

# No. 15

## BOLEYN

"*Mon Bijoux? Mon BIJOUX??!* A singular possessive with a plural noun?" Eloise, playing at astonishment, sucks in air through lips plastered in Revlon Red. She shudders, making her silk scarves billow and her noisy necklaces jostle for position on her bony chest. We're outside a gift shop which has a few items of costume jewellery in the window. Like a magpie, Eloise has a taste for anything sparkly. And like a magpie, she is, though I didn't know it then, a harbinger of doom.

It was two years ago. We are walking through the shopping centre *en route* to the station. It's my first outing with Eloise. We've been neighbours for a couple of months but this is the day when I am definitively cast in the role of friend. An honour.

"We're in bloody *Ealing*, for God's sake! Why is everything in *French*? Or ghastly misspelt *pseudo-French*?" Eloise herself is pseudo-French. It was a quirk of her mother's to give her girls French names.

Then, at the travel agent's window, she softens. "Ah, Jane, look! Madagascar! Oh, how one longs to go to Madagascar!"

Her dark, bright eyes are fixed with such longing on the poster: the thatched parasol, the thickly-padded lounge, the azure sea, the sky. I give Eloise a hug, which surprises us both.

Poor Eloise. A mediocre solicitor had coaxed just enough from her mean and monstrous husband for her to afford the house opposite ours, a whole house to herself but never in a million years enough cash for the holiday of her dreams in Madagascar. She doesn't work. When I mentioned the possibility of her getting a job, she looked at me with genuine bewilderment. And she has no friends left - except, as from now apparently, me. I don't really have any friends left either. Clem likes to keep me to himself, though I'm not entirely sure what for any more.

Eloise and I are off to Westminster and then will travel by royal barge to Greenwich.

I am lying about the royal barge.

It will be a regular tourist boat, but given Eloise's 'heritage' she doubtless feels it *should* be the royal barge.

Eloise is a Boleyn. So she says. She has not a shred of evidence to prove this but her belief is unshakeable. Hence the constant Frenchifying. "We came from Boulogne in the eleventh century, of course." Of course.

I don't mind her being a fraud. And it's nice to have an outing, even though somehow I end up paying for everything. We are going to an exhibition about the Tudors at Greenwich Palace where there will be Boleyn treasures everywhere: books with Anne's notes in the margins; the ring Elizabeth 1st always wore, bearing her murdered mother's picture; the Holbein portrait of a narrow-eyed Anne with that gold B on a chain around her neck, three creamy tear-drop pearls hanging from it.

And as soon as we're on the tube and Eloise has a captive audience (her favourite kind) she starts to hold forth:

"Henry showered her with jewels, he was besotted. If she liked something, he simply commissioned more. All the Boleyn children *oozed* charisma, of course." She smiles charismatically. "They were renowned for their intelligence and wit, and Anne especially was such a cultured girl. Sharp as a tack."

The man beside me, trying to read his newspaper, shuffles in his seat.

"There were so many wonderful people at Amboise when she was serving dear Queen Claude. Jaques Lefevre d'Etapes," – (she is sounding French by the moment) - "wonderful reformist writers. And dear Leonardo of course. Da Vinci, you know", she says, leaning in with an air of confidential patronage to the mother of an Indian family sitting opposite. "Leonardo was always at court".

Newspaper man throws Eloise a look. He would like to strangle her.

I get the impression that everyone who crosses Eloise's path wants to strangle her sooner or later. Clem, particularly at first, found her frequent, unannounced visits to our house deeply irritating. We'd been aware of her moving in and I'd popped a card through the door to say

welcome. I think it's important to extend the hand of friendship. And I was spending so much time on my own.

A few days after that when we bumped into one another, she let slip she had a birthday coming, so of course I invited her for tea and cake that weekend. She didn't have anyone else to celebrate with. And it would be nice to be entertaining again, being part of a couple who 'had people round'.

She arrived three hours early, wearing a ruby silk kimono and a feathered turban glinting with paste jewels. She sat on one of our high kitchen stools to watch me make the cake while she vaped and questioned my every move: "Isn't that rather a lot of lemon zest?" "Goodness! Aren't those egg yolks pale!" Finally, after "Is the icing meant to look like that?" I slammed my spatula onto the worktop. She shut up then, and when the three of us sat down to eat the wretched thing, Eloise made a great show of how much she was enjoying it.

There was never an awkward pause with Eloise at the table, I'll give her that – and she was at our table often. I was afraid of the silences that were widening between Clem and me. Maybe he was too. But Clem is one of those people who likes being irritated; it confirms his view of the world. He would look quite murderous when Eloise insisted on calling him 'Clément.'

She sometimes called me 'plain Jane.' "How remarkable that I, a Boleyn, should befriend a woman with the same name as that scheming Seymour snake posing as a vapid spineless kitten."

When it was my turn to have a birthday, Eloise gave me a bottle of wine that was corked and two very small lipsticks in terrible colours. They had obviously been part of a free sample 'when you buy two skincare items.'

On Clem's birthday, she presented him with an ivory shaving set, clearly ancient, clearly used, and as yellow as a smoker's eyeball. At Christmas, she gave him a box of cheap liqueur chocolates that were turning white, and me a ridiculous, old-fashioned dressing-table set: a comb, a brush and a mirror, all backed in tarnished, slightly battered silver and presented proudly in a badly scuffed box. "My mother's, darling" she cooes. "And you're the nearest thing I have to a ...well, not

a mother...but you're the nearest ...thing... I have now. Like a sister," she adds quickly.

"Soul of generosity, aren't you?" says Clem.

Eloise laughs the silvery laugh she has doubtless spent long hours perfecting and nips upstairs to the loo.

Clem opens a bottle of wine.

"The woman's a miserly, crackpot egomaniac," he says, filling our glasses.

"Yes, but she's a *lonely* miserly, crackpot egomaniac."

"All that Boleyn bollocks! If she *is* a bloody Boleyn, she certainly hasn't inherited their"...he mimics her..."wit and intelligence."

"You're forgetting the charisma, darling." Eloise grins at Clem from the doorway. Oops.

Clem laughs, and straight after supper he disappears upstairs to work or watch football or do whatever else he did up there.

Six months later, when Clem left me for Eloise, it turned out she hadn't been such a skinflint after all – at least, not towards herself. Bit by bit she'd managed to spend thousands of pounds she didn't have on terrible jewellery from online shopping channels. Who knew? Clem certainly didn't. I think of Eloise glued to daytime telly, lured by the sparkle of low-grade diamonds, phoning in to falling auctions. The thrill of the chase. Indeed. And what with Clem having to bail her out and still keep up his half of the mortgage on our house – I put my foot down; I wasn't going *anywhere!* – they were going to have to move away and downsize. Ah well, perhaps she was just being true to her Boleyn heritage: overspending and stealing other people's men.

I bump into Clem by the removals lorry on the day they move out. Awkward. He looks a tad sheepish. There is everything, all packed up and waiting on the pavement, looking tired and puny. Embarrassing. So much *stuff* and yet all of it superannuated trash. A bit like Eloise.

And despite the affectation of cynicism he'd kept up for so long, I expect Clem's been quietly hoping a priceless sketch by 'dear Leonardo' might flutter out of one of the books as he and his lover packed. I could almost feel sorry for my lost husband. I wonder if he's happy with the deal he's done.

Then his paramour runs out of her front door and waves at me, scarves aflutter, a look of *faux*-compassion on her face. I turn away. There is nothing I wish to say to her and certainly not a syllable I want to hear.

There have been nights when I've lain awake, choking on my rage, a clown. She has stolen my husband, my confidence, what there was of it, my life.

Then something shifts.

Perhaps it's seeing the lorry whisking that pathetic heap of their worldly possessions away into the sunset, but I decide that I too need to put my house in order. It's not quite true after all that Eloise has given me nothing: she has given me my freedom, albeit unwittingly. (Eloise, in all the time I knew her, never wittingly gave anyone a thing.)

I don't know where to begin. I am still wobbly on my metaphorical feet. But then I see an old raincoat of Clem's on the hooks by the front door and I lift it down. I start to gather board games we never played, the brand new briefcase I'd given him just as laptop bags came in, the manky old ivory shaving set Eloise had given him. I'm hardly surprised he didn't take that.

I clear out jars of expired spices from the kitchen and empty the shelf in the airing cupboard where I keep presents I don't want. I load myself up and head out to the car. It is a joy to be getting rid of that stupid colouring book Clem gave me when colouring books were the thing, the crappy hairbrush set Eloise had given me and a box of jasmine-flavoured essential oil, provenance unknown.

I idiotically think I can carry more than I can. I'm like that greedy mouse in Disney's *Cinderella* who picks up too much cheese and drops it all.

And, sure enough, my pile of boxes shakes and quivers. And then it happens. The top box skitters off, I try to catch it, miss, the lid falls off and the ugly hairbrush set crashes onto the path.

The comb and mirror are undamaged, or at least not any more battered than they were before, but the silver back has come off the brush – and there it is. A tiny red leather pouch.

I crouch down on the path by the open car boot and ease the pouch open. It is soft as milk, even after all these years. Calfskin probably.

And then it is in my hand. A perfect burnished gold B. And, hanging from the pendant, three creamy tear-drop pearls.

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No-one knows how many items of Anne Boleyn's personal jewellery collection are still at large in the world. And I feel a little *frisson* of respect for Eloise that she steadfastly believed her own story when no-one else did. Vindicated at last. Though I imagine that is a mixed blessing in the circumstances.

Poor old Eloise. How she would have loved to be here! This is rated one of the best hotels in Madagascar. I raise my frosted cocktail glass in a silent toast.

Then I lie back on my thickly-padded lounge and look up. At the thatched parasol, the azure sea, the sky.

(1992 words)