



What Dreams May Come (Daughter of Montague #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: With a boldly refreshing premise and a daring heroine to match, this delightful mystery series features the eldest daughter of the not-so-ill-fated Romeo and Juliet—20-year-old Rosie Montague, a young woman possessed of an irreverent wit, an independent spirit—and a penchant for sleuthing . . .

Gentle reader, I, Rosie Montague, present you with the tumultuous events of my recent months: despite my goal to remain a spinster, I fell instantly in love with Lysander of the House of Beautiful; suffered an unhappy betrothal to a duke, which ended in death for him and almost for me; am now entrapped by a compromising deceit plotted by the enamored Prince of Verona himself, Escalus . . .

Not only am I failing on the spinster front, but I have also failed to set an example for my seven siblings (soon to be eight, thanks to my parents' embarrassingly undying passion.) Specifically, 13-year-old Katherina, along with her friend, Princess Isabella. In their desire to honor my romance (now ill-fated) by commissioning a sonnet, they imitated my own youthful folly and dressed like well-born young males, complete with stuffed codpieces, and swaggered into the night. Their poetic mission accomplished, they celebrated, landed in scandalous circumstances—and the princess was robbed of her mother's priceless ring . . .

With our fates and family names at stake, I must save the day. What ensues will require that I visit a brothel, infiltrate the thief's debaucherous lair, and dodge Escalus. I can only hope to keep intact my virginity—and my life. The latter especially, should my parents find out . . .

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In Fair Verona Where We Lay Our Scene

Midnight at Casa Montague

Natural reasons why you can't fall asleep

Neighbors having a party (and why wasn't I invited?).

Aging dog ate garlic cabbage soup.

Nurse snores (like a saw cutting marble).

Parents dialoguing about their love and desire in their bedchamber down the hall and around the corner with their door shut, but our house is built around an open courtyard and sound travels (my parents are Romeo and Juliet, so you'd think I'd be used to it).

All of the above.

As opposed to stupid reasons why you can't fall asleep

After twenty years of a happy single life that, as the oldest daughter, involved managing the Montague household and my six younger siblings, being caught in a moment of passion with (I believed) my One True Love only to discover, when the torches flare, that I'm kissing the wrong man and he, who set up this ambush, swiftly moves to claim me in honorable and holy matrimony. Me! Who since I was thirteen years old has outsmarted every attempt to marry me off!

Except...well, the last time my betrothed was stabbed through the heart. I had nothing to do with that. Really. Pay no attention to the rumors put about by the malicious, sniggering neighbors who are even now no doubt having that party to celebrate my virtuous downfall at the hands of the canaglia who so skillfully trapped me.

No wonder they didn't invite me to their abhorrent party!

What's the problem, Rosie? you ask. Is your betrothed unsuitable? Ugly? Poor? Old, fat, lecherous, of low character? Not at all. He's wealthy, well-formed, a little scarred and with a limp, but from a good family, a man of power who will protect me and our children in this fair and contentious city of Verona.

First world problems, you say.

Yes, thank you for your kind analysis. I know that. Yet it's the sting of humiliation that has me tossing and turning, seeking sleep yet unable to relax as time and again, I flinch from the realizations that not only did I fail to realize my error, but then I compounded that error by responding passionately to the wrong man, then I compounded that error by getting caught because—oh, this is the worst—I had arranged to get caught in the arms of my One True Love so we would be forced to wed.

My fault! I did it! Everything should have worked! And it did, except for that small detail about who my groom should be.

Every time I drift off, I startle awake, seeing again the lords' smirking amusement, Nurse's horror, Papà's astonishment at my (to him) successful conspiracy to make a fabulous match.

As if.

If I'd been able to sleep that night, things would have been much different...

Luckily, I was awake and staring with dry, hot, wide eyes at the night candle's flame when I heard the furious whisperings of two familiar young female voices on the balcony next to mine.

With a glance at Nurse, who was snoring heavily on her cot and more than partially responsible for my recent not-death and who would move swiftly to make sure nothing untoward happened to me ever again, I slipped out of bed and moved to fix whatever had upset my sister, Katherina, and her best friend and our princess, Isabella of the House of Leonardi. Because that's who I am: Lady Rosaline Montague, fixer of all things or, as a less than pleasant acquaintance called me, "Female Most Likely to Win the Verona City-State Know-It-All Contest."

The problem, as I see it, is that a woman of intelligence is unappreciated and indeed frowned upon, and I'm not good at dissembling. I scowled as I tightened the knot on my robe. If I know the right thing to do, shouldn't I say so?

Yes, yes, you're right. You're always right. It's annoying how you're always right! I should say so in such a mild and tactful way as to allow others to believe it's their idea. Sometimes... Well, most of the time, I lose patience and say what I think. When I don't say what I think, my facial expression seems to speak for itself. What can I say? I leave the acting to the professionals, i.e. the rest of my highly overwrought and dramatic family.

It was with that somewhat impatient thought that I walked barefoot and quietly onto my balcony. I told myself I did not wish to wake Nurse but also, I wanted the opportunity to observe and perhaps overhear Katherina and Isabella. Such stealth could considerably shorten the time it took for me to pry the source of their distress from them.

Fie! Fie! As soon as I laid eyes on them, I knew all.

Or not all, but I knew they'd been making mischief and somehow had been caught, for they stood with their heads together, dressed like well-born youths in tights, thigh-length tunics, and short capes. Like youths. Boys. Males.

Gentle reader, you will not be surprised to hear I gasped in thunderous dismay.

They turned as one and stared at me in a mirrored horror, their beautiful faces dark with strain.

Princess Isabella's chin wobbled as if she wanted to bawl like a calf, and while Katherina's long tresses were tucked beneath a brocade cap, Isabella's hair was in a braid down her back and her cap was nowhere to be seen.

"What have you done?" I whispered.

As I said, not always tactful, for the already-fraught Katherina caught fire, leaped to the railing and whispered back, "Nothing you haven't already done, Sister!" She projected so well, Nurse's snoring abruptly stopped.

We froze.

Katherina and Isabella didn't want to be caught in boys' clothes. I didn't want them to be caught in boys' clothes because, as Katherina said, I had indeed done exactly that myself. What I'd failed to realize was that anyone in the family had discovered my folly, much less my seven-years-younger-than-me sister.

We waited, barely breathing, as Nurse muttered and groaned, and at last resumed her bed-frame-rattling snore.

We all breathed sighs of relief, and Isabella poked Katherina hard with her elbow. “Chiudi la bocca. Rosie might be able to help us!”

Nurse’s snoring paused again.

Again we froze. This time, when it resumed, I gestured to them to back up, grasped the plank that rested against the wall, placed it between our railings and, hitching up my nightgown and robe, climbed up and walked over.

“Fantastica! ” Isabella breathed as she backed into the empty bedroom behind her. Empty because Mamma had decided when Princess Isabella stayed the night, these two highly responsible adolescent girls should have privacy, so she allowed them to stay in a bedchamber reserved for guests. Or should I say—formerly highly responsible adolescent girls?

Katherina and I followed her into the room lit by a single candle and shut the doors behind us.

“I can do that, too,” Katherina bragged, and then in a disgruntled tone, “but Rosie keeps the board on her side.”

“If I didn’t keep it close, Imogene would do flips across it and Mamma would kill us all.” I turned on my little sister. “As opposed to Mamma killing only you, Katherina, who accompanied the princess of Verona on an adventure into the night streets!”

“I didn’t accompany her.” Katherina gritted her teeth, then admitted, “I led her. It was my idea.”

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My premonition of disaster had been minuscule compared to this reality.

Prince Escalus Leonardi the Younger, podestà of Verona, had trusted his much beloved little sister to the care of my parents, and my own sister Katherina had guided her on a dangerous bacchanal that ended in some kind of calamity, the severity of which I had yet to determine. But no matter what, if a breath of this leaked out, the Montague family would be disgraced and perhaps exiled.

“Yes, but I jumped at the chance!” Isabella turned to me and defended her friend. “Really I did. I’ve never been part of such an exciting family. Your father teaches me how to use a sword. Your mother helps me learn how to listen to people. Your brother and sisters are funny and smart and brave. The palace is so quiet. Nonna Ursula is kind, but she always says what she thinks and sometimes I don’t want to know. Escalus is a good brother who wants me to be happy, but he’s staid and somber—”

No other word for it. I grunted as if I’d been punched in the gut.

“—Yes, I know. He talks to you, I’m so sorry, because when does he ever say something interesting?” Isabella took my hand and patted it. “Thank you for being good to him, Rosie, and not rolling your eyes when he speaks, for he worried about you while you recovered from your wounds.”

I was speechless at the thoughtlessness of youth...and at the same time, I wondered when, at the creaking old age of twenty, I’d grown so aware of duty and responsibilities. I suppose, because I’m the eldest, I was forced into that mold, but at the same time, to the despair of my parents, in the past I’d had my rebellious

moments.

I had.

I had!

“Good to hear.” I barely moved my lips, which were still tender from this evening’s—what should I call it?—unbelievable, ridiculous, humbling horrible misstep involving Prince Staid and Somber.

Have I mentioned humiliating?

“That first night, I had so much fun!” Isabella squeezed my hand.

“That first night, you were such a sissy!” Katherina teased.

“Yes, but I got over it.” Isabella poked her with her elbow. “I swagger better than you do.”

“Do not.”

Isabella swaggered across the room. “Do too.”

She was very good.

“Remember when I bit my thumb at those boys?” she asked.

They both fell into a fit of giggles.

However, I wasn’t in the mood. “You girls could have been hurt. They could have drawn swords!”

“They did. And you know what we did?” Isabella spoke while both hopped up and down.

Was there ever anything sillier than young girls on the verge of womanhood? And more inclined to step right into danger? “Sweet Madonna, what?”

Katherina finished triumphantly, “What Papà told us to do. We counted our legs and when we got to two, we ran!”

I slumped against the wall in relief, not at all amused by Papà’s ancient jest.

“The second night—” Isabella began.

My heart stopped. “There was a second night?” Of course there was a second night. Tonight. Something had happened tonight to send them into a dither.

“The second night was even more fun,” she said, as if that was reason enough for more risk of danger and dishonor. “The second night we—”

“Wait.” My vision zeroed in on the manly display between their legs. “Did you stuff your codpieces?”

“No, Rosie, we grew pizzles overnight.” Katherina rolled her eyes. “Of course we stuffed our codpieces. Just like the men do!”

Isabella sniggered.

These girls were making me feel as neverendingly somber and appropriate as...Prince Escalus.

I winced. Why did everything conspire to remind me of him?

Isabella said, “We ventured into a public house and drank wine—”

I clutched my throat.

“Rosie, stop being so boring,” Katherina said impatiently. “They thought we were stupid youths and watered the wine. They cheated us, and that was fine because we were not drenched, or even tiddled.”

“Right.” I translated. They weren’t intoxicated. That was one relief.

“After that, we danced in the square, we sang ribald songs, we swaggered some more and, on the way home, we almost got robbed!” Isabella couldn’t have been more thrilled.

I hyperventilated until Katherina shoved a stool under my rear and warned, “You haven’t heard the bad part yet.”

“You were robbed? You lost something of value?” Even to me, my voice sounded thready.

“No! I mean yes, but not that night.” Katherina dismissed the second night robbery as unimportant. “Tonight was when we were robbed and...” She exchanged a miserable glance with Isabella.

Dear sweet Jesus and his holy mother Mary, this was my fault. I had wished and prayed that I be released from the results of my own act of stupidity, and three nights of girlish freedom and ensuing disaster was the result.

That fraught reasoning was so dramatic it was worthy of one of my siblings or even my parents...but not me. Not practical, mature Rosie who until recently managed her own life and everyone else’s with adept skill. How that had changed, how I’d landed

on this rocky shoal slapped by ever-increasing cold and briny waves, I did not know.

I took myself in hand and firmly told myself tonight was not about me. I must grope my way away from self-pity and back to logic. “Dear girls, why don’t you tell me, in short easy words, exactly what you did tonight that causes you such apprehension?”

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I thought I was being incredibly patient and supportive.

Katherina viewed it as criticism, and being my sister and a Montague, she went on the attack. In a strident tone, she said, “You did it first.” She waved me to silence. “I know. You didn’t get caught.”

Exactly. As Papà says, Never exchange skill for luck. “How did you find out?” I asked.

Katherina grinned, suddenly cocky. “I was in your trunk looking for your practice sword—”

“For me,” Princess Isabella said.

“—And there it was. The boy’s outfit.”

“Wasn’t mine.” Kneejerk reaction that immediately confirmed it was mine. I should have claimed it was no more than some misplacement by Nurse.

“I recognized the slash on the thigh. At first I thought...no, no way. Rosie’s my oldest sister. She’s cool. She’s savvy. Sure I helped her with that cut on her leg, but...” Katherina grinned evilly. “Actually I wasn’t sure until you asked how I found out.”

I groaned. Amateur mistake!

“Stop being such a snotnose sister. Tell her why!” Princess Isabella urged.

Alert at once, I asked, “Why you went out?”

Princess Isabella didn’t wait for Katherina to catch up. With her hands clasped before her chest, she said, “Your romance with Lysander has captured our hearts.”

Briefly I closed my eyes in anguish. “Gee, yes, terrific.” A vision of Lysander’s beloved face rose in my mind. A thought to how he would react to the news of tonight’s debacle made me cringe. How to explain? Boldly, I suppose, clearly as always, yet...nothing I could say would bring about a conclusion to mend the inevitable breach.

“All the women in Verona dream of finding their One True Love delivered by the hands of fate!” Princess Isabella spun a romantic spindle threaded with gold.

“Yeah. Fate. Which we’ve now proved conclusively is a man.” The edge of bitterness in my voice made Katherina look sharply at me.

Princess Isabella didn’t notice. “We went to Guglielmo, the poet from far Inghilterra who writes plays for the theater and commissioned him to write a sonnet in honor of you and Lysander!” Reaching into the pouch at her side, she triumphantly pulled out a wax-sealed roll of parchment and offered it to me.

I took it, broke the seal, and as I read, it became clear that...OMG, no gift in my life had ever been so sweet and loving.

“We went to Guglielmo the first night—and picked it up tonight.” Katherina beamed. “He is so proud of this sonnet, he added it to the end of his new production and tonight the players perform it for the first time!”

The sonnet sang a glorious praise for Lysander and me, to romance and first love, to poetry and laughter and...if it was performed tonight before a crowd, the disgrace

already set in motion by the girls' escapades would cause me to be the downfall of Montague honor and prosperity. I would carry the burden of shame for the rest of my days.

Yet I looked at the girls' hopeful, happy, romantic faces and I couldn't tell them the truth. I couldn't slap them down. Sooner or later—tomorrow morning at the latest—they'd find out that all their expectations had been shattered by my own foolish actions and by my (as of this evening) betrothed's deliberate actions. My eyes prickled with tears I held back from an effort of will. I opened my arms to them. "Dear sorelle, how you honor me with your love!"

Both girls came at once into my embrace.

Isabella's eyes swam with tears. "I'm honored that you call me sister. "

Katherina, who knew me better than the princess, hugged me tightly and asked in a worried tone, "Is all well with you, dear Rosie?"

I cupped her cheek. "I'm so touched by your thoughtfulness. You lift my heart!" Which might have enlightened her—my sister is wicked smart—but I assumed a sterner demeanor. "What happened tonight to send you scuttling back to Casa Montague with your tails between your legs?"

"Ah." Isabella hung her head. "We did something not so bright."

Not so bright? As opposed to all the other nights when they challenged fate and by the grace of God won?

...I did not explode with exasperation. I did not. But it was a close thing. "Can you clarify?" I could scarcely grind out the question.

“We went back to the square to dance.” Isabella whirled around, her arms raised. “Rosie, if only you could do that. It was delightful! Peasant dancing, kicking up our heels, leering at the women, listening to the music, drinking watered wine and eating all manner of jellied eels and fermented onions.”

Her exuberance almost made me smile, but I tempered my amusement by saying in my driest tone, “That explains your breath,” and the memories of my own stolen night at the square nudged me into a small lift of my lips.

But Isabella didn’t laugh, and that wiped my small smile away. More quietly, she said, “There’s a lofty, thin house on the corner of the square. I never noticed it in the day, but at night, it’s brightly lit.”

“Yes?” I knew that house, and my heart sank.

“A woman, rounded and pretty, opened the door and beckoned us in.” Isabella flushed with embarrassment.

We had reached the heart of the matter. “You went.” It wasn’t even a guess. Of course they went. They had discovered the joys of being lads, free and without constraint.

“I had to...go.” Katherina glared meaningfully at me.

“Because you’d imbibed too much watered wine,” I guessed, “and you couldn’t piss in the streets, like all the other boys, without betraying yourself.”

Katherina touched the tip of her nose in acknowledgment. “We entered the outer chamber. Musicians played. A minstrel softly sang love songs. Women wandered about in gowns of gaudy colors and smiled and spoke sweetly to us. Rich materials draped the windows, and flowers and fruit perfumed the air.”

“First clues,” I muttered.

“I know!” Katherina slapped her own forehead. “I’m not the brightest candle in the sconce.”

Isabella took up the story. “A tall woman met us, welcomed us, said her name was Madame Culatello, asked what she could do for us. Katherina jiggled her codpiece.”

Much to my mixed horror and amusement, Katherina demonstrated.

“We went into the room where Madame directed us. The color of the walls seemed to stroke the senses. Lounges covered in pillows of exotic colors tempted us to rest. We used the chamber pots, then we gave in. I chose the lounge with the pillows of silver-and-blue cloth and reclined upon it, and I saw...I saw...” She squirmed and grimaced and ran out of words.

“I chose the lounge of crimson red, so I saw first.” Katherina did not squirm, but she did grimace.

Gentle reader, I knew what she saw, for I’d seen it myself. Yet I would have to fix whatever the problem was, and I know you’ll forgive me for dragging every guilty, uncomfortable admission from them. “Tell me, Katherina, what you saw first.”

“There were paintings on the ceiling.”

“What comprised the paintings?” As if I didn’t know.

“Naked people.”

“Like cherubs? Sweet baby angels with wings?” I managed to ask without a trace of audible sarcasm and surprised a choke of laughter from Isabella.

“No. Definitely not cherubs.” Katherina narrowed her eyes at me as if she saw through my solemn mien. Yet she needed me, so what could she do but admit, “Men and women. Men and men. Women and women. Beasts! With men’s bodies and bull’s heads. All of them...doing things like we hear Papà and Mamma doing, openly, in all positions, sometimes three people! Smiling and...”

“I wish I could unsee all of it!” Isabella blurted. “Euw!”

My amusement soured. Yes, at twelve and thirteen years old, they were of an age to be married, but to me, looking at them from the vast age of twenty, they were too young. “You had entered Verona’s foremost bordello,” I said sympathetically. “It was bound to be unsettling.”

“I simply never thought...right there on the square! A brothel! And it wasn’t squalid, it was...inviting.” Katherina spread her arms expressively.

“Rosie, are men’s parts that huge?” Isabella wanted reassurance. “Or is that simply the size of brush a man picks up to illustrate his pizzle? ”

“Maybe. Probably it’s the painter’s imagination. But from what I’ve heard, they come in all sizes.” I lifted my hands and let them drop. “I frankly don’t know, dear. I really am a virgin.”

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It's true. At the age of twenty, in a town and in an era where women married as soon as they started their menses, I was still a virgin. If I'd been a nun, no one would think anything about it. But I was a single woman, I repeat by my own design, and the whole of Verona pitied me. Normally, except for a little irritation, I took my role as a withered old spinster with some grace.

Isabella hugged me in sympathy. "That's right. I forgot. I'm sorry I reminded you."

Not so much grace now. With the best of intentions, this kid felt apologetic for reminding me about my pure state, like virginity was an embarrassing social disease.

This just wasn't my night.

Isabella brightened. "But soon that will change!"

"Yes." In a way she'd never imagined. "Back to your problem."

"Isabella and I leaped up to flee. We knew we had to get out of there." Katherina talked faster and faster, as if the impulse to run urged her words to a gallop. "We looked for a way out, but there were no windows in that chamber. We had to go back into the...parlor. We thought we could sneak out, but Madame Culatello was watching for us. She called us young men. She offered us services. We said we had no money. She said the first time was on the house."

I did not guffaw, but it was close. I knew Madame Culatello; she was savvy in all things involving bodies. I likewise knew she'd immediately spotted what separated these girls from youths, and I could only imagine how much she enjoyed tormenting

them with such offers.

“The outer door opened!” Isabella joined in the tale. “A gentleman strolled in. He was tall and wore the scarlet mask of a satyr. So creepy! Kate said, ‘Flee!’ and dashed toward the opening. She shoved the gentleman out of the way. I followed and—”

The and hung on the air.

“You can’t stop now,” I told her gently.

“Madame Culatello grabbed at my cap. My braid tumbled down. I heard the ladies laughing and the madame chuckled...she sounded like a man!” Isabella’s blue eyes fluttered with confusion. “Rosie, is she a man?”

“Gender is quite fluid where pleasure is served.” Which was all the answer she was getting from little ol’ virgin me. Right now we had to concentrate on this looming catastrophe. “You lost your cap. You were exposed and recognized? Someone called out your name?”

“No. At least, I don’t think so. I didn’t hear anything.” Isabella turned to Katherina. “Did you?”

“No! As soon as Isabella was out the door, I grabbed her arm and we ran out of the square and home.”

I didn’t yet have a clear picture of the disaster. “All this panic is because you lost your cap and think perhaps you were recognized?” I began to relax. “Because we can deny—”

Isabella clutched my arms and shouted into my face, “I lost my ring! My mother’s ring, set with diamonds. Lots of diamonds. And a priceless Indian diamond in the

center! Big, polished...” Words failed when she tried to describe it. “I wore the ring on a ribbon around my neck. When she grabbed at me, I felt the tug at my throat, but I didn’t realize what it signified until I got back here. Madame Culatello has the ribbon, and she has the ring, and I am a gull, a dolt, a knotty-pated fool!”

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Katherina and I jumped on Princess Isabella, placed our hands over her mouth, looked at each other in wide-eyed dread. The walls weren't thick enough for that kind of volume. After a moment, I tiptoed over, eased open the door to the balcony and listened.

As Nurse woke, she snorted and called, "Lady Rosaline? Is all well?" Her usually bold voice was tentative, for she feared after the early evening's events, I was displeased with her.

I had been, it was true, unjustly displeased, but right now, it suited me to let her think my annoyance lingered. I stepped out and called in a commanding tone, "I'm on the balcony, Nurse, and I wish to be alone."

"May I bring you some wine? A drink to ease your mind?"

With even more simulated irritation, I snapped, "No! Nothing will help except a few minutes alone while I read my future in the mocking light of the stars."

"Yes, Lady Rosaline. As you wish, Lady Rosaline." Nurse sounded as if she wanted to be huffy, but her guilt got in the way.

I truly wanted to tell her to rest at ease, that my personality was such I could not long hold a grudge for something not her fault, but more important at the moment was that she not come out and find me on the wrong balcony, and my sister and the princess in lads' garbs. "Thank you, Nurse, for your understanding. If you have wine beside your bed"—as we all do—"drink deep and sleep. Tomorrow will be a better day."

I deeply doubted that truth, but she thanked me and drank, and settled back. The wine would ease her into oblivion, and I didn't have time to waste.

I returned to the bedchamber where Katherina and Isabella paced. In a low voice, I said to the distraught young princess, "Tell me about the ring."

"It was my mother's!"

I took a breath to ease my impatience. "So you said, but it would help if you'd describe the ring."

"Oh." Her voice quavered. "After my mother gave birth to Escalus, they could no longer...she had difficulty...they couldn't..."

"Your mother couldn't have more children?" Katherina suggested to ease Isabella's distress. Katherina might be my younger sister, but she was intuitive and generous and kind in ways I couldn't begin to match.

"Yes." Isabella nodded. "Yes. My father, Prince Escalus the Elder, loved her and wanted Mamma, but celibacy was forced upon them. To show his true and constant love, he sought a ring of brilliance and beauty to match his feelings for her, and in Venice he found it. An Indian ring of unmatched brilliant diamonds, polished in the new way and set in figured gold, and in the midst one large diamond shaped by nature, so they said. The dealer told him a maharaja had given it to his wife to protect her from illness and misfortune, and when she died in a plague, he cast it aside, wanting never to see it again. Thus it came into the hands of a Venetian merchant, who sold it to my father in exchange for the exclusive right to export Verona's rice."

The area around Verona had proved to be a fertile place to grow rice, a new crop which, when placed on the tables of the wealthy, had proved to be as coveted as cinnamon, cloves, and pepper. I said, "Your father paid a kingly price for the ring." I

did not say, And you wore it on a ribbon around your neck? I bit my tongue, for the princess's distress could be seen in the way she shredded her cuffs with her fingernails.

“My parents couldn't resist each other.”

Katherina and I exchanged glances. We knew about that kind of bond in our own parents.

Isabella's eyes filled with tears. “When Papà discovered Mamma carried a child—me—he sent her away to a convent, for at that moment, the Acquasasso family fought to overthrow him and take control of the city.”

I knew this, for I'd been nine during that unsettled time, but to Katherina it was unknown and ancient history, and she breathed, “Oh, no. Your poor mamma!”

“I don't remember my parents. I was not yet born when my father was assassinated, and I was a baby when Mamma died. All I have of her is her ring.” Isabella's voice quavered and broke.

“Gold and diamonds...it would be safer on your finger,” I pointed out gently.

“It doesn't fit. My mamma was tiny. My hands are too big.”

That made sense. “Of course. I understand. Why don't you have it sized?”

“It's not mine forever. When Escalus marries again, he'll give it to his bride. He was going to give it to his wife after the birth of their child, as our father had done with Mamma, but sweet Chiarretta died with the babe, and he grieved that he had waited.”

“Ahhh, sad,” Katherina moaned softly. An appreciation of romance, especially tragic

romance, had been bred into our bones. It was only by the grace of God, a pharmacist who couldn't mix a functional dose of poison, and my mom who had lousy aim with a knife that our parents had survived their tragedy in the tomb.

“Listen to me, both of you. Dress me in your boyish garb.”

Isabella vanished behind the folding privacy screen and came back wrapped in her nightgown and sumptuous robe, holding her male clothing.

In a family with so many daughters, among us modesty was an undervalued virtue, so without thought I peeled off my nightgown and reached for a length of linen to bind my breasts and another to wrap around my waist. They'd provide a pudgy boy's profile. Thus covered, I held my arms out, and as if the two spoiled privileged girls were servants, I allowed them to dress me.

They did it without quibble. Isabella's plain white linen shirt went on first over my head, followed by her black tights tied at my waist. I pointed at Princess Isabella's gray tunic trimmed with silver. “I'll take that.”

It laced at the front and would conspicuously display Katherina's crimson wool codpiece.

I wanted conspicuous. I needed conspicuous. Better onlookers think me an up-and-coming (ha) youth than a female alone and thus fair game for bodily harm.

At this point, the ever-stylish Princess Isabella nodded her understanding and took over. She removed Katherina's black velvet sleeves and connected them to the tunic, and while she did that, with a nod to Isabella's modesty, Katherina donned her robe, unlaced her stuffed codpiece from the front of her tights, and handed it over along with the silver laces.

I attached it, then stretched out my legs in long steps across the room. “The left leg is a little restricted,” I announced, and re-laced it to give me full range of movement.

You might wonder why this is important. The codpiece was the connection between the legs of the tights, holding them together in front, and more than one gentleman had been revealed by his man servant’s sloppy lacing and embarrassed by his own shortcomings. Worse, in some eyes, was the man who was held so tightly he minced around grimacing in the pain of an overly confined pair of coglione.

Indeed, you’re right, I had no such concerns, but obviously I didn’t want to display my female parts—that would be the absolute worst disaster. Also, like Isabella and Katherina, I knew I might have to run and for that I needed to stretch my legs to their full length.

When I announced I was comfortable and they agreed all was hidden, Princess Isabella wound her worked leather belt at my waist to emphasize the roundness I’d created with the linen. On the belt she hung her leather purse, and Katherina attached her own scabbard with her short sword, and she strapped her leather scabbard to my arm. Within rested her sharp eating knife, ready to use to slice a haunch of prosciutto crudo or to thrust into a thief’s gullet.

It was not merely for display. As the greatest swordsman in Verona, Papà believed that his daughters should be able to defend themselves, and although Mamma did not precisely approve, he taught us to inflict whatever damage we could before we, as the girls had said, ran.

Gentle reader, you’ll note I didn’t mention undergarments of any kind. That’s because in this time and place, they were unknown and unworn. Men tucked themselves into their codpieces and women...hung out beneath their skirts. Except during their monthly visitor, and that involved rags tied up every which way...don’t ask.

I forced Isabella and Katherina to give up all their coins and put them in a leather bag I hung from my belt. Princess Isabella gladly handed hers over, but when Katherina complained about me spending her meager allowance, I glared in mighty exasperation. “Did you think to escape unscathed from your mad adventure? Count yourself lucky if the worst that happens is that you must forgo a lemon ice. As for me, before the night hours flee, I must fetch Princess Isabella’s ring and save us all from ruin!”

“Melodramatic,” Katherina muttered.

I turned on her like a stinging wasp. “No! Melodrama is sensational, exciting and exaggerated. There is nothing of exaggeration to this. Pray I succeed or I tell you, Katherina, Princess Isabella’s reputation will be unsalvageable and the Montagues will be ruined. Prince Escalus himself will see to it.”

Both girls paled.

Satisfied I’d at last impressed them with the magnitude of their actions, and in a high dudgeon, I flung Isabella’s blue brocade cape around my shoulders, donned Katherina’s crimson cap and exited stage left...

...Not really.

Merely out of the bedroom, down the corridor and the stairs, carefully avoiding any telltale squeaking boards or cracking tiles. With exquisite care, I opened Casa Montague’s great outer door and stepped out onto Verona’s narrow street where theft, murder and villainy lurked in every shadow.

About the villainy.....Yes, really.

Prince Escalus ruled Verona justly, demanding his citizens be obedient to his law.

His punishment upon transgressors was swift and dreadful.

That said, the population of thriving Verona was in the tens of thousands, and among the merchants, aristocrats and shopkeepers lurked those who sought to steal prosperity rather than earn it.

In the crowd on the square, children picked pockets of the unwary.

At night, ruthless gangs roamed the streets far from the light, breaking into homes and shops, taking valuables and searching for helpless victims to pay in silver, blood and pain.

The city's clock struck midnight as I quietly shut the great outer door behind me.

I hurried along, only glancing occasionally at the glimmer of stars that shone between the tall buildings.

I dared not take a wrong turn, for I must arrive at the theater on the square before the climax of the play.

There I must convince the visiting playwright that his new loving sonnet could not be performed and to return to the former words he had written as a conclusion.

I would be successful; I had no doubt about my powers of persuasion, merely my timing.

Only then would I go to the House of the Women, La Gnocca, and retrieve Isabella's ring.

As I hurry through the streets, gentle reader, I know what you're thinking. Either you know what dramatic moment had occurred the evening before, or you wonder about

my dour hints and wish I'd plainly spell out the events that have caused me such pique.

Fine. Plainly, I'd earlier arranged to have Nurse lead my father, Romeo, and a party of the men of Verona into the darkened garden where I would be caught in the arms of my One True Love, Lysander. Thus would his family's objections be overcome—the Montagues are wealthy, but our money is stretched thin and they deemed my dowry insufficient. It was a clever scheme, for after we were caught, we'd be required to wed to heal my disgrace.

Yet by some means, I still knew not how, Prince Escalus intercepted me there. In the dark with no way to distinguish his face, I became acquainted with bold touches and passionate kisses and...

Never mind all that. What matters is that when the torches lit us, Prince Escalus begged Papà for my hand and now I am betrothed to the Wrong Man.

That's the reason for my humiliation. I, who thought I could direct the course of my life with good sense and judicious planning, had been caught by machinations I had never imagined or seen coming. Had ever a woman been so tricked?

You'll be pleased to know I did give a good solid kick to Escalus's manly parts, enough to make him gasp and double over. It was good practice, and only that memory had kept me from total frothing fury.

By the way, if you're one of those pie-eyed romantics who is thinking, "Oo, but you'll marry a prince..."

Let's talk about that.

Have you seen the duties involved in being a princess? Smiling, waving, pretending

to be interested while a series of diplomats parade past, being patient with their stupid manly quarrels which usually consist of some variation of whose codpiece is stuffed with the most linen versus the most flesh—at that thought, I adjusted my own stuffed codpiece.

This formality in addition to the usual womanly duties of home care, meal planning, cooking as necessary, bedsport and, oh, let us not forget that I am fondly supposed (based on my mother's incredible fertility) to be fecund and able to conceive one child while watching the wet nurse simultaneously burp another.

Enough of that, my friend.

Tonight was not for lamentation about my collision course with fate.

Tonight was for me and my mission.

Tonight I left Lady Rosaline Montague behind and became my brother, Lord Cesario Montague.

Yes, Cesario was merely six years old, but most of the unfettered citizens who roamed the streets after dark didn't know him, and this name gave me a tie to the Montague family and to my father, Romeo, a man some called the greatest swordsman in Verona and the one all called the man with the swiftest temper.

Yes, I complain about my parents, but their true love was a shining beacon, a shaft of light in a dark world of forced marriages, and from them I'd inherited my romantic (albeit well-hidden) nature.

And by virtue of my relationship to the Montagues and the Capulets, I was kin to half of the region we call Veneto.

Frequently...or rather sometimes, that was a plus.

Hopefully none would recognize me tonight.

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Regardless of my wary concerns, as I neared the square, I heard music and laughter, and my heart lifted and my footsteps quickened, to the theater and the backstage door. I asked for Guglielmo, the young sonnet-maker.

The stagehand pointed him out, a thin, bearded, pale-skinned man who wore clothing beset by patches and mended seams. He watched the actors from the wings, waiting to do his walk-on at the end of the play. He clutched a rolled parchment that looked very like the one that Katherina and Isabella had given me. Softly I called him by his name, “Guglielmo.”

His focus was such he resisted my attempt to speak to him with a resolved, “Sh!”

I placed a firm hand on his arm and used pressure to move him around to face me.

The knife I held at his throat may have helped with his decision. “Guglielmo.” I spoke quietly, aware I did not want to intrude on the magic of the onstage play. “Tonight my friends paid you a gold coin for a sonnet which you wrote on commission.”

Immediately he got a mulish look on his face. “I’m not giving you back the gold coin. I earned it, and the poem is one of the best I’ve ever written.”

“I agree. I don’t even like poetry, and the sonnet is pure genius.” The part about not liking poetry was true, as was the part about the genius.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The gold coin is yours to keep.” I nudged his chin with the point of my blade. “On one condition. You don’t perform the sonnet tonight onstage.”

“What? Why? When I told your friends I could add it to the play, they were ecstatic!”

“They were unaware that circumstances have changed.”

Guglielmo took a moment to process that. “You mean, Lady Rosaline and Lysander are a couple no more?”

I sorrowfully shook my head.

His eyes narrowed, trying to save the fee. “I could change the names.”

“Too many people know the circumstances which you so succinctly spelled out, and would believe the changes were a code.” When he would have objected again, I pulled a gold coin from the bag on my belt. “See this?” I held it before his eyes.

Clearly, the lowly playwright could see nothing else. He swallowed and nodded.

“What if I told you you could keep the first gold coin and earn this one in a commission from me?”

“I’m listening.” It could be said he strained to hear my next words.

“Have you heard of Romeo and Juliet?”

“I have indeed. Everyone in Verona talks about them. The players could hardly wait to acquaint me with their local lovers legend.”

“For the price of this gold coin, I would have you write them a sonnet that sings the

praises of their love stretching from the first flush, through the botched circumstances in the tomb, and the happiness they've found together in the long years since." Such a poem would be a loving gift to the parents who had supported me through all my previous travails and those that loomed on my horizon.

"That's not a sonnet," Guglielmo objected. "That's a play!"

"Two gold coins?" I offered, grabbing a second coin from my stash and wiggling both at him.

He tried to snatch the coins out of my hand.

I was too fast for him; the second coin went up my sleeve and into the leather holster there. "One now, one when you deliver the play, or sonnet, or whatever you decide to do. It matters not to me, only that you also destroy all copies of the poem for Lady Rosaline and Lysander."

"It's in my head."

I wanted to point out his head could be detached from his shoulders, but such an action was beyond my abilities and indeed my resolve, and if I did work myself up to such a heinous act, the consequences would be even worse than those I was attempting to prevent. "Forget every line."

"I know it's stupid to admit, at least while you're holding that knife, but I cannot." He tapped his rather dominant forehead. "I'm a player as well as a playwright, and I'll remember the sonnet always. But as part of our covenant, I will swear to you the sonnet will never be spoken, recited or performed until I return across the sea, and even then, I'll change the names. Additionally"—his eyes gleamed with greed—"I agree to your terms and will write a sonnet for Romeo and Juliet."

“Done!” I sheathed the dagger and handed him the gold coin. “Now finish the play with the previous ending and everyone is satisfied.”

Guglielmo hissed at the stage, made a series of gestures that meant nothing to me and earned him a glare from the lead player. I saw the play end, and applauded as vigorously as anyone standing in the audience.

As I prepared to leave, Guglielmo approached me. “One more thing, young man. In the theater, the female characters are played by youths like you. Should you ever wish to tread the boards, you’d make a charming...girl.”

Oof. That struck close to home and was a clear warning to me that my disguise was not impenetrable. “My thanks to you, Guglielmo.” My mouth twitched downward. “If I fail in this night’s challenges, I may be forced to take you up on your offer.”

Taking my hand, he bowed over it. “The story of your parents told as is would be a charming romance, but I believe it will have more impact told as a tragedy.”

With what I knew of the circumstances, I didn’t doubt it. “Their tendency toward drama very nearly turned a love affair into a tragedy, so do as you think best, but I paid for a sonnet to give them as a gift and that I would have in hand.”

He promised it before Sunday next, and I hastily exited the theater and plunged into the crowd. Bakers hawked small, fat loaves of bread, and sausage makers grilled meats which they presented on sticks to hungry theatergoers. Tavern owners sold wines and ciders by the jug.

As the scents wafted around me, my knees wobbled.

I hadn’t eaten for hours, and not long ago, I’d been badly hurt.

Indeed, for many weeks, I had hovered close to death.

My body reminded me that it cared not about my crushed spirit or the unhappy end to my love for Lysander.

The scents of the food carts tempted me beyond my feeble powers of resistance.

I bought a sausage and a roll from makers I trusted and consumed them in greedy bites that should have convinced any onlooker that I was, indeed, a youth, and one who liked his mazzafegato.

I ordered wine and, as Katherina and Princess Isabella had said, the goodwife watered it and sneered when I complained.

It wasn't until I licked my fingers and started toward the lofty, thin, brightly lit bordello at the edge of the square that I realized...I hadn't told Guglielmo that Romeo and Juliet were my parents. Somehow he knew.

Just as Madame Culatello knew Katherina and Isabella were girls, Guglielmo, who wrote and worked in the theater where illusion walked hand in hand with entertainment, had recognized something in my tone that told him the truth, and if he could do it, so could others.

Wisely, I took it as a warning and a need for haste. I needed to get to La Gnocca, retrieve Isabella's ring, and get home before my world collapsed around me, and my family, my reputation and my pride with it.

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Before I could lift the heavy iron pizzle on the door (the knocker was aptly shaped) and slam it into the waiting iron gnocca which gave the house its name, Madame Culatello opened and said, “Greetings, Rosie!”

The second person to easily penetrate my camouflage! I stopped on the doorstep and asked in chagrin, “How did you know it was me?”

Madame Culatello guffawed. “Those eyebrows, my dear. Satan’s eyebrows!”

“Ah.” I had inherited my father’s eyebrows, which rose almost without curve toward my hairline. No wonder Guglielmo had recognized me. How many others on the square had suspected and speculated about my connection to the Montagues?

I experienced a moment of petulance; could I not get away with anything?

Madame Culatello gestured me in.

I entered to lights and scents, soft calls of welcome from the workers and fond embraces offered by women whose skin colors matched all the peoples north and south. There was laughter at my outfit and teasing about my snobbishness. “Rosie, it’s been too long since you’ve visited us,” they said. “We thought you didn’t love us anymore!”

Not true, of course; I hadn’t visited La Gnocca since my own first dressed-as-a-youth foray into Verona’s night streets, but I saw the women in the daylight hours when they shopped in the market or called on Friar Laurence’s apothecary shop and we always greeted each other fondly.

Naturally, I suffered from the same need that Isabella and Katherina had had for a chamber pot.

Madame Culatello ushered me into that room and left me alone.

I proceeded as planned, then, like Isabella and Katherina, I reclined on one of the half couches.

For most of my life, I'd been profoundly uninterested in sexual sport; my parents, with their loud, exuberant celebrations of life, had led me to the jaundiced view that the bassa danza was a pastime to be enjoyed while your children blocked their ears with their pillows.

The events of recent months: falling instantly in love with Lysander, an unhappy betrothal to Duke Stephano, one that ended in death for him and almost for me, Prince Escalus and his deceitful game that led to an entrapment that seemed unlikely to vanish no matter how I finagled...

Of necessity, my world view was changing.

Bitterly I contemplated the infamous truth; love teaches even asses to dance.

I didn't feel love, but I would soon dance. Ergo, I studied the ceiling with an intent to gain knowledge.

As Isabella said, the men's pizzles were assuredly—most hopefully—exaggerated in size, for I'd not observed men walking like lumbering oxen tied to a plow. Certainly my bower of bliss would not easily welcome such an intruder. The contortions shown seemed likely to put out one's back, and except for the satyrs, everyone looked ill at ease and—dare I say it?—silly.

I closed my eyes to shut out the sights and...

Gentle reader, I hear you shouting at the page.

Rosie! Get up, girl! You've been ill, it's night, you're on a mission and you have no time to fall asleep!

I hang my head in shame, for you're right, and with the suddenness of a baby or a recent convalescent (which I was), I did indeed fall asleep.

For how long, you ask?

I have no idea. Time doesn't exist in a house of service, but I woke with a start to find Uria, a lady of lush and generous bosoms, in floaty material that draped her ample curves in ways designed to ensnare the viewer. As close as she was hovering, I felt ensnared. Also, her lips had been stained the color of red of the ceiling women's...um, lips.

"Belleza." She knelt beside the couch and stroked my hair. "When you didn't come out, we were worried about you."

I blinked the sleep out of my eyes. "I'm well. I...I need to get up and...I need to find the ring." Which I should not have said. Yes, I was groggy, and yes, I can't keep my mouth shut, but that's no excuse for stupidity. I knew Uria only vaguely, and right now she was too intimate, too affectionate, too smiley. I edged away and stood. "I need to speak with Madame Culatello."

"I know, belleza, she sent me to check on you and give you this." She held out a cat mask made of stiff black silk with a single sparkling jewel in the pointed left ear. When I simply stared, she eagerly shared, "For tonight's masquerade. Count Prospero has returned!"

“Oh.” I stepped back, away from temptation.

Count Prospero stank of money and the respectability it bought, used garbs of dark velvet, satin, and fine linen to frame his powerful body, rode the roads between Padua and Florence, Venice and Verona untouched by brigands and murderers. It seemed he knew everyone, rich and poor, along the length and breadth of the Italian peninsula, and all feared him. No one knew from whence his claims to aristocracy sprang, nor how he had earned his fortune, yet everyone knew he owned the sumptuous dwelling on the narrow street off Verona’s square, and one afforded him respect if one knew what was good for one.

Always when he returned to Verona from his travels, he opened his home to all, hosted a masquerade, and in among the music, the drinking, the banqueting and the laughter, deals were brokered, morals abandoned, respectability vanquished...all instigated by Count Prospero, the man in the red satyr mask. A mask such as Katherina and Isabella had described.

“You remember the masquerade, don’t you?” Uria asked.

I did indeed remember.

“Last time, you loved that carouse!” Uria reminded me, and pressed the mask into my hands.

Last time. She meant when at thirteen I dressed as a lad and visited La Gnocca and then had been drawn by the light and laughter and freedom to join the masquerade. She was right; I had loved it, right up to the time the whisper spread that a girl dressed as a boy had crashed the party, and Count Prospero proclaimed all should strip and dance until the culprit was revealed. I escaped unscathed, if slightly scraped, but that put an end to any other masculine expeditions I had planned.

“I will not deliberately go too close to Count Prospero and his masquerade again,” I declared, and returned the mask.

She, no respecter of personal space, opened the leather purse at my belt and thrust the mask within. “In case you change your mind,” she said in mocking tones.

The next time, I intended to be more forceful, but Madame Culatello opened the door in a sweeping movement both dramatic and vexed.

Uria used the leather strap to cinch down my purse and hurried past Madame Culatello, who gave her a hard slap on her bottom. Stepping into the room, Madame Culatello shut the door behind her. “What did she tell you?”

I found myself disliking the way she demanded information, as if I were one of her ladies. “Nothing. Merely that tonight Count Prospero hosts a masquerade. You’ll be pleased to know I’m not going. All I need now is the ring which you have in your possession.”

“Ah. Rosie.” She looked unnerved. “Such restraint might not be possible.”

“What? You mean...you think it’s good for me to go to the masquerade? I thought you’d approve that I do not!”

“I’d rather you didn’t, but”—she lifted a long, straight, blue satin ribbon from her capacious pocket—“I no longer have the ring.”

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I whimpered, a most unattractive noise, like our old dog complaining about the city bells.

“I know.” Madame Culatello twisted her hands in self-reproach. “Rosie, I’m sorry!”

I cared nothing for her distress; this was a disaster of epic proportions. “I need that ring, and I know you’ve had it in your grasp!”

“The gentleman in the scarlet satyr mask took it from me.”

“Count Prospero?” I projected with a little too much high-pitched vigor. No, please, not Count Prospero!

“It was he who opened the door and released the two...lads—”

“Damn the luck!” I had hoped differently.

“—And he observed my astonishment when I saw the treasure I held. I tried not to release it, Rosie, I vow I struggled, but he’s tall and strong, a demon who never hesitates to do whatever it takes to achieve his goals.” She touched her throat.

I saw bruises forming on her pale skin. “He throttled you to get your cooperation?”

“He throttled me to make me confess to whom the ring belonged.”

I rocked back on my heels, stricken into horrified silence. Then, “You recognized her?”

“Not Princess Isabella, but the ring. I knew her father, Prince Escalus the Elder. When his much-loved wife, Eleanor, could no longer perform in the marriage bed for fear of her health, he came here for relief and a moment away from his cares.”

I stifled a sigh. All gentlemen in Verona used La Gnocca (with the exception of Papà, and that according to Madame Culatello) and their wives and mistresses turned their faces away and pretended not to know.

The words blurted out of me. “Does the current Prince Escalus come here?”

Madame widened her eyes as if amused. “What do you mean?”

“Does Prince Escalus visit La Gnocca to relieve himself of masculine...needs?” Why was I asking? Why should I care? Was I any different than all the other wives in Verona?

“Never.” Madame Culatello lifted her proud, determined chin. “The prince supports us. He understands we provide a much-needed service to the city.”

“Good,” I mumbled. I didn’t care if Escalus had a mistress on every corner! Of a certainty, he was going to marry me, but no man ever took those vows with any intention of keeping them. They widely spread their seed among as much of the populace as they could, and... Well, except Papà.

Unaware of my rebellious thoughts, Madame Culatello continued, “Yet our prince is a man of great restraint, learned in the dungeons under the rods and whips of the Acquasasso. He cared for his young wife, Princess Chiarretta, given to him by politics as a match that brought the family properties and would support his claim as the leader of the city.”

Papà had pledged his troth to Mamma and cleaved to her alone.

If Romeo and Juliet did not exist, every girl in Verona would enter the marriage bower with no expectations of a great love. But they proved a great love between a couple was possible, and that created hope in all the youthful bosoms.

Of course, if Romeo and Juliet didn't exist...neither would I.

Madame Culatello rambled on, speculating about the Veronese aristocracy, as did we all. "I suspect Prince Escalus did his duty to the match, but passion never touched him. Indeed, after his early experiences in the dungeon and his father's murder, I fear his ability to feel passion has been burned away."

About that, I could have told her she was wrong, but I held my tongue.

I can, you know.

Really. I can.

"When his wife died in childbirth," Madame Culatello said, "I offered our services. With much courtesy, he refused, and nothing I've heard has led me to believe he has ever carelessly tumbled another. It's only recently he's begun to show signs of...restlessness, shall we say?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's a scent a man gives off when he's on the hunt. When he's found the woman he will have, and he's determined to have her. In the last months, whenever I've seen Prince Escalus in the market or spoken to him of civil matters, for he consults me with his concerns, I've smelled that scent on him." Madame Culatello leaned down to my eye level and looked into my face. "You know what I mean, Lady Rosaline. He has found his mate. Tonight the rumor flies about the city—he's claimed her."

“Does everyone in Verona know what happened at Casa Montague this evening?”

“Doubt it not,” Madame Culatello said.

I rubbed my aching forehead. “Yes. He’s claimed me.”

She straightened and beamed. “I’m so glad. He’s a good man, Rosie, and you’re an intelligent, capable woman.”

“So I’ve been told.” Not to be bitter, but... “And not as a compliment.”

“Pshaw!” She dismissed that with a wave of her hand. “You’re what he needs to direct the city and give him a private life of warmth, passion and humor. It’s a good match.”

“I’m glad you approve.” Although most people wouldn’t care what Verona’s shrewdest madame thought, I knew her to be, of necessity, smart about people and how to match them. If I had to be married, I’d like to think my husband and I would enjoy a private life of warmth, passion and humor. I only hoped with Escalus I wouldn’t be alone in supplying those traits.

I rubbed my forehead again. Such absurd thoughts. I desperately needed more sleep. “Madame, you were telling me how Prince Escalus the Elder obtained the ring which this night Princess Isabella lost.”

“When Prince Escalus wished to buy Eleanor a kingly gift, he asked my advice and I steered him to an honest merchant who sold him a ring. That ring.”

“You told Count Prospero the truth? You told him that lad was...Princess Isabella?”

“To my shame, I did.”

“Who services him? Is he here now?”

“Uria. He used her quickly and left.”

I covered my face in horror.

Grimly, Madame Culatello said, “I’ll question her about their activities; I suspect she’s betrayed us.”

“Perhaps he hurt her.”

“Uria is motivated merely by the lure of gold. Nothing more holds sway with her.”

Hiding my eyes couldn’t solve this problem, so I straightened. “What ransom does he demand?”

“A hundred gold pieces in a wooden strongbox to be delivered tonight to the masquerade.”

“Tonight? Tonight?” I was incredulous. “I’m supposed to find and deliver a hundred gold pieces tonight?”

“I have a hundred gold pieces. You can take them as payment for my failure.” Madame Culatello sounded brave, but she lifted her bony hands as if she could see the coins trickling between her reluctant fingers.

“Don’t be silly, Madame. I can handle it.” I lifted the leather bag from my belt, jingled it and with sarcasm said, “I’ve got a good start. Two gold pieces, a handful of silver and—” I halted. A mask. I had a mask, given to me by Count Prospero’s lover.

My first thought was that it didn’t take a Hamlet to realize I’d been manipulated by a

mastermind, but for what purpose?

The second thought followed swiftly on the first... It would take a mastermind to counter Count Prospero's machinations. A slow smile stretched my mouth as I considered Madame Culatello. "Madame, Count Prospero is known as a gambler, a cool gamesman who takes all wagers. Is that not so?"

"Truth."

"And he honors his debts?"

"That is his reputation."

"Very good. I'll take temporary custody of your gold, with the hope of losing only a few coins, if I can count on your cooperation and the assistance of some of your ladies." I smiled with diabolical glee. "I have a plan."

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Madame Culatello, Quartiglia and I watched from the street's shadows as, unnoticed as part of the crowd, Venera, Fennina, and Gordiana mingled with the masked and costumed partygoers. Like me, like Madame and the other ladies who'd volunteered for this caper, they wore cat masks and dressed like lads, and like me, each carried a wooden strongbox. One by one, they climbed the steep steps and entered the oak double doors of Count Prospero's tall mansion.

Unsmiling, burly men wearing Count Prospero's livery held torches and scrutinized each guest. At one point they blocked a masked gentleman from entering, and when he tried to force his way in, they scuffled with him until he abandoned his quest and fled. What he'd done to incur Count Prospero's wrath, I didn't know, but clearly these men were no simple servants. Rather they were bodyguards hired to protect their cruel lord, his belongings and his debauchery.

Intent on her mission, Berengaria disappeared around the corner into the darkness which shrouded the count's house in secrecy. When the city clock rang out the hour, Madame Culatello, Quartiglia and I followed and discovered the gate in the wall that protected Count Prospero's garden gave way when we touched it. Berengaria had picked the lock. We entered the grounds and hurried along, holding close to the tall house, until we reached an open window set on the wall above where we could see a single candle burned.

"What is that place?" Madame Culatello murmured softly. "Is it safe for her?"

For me, she meant.

Berengaria's touch on my arm made me jump and gasp. She had swiftly returned,

mission accomplished. Putting her finger to her lips, on the lightest breath she said, “I’ve only been in there once, for I had no talent for his vile games, but I believe that’s where the count sits for business.”

“What’s in there?” Madame asked.

“Not much. A desk. A chair. How much luxury does one man need to count his filthy money?”

“Go then,” Madame Culatello told her, and Berengaria and Quartiglia walked briskly to the back, then wandered into the house through the doors on the veranda, strongboxes in hand.

Then me, the last to arrive in Count Prospero’s home and in the most stealthy manner. Madame hoisted me up to sit on her bony shoulders. One at a time, keeping my balance, I put my feet under me and stood, pulled myself up and through the window to slide into his shadowy office.

Count Prospero’s lover, Uria, would not be joining us. She was confined in La Gnocca’s basement with an iron cuff around her ankle. When Madame Culatello questioned her about Count Prospero and what Uria had told him, she did not take betrayal lightly.

I leaned out to assure Madame Culatello I had landed safely and to take my two strongboxes from her outstretched hand. Struck by a sudden thought, I asked, “Madame, where will you be?” For in all our planning, she had never made that clear.

“I have my tasks to accomplish, Rosie. I intend that you’ll see me again tonight.” So saying, she was gone and I was alone in the den of a wealthy beast Machiavelli himself would be proud to claim as his own.

In stark contrast to the rest of the house, his office was utilitarian, with a wooden desk, an uncomfortable folding wooden stool, stacks of parchment, and a single candle lit to illuminate the numbers that added up the profits from whatever nefarious ventures Count Prospero supported. One painting hung on the wall, a terrifying rendition of the prince of darkness rising above hell's flames, where the condemned writhed in eternal agony. I performed a quick search that revealed nothing, lifted the painting and looked beneath. Not a secret hiding place; merely a plaster wall. Naturally Prospero didn't leave the diamond ring unguarded, curse him. That would be too convenient.

From his office I slipped down the dim corridor where lovers kissed and groped and in one case grunted in rhythmic animal delight, following the lights, the noise and the music to the ballroom.

There gilt, satyr-shaped sconces grinned and glittered in the flames of their countless candles; such an illumination was itself a conspicuous display of wealth.

The room smelled of sumptuous foods perfumed with cinnamon, long pepper and grains of paradise, and of sweat caused by the crowds of masked revelers who ate, danced, fought and flirted with abandon.

These men and women I possibly knew but didn't recognize, for they arrived at this party to behave with a delirium they would never dare in daylight and with exposed faces.

Servers wearing Count Prospero's livery carried flagons of wine and filled cups held out by greedy hands, and these men, like the ones outside with the torches, were cut from a rougher cloth than most household attendants.

Each seemed chosen for his height and bulk, and they viewed the merrymakers with a faint contempt that made me shy away from the drink they served.

Count Prospero, I feared, wouldn't hesitate to add an aphrodisiac or a sleeping potion to the cups...or poison.

Whatever would serve his purpose.

Among the crowd I observed my compatriots; Madame Culatello's most trusted ladies, all dressed in a variety of male garb like mine, each holding a wooden box and wearing a cat's mask with a jewel that pierced its ear.

Gentle reader, you might wonder how a house of women dedicated to pleasure could on the spur of the moment scrounge up five costumes of male garb.

When I asked, they chortled, and Venera informed me that some gentlemen enjoyed the attentions of women dressed as boys...and some gentlewomen, also.

All laughed again at my astonishment, and Quartiglia teased me as all do about my virginity.

I wanted to indignantly inform these five women that while it's true my imene is intact, thanks to their ceiling I know perfectly well what goes where.

I didn't say a word.

I knew they'd only laugh more merrily.

Who was I to tell these women anything? Apparently I comprehended little about the sexual varieties available apart from the basic act, for the ladies assured me that role-playing, games and other deeds—they poked each other with their elbows and refused to discuss these—were also part of the activities.

I supposed that explained my parents' constant and inexplicable enthusiasm for il

reporti sessuali, and I stowed my new knowledge away, somewhat comforted by the realization I didn't have to spend an hour every night bored by the marriage bed goings-on.

Although this evening Prince Escalus had showed remarkable aptness for...

He wasn't here, thoughts of him would not intrude on my night of freedom and most definitely not on my mission, and I thrust him from my mind.

Yet a small thought of him did linger, for I knew the dire outcome if he discovered tonight's escapade.

Which would release me from this abhorrent betrothal...and, at best, send me to a nunnery as a penitent whore.

Failure was not an option for all the reasons, selfish and unselfish.

Like duke of some great city, Count Prospero occupied a throne on a dais at the head of the ballroom. I was struck by this powerful man with his vigorous build, tall and broad shouldered, muscled like a farmer that in his youth labored behind a plow, and by the elegant garments designed to accentuate his brawn and intimidate his guests. The full-face scarlet mask, with its twisted horns and glittering gold liner around the eyes and on the smiling open lips, heightened his demonic menace.

Guests lined up before him and, when directed by his majordomo, removed their masks, knelt before the count, kissed his ring, prostrated themselves, clasped their hands in supplication, cringed and cried. The procedures hypnotized me with the complexity of the ritual, the palpable fear and the sensual scent of evil that surrounded the dais.

Yet I experienced the euphoria of knowing that because I could successfully scheme

to adjust my life and the lives of others, we would not pay his mighty ransom. We would recover Princess Isabella's ring. Most important, Count Prospero would learn a lesson he would never forget.

Now, I realized this man plotted and schemed with a craftiness equal to mine, but while my plans helped the innocent and adjusted events for good, Count Prospero wielded a whole different weaponry that could result in victory for him.

Berengaria eschewed the steps and leaped up on the dais, a formidable jump that only a woman who could crush a man between her strong thighs could perform. He flinched when he caught a glimpse of her, so close when he was unguarded. A quick examination provided evidence that she was merely a female, and he was intrigued enough to beckon her forward.

She handed him the note.

He took it in big, battered, beef-shank-sized hands, broke the wax seal, read it. I knew what it said, for it had been dictated by me and penned by Madame Culatello.

Egregio Count Prospero, feared and loved, most repellent of dreadful nobles, he who brings calamity before him and trembling in his wake,

I offer a wager of interest to the great lord in the scarlet satyr mask,

As you instructed, the whole of the ransom is inside of a strongbox. In fact, in one of the strongboxes you see carried by the ladies disguised as lads. Should you immediately choose wisely, the whole of the ransom as well as the ring are yours.

Game over.

In each of the other strongboxes, a portion of the ransom is within. That portion is

yours, but you lose 25 gold coins from the whole. With the second, fifty. If you again choose poorly, you've lost the wager and will deliver the ring to La Gnocca with your vow to never speak of these circumstances and this night.

You may, of course, keep the gold coins you have obtained during the process of the wager.

Game over.

Signed,

Your admiring servant, least among least, unworthy but ever a gambler in life and with chance... Do you have the courage to accept those terms?

I hear you. You're saying, Rosie, this is your brilliant plan? Upon what do you predicate your success? Even if he fails to choose the strongbox with the hundred gold coins, will he honor the wager? Will he produce the ring? And if not, how will you find it?

When he finished reading, he spoke to Berengaria.

She nodded, the signal I needed.

He had agreed to the wager.

She offered her strongbox.

He laughed and waved it away, not believing the strongbox so easily held by one woman could have contained the heavy coins.

His mistake, for she did indeed carry the ransom.

As Berengaria turned, she faced the ballroom, I saw her lightly stroke the finger of one hand with the finger of another.

A signal.

She then leaped like a gazelle off the stage onto the tile floor and disappeared into the crowd.

Count Prospero's cold-blooded gaze followed her.

Somehow, although her back had been turned, he'd discerned her action, for he lifted his right hand, bare except for one small ring worn on the second knuckle of his little finger.

A ring that glittered with the dark fire of a large and dangerous stone.

Well. Now I knew where it was, and for a moment, my courage failed me, for how could I win against such a devious, evil, vigorous beast?

His gaze now flicked over the ballroom, looking for the women dressed as lads, and perhaps for the one to whom Berengaria had passed her message.

I quickly turned away, but something compelled me to glance behind.

He had fixed his concentration on me. Somehow, somehow, he identified me as his foe...or his prey.

Did I stand out so much? Or was he so good at reading the masses?

Beneath his mask, pale eyes glittered. His tongue, snakelike and greedy, flicked out from between the mask's horrible, grinning lips, tasting the air as if he recognized his

plan was coming to fruition. He waved his sycophants away—they scurried like cockroaches—and stood, his gaze still fixed on me. One suppliant dared touch his thigh; he kicked her away and continued on his path.

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I stood, frozen like a mouse caught in the hungry gaze of an asp. Indeed, everything about Count Prospero seemed compelling, an illusion created to fascinate and frighten.

He had one foot on the step that would put him on the dance floor when a strong hand grabbed me by the wrist and yanked so hard I stumbled sideways and into the midst of a formation of women dressed like lads.

Venera grasped my arm and led me forcibly into the swirl of guests. “What were you thinking, Rosie?”

“I wasn’t—”

“Obviously!”

As we walked, Quartiglia stripped me of Isabella’s short blue cape and wrapped me in her long cerise cloak to disguise me and cover the box I held. Berengaria shoved her box at me and took mine, then passed that one off to Venera. Fennina jostled through the crowd, another two boxes changed hands, and anyone who watched was confused by who was who and who carried what.

I hoped.

I glanced behind me but could see nothing but swarms of masked guests and Gordiana, who brought up the rear. “You don’t engage that man in a pissing match. You of all people!” she scolded.

“Not if you want to come out unscathed. For this to succeed, you must remain free!”
Quartiglia body-blocked a gentleman who sought to break through our circle.

It occurred to me, as we hustled into the relative safety of the crowd, that these women were tall.

I mean...tall.

Not possibly man-tall like Madame Culatello, but woman-tall like, um, tall women.

Their boobs were at my eyesight line.

Was this what it took to be a desirable, successful sex salesperson in Verona? Did men want to be intimidated? Because while I was not woefully lacking in height, I did not possess the Amazonian dimensions of these women.

Usually if I lacked confidence, I assured myself I was smarter than anyone around me, but these women—they survived and thrived in a tough market.

Truly, I perhaps viewed the matter incorrectly.

Maybe to be successful, they had to live through each encounter and their strength, reach and agility would discourage a vicious male and enhance their chances of survival.

Certainly having them on my team meant we had a better chance of tonight keeping Madame Culatello's fortune and winning custody of Princess Isabella's ring.

Satisfied with my analysis, I watch them as they displayed their wares in ways that riveted the attention of men and women.

They hid in plain sight, obviously female and definitely scandalous, and among them, I had vanished.

The results of this night, I realized, would bring an increased trade to La Gnocca, but first they had to live through it. We all had to live through it...or none would survive.

I set my mind to the plan. “Has Count Prospero once again mounted the dais?”

Berengaria joined us, and she held her strongbox in her hands. “Yes, but he’s dispatching his guards around the ballroom. They’re on the hunt.”

“Break off two by two,” I instructed. “Then go alone. If you’re captured by one of Prospero’s knaves, open your strongbox and use the distraction to escape at once. Return to La Gnocca and wait for...” I glanced around but could see nothing but guests. “Has Madame Culatello not joined us yet?”

Heads shook.

“Where did she go?” Quartiglia asked.

I saw the great concern her absence caused her ladies. “She said she had a task. She is most competent and we can trust she’ll return without delay.” I crossed myself in reverent hope.

The ladies followed suit.

“Now go!” I gestured.

The ladies moved quickly, at once losing themselves in the crowd, and I was left to make my own way among guests, distracted time and again by a laugh that sounded familiar or a costume that glittered with gold thread. Neighbors who embroidered

themselves in scandal, I thought, and, knowing the Montagues and the Capulets, family.

I heard murmurs start, for while I had bound my breasts and fluffed my codpiece, Madame Culatello's ladies had not. They looked like, moved like sensual cat women on the prowl.

Speculation started, too, from men and from women.

"What are they holding?" "What could be in the strongboxes?" "Money? A message? Is there holy symbolism? Or devilish meaning?"

And of course, "Who are these women who so boldly go among us in male garb?"

Like a drumbeat of doom, the first of great wooden outer doors slammed shut, then the second, then one of Prospero's henchmen lowered the bar and hooked it through the iron fixtures. Those of us at the party were trapped, and a man's gravelly voice proclaimed, "Count Prospero has proclaimed all will unmask when the city clock chimes lauds!"

Lauds. The dawn. That first indication of morning's light...and far too soon for my plan to succeed.

Shouts of denial issued from every throat and echoed back and forth between the walls, up to the high gilded ceiling and down to the tile floor.

"You have one hour!" the gravelly voice shouted.

No upright citizen of Verona wished to display themselves in this notorious masquerade.

Were they married? They could lose their families.

Were they perceived as honorable? They could lose their prestige.

Were they holy, monks, nuns, saints? The taint of this unhallowed place would tarnish them in the public eye and the eye of the Lord.

Yet for me, a single thought cheered and calmed. Count Prospero challenged me, for he feared he could lose: the wager and his own unblemished reputation for terror.

From behind me, I heard Venera's panicked voice. "Rosie, the way out is gone. What do we do?"

I turned toward her, still smiling. "We follow through with our plan with increased vigor, for now unless we wish to show our faces—"

"You do not."

"No. So we have a deadline." I grinned at her. "Count Prospero seeks to frighten and intimidate, but remember, we're not lofty nobles. We're molded from the common clay."

Venera stilled. "Are we?"

"My family are vintners." It was true. The Montagues made fine wines. We had risen from the rich dirt of the Veneto to be prosperous and respected, and at the same time, we kept our estates where we grew our grapes. "What about your family?"

She hesitated as if the memories pained her, then confessed, "Long ago they were respectable merchants in Florence. They wished me to marry a toothless decaying lord to gain a title for our family. I would not, and my parents...I don't care where

they are. I've made a new life, and now my family resides at La Gnocca." She nodded decisively. "Yes, it's well to remember who we are and what we seek."

"We can escape through back entrances and open windows, and we don't hesitate to descend to a lower level to leave this place. No locked and barred doors can hold us, and we have no fear for our plan is sound." If I do say so myself, I give a good pep talk.

"Look, there he is, Count Prospero himself." Venera pointed at a satyr-masked man in shadowed clothing and gave me a push. "Go quickly!"

I ducked through the crowd, and as I did, from across the ballroom, I heard Gordiana shout, "My strongbox. He took my strongbox! Thief! Thief!" She projected well; had she once been a singer in the trovatori?

A few voices took up the shout of Thief!

Then a call of, "What's inside? Let's see what's inside!"

Ah, curiosity. I had depended on that, and when men and women started screaming and, toward the door, shouting to Prospero's henchmen to open, I knew my plan was proceeding as I desired.

Berengaria bellowed, "Open or die!"

How I loved these women! How well they improvised their parts!

Quartiglia bumped me from behind.

Startled, I jumped.

“Getting nervous, Lady Rosaline?” She grinned cheekily.

It seemed I was.

“I see Count Prospero to the left. Go right!” she instructed.

I nodded. We exchanged boxes and parted ways, with me going across the river of people flooding toward the front door.

The box weighed more than any of the others I’d held. With the rushing here and there and the being on constant lookout, I was tiring, and the burden dragged at my arms.

Then! Somehow, Count Prospero found me again. I caught a glimpse of him fighting his way toward me. I fled, glancing behind me, not understanding how he had tracked me, how he managed to be so many places at once.

I was sweating, wrapped in the linen to disguise my figure, and sweating more as thoughts unnerved me. Was Count Prospero indeed demonic? In league with the devil himself?

As I looked back, I slammed into a man’s body. He grabbed me by the arms, steadied me, and asked, “Rosie, what’s wrong?”

I stared in astonishment. In the light, Madame Culatello in gentleman’s clothing looked very manlike, her voice an octave lower than I’d previously heard, yet her face was as feminine as before. She held a strongbox tucked under her arm, and when I said, “Come on!” she followed without question.

I dragged her behind a velvet curtain. “Count Prospero has tagged me. He finds me wherever I am.” I feared him, a man who reveled in and abused his power, and I

admit to panic. It had seemed so simple tonight when Count Prospero had thrown down the challenge. Now I realized how much more I had to lose than I had imagined: if he hunted me down, I would die.

She peeked out the right side of the curtain and stared over the heads of the milling crowd. “No. Oh, Rosie, no! That’s—”

On the left side, a massive, battered, beef-shank-sized fist clutched the velvet and the man in the scarlet satyr mask flung it back to reveal us.

Madame Culatello gasped. “No! Rosie, run!” She leaped at him, slammed herself into him. It was like seeing a ram attack an ox, for Count Prospero both outweighed her and contained within himself the ability—nay, the desire—to subjugate and harm.

I did run. I darted toward a heavy pewter candlestick, seized it and ran back to find a smiling Count Prospero held her by the throat.

I slammed him in the ribs with the candlestick, and gentle reader, I was fighting for a friend. I connected with a solid thump.

He shrugged off my blow and smashed her in the face with his fist. She flew backward and hit the window. The precious glass broke beneath her skull and shattered outward and she collapsed.

Her strongbox flew from her hands, bounced on the tiles, opened and—two squeaking dormice skittered in opposite directions, and four gold coins rolled in crazed circles across the floor.

I wound up for another hit.

He batted my weapon away as if it were no more than a mosquito.

The worst had happened. Count Prospero had hunted me down. My protector had been vanished. I was weaponless, on my own, and there was no point in being afraid now. I looked into the pale eyes behind the mask, and with a calm that denied the crowd's screams, the fights starting all around, and his towering menace, I said, "That's your second box, Count Prospero. You have only one more to choose, and you lose the wager."

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Count Prospero was not amused. Snatching my strongbox from under my arm, he grabbed my wrist in his brutish fingers and hauled me across the ballroom toward the back of the house. No one paid attention to us. Most people crowded toward the great doors; a few ran toward the back, taking the servants' exit or crawling out the windows. Throughout the crowd I could hear Madame Culatello's ladies shouting suggestions like, "The guards are demons!" and "We're sacrifices to Count Prospero's dark forces!"

I had no trouble believing that the guests credited the shouts, since even now I wondered if Count Prospero would drag me down to the depths of his house and all the way to hell.

As he veered toward his office, I heard the sounds that meant the great doors had at last been opened wide. I could hear Verona's streets, the shrieking of Count Prospero's guests, the muffled roars of his guards as guests trampled them, savaged them, tossed them aside like the refuse they were.

Count Prospero flung me inside the bare room. He kicked the solid wood door closed, muting the sounds.

In the silence and the light of the single candle, I watched with terrified fascination as Count Prospero placed the strongbox on the desk and opened it—to reveal the rat that gave it weight feasting on a wealth of shriveled raisins, and worth...nothing.

Bad choice.

I, like a fool, laughed.

Also a bad choice.

Prospero slowly looked up, the candles shone full on his mask.

For the first time I realized his eyes were glacial blue or icy green, hypnotic in their power, and I backed away.

“You imagine this is funny?” The words slipped softly from his unseen lips.

To my ears, it sounded as if a snake had gained the ability to speak. “It is.” I lifted my chin and pretended I didn’t feel the chill that exuded from him. “That’s the third strongbox. As promised, at the bottom there were gold coins. Three, to be exact, and undoubtedly covered with rat shit.”

He swept the box off his desk, scattering the raisins, the gold, and the fat glorious rat who landed with a thump and indignantly waddled after his food. “Who carries the box with the ransom? Or is that a woman’s lie?”

“I don’t lie.” I may spin the truth, but I don’t lie and I don’t feel the need to explain that to this insulting cur. “Berengaria carries the gold. She has kept possession of that strongbox the whole time. You remember Berengaria. She jumped onto the dais next to you, frightened you”—how I relished those words!—“gave you the terms, and when you agreed, offered you her strongbox. If you’d taken it, you’d have won the wager and one hundred gold coins would be yours, and the precious ring.” I didn’t like the way Count Prospero’s head bobbed on his neck, as if rage had seized him by the throat. Yet what could I do but forge ahead? “You lost the wager.” I pointed at his hand. “Give me that ring.”

Now he laughed. “Did you really think that if I failed, I’d give you the ring?”

What I really thought was that I wanted not to be here, confronting Count Prospero

by myself. “A wager is a gentlemen’s agreement. You must do as you vowed.”

“You’re a woman.” The way he said it, with such contempt, as if I was one of the lesser creatures created by God.

“I am.”

“Your cohorts are women. You dare to dress like men. You do that because you know a woman is nothing more than a cow made to bear a man’s son and provide it milk. A woman’s skin is the parchment on which a man writes a wager that commands respect. A woman’s wager is nothing but a bleating of a sheep.”

Furious red dots darted in my vision. “You bray like a crossbred ass unable to produce offspring!” I leaped toward him. “I should remember, you’re no gentleman. You are no lord. You’re low-born, a knave, a bully, a charlatan, a buffoon, a maggot that crawls to eat the entrails of the dead. You destroy everything and produce nothing.”

Like a striking asp, he grabbed my wrist in a bruising grip and lifted it high above my head. “You. Did you think I don’t recognize you? She told me you were coming. She demanded payment for your identity. I know what I hold, and you’re worth every coin, Lady Rosaline of the House of Montague.”

She? She told him?

He continued, “I’ve heard the rumors that fly about the city. You’re his. Prince Escalus. He owns you. If he wishes to wed you, he’ll pay dearly for you. Whatever I demand, he’ll give me for your person in the hopes he’ll have you yet unsullied and virginal.”

Zoinks! Way to answer that question. No wonder Madame Culatello had disappeared

after helping me in the window. No wonder she had conveniently collapsed after the tussle with Count Prospero.

She had sold me out.

Also. When you're the daughter of Romeo and Juliet and your father is wicked fast with a blade, and he teaches you on the sly (because your mother doesn't quite approve) to defend yourself because he wants his daughters never to be afraid or vulnerable...

This guy was a lot taller than me. He was strong, and he had me dangling by my arm. My shoulder joint screamed with pain. I was, according to his benighted belief, helpless.

My father spoke in my head. Pull the dagger from your sleeve and stab Count Prospero in the heart.

Well, sure, but with his long arms, he held me out like disreputable vermin. Additionally, the whole day and evening and night had been one damned thing after another and this betrayal by Madame Culatello, who I trusted, infuriated me beyond good sense.

And...I sigh as I explain what I would rather not. But I have thrust a blade into one beating heart, and reluctantly I discovered what warriors know. To stand face-to-face with someone and stab them required nerve and skill and a willingness to recall, over and over, how death clouds the victim's eyes and vanquishes the eternal spirit. With that recollection, my own life fades into a nightmare where my guiltless spirit is stained forever, and I seek absolution from my confessor, and while it's given, I still can never forget.

So yes, if there's another way, I'll try it, and now rather than reaching for my blade, I

used one long leg and a well-aimed foot to kick Count Prospero's thigh close to his man parts.

No doubt you're saying, Rosie, you missed your main objective.

True, but it really didn't matter. Men are men (embroider that on a pillow) and instinctively, he collapsed to protect his hairy hangers. As soon as my feet hit the floor, I slammed my knee up—which is a lot easier in tights than a skirt—and snapped his broad, manly chin backward. His mask tilted sideways, robbing him of his demonic appearance and making him look more like a jester. His breath whooshed out of his lungs, and the sound of his teeth clanking together gave me such intense satisfaction I dared one final clout to his ear and a grab at the ring.

To no avail. He stumbled sideways, and only by extreme self-discipline did I recover my good sense and do as my sister and Princess Isabella had done—I counted my legs, and when I got to two, I ran.

Opening the door, I dashed down the corridor.

Behind me, I heard Count Prospero's roar of fury.

I glanced back and to my horror saw the treacherous villain standing beside the door, his glittering scarlet mask in place, watching as I fled. Our eyes met. Terror and certainty leaped inside me.

He knew something I did not.

He did not fear that I would escape.

Turning, he walked back into the office and with an ominous thump, shut the door.

In a panic, I sprinted into the increasingly turbulent remains of the masquerade. An abundance of screams meant all Madame Culatello's girls had released their rodents into the crowd. The stampede toward the door threatened to crush me and only a firm hand on my arm and a yank behind the curtain saved me from landing on my face. I turned to my rescuer, hoping to see Venera or Gordiana or Berengaria or Quartiglia or Fennina—and instead I saw the tall man in black velvet wearing a leering red satyr mask.

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What the...?

How had Count Prospero recovered from my kick to his cojones, gone back into his office, then returned to catch and save me...with, I knew, the intention to hurt me, to ruin me, to destroy my family, for revenge...

Obviously, there was only one thing to do. I screamed, "Fire!"

On the other side of the curtain, voices picked up the message. "Fire!" "Run for your life!" "Fire!" And from one of Madame Culatello's ladies, "Prospero uses his hellfire against us. We're all going to burn!"

Beneath the satyr mask, I thought Count Prospero rolled his eyes. Later, I also thought—Of course, because his eyes are dark. But at that moment, the detail escaped me.

He peeked out from the curtain, nodded and let me go.

I didn't wait to wonder at his leniency. I darted out into the ballroom. The screaming crowd had much diminished, and what was left ran, stumbled, jolted toward the doors and spilled out into the street. I had planned to escape across the square to nearby La Gnocca but remembered I would find no refuge with Madame Culatello, who had betrayed me.

Turning, I fled toward Casa Montague. Toward home. When I was well away from Verona's center, I slowed to a walk. I had, after all, been ill and the well-being that had buoyed me through this night drained away, for I realized that the worst had

happened. Count Prospero did not have the ransom—but he still held Princess Isabella's ring.

I had failed. Failed my family, failed the princess, failed so fatally I might as well amble my way to a nunnery. First I had to let Katherina and Princess Isabella know, and I had to face my parents with my shame written plain on my face.

As I trudged along, I began to imagine I heard sounds behind me. Sounds like men's boots thumping in pursuit.

Surely not. I'd got cleanly away. Only if someone knew my destination could they track me.

...Truly, someone did know my destination. Someone with rough men who lived to do his bidding. Count Prospero had let me go only to hunt me.

I picked up the pace. Took a side street. The boots thundered past.

I leaned into a recessed doorway. Put my hand on my aching side. Thought I'd misled them. Thought I'd imagined that they tracked me.

Then, oh God, then they returned, muttering in deep voices. I heard my name, and I knew this pursuit wasn't my imagination.

I sprinted away, dodged and weaved through the dark, narrow streets, while the boot heels thumped in pursuit. My heart pounded like a rabbit's that was hunted by hungry wolves; I dared not stop, for violence itself chased me. I wound my way through the back streets toward Casa Montague, trying to lose my stalkers, but they seemed always to predict my route and to herd me toward some unknown destiny. Fatigue hunted me as fiercely as ever did the villains, and I began to falter. They would be on me in a moment...

I spied an open iron gate that led into a courtyard dimly lit by a single candle. To me, at that moment, it seemed like a haven. I dashed inside, pulled the gate almost closed and flattened myself against the wall.

The gate clinked shut with a resounding thunk. The key turned in the lock.

A tall man, dressed in dark clothing and wearing a satyr mask, stood with his arm outstretched, his hand firm against the gate. “Rosie, how good of you to come to me and save me the trouble of hunting you down.”

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For one moment, I thought myself crazed with exhaustion, for this man sounded like Prince Escalus.

Reaching up, he untied his mask, removed it and revealed himself.

Yep. Prince Escalus. My betrothed.

In a flash, I knew what had happened. The inescapable man in a satyr mask?

Not one man. No, no.

Count Prospero, Prince Escalus and the prince's personal bodyguards, Dion, Marcellus, and Holofernes. My sensation of being herded? I had been herded, right into this courtyard, to a confrontation with Escalus. As if I hadn't been humiliated enough for one night!

I admit, I bellowed. "What did you think you were doing? You frightened me half to death!" Have I mentioned that Montagues are comfortable with bellowing?

Prince Escalus did not bellow. He did not react except—he reached for me. He grabbed me in a hard embrace, manhandling me in a way I didn't anticipate and couldn't counter. With one hand, he tossed up my tunic, bared my ass half covered by tights, and forcibly turned me over his knee. With the flat of his hand, he spanked me.

Three good hard slaps on my culo.

I could not comprehend such an indignity. Never in my life had anyone had the

audacity...

And Prince Escalus? He was a stodgy, boring, uncommunicative man. Yet he showed temper here, and dominance. I wrestled my way free, struggled to my feet, faced him with fists clenched, ready to attack. I wanted to shout, but I'd lost my breath and my voice. "How dare...you...? Why would you...do...?"

In a tone as clear as winter ice, he told me. "I wanted to frighten you half to death! I meant to terrify you, to teach you a lesson! What were you doing in Verona, alone in the night, dressed as a fresh-faced youth waiting to be cheated, beaten, raped, murdered?"

As you know, I had good reason, but as I drew breath to shout the answer, I stopped myself. I couldn't betray his sister Princess Isabella and my sister Katherina. Escalus had spent his adolescent years in the Acquisasso dungeon, and he wouldn't understand youthful fecklessness. In addition, I had no desire to cause a rift between him and his only sibling, nor did I want him to know more of the adventurous streak that marked our family, nor did I want Katherina punished for her foolishness.

I throttled my words unborn. Yet my restraint, admirable though I considered it, meant nothing, for Escalus didn't wait for an answer. In another one of those lightning-fast moves, he placed his palms on my butt cheeks, picked me up and thrust himself between my legs.

I gasped, because somewhere in our wrestling he'd removed my codpiece, and I was wide and bare against...against his codpiece. Which, I can assure you, was not stuffed with anything but himself. Not that I intimately know what I'm talking about, and not that I had time to contemplate, but...definitely him, definitely aroused, hard and hot.

He slung me around in a whirling half circle that made me clutch him with my legs. He rested me against the edge of the fountain's marble basin. The icy stone

underscored the blistering of my butt, and I squirmed in discomfort and...well, it had to be discomfort.

Escalus held me in place and thrust himself against me, again, and again, and the discomfort became more like...more intense. More like...sure, I was a virgin, but it wasn't as if I'd never...

I know how to touch myself, okay?

I gasped and gripped his shoulders, and tried to contain myself and wanted unabashedly to give myself, and...I didn't have a choice. I could see his eyes glinting in the darkness. He never let up the pressure. I was gripped by pain. I was panicked with desire. I needed to reach...I wanted that moment...I needed...something...

I tried to hide my face in his chest.

"No." He took one hand away from my culo, and with his fingers under my chin, he pushed my face up so he could see me.

And I could see him. The single candle barely illuminated his unsmiling features, and for the first time I feared him, for he seemed carved of stone, a monument to mastery. With this demonstration he proved himself stronger, more resolved, more ruthless than me, and if I couldn't hide my face, I could close my eyes and hide his.

A mistake, for without my sight, sensation stormed me. He used one final firm thrust to push and nudge, creating rich colors of life's creation beneath my lids, and I rubbed myself against him, seeking more and more pleasure. When I moaned aloud, an untamed sound, I opened my eyes in horror and surprise.

Had I hoped he hadn't heard, seen, noticed?

Foolish Rosie! He watched my face, followed my movements, listened to my whimpers with the faint smile of a satisfied man. Not his own satisfaction; he remained hard and hot against me. But the satisfaction of a man who'd succeeded in his intention. To teach me a lesson, he'd said.

Yes, he'd done that. I'd never in my life given up control to anyone. Not like this. Not to someone who could mock me, who could hurt me, who could make me a laughingstock in Verona. This was not me, not Lady Rosaline of the House of Montague, who trembled and cried out. Yet these emotions rose from a place beyond my control, a place where, apparently, Prince Escalus held reign.

Gradually he lowered my legs to the stones, yet still he leaned against me. "Can you stand?"

He knew my knees quivered, and that was another betrayal of my own body. He slid his arm around my waist to hold me and, when I would have pushed away, hugged me tightly against him.

I wanted to curse him, but among all the things I'd learned tonight, I knew another emotional outburst wouldn't accomplish my objective to get away from him. In a stuffy tone and in a voice that had developed a tremolo, I said, "You're not behaving with the propriety of a great lord toward a lady."

"Then the lady shouldn't have come out alone to entice the great lord."

"I didn't come out to entice...you." I slid sideways out from underneath him.

He let me go and stood, tall and still, watching me retreat toward the gate. "To find Lysander, perhaps?"

"Sweet Mary, no!" I froze in place. I didn't need or want my noble betrothed thinking

I chased after another man. The punishment for betraying Verona's prince would make a convent look like paradise.

He advanced on me, a dark shadow backlit by that single candle. "Lysander didn't arrive at your assignation last night."

"After your timely arrival to take his place, I suspect he was detained." I spoke each word as if dipped in acid. "By someone."

Prince Escalus neither acknowledged nor denied his culpability. "Perhaps you came out to find something someone had lost?"

That startled me. "What?" The ring? He knew about the ring?

So fast he was a blur, he reached out and grasped my arm. Taking my left hand, he pressed it against his codpiece. I felt his erection, still hale and hearty and, to my mortification, the material was damp. From me. My body had done that. I was still damp, and even worse, when he demonstrated what I would have ignored, I reacted yet again. If at that moment he'd freed himself from his codpiece, he would have found his place in me with little difficulty. Except for my wretched virginity, which I'd been told was an obstacle indeed.

"I'm pleased to discover I was right about you." Lifting my palm to his mouth, he licked it, then took my fourth finger, put it in his mouth and sucked on it.

I gasped, for the way he used his lips and tongue felt somehow intimate, and both terrifying and tempting.

He gave that slight upward tilt of the lips that might indicate amusement, or some other emotion I feared to acknowledge, and taking something from the purse on his belt, he slid it on my finger.

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A ring. It hesitated at my knuckle, then glided all the way on to rest against my hand proper.

I knew what it was, of course, but I lifted it to the light and saw in the polished stones a dark beauty reflecting the intensity and invincibility of Prince Escalus. For invincibility was what he intended me to see.

“God creates diamonds in this shape and with no color, brilliant, clear, a symbol of purity.” He defined the properties of a diamond with such precision he seemed to be instructing me. “Thus it is a stone to be given to dearest betrothed. The stone will ward off evil, destroy the effects of poison, and lend strength to a warrior...such as yourself.”

I formed my hand into a fist. If only he knew what this warrior longed to do.

Perhaps he did, for he took my curled fingers and straightened them. “Diamonds are unbreakable and so hard they cannot be cut.”

“How does it achieve this shape?” I didn’t believe that, for the stone resembled two pyramids joined at the base.

“This diamond was formed in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. It’s one of God’s perfect creations, signifying divinity, spiritual union, and...love.” Again he put his lips to my hand, and again I felt the slow, warm, wet slide of his tongue between my fingers.

“Subtle.” I yanked my hand free. “How did you get the ring when I could not?”

“I took it from the unconscious Prospero’s broken finger.”

“Oh.” I contemplated the band, the dark jewel that Prince Escalus used to permanently mark me as his possession. “I see.” I did. Another demonstration that I lacked the strength of a man. Like I didn’t already know that. Like it wasn’t constantly, every day of my life, ground into my mind by society, the Church, and most of all by men. None of whom I liked at this moment.

“Right before I placed a gold coin on each of his closed eyes.”

Oh. My lips formed the word, but I didn’t voice it. According to ancient tradition, one laid two coins on a corpse’s eyes to pay for Charon’s transport across the river Styx and into the lands of the dead. I indulged in a moment of imagination; Count Prospero’s moment of disorientation on regaining consciousness, of suffering the weight on the eyes and then realization—coins! As if he had already died! And not merely coins. Gold coins from Verona’s podestà.

When I regained my voice, I asked, “A subtle portent to Count Prospero?”

“Less than subtle. He leaves Verona this morning and forever, or suffer the wrath of the prince of Verona.”

I’d never heard Prince Escalus speak of himself in regal third person, and I took that as a portent as surely as Prospero, on his waking, would take the warning.

I needed to know one more thing. “My prince, how did you know the ring had gone astray?”

He drew himself up in chilly reprimand. “Madame Culatello knows her duty, if you do not, and sought me out to tell me the whole story and beg my help.”

I wanted to collapse in relief. “I’m so glad!”

Clearly he was puzzled. “Glad that she alone in this affair has good sense?”

“No, glad that she wasn’t the one who betrayed me to Count Prospero. I consider her a friend, and when I thought she had...I believed for a few horrible moments that she’d betrayed me to him. It was a misunderstanding, one I should never have allowed myself to indulge in.” I thought of Count Prospero’s fist to her face. “I pray she hasn’t suffered too much for this night.”

“I also do so pray.”

I walked toward the gate. “If you’re done playing cat-and-mouse games with me”—yes, I was grouchy—“I would go home to Casa Montague and seek solace in my bed, for I’m weary and sore with much effort.”

“Yes, you can go.” He stopped me with one hand on my arm. “In a minute.”

I feared what more he would do and say, but he paused to grimace and rearrange himself as if his codpiece fit too tightly for comfort.

Small consolation, that, but I felt pleased to be not alone in my suffering.

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The prince's bodyguards, Dion, Marcellus and Holofernes, waited in the street, twirling their scarlet satyr masks while they waited for their master to finish disciplining his wayward betrothed. I wanted to say something scathing about terrorists who made it their business to frighten a woman, but the sight of the prince's sedan chair made my aching legs wobble.

Blessed Mary, I didn't have to walk.

Escalus bundled me in, shut the curtains around me. The chair rose and moved rather rockily through the silent city. What could I expect? These men weren't experienced bearers and mayhap resented this added duty. Nevertheless, I stretched out my feet and closed my eyes, and a mere second later, Prince Escalus touched my shoulder. "Wake, Rosaline, you're home."

I blinked the sleep out of my eyes. He held my arm as I slid out of the chair and saw before me the great ivy-covered wall that protected Casa Montague's garden and the Montagues themselves.

The prince moved to the narrow door, almost hidden in vining leaves, and using the key Papà had given him, opened it and ushered me inside.

I was going to make it. I was going to get away without explaining myself. "Good night, sweet prince." I thought to soften him up with an endearment, grease the waterwheel, escape swiftly.

His midnight voice brought me to a halt. "How did Princess Isabella come to lose the ring?"

The code of the Big Sister: I would not tattle. “How do you think she lost it?”

The latch clicked firmly behind him. “That’s not an answer, Rosie, and your evasion tells me more than a straight reply.”

Once again it was him and me alone in a garden. I turned my back and walked briskly up the wandering path, through the hedges toward the house. Let it not be said I hadn’t learned my lesson. “Since you know Princess Isabella lost the ring, you must have some theory as to the circumstances.”

He kept pace with me, one step behind on the graveled walk. “I suppose she was doing something she should not.” He sounded jaded, like a man who had, after the deaths of their parents, raised his much younger sister and now realized his best efforts might be flawed.

I contemplated a reply that would not necessarily reassure but tell enough to satisfy him. “She was doing something daring, something she never would have before she met...me.” Best not to mention Katherina.

“You believe I’d be happier to remain in ignorance.”

“We are often happier in our ignorance than our knowledge.” Another evasive reply couched in terms the playwright Guglielmo would employ, but I hastened to add, “You did ask that we Montagues help Princess Isabella lead a less isolated, less regal, and more normal existence. I swear to you, no harm has been done. She’s safe and asleep right now”—she had better be —“in Casa Montague. I beg that you leave the matter be. No one was hurt. She is chastened and has vowed she’ll never do such a thing again. I trust her word. Don’t you?”

“Indeed, but I’m not happy that my newly betrothed, who I’ve waited so long to possess and who has already faced such terrible peril, should find herself going to the

rescue.”

“It’s not what I would have chosen, but—”

“You lie!” His words lashed me with his certainty.

“My prince?”

He paced toward me. “Tonight...” He glanced toward the east, where the sun’s approach tinted the dark dreamtime sky. “Last evening, you were trapped, hoist on your own petard, manipulated in the way you’d blithely imagine only you can contrive.” He seemed to expect an answer.

“Aye.” A surly agreement to a man who’d engineered my crushing defeat.

“I know not whether fortune brought this boyish adventure to you or whether you—”

I went from surly to snappish. “Fortune. Good fortune, my prince. We’re both glad I was in the right place at the right time.”

He stepped in front of me. We stood in one of the many bowers created by trees and climbing roses and artfully placed seating. He could see my face, I knew, for I could see his and his always expertly concealed and possibly nonexistent emotions. “Excellent. I’d hate to think I’d misjudged your wisdom.”

“Or anything else about me, I trow.” For the man had told me, as if this was a sensible way to choose a wife, about the lists he’d used to catalogue my good and bad qualities. Was I more irked about the total lack of romance, which as a daughter of Romeo and Juliet I was bred to understand, or his accurate reading of my character traits? I didn’t know, nor right now did I care to face the truth...whatever it was. “Now, if you don’t mind, I should go in.”

He let me step by him. “Shall I tell you what you dare not confess even to yourself? Shall I tell you your darkest fear?”

I was exhausted. For what was left of this night, I wished for no more confrontation. I wanted my bed and enough time to sleep away the memory of this adventure. I took three steps, then irresistible curiosity brought me to a halt. I faced him. “What?” What? Huh? My darkest fear? What man ever thought of such a thing? “What do you know about my darkest fear?”

“More than you, I vow.”

“What is that?”

Again the midnight voice and a steady gaze. “What do you consider your darkest fear?”

“I’ve never...” I remembered last night. “Being laughed at. Isn’t that everybody’s darkest fear?”

“No.” He blatantly told me I was wrong about myself. “You fear a man who is your equal.”

This guy was peculiar. Which I had suspected, but he seemed so intent, so sure of himself. Sort of scary. “I don’t! Why would I fear that? According to current wisdom, all men are my superior.” As I spoke the words, irony coated my tongue.

“Current wisdom.” He snapped his fingers in scorn. “You know what you are. You know what gifts you contain within your clever mind and beating heart.” Stepping close, he placed his palm on my chest between my breasts, and it seemed as if he fed a bolt of lightning into my body. “You fear boredom, marriage to a master who is not your equal in intelligence, wit, and spirit. A lord who traps you in a golden cage,

believes you're like other women, submissive, content to tend the house and please the man above all other things."

I wanted to pull back, to demand he be like other men and never look below the surface. But that hand on my chest held me like a magnet, and when he flexed his fingers, I could scarcely breathe.

He whispered, "That's not the life we'll lead. We'll have a daily truce, a nightly battle, until two bodies, minds, hearts become one and all the angels smile, for we are married and mated, loved and loving."

I whispered in return, "You say things in the dark you would never say in the light."

"Yes." Prince Escalus seemed to find nothing to marvel at there. He dropped his hand, and in a normal tone, he said, "We'll not talk of this again. Prospero is banished, and the only proof this night ever happened is an odd legend of Verona's wild masquerade."

"I wear your ring."

Most decidedly he said, "You'll not remove the ring."

"The ring is proof. People will see." I did not add, clearly. I merely thought it loudly.

"We borrow Cupid's wings and soar with them over the common bound, and people will see the diamond flashing above them and be dazzled." Here he went with the poetry again. "The actual sequence of events will never occupy their minds."

"Have you met my family?" My noisy, nosy, tactless family? "My prince, I cannot appear in the morning wearing a glorious betrothal ring when last night I didn't have it. Every person in my family would take note, and under my mother's interrogation,

the secrecy of this night will be revealed.”

He wanted to object, so I hurriedly added, “My mother, Lady Juliet, is a gracious lady who reveres you as the prince of Verona. That said, with our betrothal you’ve become family, and the defenses that protected you from any deserved reprimand have tumbled. I don’t wish to explain to either of my parents what more happened between us tonight.” I pinned him with a stern gaze. “Do you?” Say no, please say no.

“I have become family,” he said in a wondering tone.

Not what I expected him to dwell on, but... “Aye.”

“Your mother would...scold me?”

“Most assuredly, and my father would rudely handle your royal person.”

Escalus seemed almost charmed. Yes, because on his “Reasons to wed Lady Rosaline” list, he had included his liking for my family. Although on the “Reasons not to wed Lady Rosaline” list, he had included his dislike of our collective shouting. Which made no sense in light of my warning about Mamma’s scolding.

I never claimed to understand men as a whole. It’s a whole different gender.

I explained, “Tonight I’ll wear the ring so I may show our sisters it’s been retrieved, and to let them know...well.” I didn’t need Escalus to know about the inappropriate sonnet that had originally sent the girls out into the night, and of the correction that needed to be made. “Afterward, I’ll send it to you via trusted messenger.”

“You’ll wear it until morning. That is my wish. Then I’ll send my bodyguards to Casa Montague and you’ll slip the ring to them.” He corrected me decisively. “I’ll have it sized to fit your finger more comfortably.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t realize he’d noticed my discomfort.

“You’ll wear my ring until morning. Do you so vow?”

He had a bee in his beret about this one. “I do.” That was a little too close to a wedding vow for comfort, and I saw by the faint twitch of his lip he appreciated the significance.

“Later, in an appropriate and public ceremony, I’ll again place my ring on your hand for all to view.”

I ran my finger over the largest stone. “I promise, when it’s time, I’ll wear this ring as a sign of your possession.”

He rumbled a little, maybe a laugh? “You still don’t understand. I haven’t possessed you yet, Rosie.” His hand slid around my waist, he pulled me into his body and leaned over me, until I felt his breath on my lips. “When I do, I’ll mark you with more than diamonds. I’ll mark you with pleasure and with passion. I will have you, Rosie, and everything in you. I vow that to you and to the heavens.”

Prince Escalus did intense very well, and the way he put the words together sounded less like a promise and more like a threat. I waited for an agonized moment of anticipation for his kiss.

He released, stepped back, and in a return to his normal tone of voice, he said, “Now go give my sister and your sister a good fright, then let them know they’ve been saved by your cleverness, and any further indiscretions on their part will be met with justice swift and terrible.”

So anticlimactic. So annoying. I touched my lips with the tip of my tongue. I swear they felt swollen...and I swear I heard his breath catch. “Yes, my prince.”

If he noticed my snippy tone, he gave no indication.

With one finger, he touched my cheek. “For you, sleep will knit the existence you believe unraveled, and when you wake tomorrow all will be as it was, and this like a dream, yet a vision of a heady future.” With that, he was gone, disappearing into the depths of the garden like some dark and prophetic guardian angel.

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I went at once to the bedroom where I knew Princess Isabella and Katherina slept, no doubt secure in the knowledge I would succeed in my quest to regain the princess's ring. I opened the door and —

“Rosie!” Both girls leaped off the bed and ran to hug me.

I had forgotten how, at that age, I could stay awake all night talking about nothing and everything, solving Verona's problems while simultaneously discussing acne cures, speculating on life and marriage, giggling about my parents' lifelong love affair and secretly longing for what they share.

Personally, after the walking, the running, the stress, the thievery, the fighting, the encounter with the prince...I was pooped.

I must have sagged in their arms, for together they supported me as they led me to a chair—I cautiously sat—thrust watered wine into my hand and placed a platter of fruit, bread and cheese on the table at my elbow. They knelt on the floor beside me and watched worshipfully as I raised the goblet to my lips with shaking fingers and drained it.

Katherina poked Princess Isabella with her elbow and pointed at my left hand. “See? I told you Rosie would get your ring.”

Princess Isabella gasped, leaned forward to touch the diamond with tender fingers.

To me, Katherina said, “She was worried, but I never was!”

“I had faith in Rosie,” Princess Isabella replied sharply. “I worried about her health and well-being. As I should, for look at her! She’s exhausted.”

“I was worried about her, too!” Katherina protested.

Probably she wasn’t; as did most of my family, Katherina had an exaggerated opinion of my competence, one that I had fostered and tonight had been stripped from me.

So to speak.

Princess Isabella tore a chunk from the bread and handed it to me. “I’m in your debt, and I’ll never forget this as long as I live. You are indeed my sister of the heart.”

I looked at the ring. “You have no idea.”

“Let me see it!” Katherina held out her hand, palm up.

I shook my head and nibbled on the bread.

“C’mon, Rosie. It’s my one chance to see a diamond up close. Isabella doesn’t mind if I look at it.” Katherina cajoled Isabella. “Do you?”

“No,” Isabella said. “But you have to promise not to put it on, because the next person to wear it is—”

“I know. I know. Prince Escalus’s betrothed, whoever she is. I mean, really. It won’t be too bad for her. He’s deadly boring and he has those scars, but he has an air about him. I don’t know what it is...”

“Competence,” I said. After all, he had very competently handled me.

They looked at me as if I'd grown a gorgon head.

"Rosie, you have no romance in your soul!" Katherina didn't spare me her little-sister judgment.

"I used to," I said wistfully.

"You never!" Katherina said.

"Except about Lysander," Isabella reminded her.

In unison the girls clasped their hands and pretended to swoon.

In a businesslike tone, Katherina said, "Really, Rosie, let me hold the ring!" When I didn't move, she began tugging on my hand.

I curled my fingers into a fist and shook my head.

"It's not yours!" Katherina said. "If you won't give it to me, give it to Isabella! It's hers. Her mother's!"

I felt sad at being the one to deprive Isabella, but I had no choice. I had made my vow. Again I shook my head.

Isabella figured it out first. She drew back, stared at my face, stared at the ring, stared at my face. "Oh." The word dropped from her lips, and like a pebble in the pond, its effect spread outward, breaking into Katherina's determined discourse, making my sister sit back on her heels and look at me, too.

"Rosie? What is it?" When I didn't reply, she said, "Rosie!"

“It’s not Lysander she’s betrothed to,” Isabella said gravely. “It’s Escalus.”

Katherina flopped onto her butt as if someone had pushed her. “No.” She looked between me and Isabella. “No!”

I couldn’t stand to see those disillusioned young faces staring at me as if I’d betrayed their sweet dreams of love, so I stood and walked to the marble-topped table. “Yes. I am the betrothed of Prince Escalus.” I poured water from the jug into the basin, splashed water on my hot face, and wiped it carefully with the towel. “Tonight, after he’d recovered the ring, he placed it on my finger and told me I was under no circumstances to remove it tonight.”

“No!” Katherina seemed unable to budge from that disbelief. “You were going to meet Lysander. What happened to Lysander?”

“How do you know I was going to meet Lysander? Why do you think something happened to Lysander?”

“Because I overheard Nurse plot the scheme to get you wed to him!”

I bent my stern gaze on Katherina. “Overheard?”

“Nurse honks like a goose,” Katherina declared.

“No one else heard her.” I knew this because otherwise the plan would not have been set into motion at all. My parents would have seen to that.

“I may have been standing close to the open door,” she conceded.

Isabella used a light finger to touch the diamond, not with longing but with reverence. “You’re in truth my sister. Legally, in all ways, my sister.” She hugged Katherina.

“And you! We are family. I’ve always wanted to be part of a large family, and yours is so merry and loving and loud!”

“Wait until we get the Montagues and the Capulets together,” I warned her. “You’ll long for silence.”

Isabella disregarded that; such a genteel princess could not be expected to comprehend the volumes and the controversies that our families generated. She asked, “The ring—does it fit you?”

“It’s a little tight.” I flexed my fingers. “Then again, it’s supposed to cut off my circulation,” I jested, but my voice cracked and betrayed my true sentiment.

That convinced Katherina as nothing else could. “No, oh Rosie, no,” she said again, but softer, more tenderly. “Love star-crossed and marriage bound by duty. It’s not fair!”

“Not fair.” I laughed a little, although my humor was lacking. “You know what Mamma says about not fair. ”

““Justice and life seldom walk hand in hand,”” Katherina repeated grudgingly. Of all of Mamma’s bromides, we children hated that one the most. “But it’s not fair,” she repeated.

“No.” I took another bite of bread, but it was dry in my mouth, and I cast it aside.

Katherina’s eyes widened and she sat straight up. “The play! The playwright! We paid Guglielmo to write the sonnet for you and Lysander!”

Isabella gasped in horror. “They performed it tonight—”

“I caught them in time,” I assured the girls. “Instead, now he’s writing a sonnet exalting Papà and Mamma. He imagines Romeo and Juliet could become a splendid play, too.” I left off the part about Guglielmo writing it as a tragedy; one did not tempt the Fates.

“Er...may I ask, how did it happen that Escalus was in the right place at the right time?” Isabella began.

“It must have been an accident!” Katherina said.

“No.” Princess Isabella was firm. “Accidents don’t happen to my brother. He plans and plots everything, especially something as important as his marriage. I should have known when he urged me to visit you. He’s so protective but he seems to think...well, not that you’re not part of one of the foremost families in Verona, and he’s commented that everybody shouts...” Under the combined focus of both Katherina and me—I hesitate to call them glares—she started to look a little panicked. “I...I should have suspected he had...” She whispered, “Ulterior motivations.”

“He could not have developed his resolve so long ago as that!” Katherina objected.

“Most definitely,” Isabella and I answered together.

I added, “When it comes to long-term strategizing, the prince of Verona casts his shadow lightly but inescapably.”

Katherina’s eyes grew round in awe. “Zoinks!”

“Don’t swear, dear,” I said. That was for me.

In a worried tone, Isabella asked, “Does he know what I did?”

“Not for certain, but he has suspicions.” I took the damp towel and wiped my face again. “Think carefully before you answer his queries.”

She lifted her chin in a regal movement. “I’ll tell him the truth. It’s my duty.”

“Nay nay.” Katherina flopped back on the bed, her forearm over her eyes.

Isabella stared at her as if confused. “What?”

Katherina lifted her arm and looked at her.

Isabella contemplated her friend, then looked at me. “Will...do you think Katherina will get in trouble with Escalus?”

“He is, as you said, a stodgy man who takes his duty as prince very seriously.” I chose my words carefully. “If confronted with the evidence of misbehavior, he may feel he must take action, and what would follow wouldn’t reflect well on...any of us.”

Isabella’s high, fair forehead crinkled with thought. “Oh. Yes. I see. I did something I shouldn’t have while under the Montague roof, and therefore, while I should bear all responsibility for my actions, others might not view the matter in a like light.”

I’ll say this for her; she caught on quickly, probably the result of princessly training.

“Yet I should also confess to my brother...” She wrapped her arms around her waist. “I don’t know what to do. What’s right?”

“Sometimes what’s right isn’t easy to know.” After that diplomatic banality, I added, “However, I believe your brother is willing to...overlook the details of this transgression in return for the unspoken assurance you’ll never again engage in such an adventure.”

“Never! I loved it so much until the end. It was like eating a delicious apple, and in the last bite, finding a worm!” She shuddered. “I’ll say nothing.”

Katherina groaned in relief.

“Although I must confess to Friar Laurence.” Isabella turned to the outstretched figure of my sister. “You too, Katherina.”

Katherina groaned in dismay.

I laughed and left them to their mutual commiseration, and probably some pleasurable reminiscing, and quietly retreated along the gallery toward my bedroom.

From the atrium below, I heard our footman call softly, “Lady Rosaline, you have a visitor.”

Gentle reader, I know you comprehend my next thought.

Now what?

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Wearily, I dragged myself to the rail and stared down at Tommaso. In my politest tone, far different from the one I wished to use, I asked, “May one ask whom?”

“A tall...person. She is...from a house on the square.” Before Tommaso became our footman, he’d lived on the streets and he knew very well who wished to see me. He simply didn’t know whether he should present her.

I nodded. “Madame Culatello. Welcome her in. I’ll descend.” Actually, if I didn’t get some sleep pretty soon, I was going to do more than descend. I was going to fall flat on my face. Nevertheless, I would not dismiss Madame Culatello or her exhaustion, either.

Madame Culatello had changed into a handsome day dress that complemented her narrow figure, but she looked worn and weary and a bruise discolored her cheek and blackened her eye.

I greeted her with smiles and thanks for her support last night, asked Tommaso to bring wine for us both, and expressed my hope that none of her ladies had come to harm in the riot of confusion that ended the masquerade. I also reflected guiltily on my belief that she’d been the one who betrayed me. That suspicion had been unworthy of her and cast shame on me.

When she had assured me all was well, I guided her into the atrium, open to the sky, and to the small table farthest from the bedrooms at the back where my parents slept.

As we sat, Madame Culatello took my hand, saw the ring, and burst into tears. “He found you. The prince found you!”

“Sh.” I handed her a cloth to muffle her sobs. “He did, indeed.” As a reminder, the cold seat felt good against my sore bottom. “As you see, I’m for the most part unharmed.”

“Berengaria saw you running from the masquerade. Men were chasing you. Men in satyr masks! She chased too, but one of them turned on her and she fled in fear.”

I wished to smack whichever of the prince’s bodyguards had dared frighten the valiant Berengaria. “I’m sorry I didn’t think to send a messenger. But you know I land on my feet.” I tried a bracing smile.

Madame Culatello didn’t seem particularly reassured. “Berengaria returned to La Gnocca and we called in all our contacts, but no one knew where you’d disappeared to, only that you’d been chased when you tried to return to Casa Montague.” She gratefully accepted the wine Tommaso offered. “I worried because...Uria is gone!”

“Gone? How? The iron cuff!” I’d seen Madame Culatello lock it around Uria’s ankle.

“The cuff had somehow been opened.” She drank. “There was blood on the metal.”

“Hers?” A stupid question, for how would Madame Culatello know? I, too, took the wine and swallowed to ease the constriction in my throat. “Was there a struggle? Could you tell?”

“A struggle, yes. He came and got her. Foolish girl. She failed him and now she pays the price.” Although Madame Culatello had been angry at Uria, and although we both knew Uria had given Count Prospero the information he needed to trap me, she still hurt for the young woman who had been one of her companions.

I settled back in dismay. I’d assured myself the only one to come to harm tonight was me, and some would point out—had pointed out—I deserved all that happened and

all's well that ends well. Now I wondered what had happened to Uria, and hoped she didn't fatally regret her foolish alliance with Count Prospero.

Madame Culatello turned the subject to what she considered a happier topic. "I'm so glad I found Prince Escalus and brought him. He saved you in time?"

"In time for what?"

"Before those men grabbed you and...hurt you." A euphemism for what cruel men invariably forced on a desperate woman.

Should I tell Madame Culatello the truth? That Prince Escalus had taken this night's opportunity to...to...

Madame Culatello's gaze sharpened. "Perhaps I'm asking the wrong question. He didn't hurt you, did he? When I went to the palace and told Prince Escalus the events that were unfolding, I've never seen him...he was angry. Livid. With me, and with you. He didn't even give me time to explain what had happened and why you were involved in recovering the ring. He simply told me to watch over your safety until he could arrive, called for his men and shoved me out the palace door." Leaning forward, she clasped my hand. "He's very possessive of you."

"I'm not hurt," I assured her.

She squeezed my fingers a little too hard. "I should have known that a man with formidable control needs it to constrain his formidable passions, and one should avoid roiling those passions lest they tumble you into a whole new world."

"Now you tell me."

She didn't smile as I expected. Her attention wasn't on my small attempt at humor;

her thoughts were turned inward. In a troubled voice, she said, “Whatever passions he showed you in these last hours, still he put his ring on your finger.”

“So he did.” Formidable control for his formidable passions. Going forward in my dealings with Prince Escalus, I needed to remember Madame Culatello’s assessment and her wisdom in dealing with human pairings.

“Ultimately, all is well. Even if he’s displeased, you still hold your place as his betrothed.” Madame Culatello stoked the diamond with one finger—and that finger trembled.

I grasped her hand. “Cara amica, what’s wrong? Do you worry more about Count Prospero and what vengeance he’ll wreak on you? For you need not. Prince Escalus has banished him.”

Rather gloomily, she said, “I fear we haven’t seen the last of Count Prospero.”

I remembered Prospero’s wealth, his insidious power, the terror he so relished exploiting, and his fury at me for challenging and defeating him, and I comprehended her distress. “Perhaps not, but we must trust that Prince Escalus can compel him with the promise of imprisonment and death should he attempt to return.”

“Yes. Foremost in the prince’s intention is to keep Verona’s law for the sake of her people. After such a tumultuous night, I fear he’ll view me as a disruptor of order and cast me from the city and my ladies with me.” She lifted her chin...but it wobbled. “I can survive. I can start over. But I’ve extended my protection over those girls and I’d hoped...imagined I could keep them safe from the dreadful cruelties men can inflict. Now...” Another tear trickled down her cheek, and she swabbed at it with the rag.

“Oh. I comprehend... Oh.” Prince Escalus had displayed his wrath and Madame Culatello foresaw calamitous results for the home she had so carefully built and the

shelter she so kindly offered to my sister, to Princess Isabella, and to me. I thought how I should proceed.

I glanced up at the sky. The sun's first rays were touching the house. Night was over. I'd kept my vow to Prince Escalus. Now it was time to help a trusted friend.

And yes, gentle reader, you're right. I banked too much on blind faith, but you'd do the same, I know. I said, "This night, so lately flown, Prince Escalus put the ring on my finger as a symbol of his..." Not possession. He'd firmly corrected me when I used that term. "As a symbol of our betrothal. The prince and I know, however, it's important that the ring ceremony be public and seen by all our people, our aristocrats and our families. Indeed, after such a rough beginning, it's imperative that every bit of our time be bound by ceremony and witnessed by all."

She laughed, as I meant her to, but she comprehended very well the dangerous nature of gossip, how much had already spread because of the fashion in which the prince had captured me, and what more could happen should this night's masquerade escapade become public knowledge. "Yes. Of course." She tried to focus on my issue, which I knew was so much less than hers.

"Also, he wishes to size the ring to fit my finger more easily, and I told him I'd return it today by a messenger I trusted." I worked the ring off over my knuckle. "Would you take it to the prince?" I put it in her palm and closed her fingers over the glittering stone set in a carefully crafted swoop of gold.

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Madame Culatello stared at me, absorbing my message.

You have to admit, as befitting me, it wasn't subtle.

She straightened her skinny shoulders. "Lady Rosaline, I would be honored." She didn't say "I won't fail you" or any of the assurances she might have spoken. She understood my message, and the message I sent to the prince. La Gnocca would continue to operate in Verona under his protection, and mine. She knotted the ring into the lace around her neck and thrust it into her cleavage. "There's no safer place in Verona," she told me with fake solemnity.

"This evening I'll send a cask of the Montagues' best red wine to La Gnocca." I absorbed the upwelling of gratitude I felt for the help of La Gnocca's ladies. "You and all of your family should drink it with my gratitude."

Madame Culatello's concerns visibly fell away. "That will indeed lighten the evening workload."

At the sound of a knock on the door, I rose and tried not to shout, Who the hell? But I must have said it with my expression, she chuckled and rose also. "I leave you to your next visitor." Taking my hand, she leaned over it and kissed my fingers in a courtly gesture. "You'll make the prince a fine wife, and Verona a grand princess."

Tommaso appeared. "Lady Rosaline, it's a foreign fellow." He lowered his voice. "Rather scruffy."

"Show him in." I smiled to see Madame Culatello and Guglielmo view each other as

they passed, each clearly convinced the other was odd and inappropriate.

Tommaso bowed Madame Culatello out and pointed toward the wine goblets. I nodded and considered how lovely it was that this youth from the streets had so easily grown into his position.

To me, Guglielmo bowed in courtly grace and said, “I bring the promised sonnet.”

“So soon!” Surely he must have dusted off an old one rather than written one afresh.

His shining eyes, his eagerness to wave the roll of parchment he clutched in his fist disabused me of that notion. “The idea of this play has possessed me. The glorious tale of Romeo and Juliet as a love story and a tragedy has kept me up long hours of feverish scribbling.” He showed his ink-stained fingers. “Forgive me my early intrusion, Lady Rosaline, but I couldn’t wait to read this sonnet to you. It’s a part of the scene when Romeo and Juliet first meet at the Capulet party. If I may?”

I gestured to him to continue.

“I play both parts.” He took his place in the atrium where the sun shone behind him and placed him in silhouette, and he proved he was an actor as he performed first as Mamma, then as Papà. He became each of them, male and female, lover and beloved, engaged in witty courtship banter.

Mamma:

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,

Which mannerly devotion shows in this:

For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,

And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

Papà:

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

Mamma:

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in pray'r.

Papà:

O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do,

They pray—grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

Mamma:

Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

Papà:

Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.

(Guglielmo pressed a kiss on the parchment)

Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purg'd.

Mamma:

Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

Papà:

Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urg'd!

Give me my sin again!

Gentle reader, as you know, I'm neither sentimental nor poetic, but this sounded so much like my parents when they were adoring each other—as always they did—that I pressed my hand over my heart to contain the delight.

From the gallery above and behind, slow applause began from the very hands Guglielmo immortalized in his sonnet.

He swung around to see Papà and Mamma smiling down at him, clad in robes, both gloriously beautiful as befitting this legendary couple.

Of course Guglielmo recognized them, and executed a grand obeisance, and threw a kiss to Mamma, which caused Papà to frown and me to hastily intervene. Taking Guglielmo's arm, I said to them, "This night, I commissioned a sonnet to celebrate your long love affair and this young playwright from Inghilterra has captured the essence of your hearts. I do thank you, Guglielmo, and here's the other gold piece I promised you."

Guglielmo still stood, staring up at Mamma with a dazzled expression.

Papà's frown grew more ominous and I didn't know whether Papà's tendency to skewer men who fell in love with Mamma hadn't reached Guglielmo's ears or he was so bedazzled with Mamma's celebrated beauty it never occurred to him to cower in prudent apprehension.

Personally, I'm not in favor of blood on the flagstones of our atrium. It's a bitch to

clean off and our staff rightfully objected, so I signaled Tommaso, shoved the promised gold piece into Guglielmo's one hand, took the scroll from the other, and said, "Thank you, Guglielmo, for your talent, it's time to exit the stage. Our footman will see you out, go forth and write your play!" I watched as Tommaso firmly marched the sputtering fool toward the entry. When I heard the front door shut firmly behind him, I changed my mien and smiled up at my parents. "Buongiorno, i miei genitori. I trust this sunrise finds you well."

"Do you indeed, Lady Rosaline?" Mamma had blossomed with the advance of her pregnancy, and tonight I realized she'd reached the stage of, shall we say, irritability, for in her large, doe-like eyes I saw not a hint of warmth toward her wayward daughter. That is to say, me.

One couldn't blame her, of course. She was also at the stage of needing more sleep, and I was depriving her. In a miffed tone she said, "Daughter, it would seem from your attire and that recitation, we slept too well."

Papà focused on me, observed my masquerade in boy's clothing, patted my mother on the shoulder and said, "Amate Juliet, I present the opportunity to speak to Rosie about her betrothal, as you wished. She's all yours." He left as if a charging bull was after him. When it came to disciplining his daughters, he was a rampant coward.

She glared after him, then turned her glower onto me and tapped her foot.

I advanced across the atrium to stand below her. I curtsied, an awkward motion when done in tights. "Mamma, 'tis true, I have been on an adventure which you in all parental wisdom should chide and scold. Yet I beg you to shrug it aside, for I've righted a wrong and saved a friend, and"—I lifted the scroll that contained the imagined dialogue between Romeo and Juliet—"paid honor to the love between you and Papà with all the gratitude of a child who recognizes the happiness of the home you've built together against all odds."

I knew I'd said the right thing when she asked without rancor, "What if the prince should discover your exploits?"

"He already has." I wished to clarify before I said too much. "I suppose Papà told you all that happened last evening in the garden between Prince Escalus and me? That we were caught and now I must marry...him?"

"He did, and your Papà is dazzled by your cleverness in catching the prince." She gave me a wise smile that bonded us in knowing. "He believes you did it on purpose."

At this juncture, I thought it wise not to commit myself.

"It is true, isn't it, Rosie? That you were in the garden on purpose? To meet Lysander?"

I nodded, thin-lipped.

"Somehow the manipulator was manipulated?"

I nodded again. The night's exploits had managed to push the mortification to the back of my mind, but Mamma recapped the events ruthlessly and, I knew, deliberately.

"And? What have you gleaned from your adventures you so blithely tell me to ignore?"

"Prince Escalus continues to favor me with his intentions." I chose my words meticulously, for because while Mamma had been impetuous in her early passion for Papà, she cast an all the more vigilant eye upon her daughters' virtue.

“Despite your wild adventures—”

“Not so wild, Mamma!” Although some might believe visiting a theater, a house of pleasure and a masquerade all in one night constitutes wild. (Let us not discuss the fountain courtyard and garden intervals.)

“—Prince Escalus will have you. Do you understand exactly what that signifies for you?”

I wasn’t sure what she sought in the way of an answer, so I shook my head.

“You’ll be our princess and will deal well with your new position.”

“Yes, Mamma. I will, Mamma.” Whether or not I like it, Mamma. I promptly quashed the thought. One did not sass Lady Juliet with any expectation of surviving with character intact.

“But you’re a woman who has sought the passions your Papà and I have shown every day of your life.”

“I wouldn’t say that!” I’d spent my life attempting to remain a spinster.

“You set eyes on handsome, clever Lysander and fell in love.”

Sturdily I said, “That’s of no moment now.”

“No, and sadly, the prince is as cool and temperate as a breeze off the Adriatic.”

When I thought of the scene in the fountain courtyard, of Prince Escalus and his abrupt display of fury and desire, I could only be glad that the sun hadn’t risen enough to pierce the shadows beneath the gallery, for I blushed hard enough to break

a sweat.

Mamma must have perceived too much in my expression, for she used her shrewd parent voice to say, “Someday, my Rosaline, you’ll advise me of the details of this night.”

“Yes, Mamma.” I bowed my head in obedience and possibly exhaustion. “Now, with your permission, I would seek the sleep of the righteous.”

“Are you? Righteous?”

“Mostly. Probably the telling of the night should wait until after I’m bound to the prince in holy matrimony.” I started toward the stairs, then I thought of the details and paused with one foot on the first tread. “Or even better, after the birth of our eighth child.” I meaningfully viewed her baby bump.

“Will I laugh then?” She seemed to be in doubt.

Justifiably. “Maybe our tenth child.” I climbed the stairs and took my mother’s hand and kissed it fondly.

She rested her hand on my head. “This marriage is not the fate I ever imagined for you, my darling Rosie.” She tilted my chin toward her. “You choose your own path.”

“Always I’ve chosen my own path. No one cared or paid particular attention. I’m not maligning you, Mamma, but you have other children and I am, as we know, quite competent and a sturdy plant that needs little support.”

Mamma nodded in agreement. “You were ever frighteningly competent.”

“On the day I met Lysander, my flat, stable world shivered and I staggered. Yet I kept

my feet until last night, when the earth quaked and rolled and all I knew was overturned and I...am not the same.” My eyes drooped and I yawned. “If I may, I’ll sleep now. I don’t know what dreams may come. Perhaps a vision of a heady future.” Wait. I frowned. That sounded familiar.

“Go to bed, Rosie. Things will look better after you’ve slept.” Mamma kissed me and returned to the bedroom she shared with Papà.

I returned to my bedroom (at last!) where Nurse still snored with magnificent warbling tones.

My parents’ passion had subsided, at least for as long as it would take Mamma to give Papà the Rosie report.

The neighbors’ raucous party had fallen silent.

Our old dog did wake and pad over to greet me, enveloping me in a cloud of welcome-home gaseous emissions that convinced me to send him to sleep with my little brother Cesario.

That little boy reveled in a rancid fart, his own or others.

I petted the dog, put him out of the room, and stripped out of my boy clothes.

With my knife, I cut them into rags, removing temptation from any other little sister who sought adventure.

I donned a clean nightgown and wearily sank down on the bed.

I winced when my bottom hit the mattress; amazing how three spanks from a firm hand could so promptly remind me of the prince’s reprimand.

I suppose that was his intention.

I pulled the pillow over my eyes to close out the brightening rays of the sun, closed my eyes and drifted to sleep...then promptly came awake for a single thought.

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On Tuesday next at 8 p.m.,

Princess Isabella of the House of Leonardi

Requests the Honor of the Presence of Rosaline of the House of Montague,

Her Honored Parents, and Beloved Siblings

for a Tour of the Palace and its Gardens

and a Simple Family Dinner to Celebrate the Upcoming Nuptials of

Lady Rosaline to Prince Escalus of the House of Leonardi

Please send your acceptance via return messenger within the hour.

The Montague family was preparing to go to the palace for that intimate dinner. The image should have conjured up glamour, excitement, music, food, and wine.

Alas, it was not so.

Earlier, Nurse had helped Mamma into her voluminous gown with a high waist to accommodate the baby bump. As always, Mamma personified glamour and beauty, Verona's ideal noblewoman ripe with child.

Now in my bedroom, she reclined on my bed with pillows behind her shoulders and supervised as Nurse and her staff helped Katherina, Imogene, Emilia, and me into our

layers of chemises, stockings, underskirts, bodices, and skirts.

In the adjoining bedroom, Papà had volunteered himself and his manservant to wrestle Cesario into his formal clothing.

For my sake, my sisters attempted to maintain their good humor, joking that because of the reported dismal state of dining at the palace, I should strap on the scabbard Nurse had given me, but leave out the dagger and instead stuff it full of bread, cheese, and dates.

Yet, as Emilia said morosely, that wasn't funny when it sounded like such a good idea.

We did, of course, each have our eating knives attached to our belts with a scabbard, but we couldn't leave those home any more than we could walk the streets without shoes. A guest who arrived at a meal without a blade would likely go home hungry and defenseless.

I had a new silk gown—bodice and skirt, never worn—made for Mamma before she fell pregnant.

The color, an intense teal, should have been too bold for an ingenue, but as Mamma said, I was too old to play that role, the prince was too sensible to expect it, and because she'd passed her dramatic coloring on to me, the color presented me like a dewy pearl in a velvet setting.

Overnight, Nurse had driven our seamstresses to lengthen the hem (I was taller than Mamma), let out the bodice (my shoulders and rib cage were broader than Mamma's), and create a matching pearled cap to cover my dark hair and matching beaded sleeves to be laced onto the bodice.

I felt like the prize pig at an auction.

“Should she carry a dagger?” Nurse was serious. “For the first time, she’s going to the palace as the prince’s betrothed, an important role in these treacherous times, and enemies may lurk in the dark corners and hidden places.”

No one scoffed. My recent ordeal with Verona’s first serial killer had left more scars than the one on my chest. We had discovered by grisly experience that a woman, no matter how protected, could discover danger where she least expected it.

“Yes!” Imogene was all about fighting.

“Not Lysander’s dagger,” Mamma warned. “Nor yours, good Nurse. The prince’s dagger is correct.”

When danger had first reared its head, both Nurse and Lysander had given me daggers, to strap one each onto my arms.

Prince Escalus had given me a dagger also, this one a stiletto to strap onto my ankle.

I had put them all to good use, and his dagger I had slipped into a scabbard lined with ribs and extinguished a beating heart. His dagger, wielded by me, had saved my own most wretched flesh, and for that, at least, I was grateful.

Nurse fetched the blade from the cupboard, knelt and buckled the worn leather onto my leg, then straightened my linen underskirt and velvet overskirt so no sign of it showed.

Now dressed, we girls lined up in front of the bed for Mamma’s preliminary inspection.

She clasped her hands over her heart. “My beautiful daughters!”

We were, of course. That’s not narcissism; when you’re raised knowing your parents are the most beautiful, romantic, admired couple in the known world, it follows that you, too, are a beauty. We all have varying degrees of raven hair, golden skin, and well-lashed, large brown eyes. Katherina and I had developed curvaceous figures; we assumed the younger girls would, too. With another vision of pulchritude always following close behind me, I didn’t waste time on conceit.

Yet standing here, a jewelry box of silks and satins, gold embroidered sleeves and soft shawls woven in Nepal, we knew we were striking, even intimidating.

Nurse helped Mamma sit up.

“Now!” Mamma said. “Emilia, stop picking your nose. Katherina, lift your chin! No one will notice the pimple on your forehead.”

“How can they not?” Katherina snapped. “It’s a unicorn horn!”

Nurse studied it, then produced a yellow-colored salve that reduced the redness.

“Imogene, show me your hands.” Mamma looked at Imogene’s nails and shook her head. “Nurse, take her and use soap and a brush.”

As Nurse dragged her away, Imogene wailed a protest.

Mamma continued, “Emilia, forget you have a nose. Rosie, come here.” She held out her hand. I came and took it. “You’re handling this calmly. Are you feeling well?”

“Mamma, I would rage and cry if I thought it would do any good, but I recognize the truth of your words yesterday. I do take responsibility for my actions.” The certainty

was, my world had fallen apart and I had moved from hot wrath to numb horror. “I’m resigned to my fate.”

Katherina snorted.

I looked at her. “In sooth, I am. I’ll be the wife of the podestà. I’ll be wealthy, wear beautiful clothing, host parties, be the envy of all Verona—”

“You don’t care about any of that stuff!” Emilia protested.

“No, but that’s what my life now will be. Before Lysander, I’d schemed to stay here in the heart of Family Montague and be the maiden aunt to all the babies you would have. I’d have been happy. To my surprise, I met Lysander and dared to dream I had at last discovered a love worthy of a progeny of Romeo and Juliet’s. Then...” I lifted a despairing hand and let it fall.

Katherina was the daughter who always asked the right questions. “Did Prince Escalus explain why he was there instead of Lysander?”

“He said quite a few things. He wants a wife and he had specifications. Apparently, despite my temper and my unappreciated ability to shout loudly enough to make myself heard, he values me a master diplomat.” In reference to my ability to tactfully maneuver myself out of unwanted betrothals...except the last one in which my betrothed was stabbed to death by the aforesaid serial killer. That happened without any maneuvering on my part.

I promise you, it did.

“Diplomacy is good for the wife of the podestà.” Katherina nodded.

I shot her a glare, then remembered it was my resolve to remain stoic in the face of

this adversity. “He said he liked my charming family.”

“Emilia, stop picking your nose!” Mamma commanded.

“It itches!” Emilia protested.

“Come here, child.” Mamma held a linen towel to Emilia’s face. “Now blow.”

Emilia honked.

“He’s in for a rude shock,” Katherina told me. “What else?”

“He wants an older sister to care for Princess Isabella.”

“You have the creds for that.” Katherina tried always to look on the bright side, but now in a biting tone, she added, “It would be pleasant if you could have been left in place to act the older sister to us.”

I hugged her. “I’ll always be there when you have need of me.”

“Don’t wrinkle!” Nurse shrieked from the basin, where she scrubbed at Imogene’s hands.

We deftly separated.

“He said I’d proved myself to be a good household manager.” (This was true; Mamma was a grand woman, but a disaster at managing the Casa Montague and I’d early taken the reins.) “And because I come from fertile stock, I’ll provide him with a crew of strong sons to row his barge and a flock of lovely daughters to listen, enraptured, as he spins the same tale over and over of his past triumphs.”

The last was a jest of a kind; at the dinner table, Papà did enjoy repeating tales of his youth until we all cried, “Desist!” Not that he ever listened.

“He’s the prince. Of course, he wants heirs.” Mamma sounded prosaic.

“He did mention that,” I said, “and he seemed enthralled with filling the empty, echoing corridors of the palace with progeny.”

“Ahhh.” Mamma and Katherina sighed sentimentally. “How sweet.”

I covered my face with my hands. I know my place in society, but the hop from lifelong virgin to breeder of nations seemed sudden, jarring, and—considering the bedroom duties necessary to bring this about and the partner who had elected himself as my mate—a lot of work for a few minutes of what I assumed would be pleasure.

Someone tugged at my arm. I looked down into Emilia’s wide eyes. “Yuck,” she said.

“Thank you, Emilia. I couldn’t agree more.” I stared at the others. “Then he cited that I’d trusted him to rescue me from murder charges.”

“He did do that,” Katherina agreed.

“A lot of people helped with that,” I snapped. “He said I teased him. He seemed much struck by that.”

Mamma’s soft heart was wrung. “No laughter, no teasing. Since the deaths of his parents, Escalus the Elder by assassination and dear Eleanor after she gave birth to Princess Isabella, Prince Escalus has lacked a normal family life.”

“He’s not like us,” Emilia said, and it wasn’t a compliment.

“He said something about admiring my courage.” Then I lied. “And that’s all.”

Imogene arrived holding out her distinctly cleaner hands as if they belonged to someone else, someone she didn’t know or like.

Nurse followed close on her heels, and she mocked me. “That’s all? Really? What about what he gave you?”

This woman had been my mother’s nurse and my nurse and supervised the care of all the children. She slept in my room, she bossed us all, and now she butted into the conversation when I least wanted her.

I glared, conveying my displeasure without words. “He didn’t give me anything.” That I wanted to admit.

As was her wont, she blithely ignored my palpable hint. “After you met with him, you clutched something in your hand and held it to your heart.”

Mamma and my sisters all began to smile.

“Let me assist your faulty memory,” Nurse said. “When I asked you about it, you said he gave you something to think about.”

In exasperation, I said, “La merda, woman, do you never cease your babbling?”

“Don’t be vulgar, Rosaline,” Mamma said automatically.

Nurse put on an innocent expression. “To be silent when I know the truth would be a sin of omission.”

My three sisters began circling like the brats they are. “What did he give you, Rosie?

Did he give you a ring? Did he give you a kiss? Did he give his heart?"

"Definitely not his heart." If he'd said he loved me, I might not return his affection, but I wouldn't be quite so aggravated.

"We haven't seen a ring," Imogene said, "so—"

Katherina and Emilia chanted, "Oooo, a kiss. Rosie got a kiss. Rosie got a kiss. Rosie got a—"

"That's enough, girls." Mamma was firm, but smiling. "We must leave Rosie her secrets."

"Humph." Like that was going to happen in this household.

Papà staggered in, sweaty and exhausted, pushing Cesario ahead of him. Tommaso, our young footman recently promoted to the position as Papà's manservant, stood behind him, looking equally worn. "Behold my son, perfectly dressed. Now I have to go change again. Don't let him get dirty or tear anything. I'll be right back!" He sprinted out of my room and down the corridor to our parents' suite, with Tommaso on his heels.

Cesario smiled, a cheerful imp, and struck a pose. "Princess Isabella will think I'm handsome and love me more than ever."

"You're a blister on the bottom of humanity"—if there was a choice between diplomacy and insult, Emilia always chose the insult—"and Princess Isabella knows it."

"I am not!" Cesario shoved her with his hand.

“Are too.” Emilia shoved back.

“She does not!” He shoved.

“Does too!” She body shoved.

Nurse caught them both by the backs of the necks and held them apart. “You will both remain clean and unwrinkled until you arrive at the palace or I’ll personally wash and iron you while you’re in your clothing.”

Both kids relaxed so abruptly, they fell to the floor, where they remained until Papà arrived clad in an entirely different outfit. “To think I used to take an hour to dress,” he marveled. “Children have an unexpected way of changing your priorities.”

Mamma put her hand on her belly and half closed her eyes. “This child is much more placid than Cesario. Probably a girl.”

“No, Mamma, it’s a boy.” Imogene threw that off as if everyone should know. “He looks like Grandpapa Montague and he’ll make famous wines.”

We stared at her. Imogene had a most disconcerting way of predicting the future, which wouldn’t be a concern if she was wrong, but she was always right.

Time to turn the subject before someone mentioned witchcraft. “One thing about this visit,” I announced with robust, if unlikely, good humor, “there’s no way it can be as bad as we fear.”

* * *

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“The central atrium of the palace contains exotic trees and plants from far-distant lands, like Persia and Aksum. You can tell this tree, commonly called a palmyra by the long, hanging leaves and the rough, scaly bark.” Prince Escalus used his long fingers to display the leaves to the whole Montague family, who nodded in unison, holding their eyes open as wide as they could to keep from nodding off. “It is said to grow to great heights far to the east, in the warmer parts of Jambudv?pa.”

In the big scheme of things, this oratory was nothing more than a fleeting moment of discomfort, but...my fault. My fault that my beloved family was bored almost to tears and we all now knew that we faced many more moments of excruciating ennui. Moments that would stretch into hours, and hours into years...

Because I was betrothed to Prince Escalus, soon to be married to him. I'd doomed my family and myself to an eternity of listening to him expound about his peculiar enthusiasms as if they were interesting.

I groaned gloomily.

Prince Escalus stopped talking and looked at me in inquiry.

Mamma and Katherina viewed me in warning.

Cesario piped up, “Rosie, you sound like Mamma. Does your tummy hurt like hers?”

I put my hand on my belly. “Sweet Jesus, no!”

Papà glared at my hand.

I dropped it to my side and faked a smile. “Prince Escalus, while as an apprentice apothecary, I admire your enthusiasm for your garden—you have so many gardeners!”

I’d glimpsed a dozen men and women lurking in the bushes, kneeling in the dirt holding a trowel, carrying plants in pots.

Prince Escalus flicked a glance around. “My garden is dear to me.”

“Obviously.”

“As an apprentice apothecary, would you like to tour the herb garden?” He gestured toward the walls that separated the common herbs from his more exotic plants.

“No, I thank you.” Heaven forbid! “I fear my family doesn’t share my enthusiasm for herbal preparations. While we have our whole lives to enjoy this marvelous space, I’d hoped to hear more about the palace art and culture.” A lousy excuse, and one that had my siblings rolling their eyes, but better than any suspicion that I might be with child.

Prince Escalus strode over, loomed over me (I was to discover he used looming to great effect), and looked into my eyes. “I was going to tell you about this spring-blooming plant, commonly known as rhododendron. But whatever my future bride desires is my command.”

Behind us, Imogene faked sticking her finger down her throat.

Mamma slapped her lightly on the back of the head.

I grinned.

One side of Prince Escalus’s mouth lifted. I think it was supposed to be a smile, but

with this melancholy guy, who knew? Anyway, why was he smiling? He hadn't seen the byplay.

The word "melancholy" fit Prince Escalus like a well-tailored coat.

He'd never been a handsome boy, and, in fact, before the battles, I remember him comporting himself like the self-important youth he knew himself to be.

Son of the podestà, heir to the rule of Verona—how learned, how glorious, and how commanding in his every word and deed! Even young as I was, I disdained him.

Not that it mattered; I was a girl and unworthy of his notice.

Then, eleven years ago, his life had been split in two.

The House of Acquisasso tried by stealth, violence, and deception to take the office of podestà for their own.

Prince Escalus the elder put down their rebellion, for he was a warrior of renown, and in the aftermath was assassinated.

To this day, the assassin remained at large and undetected.

Barely thirteen, Prince Escalus the younger survived imprisonment and torture.

He rose from the dungeons to take command of the city, and now his importance was indeed as great as he'd previously imagined.

Still, suffering had marked the unremarkable countenance, and not in a good way.

Although he was now but twenty-four, he wore black, and black, and more black, lightened by occasional trims of midnight blue, mold green, and gloomy maroon.

Streaks of white marked his shoulder-length black hair, his brown skin bore a gray tinge of dungeon, and his scarred complexion would eternally show signs of the knife and the heated rod.

He limped slightly from the iron bar they had used on the bones of his right leg, and although I'd never seen him in action, he'd earned a fearsome reputation as a swordsman.

In other words, Prince Escalus was the complete opposite of my One True Love, Lysander of the house of Marcketti.

Cesario's patience had been tested long enough, and he blurted, "Prince Escalus, where's Princess Isabella? I love Princess Isabella. I want to see her."

Prince Escalus glanced around as if puzzled. "I don't know. I believed she would join us for this part of the tour. She always seems so interested in my garden."

In other words, she was staying the hell away.

"I'm sure directing a formal dinner could be a challenge for a twelve-year-old." Mamma had already established herself as the orphaned Princess Isabella's surrogate mother. "Perhaps I should find her and offer my assistance."

"And me!" Katherina said.

"And me!" Imogene said.

"And me!" Emilia said.

"And me!" Cesario said.

Papà put his hand on Cesario's shoulder. "Son, men don't interfere in the business of

women.”

“That’s not fair!” Cesario protested. “I’m the one who asked about her!”

“Princess Isabella is surprisingly accomplished at such formalities,” Prince Escalus assured us, “and needs no assistance.”

“If you have no taste,” Katherina said to me out of the corner of her mouth.

I widened my eyes to keep from cackling.

The prince continued, “If you come this way, this door leads into the long walk.”

As with most rich homes in Verona, the palace stood as a private enclave surrounded by tall stone walls built to keep intruders out and the residents safe, for Veronese families fought for power, and at any moment, another city-state could march to bring us under their control.

Yet while the palace walls were the tallest and most heavily fortified, and the towers were created to support the prince’s archers and watchmen, the interior reflected all the wealth and comfort of a master family.

The atrium at the center of the house was the largest I’d ever seen, and the balconies and stairways and great carved wood doors led into the home itself.

Despite my recent humiliations at the prince’s hands, the interior of the palace interested me.

Prince Escalus led the way. “Within the great walk, we display the works we collect for public display.”

“You allow the public to view?” Papà knew very well he did not. Since the revolt, the

prince had instigated a security shutdown and no one entered the palace except to speak privately to the prince, and that in one designated and well-guarded office chamber.

“No.” Prince Escalus was brief, blunt, and unapologetic. “The best works of art we keep above with the bedrooms for our private enjoyment.” He turned to me and without appearing to move closer, again he loomed. “I look forward to giving you, Rosie, a private showing.”

Gentle reader, what was I supposed to say to that?

I’m looking forward to it, too?

Because while I’m not a subtle person, I knew his private showing had little to do with works of art.

Papà made a low, rumbling growl.

That was never a good sign.

Mamma, bless her, stepped in with a firm hand on Papà’s arm and a pleasant reprimand. “As you know, Prince Escalus, Romeo is one of the most renowned swordsmen in Verona—”

Cesario interrupted, “The most renowned.” He knew the legend as well as anybody, and although he didn’t quite understand Prince Escalus’s subtext, he did know he didn’t like the tone of the conversation.

Mamma placed her other hand on the top of Cesario’s head. “—and should anyone unsheathe their works of art prematurely, I don’t know if I could stop my beloved husband, Romeo, from removing said works of art from their hooks on the wall.”

A prolonged pause.

Prince Escalus looked around at the Montagues. Mamma was now gripping Papà's straining elbow with both hands. Katherina kept a straight face. Imogene openly giggled. Emilia was whispering to Cesario what Mamma's code meant. (Remember, Cesario was only six, and a boy; subtlety was beyond him.)

At last, Prince Escalus's gaze landed on me.

I explained, "In a large family, a member must always be aware that what one says may be overheard and subject to interpretation by other members. Discretion is advised."

Prince Escalus looked around again at the Montagues, and I think it was the first time he truly realized that in marrying me, he married the whole family.

I felt obliged to add, "Please recall, I have two sisters not present who are equally opinionated and outspoken."

Katherina had to spoil my warning with an opinion of her own. "No one's as opinionated and outspoken as you, Rosie."

Prince Escalus's mouth did that sideways twitch, which might indicate horror in this case, but I'd come to suspect might be humor. He bowed first to Mamma and Papà. "I beg your pardon. I hold the greatest respect for your daughter's virginity."

Only I recognized that as a thrust (if you'll pardon the term) at my irritation with that virtue that has given me fame among the vulgar of Verona.

Papà gave another growl, not quite as menacing, but, still, a warning. "Step carefully, my prince. Montague loyalty flows to the house of Leonardi. But above and beyond all other duty, I am the papà. I stand with my noble family in joy and peace, and

before my family as a bulwark against harm.”

Imogene’s giggles abruptly halted. The other children straightened and nodded solemnly.

“I understand, Lord Montague.” Prince Escalus bowed more deeply to Papà and Mamma. “And madam.”

“We know our roles in our world,” I said softly.

He viewed my siblings with what I thought must be a new comprehension, inclined his head to them, and offered me his arm. “Would you walk beside me, Rosaline, as we lead our family to the grand walk?”

I placed one fingertip on his velvet-clad arm. “As you command, my prince.”

He looked at that fingertip, then into my eyes, and I knew he saw too much.

He said nothing, and merely led me toward the palace’s massive doors of walnut and worked bronze. At our approach, two footmen in livery flung wide the entrance, and once inside, Prince Escalus waved an encompassing hand.

No one spoke a word, our reticence not because of ennui, as in the garden, but because this place, this home, this monument to beauty, conquered us with parts equally glowing and impressive. The high ceilings, the wooden floors, the long carpets, the statues, the framed paintings, the murals, the gilding, the candles, the fresh flowers...the rich, warm colors of the tapestries threaded with gold and the velvet curtains.

Each breath felt alive with color, as if I was standing inside a sunset, and for the first time in days, my humbled soul eased.

Mamma broke the silence. “My prince, who decorated this?”

“My mother, Princess Eleanor,” Prince Escalus answered.

“I knew it!” Mamma’s eyes sparkled with joy. “When Eleanor walked into a room, she lit the very air with warmth.”

“You knew my mother?” Prince Escalus asked without expression.

“I did. She was my dear friend. Her death robbed the world of light.” Suddenly Mamma looked tired, and she gripped Papà’s arm.

At once, Papà said, “Prince Escalus, the wife of my heart needs rest before our meal. Where may I take her?”

“This way.” Prince Escalus gestured the Montague offspring to the right along the great walk. “If you like, you may preview the works and I’ll be along later to help you understand them.”

While Prince Escalus escorted my parents into a quiet room close by, I noted a great many maids dusting, and a footman or two hovered to give advice. Such a display seemed excessive to me, but it wasn’t yet any of my business how the prince ran his household. What was my business was my doleful siblings, who stood eyeing each other and me.

“This is nice,” Emilia said, “but—”

“Art...” Imogene moaned softly.

Cesario wasn’t a whiny boy, but he whined now. “Do we have to? Look at the pictures and the statues?”

“Don’t worry, the prince will be ‘along later,’” Imogene imitated Escalus’s superior tone, “‘to help you understand them.’”

The art tour stretched before us in excruciating boredom, and without Mamma’s diplomacy, we had no chance of escaping.

“Psst!” I heard. “Psst! Emilia!”

In unison, we looked around. Princess Isabella stood behind a heavy velvet curtain, beckoning to my youngest sister.

It took only a moment for us to realize Princess Isabella offered escape, and Emilia leaped toward her and vanished into the folds.

Cesario started to rush toward concealment, but Princess Isabella held up a hand. “Wait. You’re the boy. My brother will immediately realize you’re missing. You must stay until almost the end.”

Cesario sagged. “Noooo!”

Emilia stuck her head out. “You get to be the youngest. You get to be the boy. You get to do all the fun stuff. Balls up, kid!” She disappeared again.

Princess Isabella blew him a kiss, and she followed Emilia.

Cesario looked around at Katherina, Imogene, and me, and we nodded. “She’s right,” I told him.

He sagged and with dragging feet wandered toward me.

Prince Escalus stepped into the great walk and made a shooing gesture with his fingers. The servants vanished and my sisters scattered as if admiring the works of

art; in fact, they had placed themselves in such a manner to make it difficult for him to realize we had lost a sibling. I pointed toward the ornate mosaic that covered part of one wall and projected my voice to fill the space. “You’re right, Cesario, you can see the Moorish influence in the brightly colored tiles and elaborate design.”

The prince joined us. “Did you recognize the Moorish influence, Cesario?”

Cesario fixed his gaze firmly on the prince’s chin and lied like a trouper. “Uh-huh.”

“Do you know the two reasons we have a Moorish influence in Verona?” Prince Escalus asked in an instructional tone.

“Nuh-huh.”

“Because the Moors captured the island of Sicily and there spread their culture, art, and architecture. What do you think the other reason is?”

Cesario looked like a mouse trapped in the mouth of a scrawny cat. In what was clearly a wild guess based on his tutor’s current teaching, he said, “The Holy Father’s Crusades?”

“That’s right!” Clearly delighted, Prince Escalus hugged Cesario’s skinny little shoulder, while Cesario looked at me in alarm.

Prince Escalus looked around at the girls. “Come with me and I’ll show you... Weren’t there more children—”

Katherina joined us and widened her brown eyes, exotic in their upward tilt—Mamma’s eyes—at him. “I can’t wait to see what else you have to show us.”

He fell for it. Of course.

Imogene lagged behind as Prince Escalus led us onward through the gallery, and whenever he glanced back, she would appear to be studying a sculpture or a textile.

He seemed gratified by her fascination, and by the questions with which Katherina and I plied him, and before too long, Imogene had vanished.

When the prince failed to notice, I nodded at Katherina and interrupted him midsentence. “Cesario, do you need to use the facilities?”

Cesario was squirming from boredom, an action easily misinterpreted by Prince Escalus.

“I’ll have a footman take him,” the prince said.

Two footmen popped out from beside the drapes and hurried toward us.

“It’s a large palace and he’s a small boy. With Mamma resting and Papà tending to her, I’m in charge.” I spoke crisply, for I was the oldest sister and I was in charge. “I’d feel more at ease if Katherina escorted him. Perhaps the footman can show them where to go?”

“As you wish, but that leaves us quite—”

Katherina snatched Cesario’s hand and fled, chased by the footman.

“—alone,” the prince finished. He looked around. “Where did the other children disappear?”

“I’m sure they’ll appear momentarily.” I saw a nearby drape move.

A pale, sad-faced female peeked out at me, but as soon as my gaze met hers, she pulled back.

“Who was that?” I asked in a low voice.

“Orsa of the kitchen. She wants to view you, I trow.”

“Yes. I do seem to be a moving display.” I had suspicions that the parade of servants worked to observe their future mistress—she who would hold their futures in her hands. Testing my theory, I said, “The palace seems well tended, if perhaps a little dusty.”

At once, two maids popped out of hiding holding cloths and wiped at vases and tables.

Craning my neck, I looked up. “Especially the cove molding and drapes. There are cobwebs!” I managed to sound scandalized.

Three footmen appeared, one carrying a ladder; in moments, the neglected upper parts of the great walk were being tended.

Prince Escalus seemed not to notice my manipulations. “Your siblings...as you said, it’s a large palace, and I hope they’re not lost.”

“I’m sure they’re fine.” As I prepared to launch myself into scintillating conversation to keep him occupied, a large portrait had caught my eye, a man of impressive physique and weathered beauty. His shoulder-length blond hair had been artfully highlighted, his dark eyebrows served as a frame for his alert green eyes, his unsmiling mouth, sculptured cheekbones, and determined chin bespoke a man of authority and responsibility. I wandered toward it, trying to comprehend how it was possible for mere wood plank and paint to portray a face so alert his gaze seemed to be watching me. “Who is this?”

“My father, Prince Escalus the elder. Alberti painted him as Papà received the first rumbles of rebellion, and captured a mighty likeness of his sense of responsibility for

the unrest and his ongoing schemes to turn the tide. After the uprising, much strife had changed his countenance. When he rescued me from the Acquasasso dungeons, he spoke more wisely and looked more haggard, a man who'd given all for his city and feared for the future of his family."

"When was he..."

"That very night, he was drugged and stabbed in his bed, and I, to my eternal shame, have not been able to find his killer."

I knew the story, comprehended the prince's tragedy, loss, and sense of responsibility. As I looked up at the picture, my betrothed joined me, standing behind and to the right, and I looked between Prince Escalus, a man of shadow and scars, and the portrait. "You don't look like your father at all. He's very handsome."

Prince Escalus gave a bark.

I'd heard that sound once before. I was fairly sure it was his form of laughter, and immediately I realized what I'd said. "I didn't mean it that way. I meant—"

"I know what you meant. I resemble my paternal grandmother, a formidable woman who spreads terror before her like a farmer spreads manure."

I sputtered a laugh. "I have indeed heard such."

"Soon enough, you can form your own opinion."

Without thinking, I snipped, "One more thing to look forward to." At once, I realized I had broken my vow to my mother and myself, and swept around to face him. "Not that I—"

He was leaning down, leaning close, eyes closed, nostrils quivering.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

His eyes popped open, and we stood face-to-face.

“Were you smelling me?” How bizarre was that?

He didn’t straighten up or back away. “In the past, I’ve noted your hair smells like a flower.”

“A flower.”

“A rose. A dark red rose. One with velvety petals.”

“Dark red? You know what a color smells like?” Then, “In the past, you’ve smelled my hair?” I didn’t know how to respond. Outrage? Confusion? Laughter? I experienced them all.

“I don’t know why dark red. Your hair’s so black, it has blue highlights. I saw the whole glorious length of it, do you recall? In the moonlight?”

“Yes. I recall.” Thank God, my mother had made me promise to be all that was polite because the memory was so uncomfortable I’d have punched him in the pizzle right there. “When you made the list of my virtues and my undesirable characteristics, which side did ‘her hair smells like a dark red rose’ go on?”

As you recall, gentle reader, by his own account, he’d done exactly that: made a list of what qualities I had that would make me a good wife and what qualities I embodied that weighed against me. Not that I held that cold, logical approach against him...

You’re right. In my family, we looked not for riches or pulchritude—everlasting love ruled our lives.

He said, “I like the scent of a dark red rose. It inspires me with...dark red passion.”

An almost inscrutable answer, except that now, as daylight fled and the autumn evening began its reign, I noted many things. Although he was scarred by the tortures he'd endured at the hands of the house of Acquasasso and not (as I've said) a handsome man, his eyes were large and heavy-lidded, changeable as the sea, seductive in their intense focus...on me. I, who had felt nothing but a burning humiliation at the clever and public way he'd entrapped me, now recalled how he'd laid me across his lap, wrapped himself around me, kissed me until wit had flown, and what took its place burned under my skin like cold, still silver heated to liquid lust.

The lust had not, as I thought, dissipated in the cold light of day, but only awaited the dusk and the man to heat again, and course through my veins, my nerves, my mind.

He grasped my left hand and looked into my palm. “Do you still have the betrothal kiss I placed therein?”

I nodded, because that was, in fact, what he'd given me on the night of my dishonor and our betrothal. He'd spoken of his admiration for my courage and my loyalty to saving my family. He'd pressed a kiss on my skin and wrapped my fingers around it and bade me keep it close to my heart, and, as Nurse had loudly and publicly noted, to my dismay, I did find myself occasionally and unexpectedly holding my fist to my chest.

Now the prince leaned in. His breath feathered across my skin. “A more solid token will soon take its place on your hand. A ring of precious diamonds that will with its magic stones protect you from harm and be a warning to all that the prince has claimed you...forever.” His gaze compelled my eyes to close and—

Carried on the breeze, a voice called my name. “Rosaline...”

I wrenched my head around. I looked down the gallery, expecting to see the figure of a man.

Nobody was there. No breeze ruffled the air.

“What?” Prince Escalus’s dagger sang as he drew it, and he searched, too. “What’s wrong?”

“Didn’t you hear that?” I trod the carpet toward the far, dim end of the long walk. “Someone called me.”

Prince Escalus looked around again, and gradually resheathed his dagger. “I heard nothing. Who called you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you making sport of me, Lady Rosaline?” In a moment, the prince’s voice had changed from summer warm to winter chill.

“I am not, sir!”

“Is the man you heard Lysander, forever with you in your head and heart?”

“No, I... No! I wouldn’t so dishonor your home by such pretense.”

“For I tell you now, I’ll not have the ghost of that youth haunting my marriage bed.”

With those words, my promise to my mother burned to cinders. “In your marriage bed, sir, you’ll get, sir, what you’ve earned by your cold analysis and unworthy deception. Now, on my own, sir, I’ll explore the palace further and trust that no man from within or without will summon me in any unprovoked manner.” By the time I was done with my magnificently indignant speech, I may have been shouting, for as I

stormed away, Prince Escalus winced.

Served him right, the arrogant, petulant, anticipated-by-him master of me.

I walked—nay, I stalked—down the great walk to the far corner, aware all the time he watched with a judgmental gaze. I wondered if he'd be foolish enough to try to stop me. I entertained myself with imagining his apology and my haughty rejection thereof. I turned the corner and gave rein to my increasing outrage with dire mutterings and a good, solid kick at one of the finely carved, heavy wood tables.

To my horror, the tall vase thereon rattled and tipped, and I caught it barely in time. As I cradled it in my arms, I remembered my father's admonitions, my mother's lectures, and the scar that had been my constant companion since the last time I'd lost my temper.

Besides, my toe hurt from the impact.

Meticulously I returned the vase to the table. Shouting imprecations at the prince and storming away was greatly satisfying, but I'd learned from other iterations the return usually involved some form of uncomfortable apology. And I was pretty sure it would have to come from me, because apparently the Lord God's Eleventh Commandment was: Men do not apologize, no matter how wrong they are.

I really hated that one.

"Lady Rosaline..." I heard the faint call again. But from where?

I whirled to face...nothing. No one stood behind me. For as far as I could see, the great walk was empty. "Who's there?"

No reply.

“You kids better stop teasing me.” For that was the only thing that made sense; Princess Isabella had led my siblings into a hidden passage—great Veronese houses were riddled with hidden passages—or they’d slipped from curtain to curtain in a nefarious intention to frighten me. Surely, the palace servants, for all their skulking, wouldn’t play such a trick. No. That made no sense. It had to be the kids. At any moment, I’d hear a childish giggle and...

“Lady Rosaline...”

A door stood open that had previously been shut and the mysterious voice seemed to originate there.

Why, you ask, would a sensible woman follow an eerie voice up a narrow, steep, dark staircase? Surely, that was as ill-advised as going into the cellar in a thunderstorm to investigate a noise when a murderer is on the loose.

The answer was simple—because the alternative was apologizing to the prince for my impetuous speech, while at the same time practicing restraint so I don’t kindly point out what an ass he’d been and that he deserved every word.

I climbed that stairway, climbed another stairway, climbed another, paused to gasp (my recovery was not yet complete and my layers of clothing heavy) and considered whether I was being a deluded fool.

Probably.

I almost turned back, but again I heard the voice call my name. Leaning down, I pulled the stiletto from the sheath on my ankle. I exited the last open door onto the stone balcony that surrounded the top of the tallest palace tower, there to find myself alone.

I did not doubt that I’d conjured the man’s voice out of my own longing to be out of

this marriage trap in which I found myself—but you’d think that the prince was right. If I was going to hallucinate, it would be Lysander’s voice I’d hear.

Sheathing the stiletto at my ankle, I straightened to study the view.

All of Verona lay beneath me bathed in twilight: the hills, the Roman arena, and the expansive piazzas. I leaned my elbows on the rail and watched the shadows of the sun-kissed clouds slip across Verona’s red stone streets, sprawling markets, golden buildings with their rosy roofs, and wander along the showy crescents of the Adige River. I stared, enraptured, as the occasional torch moved through the streets and the glow of firelight and candles spilled from the public houses. It was beautiful, my city, and I loved it with all my heart; yet right now, if I could follow those clouds and those shadows, and travel the countryside and escape even for a few moments these city walls, how swiftly I’d leave this all behind!

“Lady Rosaline.”

The voice, much amplified, spoke near me, and I jumped so hard I bit my tongue. I whirled to face—a man emerging from the stone wall. I mean, like, materializing through cold, hard rock.

I’d seen this man recently.

Prince Escalus the elder. The man in the portrait. The man with the golden hair and the striking green eyes. The father of Prince Escalus the younger and Princess Isabella, who, for lo these many years, had been moldering in the grave.

“Wait.” I pointed an accusing finger at him. “You’re dead.”