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Also by Meg Clothier

*The Girl King*

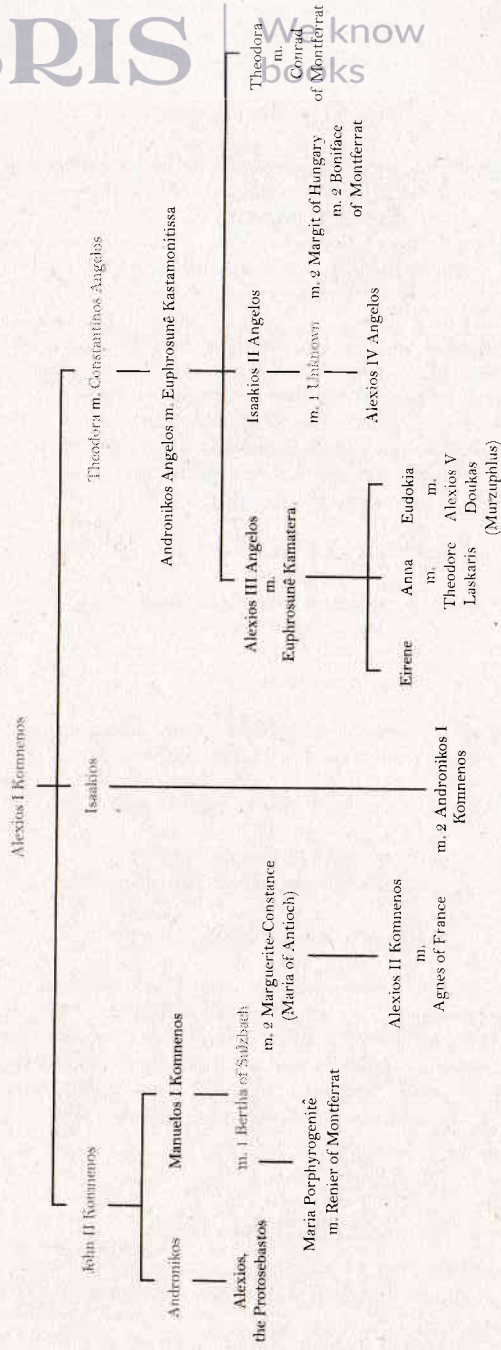
# The Empress

MEG CLOTHIER



arrow books

# FAMILY TREE



This is a *lightly* selective diagram showing the Komnenos and Angelos families only insofar as they relate to *The Empress*. Many siblings and spouses are missing, especially from older generations. The people in fainter type do not appear in the book.



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We know books

*It is 6,650 years – give or take a few – since God made the world.*

*Two men, both squarely in their prime, both more than a little drunk, are sitting side by side in the Blachernai Palace in the Queen of Cities.*

*It is dead night.*

*– Outside, marble columns glimmer, ghosts in the moonlight, but inside, thousands of candles and the best Thracian wine have turned everything dazzling bright. Golden mosaics dance about the walls, flame-haired girls whirl and bob, swords flash and disappear down throats and big cats roar as they leap through rings of fire.*

*The host of this great feast is Manuelos Komnenos, the most powerful man in the world. His guest's name is Louis, and he rules a little kingdom far away in the west.*

*Louis wants grain and guides, so that he and his soldiers of the Cross, camped in their thousands beyond the City's walls, can journey east and south to wage holy war. Manuelos wants them gone. They are wild, uncivilised; they are trouble. But they are fellow Christians – of a sort – and must be treated with care.*

*Servants refill their glasses.*

*'I thought you'd be a lumbering barbarian,' says Manuelos.*

*'And I thought you'd be a snake-tongued snob,' replies Louis.*

*The men laugh and talk of their troubles and their triumphs, of the men they have fought, the women they have loved. They talk of friendship and the future. Manuelos leans forward and grasps Louis's arm.*

*'When I am blessed with a son, I want no wife for him but a daughter of yours. What do you say?'*

'I say you do me great honour,' answers Louis.

'Swear to it?'

'I swear.'

Hands clasp. And together they toast their unborn children's happiness.

The night ends, and the next day Louis straps on his sword and travels onwards to fulfil the promise he made to God.

Many years pass.

Manuelos's wife bears him two daughters – one lives, one dies. He marries again. Again he waits. And when he has all but given up hope, when he is all but an old man, a son is born, a son who survives the fevers of childhood and reaches his fifteenth year.

That is when the emperor in Constantinople sends word to the king of France and asks for a daughter.

## The spring of 1179

'I'm going to be queen of the world,' Agnes sang to herself.

She stopped.

'No, not a stupid queen. Much, much better than a queen. Empress. Empress of the whole wide world.'

She skipped a little further.

'Empress of the City. *Basilissa tou . . . tou . . .*' The Greek her father had always insisted she learn, without ever quite explaining why, stuck in her mouth. She stamped her foot to make the words come.

*. . . tou Poleôs.*

She started to chant the phrase, the s's sizzling on her tongue. She swung her arms out, whirling in circles until the gardens around her blurred, green grass, grey stones, green, grey, green-grey. Then a flash of red and gold. She fell over.

Henri and Little Louis were standing there. Laughing. She stood up, brushed the dust from her dress and stuck her nose into the air.

'You won't be laughing when you hear what I've got to tell you.'

'You always say that and then it's always nothing,' said Louis.

'No, I don't.'

'Yes, you do.'

'No, I . . . Shut up. Don't argue. Show a little respect to your elders.'

It was a sore point. The three of them were almost exactly the same age – thirteen, twelve and eleven, on the brink of

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adulthood – but she was the king's youngest daughter and they were his oldest grandsons, and that made her their aunt.

'That's what I say to respect,' said Louis with a vigorous hand gesture that made Henri snigger.

Agnes had no idea what it meant, but she guessed he'd learnt it in the stables, so she clapped her hands to her mouth and shrieked.

'Don't be disgusting, Louis! I'll tell my father, I shall, I swear I shall.'

She turned and started to run back to the palace – although not quite as fast as she could. She didn't want to look unladylike, not today of all days, and she certainly didn't want to see her father again. He was grumpy and had hair coming out of his ears. But he was the king, and the boys would be whipped raw if he found out they'd been teasing her, his treasure.

'Don't, Ness, please don't. Come on. Please.' They each had hold of one of her hands and were trying to drag her away from the garden gate. She tilted her head back so she could look down on them, and decided they were pleasingly penitent.

'Please who?'

'Please, Agnes. Please, Aunt.'

She smiled a little cat smile, gracious in victory.

'All right. I won't. Just this once. Little boys,' she tutted, knowing it would enrage them – and knowing they were powerless to do anything about it. 'Now, aren't you going to ask me what I've got to tell you?'

An emphatic *no* was forming on Louis's lips, but Henri thumped him. 'Go on then, tell us.'

'I'm going to be empress in the east,' she said, the words coming out less sedately than she might have liked.

'What? No you're not,' gasped Louis.

'Yes I am.'

'No you're not.'

'I am, I am. Father just told me. It's all arranged.'

Henri gawped. 'You're going to marry the Greek emperor? The actual real one?'

'No, ignoramus. He's already married. And he's older than Father. No, I'm going to marry his son. His only son, Alexios,' she said, caressing every syllable of his name as lovingly as one of her pet doves. 'Young, handsome, brave Alexios. It'll be the most perfect wedding the world has ever seen. And then, when his father dies, which won't be that long, Alexios will be emperor and I shall rule by his side.'

An image, as lovely as it was fuzzy, wafted through her mind. A pair of silver thrones surrounded by blue sea and white marble. Thousands upon thousands of people gazing up at her, all whispering the same thing. *What a beautiful couple.* She turned to her husband. Chestnut curls lapped about his golden crown. He took her hand, his blue eyes – no, she corrected herself, his *brown* eyes melting . . .

'Pah,' said Louis. 'The Greeks. They're tricksters and sh-sh—the word fought its way out —charlatans.'

'That's right,' Henri weighed in. 'They know everything about the price of gold and nothing about the weight of iron. They couldn't even fight the Saracens without our help. They're—'

'Shut up, Hee-haw,' she said, using his mother's pet name for him that made him mad as a wasp. 'Just because you're jealous—' 'Jealous? I'm not jealous.'

'Not jealous that I'm going to be grander and richer than your father – than *my* father – and every prince and comte and duc put together? Not jealous that I'm going to live in the greatest city there'll ever be? I'll live in a golden palace and eat off golden plates . . .' she wasn't sure about that, but as she spoke, it became true in her mind, 'and I'll have hundreds of servants just to sing me songs while I bathe and a pet nightingale and a pet leopard and . . .'

But before she could decide what else she needed in her menagerie, she clamped her mouth shut. It was too late.

'Pride is a grievous sin, sister. Her brother, Philip, had crept up behind them. He had florid cheeks and a thrusting chest and was duller than he had any right to be. But whatever she thought of him, he was their father's long-awaited son, the first child of his third marriage, the heir, the golden youth, and she knew better than to argue with him.

'Forgive me, brother,' she said, bobbing her head. 'I am so honoured to be able to serve our father with this match that I forgot myself.'

The two boys struggled to compose their faces. Philip became more pompous and preachy by the day – that was something they could all agree on.

'It is a very great honour, Agnes. A daughter's first duty to her family is to marry early and to marry well.'

'Yes, brother. We are so grateful that you are here to remind us that duty must always be at the forefront of our minds.'

She rolled her eyes at Louis and Henri from under her downcast lashes, making the laughter explode from them. Her brother's gloved hand lashed out and cuffed them both over the head.

'Don't snigger like kitchen boys. What are you doing here anyway? You're too old to be playing with girls. Where's your tutor? Go on, away with you.'

They darted off over the stones, leaving brother and sister alone. Philip began to pace before her, slow and measured, rubbing his face – probably to remind her that he now had to shave every morning. A lecture was clearly on its way.

'You should not encourage those boys to follow you about.'

'I don't encourage them, brother. Is it my fault they love to plague me?'

'You know what I mean.'

'I'm sure I don't.'

But she did, of course she did. Boys always wanted to be

near her, however cruel she was to them. She'd always known that. Men were the same – except she was never cruel to them.

Philip grew sterner, his voice more pulpit-like. 'Your face, sister, is not a face I would wish a sister of mine to have.'

'This is the face God gave me, brother. Surely you do not think his plan was at fault?'

'I would not have you proud.'

'So you said, brother.'

She had not lifted her eyes from the ground all the while he spoke, and it was clearly starting to annoy him. He took her by the shoulders.

'I wish they had not asked for you. I wish my father had said no . . .'

She wondered, briefly, why they had asked for her. Had they heard how beautiful she was? She was beautiful. Everyone said so. One of her uncles said she was probably nearly as beautiful as Helen of Troy. Lucky woman. Combing her hair while the swords of thousands of men crashed outside the city walls. It would have been better, of course, if Alexios had sailed west and stolen her away. But, she thought, you can't have everything.

'Sister, sister, are you listening to me?'

'Of course, brother.'

'The Greeks' city is a dangerous place. It is bloated with sin. Rank with luxury. Their ways are not our ways. Constantinople is not Paris. It is full of half-men and fallen women.'

'Have we no such women here?'

'No, none.' He looked sharply at her. 'None. Not one.'

He was shaking his head and so she shook hers as well. But all she could think was that she liked the sound of the City very, very much indeed. What was Blois, what was Champagne, what was Paris itself? Nothing. What was Constantinople? Everything.

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