Though Margot wished to be a fair and just voice as Queen of France, she was doomed by the era’s patriarchal structure, a time of eight long religious wars. Voltaire thought her one of the greatest queens of France. Yet, she was blocked: cursed by blood, *le sang royal* of her family.

She was damned by the Saint-Bartholomew’s Day Massacre—a bloody slaughter on the eve of her wedding to Huguenot, Henri de Bourbon, King of Navarre—instigated by her treacherous mother, Catherine de Medici, the Black Queen, and her elder brother, Henri. The streets of Paris flowed with blood for weeks, the Seine turned scarlet. Her wedding earned the sobriquet: *Les noces vermillon*. Scarlet wedding. And she was branded Bloody Margot.

At only 19 years old the beautiful, brilliant Margot was condemned—held prisoner in the Louvre and exiled from court. Ultimately exiled to desolate Usson, imprisoned in a medieval fortress perched on a volcano. She remained a threat and understandably plotted against her jailers. They sent assassins to kill her.

In her *Memoires*, written in prison, she gave a reflective account, referencing celebrated minds with whom she regularly corresponded. Her writings responded to poet *Abbé de Brantôme*. To paraphrase: *Mother Nature created a perfect work in Marguerite de Valois, such a*

rare and perfect beauty that one sees her as a goddess, rather than an earthly princess.

In 1605, Henri IV obtained a “royal divorce.” After nearly twenty years in exile, Margot finally returned to her beloved Paris. She built a palatial estate across from the Louvre on the Left Bank, then considered insalubrious. Margot was the first to make it fashionable. She invented the renowned *salons* of Saint-Germain that brought together artists, intellectuals, and aristocrats.

Historians, mostly male, claim that Margot had no children and was sterile. The same historians label her whore, heretic, nymphomaniac and witch. As a woman of the 21st century, aided by Margot’s whisperings, I uncovered a different story.

She bore a son who became a key agent in the conspiracy which resulted in King Henri IV’s death by the assassin Ravaillac in 1610.

Queen Margot outlived him and her treacherous family. She died in 1615 at the age of 61.

But she was not *the last daughter of the Valois*. That story is written in *The French Queen’s Curse*. Will her ghost now leave me in peace? If she does, I may miss her, however I hope I have done her justice as she sought.

Among my original inspirations were Alexander Dumas’s wonderful novel, *La Reine Margot*, and the exquisite film adaptation by Patrice Chéreau.

Though this novel is a work of fiction, I have endeavored to be accurate with historical facts, anecdotes and present day detail. Any errors are my own. It is not my intention to provide here a thorough historical note of my muse, the complex, fascinating Marguerite de Valois and the times in which she lived. I will delve into that in newsletters and blogs in the future on my website. Juliettelaubert.com.