



TUDOR

Juliet Landon

The Mistress and
the Merchant

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Temptation in the Italian's arms...The new mistress of her late uncle's estate, Aphra Betterton, longs to hide away and forget the man that betrayed her. So when handsome Santo Datini arrives – to make amends for his brother's duplicity – he's the last person Aphra wants to host! Italian merchant Santo is on a secret mission that no beautiful, proud maiden will disrupt. But with their temptingly close quarters generating scandal, can Santo win Aphra's trust – and her heart! – in to the bargain?

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Thoughts of resistance were swept away on the tide of Santo's kisses.

While it lasted, Aphra was almost convinced that his hunger was genuine—that this great handsome creature had been waiting for an excuse to take her in his arms and make her forget what she had lost, what had never been hers. Santo Datini was a mature male who knew well how to make a woman like her, fighting her confused emotions, confront the desires which in these last few days had been twisting her heart into knots. After this she knew that any more talk about being broken-hearted would—to her shame—be seen as a sham.

Santo's kisses softened, and the pressure of his arms allowed her to move within their embrace. 'You see?' he whispered. 'That broken heart of yours is bruised, that's all. And your pride. There's nothing here that cannot be mended.'

Author Note

The Mistress and the Merchant is the third in a trilogy, the first of which was *Betrayed, Betrothed and Bedded*, the story of Etta's parentage and the lust of Henry VIII.

The second, called *Taming the Tempestuous Tudor*, is about how Etta came to love and marry Lord Somerville—Nic—in the first year of the reign of Elizabeth I.

Aphra appears in both these stories, first as a young child, then as a young gentlewoman who accompanies Etta to the royal court.

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JULIET LANDON has a keen interest in art and history—both of which she used to teach. She particularly enjoys researching the early medieval, Tudor and Regency periods, and the problems encountered by women in a man's world. Born in North Yorkshire, she now lives in a Hampshire village close to her family. Her first books, which were on embroidery and design, were published under her own name of Jan Messent.

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For my family—

Andrew, Danny, Aoife and Maeve, with love.
And for my friends, Bryan and Beryl,
for loyalty and love through good times and bad.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Author Note](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

Sandrock Priory, Wiltshire—1560

Almost hidden by a creamy-white canopy of apple blossom, Aphra turned to take another look at the solid stone walls of Sandrock Priory as if to remind herself, yet again, that it belonged to her. Against a cloudless sky, she saw how the ivy clambered up towards the red roof tiles where patches of yellow lichen and pale fern fronds made a vivid palette of new spring colour after so many weeks of greyness, the same greyness that had surrounded her heart with tragedy. Now, at last, she was beginning to see ahead to a new and peaceful life at the converted priory in which, until two months ago, Dr Ben Spenny, her beloved uncle, had lived and worked as one of Europe's leading apothecaries. That he had left the priory to her in his will was still a source of amazement and some concern, too, for the place was enormous and, had he not also left her his considerable fortune to go with it, she would never have been able to afford its upkeep.

Her sandalled feet shifted in the long damp grass, turning her towards the orchard where honeybees droned busily into the blossom before heading back to the hives. Everywhere she looked, new growth was unfurling through the warm soil, washing the neat garden plots with a richness that seemed to echo Aphra's new status as a property-owning woman, the new mistress of Sandrock. Only

thirty years ago, the priory would have responded to the sound of bells and Augustinian canons at prayer, its gardens given over to the growing of vegetables and fruit for the refectory tables. Since its enforced closure in 1536, the buildings had been stripped of all association with religion and converted into rooms for domestic use by Aphra's grandfather, Sir Walter D'Arvall, whose illegitimate son, Dr Ben Spenny, had inherited it. Aphra had never called him 'uncle'. Their friendship had always been closer than the usual uncle-to-niece—more like dear allies whose degree of kinship had allowed a certain familiarity. Although never discussed, their special bond was enjoyed by both of them and understood by their families.

During his years of ownership, Dr Ben had housed young medical students specialising in the use of herbs, a branch of medicine that in the last decade had become more highly respectable and reliable than ever. He had shared with them his wide knowledge of plants and their properties, and had helped them to complete their degrees. The University of Padua in Italy had sent him one of their best students to study here, though he could not have anticipated that young Master Leon of Padua would fall deeply in love with his beautiful niece, Mistress Aphra Betterton of nearby Reedacre Manor. Now, in just over a year, fate had stepped in to deprive Aphra of both Master Leon, whom she had loved, and Dr Ben, whom she had also loved, but differently.

Yet while fate had taken away with one hand, it had given something back with the other, demanding at the same time that she should move on into another phase of her life that would set her mind and body to work instead of wallowing in grief. It was a huge task for her to take on single-handed, albeit with a number of workers living on the estate and who knew more than she did about how Dr Ben had managed things. She would have little time left over at the end of each day to indulge in memories, even if they were too recent to have healed completely.

Swishing her old grey-blue skirts through the dew-laden grass, she looked across to where one end of the physic garden joined the orchard, where already men were tying, hoeing, digging and weeding, their brown backs bent to the earth. A splash of bright colour amongst the greenery made her frown and look harder, then smile as she recognised the distant figure of her father wearing his favourite suit of deep red velvet. As an assistant at the Royal Wardrobe in London, Sir George Betterton had access to all the latest fashions in colour and style, always dressing up for an occasion, even for visiting his daughter on a May morning. Behind him, however, stopping to look at the patches of new growth every now and then, was another man Aphra didn't know. Nor, if she were quite truthful, did she want to, having come here to be alone without the need to make polite conversation to anyone except her family. This was an intrusion and her father ought to have known better.

Trying to suppress her irritation, she glanced down at the hem of her skirt, soaked with dew, grass stalks stuck between her toes, and her old white apron pocket bulging with warm eggs laid away by an independent hen. Aphra's thick pale blonde hair lay loose upon her shoulders, shining like silk in the sunlight, sliding back down on to her face whenever she brushed it away. Her lips showed a dusting of white flour from the bread roll the baker had given her as she'd passed the kitchen. It was not the image she would have chosen to present to a stranger.

She had time to study him before she emerged from the low-hanging blossom, wondering why her father had needed to bring him here without warning. He was tall and powerfully built with long well-muscled legs encased in a dull gold hose that matched his paned breeches of a deeper tone, like his short doublet. Judging from his tanned skin, she thought he might be a man who travelled, his dark hair lying thickly upon his frilled collar at the back, kept in place by a brown-velvet cap. As he and her father drew nearer, she had an uneasy feeling that he knew of this place, for he looked around him as he walked, at the small arched windows, the massive walls, the regulated order of the estate, the wattle fences, the eel traps in the stream running alongside the building. She thought she saw him nodding, as if to confirm what he expected to see.

'Good morning to you, my love,' her father called. 'Were you hiding?'

‘Not from you, Father. Good day to you.’ She lingered in his embrace, smiling into his velvet doublet, wishing with all her heart that he’d come alone, or with her mother.

He took her hands, suddenly serious, apologetic, but unable to say so. ‘We have a guest,’ he said, rather unnecessarily, ‘and I ask that you receive him, love.’

Darting a glance over her father’s shoulder, she noted two very dark brown eyes regarding her with open admiration and again she felt that he was confirming what he already knew. ‘Father,’ she said, squeezing his hand, ‘this is not the time.’

‘I know, love. I know. But I think in this case, it might be best.’

She sighed, unable to hide her resentment, but unwilling to be more discourteous than that. ‘Then introduce your friend, if you must.’

Sir George’s concern was plain to see as he let go of one of Aphra’s hands. ‘This is Signor Datini,’ he said, ‘from Padua. Elder brother of...of Master Leon, my dear.’

The sharp pull away from his hand and her step backwards hardly surprised him, the wound to her heart being still so raw. ‘Father,’ she whispered, holding a hand flat to her chest, ‘how could you bring him here? Here, of all places, where I...’ Glaring at their guest, her beautiful grey dark-rimmed eyes sparking with anger, she could not trust herself to finish the sentence without discourtesy.

Showing a remarkable degree of understanding, Signor Datini stayed at a respectful distance, speaking to her in a deep voice quite unlike his brother’s light musical tenor. ‘Mistress Betterton,’ he said, ‘I hope that in time you will forgive my intrusion, even in the company of your father, but there are reasons why I had to see you in person.’ He doffed his cap, revealing a head of thick wavy hair.

‘Who sent you?’ Aphra asked sharply. ‘Did he?’

‘You refer to my brother. No indeed, mistress. My father sent me.’

Sir George had rarely heard this harsh tone from his daughter except when scolding a servant. ‘Aphra,’ he said, ‘there are things to be discussed.’

‘I’m sure you think so, Father, but I am well past caring. The time for explanations passed some time ago. Signor Datini’s journey has been wasted if all he wanted was to discuss his brother’s treachery. I am well rid of him. You may tell him so, from me.’

‘Please,’ said the elder brother, ‘please try to understand. We do not condone my brother’s deception. Our family is concerned for you.’

‘Very touching,’ Aphra retorted, ‘but I do not need their concern. Your brother and I were not betrothed, signor, so I have absolutely no claim to make and, even if I had, I would not. Your brother’s sudden change of mind is insulting enough without haggling over who said what to whom. So if you have come here to find out whether I intend to sue, you can assure your family that I am well rid of a man as fickle as that.’

A lesser man than Signor Santo Datini would have reeled from that salvo, but he was a hard-dealing merchant and the fury behind Mistress Betterton’s eyes was something worth seeing even though it was directed partly at him. He had, for one thing, come here to find out more about her and the effect his brother’s stupidity had had upon her future intentions, but it would not do to tell her so. Licking her wounds, the lady was clearly in no mood for platitudes. ‘I can understand how you feel,’ he said, committing that very same error, deserving her quick retort.

‘I doubt that very much,’ she said. ‘No one can.’ Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes, brushed angrily away with the back of one hand. ‘There is no more to be said on this subject, Father.’

‘Not out here in the orchard, perhaps,’ Sir George agreed, ‘but I think we might offer Signor Datini some refreshment before we return. Shall we?’ Extending a hand, he indicated where their courtesies lay.

Assenting in silence, she led the way to the prior’s house that had been converted into a more comfortable collection of parlours, bedrooms, kitchens and service rooms where, in the last few weeks, Aphra had begun to place her personal stamp on the previously masculine interiors. Through cool stone-flagged passages she led the two men into a sunny parlour overlooking a beautifully

manicured square plot that had once been the cloister garden. A servant poured wine for them, discreetly leaving them as soon as they were seated on cushioned benches. The white plastered walls reflected light from the greyish-green glass in the windows and on the windowsill stood a pewter jug filled with bluebells. A woman's touch in a place built for men.

Aphra sat next to her father opposite Signor Datini, uncaring that her face was streaked with tears or her hair was sticking to her cheeks. For months, ever since Leon's distressing letter, she had told herself that it would have been easier for her to bear if he'd been dead; the memory of his sweet deceitful words, his arms, his kisses flooded over her like a terrible ache and it seemed that, as the hostess, she would be obliged to speak of him to his brother whether she wished it or not.

'He spoke of his family,' she said. 'You are Santo, I take it?'

'I am indeed Santo, mistress. Leon told us about you, too.'

'Really? Then why the sudden change of mind, I wonder? Did he get cold feet at the thought of marrying an English woman? If that was on his mind, signor, you may return to Padua with the good news that there is no betrothal nor any claim for the Datini family to concern itself with.'

'Aphra! Stop! This will not do, my dear,' her father said. 'You cannot hold Signor Datini responsible for any of this. He was sent by his father.'

'To check up on me? On our family? Well, tell your parents I can manage well enough without their help. As you see, I am well set up with my family nearby. What more could I want?'

Bitterness and anger from his daughter were too new for Sir George to be used to them, she being usually so quietly in control of herself and every situation. 'Little mother hen' he and Aphra's mother called her, knowing how she would take to motherhood with enthusiasm one day, though not like this. The idea of having a family one day, they thought sadly, might have been one of the reasons she had been too hasty in accepting the first offer of marriage that had come her way, falling in love too easily with a young student who had not finished his training. Master Leon had not wanted a betrothal ceremony before he returned home last September to tell his parents, which ought to have rung warning bells in their minds, and did not, because he'd had Dr Ben's approval.

'Mistress Betterton,' Santo said. 'I am happy to see that you want for nothing, but I came to offer you our family's protection, should you need it. I had no idea what to expect, though I knew about Sir George's royal employment, of course. As for yourself, I am both surprised and relieved to see you living where my brother received tuition with Dr Spenny. Leon told me about Sandrock Priory. He was happy here but, as a student, he had no right to offer you something he didn't have. That was wrong of him.'

His gentle tone did nothing to ease Aphra's distress. 'Yes,' she said, 'we spoke of marriage, but we made no vows, formal or otherwise. That exonerates the Datini family from all obligations, doesn't it? Or is it me who is to blame? Is that what you think? That I seduced him?'

'Aphra! Enough of this!' her father said, sternly. 'You are letting your tongue run away with you. Say nothing you might regret later.'

'Father, I regret everything. Everything. Every word. Every deed. Every wasted emotion. And I regret that you have brought Signor Datini here to remind me of what I would rather forget. Why on earth did you think it could help?' Pushing herself away from the table, she walked over to the huge stone fireplace where the surround was covered with the arms of previous priors, a mass of symbols understood even by any illegitimate incumbents. Dr Ben himself had been illegitimate and his brother Paul, too, with whom Ben had been staying when he died. Both sons had been generously included in their father's will.

'My family, mistress, wanted you to know of our support and sympathy,' said Santo. 'And Sir George and Lady Betterton, too. Leon is deeply ashamed of himself.' His voice was rich with the lyrical tones of his own language.

‘Ashamed with another woman, you mean?’ she said, whirling round to face him, deliberately thinking the worst, tormenting herself. ‘Is that what you meant by offering me something he didn’t have? The freedom to marry?’

His slow blink turned his eyes away from her towards the light and she could not tell whether he was refusing to rise to her bait, or whether he wished to spare her more pain. She chose the more painful option, simply because she had become used, after Leon’s short letter, to thinking the worst of him. He had given her no reasons, nothing positive to cling to, only an abject apology in a rambling tortuous English that suggested he had not found it easy to write.

She held her face with a hand on each side as if to prevent it crumpling. Her father took her into his arms and held her, her long loose hair falling down his doublet like a veil. His eyes met those of their guest over the top of her head, accepting that Santo’s slight nod of the head meant that Aphra had guessed correctly and that it was time for them to leave.

* * *

Sir George’s country home, Reedacre Manor, was barely an hour’s horse ride away in the same county, and indeed it was fortunate that he and his wife were still there instead of at their London home near the Royal Wardrobe. Had not Signor Datini arrived there unexpectedly last evening, they would by now have been packing up for their move, for Aphra was settling into Sandrock now and physically in much better shape than a month ago. Peace of mind was what she required and Signor Datini’s arrival would not help matters.

The Italian rode easily on the big hunter from Sir George’s stable and both husband and wife had remarked on his graceful bearing and his exceeding good looks that made his brother seem more like a young lad than a fully matured man. He was, they decided, altogether more robust, and probably more reliable, too, after the way things had turned out. His deep voice and Italian inflections seemed to lend a certain gravity to his speech that differed completely from his younger brother’s slick boyish charm.

‘Your daughter is a very beautiful woman, Sir George,’ he said as they turned a bend of the leafy track. ‘I can see why my brother fell in love with her.’

‘She is, signor. She’s very lovable, too. You have not seen her at her best today. She’s usually the gentlest and sweetest creature. I’m afraid you saw the virago. I hope you’ll forgive her the incivility.’

‘There’s nothing to forgive, sir. She’s been through a lot recently. I did not know until you told me last night that your daughter was the new owner of Sandrock. How will she manage it on her own?’

‘It’s early days, signor, and we’re waiting to see. She’s good at managing things, but she’s young and we’re concerned that she has not yet acquired the authority that her uncle had at Sandrock. He knew the place well. He was brought up there. Aphra will have a lot to learn about managing an estate as large as that.’

‘Isn’t it going to be an expensive place to maintain?’

‘Oh, I expect so. But Dr Ben left her his fortune, too. She won’t have a problem with funds.’

‘Indeed? They were close, I understand?’

‘How close, you mean?’ Sir George was well used to hearing unspoken questions.

‘Well...yes, sir. To be left all that in his will suggests...’

‘Something deeper than usual? No, you’re wrong, signor. Dr Ben was my wife’s half-brother. So is Paul, in London. Paul was left a splendid house by the river when Ben was left Sandrock. There’s never been any rivalry between them, but maybe Aphra was given Sandrock because he knew she’d need a place of her own one day. She and Ben were close friends with a shared interest in medicinal plants. He knew she would look after the gardens.’ The soft thud of horses’ hooves on the track changed to an occasional clink as the shoes hit a stone. ‘You keep away from those stones, my lad,’ Sir George told his gelding, watching the soft ears rotate in acknowledgement.

‘Mistress Betterton has suffered,’ said Santo. ‘I hoped my presence might have helped.’

‘Yes, it’s not been an easy time for her. Normally, my lady wife and I would go to see her again tomorrow, but perhaps you should go instead.’

‘You think she’d be pleased to see me, sir?’

‘Now that, signor, is not a question even I can answer and I’ve known her for twenty-three years. Give it a try, eh?’

‘Certainly, sir. I’d be happy to give it a try.’

Images of Mistress Aphra Betterton continued to percolate through the mind of Signor Datini as he rode in silence beside Sir George. Now he understood why his host had told him little of where and how she lived, obviously intending that he should be surprised by her new circumstances. Nor had he told him of his daughter’s beauty, although Leon had. Santo had thought at the time that his brother’s description was the usual exaggeration of a lover. Now he knew that it was not so and that no glowing description could have done justice to the damaged woman he’d met that morning, even wearing her oldest clothes, her hair undressed, and her lovely skin blotched with weeping.

She had not wanted him there: that was understandable. A virago, Sir George called her, yet he was as quick to excuse her as a lovable woman, adored by her family. This he could well imagine while at the same time thinking that his brother had been ten times a fool for leading her on so, a maiden, totally innocent, and too naïve to ask of him the things she ought to have known about. She was too good a creature to be treated so.

As they came within sight of Reedacre Manor, Santo looked forward to another evening with the Bettertons whose hospitality was faultless, especially towards one on whom they had little reason to look kindly. He had intended to make his way back to Italy once he had got what he came for, but she was angry and bitter, and progress would be slower than he’d anticipated. Perhaps he might be rather more welcome at Sandrock tomorrow than he had been today. Who could tell?

* * *

Aphra had not waved her father and his guest off that morning, for she had not been as reluctant as all that to see them go. Just when she was beginning to find calmer waters, those two had caused yet another storm she could well have done without. Having abandoned a perfectly good platter of bread, cheese and fruit because of her unresponsive taste-buds, she sought refuge in Ben’s extensive library where, until only recently, his students had studied and compiled their dissertations. For all she knew, Leon of Padua might have sat on the very stool she now used. Would there ever be a day in which she did not think of him and wonder why...why...why? Was his brother’s visit meant to find out about her family and her father’s royal appointment? Was it to find out more about her, to see if she meant to make demands on the Datini family, pretending a betrothal?

And what of the elder brother? Was there an air of curiosity about his visit? She had noticed, even through her distress, how he had looked around at her new home, no doubt thinking that Dr Ben must have thought highly of her indeed to bequeath her such an amazing place. He would wonder, of course, who she grieved for most, his deceitful brother or her uncle. Since his silent assent on the subject of another woman, Aphra was now bound to admit that Leon had damaged her love for him beyond repair by leaving her without an explanation. What she felt more than the pain of love was the dark, destructive pain of rejection. She had given him her love, sure of his devotion, certain of his return, ready to wait until he qualified. Her cousin Etta had warned her about men who did that kind of thing, but she had laughed when she ought to have listened.

* * *

On the morning after Signor Datini’s visit, Aphra climbed the stairs to an upper floor over the great cellarium, an immensely long room set with tables where, until recently, Dr Ben’s young students had learned about the important medicinal properties of plants. The sweet aroma of dried herbs still hung in the air, although all signs of study had now been removed, the tables cleared, the benches stacked away, the tools, glasses, weighing scales and books stored neatly in the cupboards that covered one wall. The other long wall had windows that looked out on to the square cloister

gardens below, where a gardener pointed in Aphra's direction to a man she knew, but would rather have avoided.

She waited for the thud of his feet on the stairs, for the cheery greeting that would be the start of an almost non-stop flow of inconsequential chatter that must, she thought, have contributed to his first wife's early death after bearing only five children. That she herself was a prime candidate for the role of wife number two had been made clear after only their first meeting two weeks ago when he had introduced himself as 'Sandrock's most influential landowner'. She had not contradicted him by pointing out that the title ought by rights belong to her, though she was sure a man would have done.

'Ah, Mistress Betterton,' he cried from the top step. 'Hiding away, eh?'

'Good morn, Master Pearce,' she said. 'No, I have no need to hide on my own property.' It was with a fleeting sense of disappointment that she greeted him, for he was nowhere near as good-looking as Leon's elder brother, who had also rattled her usual good nature. 'Do come in,' she added, wondering if he would hear the sarcasm.

Master Richard Pearce was, however, a talking man, not a listening one, and he smiled at the pseudo-welcome. 'Thankee, my dear lady,' he said, striding forward ready to claim a kiss, this time, it being the custom for ladies to offer lips instead of cheeks.

But Aphra had not allowed it before, custom or not, nor would she allow it this time, so took a step backwards round a corner of the table. She didn't like being called his dear lady, either, already resenting the hour to be squandered in this man's presence while sharing with him the revered space that had been Ben's.

'Thought I'd look in on you,' he said, looking around him as he lifted his cap, assessing the potential of a room this size while removing a roll of parchment from beneath his arm, 'and get you to sign this, if you'd be so kind.' Laying the roll upon the table, he pulled it out, looking for something to weight each corner. Seeing nothing suitable to hand, he walked over to the wall, removed four precious books from the shelf and slammed them down as if they were bricks instead of leather-bound herbals, written and illustrated by hand two centuries ago.

It was during this insolent performance that Aphra saw, from the corner of one eye, the brown-velvet cap of Signor Datini rising slowly and quietly up the staircase until the whole of him stood just inside the room, shadowed by the wall. Immediately understanding the unwelcome presence of Master Pearce and Aphra's impotent anger, he made no attempt to be seen by the self-important visitor, placing a finger to his lips to indicate his complicity. Having only a moment before wished that her neighbour had been Leon's brother, however inconvenient his appearance, Aphra could not help but feel a certain relief that he was here, after all. 'My signature?' she said, craning her neck to see what the document was. 'I would have to read it first.'

'Oh, no need for that,' said Master Pearce, sweeping his hand across the map. 'Simply a formality, that's all.' Jabbing a finger at each part of the map as he spoke, he rattled off various points known to her. 'Here's you at the priory and this is the boundary of your land in Sandrock, see? All round here, from the old shire oak, to the stream where it crosses on to my land, to the east field over here, to the west...'

'One moment, Master Pearce,' Aphra said. 'There is my mill. On my side of the stream. I believe the boundary is well beyond that, not as it's shown here.'

Master Pearce straightened to his full height and smiled patronisingly at Aphra. He was well dressed in a matching doublet and hose of sober charcoal-grey brocade that flattered a figure tending towards corpulence, his narrow ruff supporting several chins and ruddy cheeks bulging beneath a thick thatch of greying hair. Thirty years ago he would have been called handsome, though now his nose was red and fleshy, his eyes hooded by deep folds of loose skin. 'This is the newest version,' he said, still smiling. 'There was a dispute last year... Dr Spenny and I agreed...it seemed sensible to make some adjustments, my dear.'

'Sensible to whom?' A deep voice spoke from the shadows.

Master Pearce was quick on his feet, swivelling round in complete surprise, his grey eyes bulging with alarm and annoyance. 'What? Who are you, sir?'

Aphra had been prepared for the intrusion. 'Allow me to make the introductions, Master Pearce. This is Signor Datini, a guest of my parents.'

Signor Datini moved forward into the room with an admirable nonchalance. Caps were lifted and brief bows exchanged, Master Pearce being quick to ask the first question. 'Your profession, signor?' he said, looking him up and down as he tried to guess.

'I am a merchant,' said Santo Datini. 'My home is in Italy, sir.'

Fractionally, Aphra's eyes widened, quickly hiding her astonishment before the elder visitor winkled out of the Italian more in half a minute than she had bothered to find out in an hour. 'So,' continued Master Pearce with some hope in his voice, 'you will not be conversant with English law.'

'I am indeed fully conversant with English property law,' Santo said, 'or I would not be of much use as a merchant, would I? In Italy, the English system of justice is much admired and all merchants must understand how it works or quickly run foul of it.'

'I see,' said Master Pearce, looking from one to the other with a frown. 'And you are here to assist Mistress Betterton, then?'

'I have been asked to assist Mistress Betterton in certain matters,' he said, smoothly. 'I would certainly need to take a close look at any changes to the extent of land belonging by ancient right to her and to witnessing any signatures.'

He sounded, she thought, exactly as a lawyer would sound. Rigidly formal. And if she had not already heard him speak, she would think this was how he would always be, in professional mode, utterly convincing. Was he speaking the truth? Leon had said nothing of this to her. Or had he, when she was not listening? What was more, she knew, as did Signor Datini, that Master Pearce was not speaking the truth when he appeared to be claiming that Sandrock Mill was his. The miller might have tried to short-change her over his rent, but she knew he would not have paid her at all if this man had been his landlord instead of her.

'Is that so?' said Master Pearce, already removing the books from the corners of the map. 'Well then, perhaps we should leave this for another occasion. These things can get incredibly complicated, can't they?' He let the roll spring back into his hands.

'And I shall have to unearth the priory's map, shan't I, to be sure of getting it right?' Aphra said.

'Excellent,' said Santo, smiling his satisfied merchant's smile. 'That should leave us in no doubt about who owns what. Don't you agree, Master Pearce?'

'Indeed. Now, if you will excuse me, mistress, I must attend to my duties.' He bowed, curtly, pausing on the top step to look directly at the Italian. 'Have you really come all the way from Italy, signor, to assist Mistress Betterton?'

There was only the merest fraction of a delay in Santo's answer. 'Wouldn't you?' he said.

If there had been any doubt in the elder man's mind about the Italian's expectations here at Sandrock, they were dispelled by that reply. He turned, disappearing an inch at a time.

Aphra smoothed a hand over the tooled leather bindings of the nearest book as if to comfort it. 'He's been here almost every day since I arrived. I don't like him,' she whispered. 'I wish he would stay away.'

'And would you have signed?'

She shook her head. 'Probably not. But he would have stayed and talked till kingdom come to convince me.' She smiled at Santo's shout of laughter.

'Your idiomatic English,' he said. 'I shall never get used to it.'

'But your knowledge of English law?' she said, quietly. 'Was that a bluff?'

'Bluff?' he said, twitching his eyebrows.

'Pretence,' she replied.

'Ah...bluff. Yes, a little. But I'd wager I know more about English property law than he does.'

‘Or his lawyer?’

‘Argh! He’ll not have a lawyer. He’d have to pay him, wouldn’t he?’

‘So shall I, signor, for your professional assistance and I cannot afford you. You may as well go home.’

He tilted his head this way and that to catch her eye, without success, and he could tell that she was in no mood for a confrontation, just as she had not wanted to deal with Master Pearce’s claims. He chose to ignore the command. ‘May I sit?’ he said, purposely distancing himself from that man’s appallingly bad manners.

‘Please do,’ she said, seating herself on the other side of the table. ‘Are you really a merchant, signor? Or was that a pretence, too?’

‘I am indeed, mistress. Did my brother not tell you?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, looking at the table between them. ‘I don’t remember what he told me. I’m trying not to remember. I don’t want to remember.’ Her voice shook.

‘No, I can understand that. But be assured that what I tell you will always be the truth.’

‘Forgive me, signor,’ she said, ‘if I regard that with scepticism. My belief in men’s words is at a low ebb. Your brother lied to me and so might you be doing for all I know. Since then, I’ve learnt to believe very little and to trust no man.’

‘Then listen to me, madonna, if you will. As a newcomer to land ownership and to the sharp practices of others, like him, for example, you may find yourself in need of a man like me who can speak with some authority. A man who has your interests at heart and for no ulterior motive.’

‘That sounds too good to be true, signor, but I’ve already said I cannot afford you.’

‘I’m not looking for payment, only for your friendship, since I cannot be of any help to you unless we are friends, at least.’

‘At least? What does that mean, exactly?’

Saints alive, he thought, she’s as prickly as a holly bush.

‘Trust,’ he said. ‘I suppose it means you must trust me. After your experience, you find that difficult. But if you could perhaps try to see things from my point of view, my offer of help is to make up, in part, for my brother’s failings. It’s something I want to do for you, to help you through your grief, to make these first few months less difficult. It will cost you nothing, except perhaps a meal now and then.’

By the time he had finished explaining to her, her hands were covering her face, her shoulders shaking with sobs, and soft mewling sounds were sifting through her fingers, dripping with tears. He sat in silence without moving, knowing that this would not be the last time she would weep for her losses. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her safe against the world, to shield her from more harm, to heal the wounds caused by his brother whose foolishness he could understand but never condone. And then there was this charismatic man called Ben. Had she come up here to this room to find comfort in his workplace? How close had they been?

The weeping was brought under control soon enough, followed by a whispered apology. He was quick to put her mind at rest. ‘Think nothing of it,’ he said. With her knuckles she wiped the tears from her face and pushed a strand of damp hair away into the thick plait that hung down her back, revealing the fine bones, the high cheeks and delicate ears, the delicious tilt of the nose and well-defined mouth, the graceful sweep of her throat and neck. Yesterday’s faded old clothes had been replaced by a plain bodice and skirt of dull rose pink over a white chemise, the lacy top of which could just be seen at the neckline. Santo thought of all the women who had wept in his presence, but could recall not one as exquisitely lovely as Aphra Betterton. ‘Do you know where we might look for a map of Sandrock?’ he said. ‘If we both knew exactly where the priory land lies and who rents it, we shall have the advantage of Master Pearce. Do you agree?’ For a moment, he thought she might insist on going it alone, that pride might get in the way of common sense, which would be a pity.

Her eyes rested on his face, then on his hands and back again to his eyes to find that essential element of honesty. 'But there will be questions,' she said. 'Village gossip. That man will already be telling all he meets about Mistress Betterton's Italian assistant.' This was a conversation she preferred not to have. Ignoring her parents' advice to wait, she had come to Sandrock alone to take advantage of the seclusion where the only decisions to be taken concerned the running of the household and gardens and the direction Ben would have wanted her to take in recording his plant collection. Relatives she had aplenty. Relationships she did not want. Especially not from the same quarter as the previous one and its disastrous consequence. And after their short and decisive meeting yesterday, why had this man returned to offer help when she had already made it clear what she felt about that?

Yet look how efficiently he had dealt with the problem of Master Pearce. How comforting it had been to have the Italian merchant there to speak with a man's authority and without the condescending argument that would surely have followed if she had tackled the man on her own. She knew about merchants. Her cousin Etta was married to one. Hard-dealing, worldly, tough and knowledgeable, and difficult to shake off when they saw something they wanted. So what did the man want? Her trust in men had fallen to rock-bottom since Leon's departure and his inexplicable change of heart. Now, the appearance of his elder brother, capable, handsome and more mature than he, threatened to disturb the cocoon of pain she had built around herself. With that in place, she could keep everyone out and fuel her reasons not to trust, not to make herself accessible, not to welcome any man's company for whatever reason. Now it looked as if she was being manoeuvred into accepting him as an assistant, which she knew she needed, right here where they would be obliged to meet on most days. What madness was that?

She sighed, thinking of the effort she would have to make.

'Madonna,' he said, gently.

'What?' Her head was turned away, trying to avoid seeing him.

'I understand your problem.'

'How can you possibly understand?' she replied. Pushing herself away from the table, she walked to the window to the medley of greens seen through panes of rippling glass. 'I wanted to be here on my own and now look what's happened after only a couple of weeks. Anyone would think I'd had no experience of handling estate matters when in fact I've assisted my mother for years while Father was away in London. I was sure Sandrock would be the same, that there'd be nothing here I'd not know how to deal with, and now all this nonsense of my neighbour wanting my mill, a dishonest steward and probably much more, for all I know.'

'Your steward is dishonest?'

'Oh...' She shrugged. 'He's hiding the accounts from me. I'm assuming...'

'I'd soon deal with that problem, mistress.'

'Needing help was never part of my plan. You were not part of my plan either, signor. You are the brother of the man whose deception has cast a blight on my life.' Aphra was not usually given to dramatics, but now she turned from the window to face him with her arms thrown out wide as if to demonstrate the enormity of her folly.

'Then try looking at it another way, mistress, if you will.'

'I don't want to look at it another way. There isn't another way.'

'There is,' he said, struggling to hide his smile. 'You simply think of me as your assistant instead of...'

'You see?' she yelped. 'That's exactly what I mean. Try to forget you are his brother. That's what you were about to say, isn't it? As if I could. As if I have not tried and tried to put him out of my thoughts. He was here, in this room, and Ben, too. I see them walking through the doors, in the gardens, the library, the church. They are everywhere and I thought that my being here would help me to lose them at my own pace. Slowly. It was the suddenness,' she whispered, 'that was so unfair.'

He nodded in sympathy. 'Yes,' he said, 'but, you know, in my experience it sometimes happens that what one thinks of at first as a hindrance...'

'Like you.'

'...like me, can become quite the opposite if you give it a chance. This situation was not planned by either of us. I thought you'd be living with your parents, not managing this great place on your own. You didn't know I'd be sent to England to offer some help to the woman my brother loves, but what a folly it would be to refuse that help rather than to make use of it.'

Aphra didn't move, didn't want to be persuaded by words that made complete sense. 'There is something in what you say, signor, except for your brother's love. That was false, wasn't it?'

'No, it was not false,' he said. 'Leon has not stopped loving you.'

'How can you know that?'

'Because he's told me so.'

She stared at him, only half-believing, then came back to sit facing him at the table. 'Let me understand this,' she said. 'Yesterday when my father was here, you implied that he was already married when he was here in England.'

'I said he was not free. He was in fact betrothed when he spoke of marriage to you, mistress, which he had no right to do. A betrothal is binding, as you know.'

'Then why could he not have said this in his letter? It was garbled. It gave me no indication...' she spread her hands, helplessly '...no facts at all.'

'Yes, I know.'

'You know? How do you know?'

'I helped him to write it. He was terribly upset. He asked me to help him.'

'So it was a family decision, was it? I see.'

'No, you do not see,' he said, countering her rising anger with his voice. 'But there is nothing positive to be gained by delving further into the matter. He is now married at my father's insistence. Leon's problem is loving too easily.'

'Well, thank you for that!' she said coldly, getting to her feet with a very noisy scraping of the stool on the floor. Her eyes blazed at him, the colour of gunmetal. 'He loved too easily. How inconvenient for the Datini family. And how many other gullible, love-starved women did he speak of marriage to? Was this a habit of his, this loving too easily? How many other letters did you help him to write, to avoid the unpleasant truth?' Her voice grew harsh as it rose in anger, her sarcasm wilder, hitting out in all directions.

Santo knew better than to attempt an answer to such questions, knowing that if he waited, she would hear the echo of her tirade and begin to calm down.

Simmering, she crossed her arms over her breast. 'Loving too easily,' she muttered. 'Yes...well, that might be said about me, too. Perhaps we both mistook the signs. I certainly did, but then, what do I know about it? I thought love was like that. Straightforward. Uncomplicated. What a fool I was. Are you and your brother alike in this loving too easily, signor? You have a wife and family in Padua, I suppose?'

'I am neither married nor betrothed, mistress. Not yet. But when I spoke of my brother loving too easily, I did not mean to imply that he was indiscriminate. I meant that, by nature, his passion for goodness and beauty is highly developed. He feels things deeply, in here.' He laid a fist upon his chest. 'And he appeared to believe that he might be released from his obligations if he explained matters to those concerned. But my father is a man to whom honour and loyalty is everything, and he refused to allow it. Leon has been obliged to keep his promises. It's the law. Our family name carries considerable weight in Venice, you see.'

'So, a prestigious marriage, then. Arranged, was it? Or a love match? No—' she lifted a hand '—don't tell me. I don't want to know. I wish her well of him, whoever she is. What a pity he lacks that prized honour and loyalty.'

‘As I said, mistress, he was distraught not to be able to follow his heart. He blames himself for what’s happened and begs you will forgive him.’

‘Then when you return, signor, just remind him of the love he has lost, will you? And tell him how I’m being courted by a wealthy old landowner who has his eye on my very large estate, too. And since that is my only value now, I might even work my way through a succession of noble old husbands who can add to my material wealth, until I—’

‘Stop!’ Santo said, emphatically. ‘This bitterness will not help matters.’

‘Then what will?’

‘I will,’ he said. ‘Give me leave to assist you, even if only for a few months while we sort out some issues, like the accounts and estate management, for example. If you haven’t yet seen the map of Sandrock, you presumably have not examined your property yet, have you? And you’ve already encountered some inconsistencies? Well, I can keep nuisances like old Pearce out of the way, if that’s what you want. I know from Leon that Dr Ben was more interested in his work than in being the owner of an estate like this. I would not get under your feet, mistress,’ he added, gently. ‘I shall keep out of your way. And although I cannot rescue the love you lost to my brother, at least I can pour oil on troubled waters, if you would allow it?’

Aphra did not reply immediately, but when she did, it was with a question about him. ‘What about your own work at home?’

‘I have some very capable managers and I have couriers to keep me informed. I have ships that come into Southampton and London, neither of which are too far from here, are they?’

‘What about the gossip?’

‘There are other male employees who live on the priory precincts, surely?’

‘There are. The bailiff. The churchwarden. The priest and the steward.’

‘Then perhaps I could be allocated a room, somewhere? I brought two men and a groom with me, all of them discreet and trustworthy, and English-speaking.’

‘Your baggage, signor?’

‘Is with your parents at Reedacre. Should I go and collect it, and tell them of our arrangement?’

Taking her face between her hands, she closed her eyes, whispering to herself, ‘What am I doing? What on earth am I doing?’

With one lithe movement of his body, Santo came to her, standing close. ‘It’s time to move on,’ he said. ‘Share the burden with me. That’s why I was sent.’

She nodded, eyes still closed, sighing again as questions filtered through her mind.

That is not why you were sent. Not all the way from Venice for my sake. I’ll not believe the Datinis care so much. So what is it you came for?

‘I’ll find you some rooms,’ she said, turning away, feeling the warmth of his body follow her.

Share the burden with me, he had said. It was what her father had offered, too, when she had moved into Ben’s old home, but she had assured him of her ability to manage, having had years of experience helping at home while he was in London. Had she shown any signs of being unsure, she knew he would have insisted on having his own managers here each day, an imposition she was anxious to avoid when her only desire was to be alone with her wounds, healing them in her own time. Spending so much of his time at the Royal Wardrobe, Sir George had little enough to spare in keeping her safe from the intrusions of neighbours. Master Pearce would never have challenged her ownership of the mill had she not been so vulnerable. And now she knew her parents would not hesitate to approve of the arrangement to allow Signor Datini to stay. But how approving would the villagers of Sandrock be?

[Chapter Two](#)

As soon as she had given her reluctant agreement, Aphra knew that this was indeed the madness of a woman not thinking clearly. To accept the help of a man at this unsettled time, when her emotions were so confused, was something she had been determined never to do. What had she been thinking

of? Had it been his warmth as he stood too close? Why had she allowed that, when no stranger ought to have come so near?

Barely half an hour after Signor Datini's departure, she sent one of the young estate workers to ride after him with a folded piece of paper taken from Ben's store on which she had written her change of mind. He must not return to Sandrock, but go back to Padua, she had told him. She would manage well enough on her own.

Convinced that that was the last she would see of this unnecessary interference, the control which had almost slipped away now returned, helping her to justify the growing theory in her mind that there was some malevolent alchemy at work between herself and men that must be prevented from worsening.

Only last year, when she and her cousin Etta had been with the royal court, an attempt had been made on her life which others present had believed was intended for the Queen. Her own family knew differently, but the foolish young man responsible had suffered a traitor's death and Aphra had been more deeply affected by this than she had disclosed to her relieved parents.

Then she had lost Leon, whose letter had made little sense to her, leaving her hurt, angry, confused, rejected and bitter. After that, her beloved uncle had died in London in what she felt were mysterious circumstances that had not yet been explained fully except to say that he had complained in the past of chest pains. Ben had said nothing of this to Aphra when he'd visited Reedacre Manor on his way to London, but by then she had had Leon's letter and their conversation had been mostly about her pain, not Ben's. He, too, had been profoundly shocked to hear of Leon's deceit and had offered her what comforting words he could, but nothing in his manner had warned her that they would never speak again.

Her parents had dealt philosophically with her tragedies, pointing out that men were no more likely to deceive than women and that death visited at will and often without invitation. The recent death of old Lady Agnes, Aphra's grandmother, had not been altogether unexpected, but none of them could have foreseen Ben's sudden demise, a man in the full flood of life and brilliant at his profession. These losses in such a short time should not, they had told her, be seen as particularly significant, but they had discounted the desperate young man last summer while Aphra had not, nor had they taken into account their daughter's vulnerable state of mind that preferred answers to the random workings of fate.

They had refused to take seriously her decision to remain unmarried for the rest of her life, but nor had they tried to persuade her otherwise. It was not her father's way to propel her into a marriage of his choosing, not even for an only daughter, for he and his wife had fallen in love at first sight and knew the workings of passionate hearts. For Aphra, however, her mind was immovable on that point, though she had not yet been successful in making her intentions understood by Master Richard Pearce.

Signor Datini's visit had made her aware, though, of some issues that ought to be addressed without delay if Master Pearce should push forward his claim to some of her property, one of which meant finding the map of Sandrock that the man said had been replaced by a newer version. In itself, that was not so surprising, for land had been redistributed since the priory had been sold to Aphra's grandfather for his own personal use. Doctor Ben had not wanted to keep all the fields under his control, so had sold some of them to the village freeholders, though Aphra did not believe this included the flour mill standing well within her boundaries.

The estate accounts were another issue she ought to have attended to by now, having been put off too many times by Master Fletcher, the steward whose job it was to discuss them with her every week. So far, she had not seen them at all and had come to the conclusion that she was not meant to, but a confrontation with the steward was not an inviting prospect when she would have to tackle it on her own.

* * *

Sleep evaded her that night, as it so often had recently. The full moon cast a silver light through her window, washing her room with a soft glow that changed all colours to monochrome, transmuting decisions into doubts and back again as the events of the day wandered through her mind. Questions remained unanswered. Why had Leon's brother come all this way to see her? Why would the Datini family care about her? To share the burden, he'd said. What burden? Did they think she might pester him, perhaps? Write to his tutors at Padua? Did they feel some responsibility for his actions or was it just to discover more about her state of mind?

Hugging her woollen shawl around her shoulders, she gave in to those thoughts that had not been allowed an entry in the daylight. Now she understood how foolish she had been in accepting Leon's plans for their future before any formal agreement was in place, yet at the time his passion had lost nothing by the irresponsibility of it. She had been cool, at first, while he had visited her ailing grandmother as she was nursing her. There had been more to concern her than the good looks and charming manner of the young man sent by Dr Ben from Sandrock and it was only when he accompanied her and her cousin Etta, now Lady Somerville, to London that she discovered how much they had in common and how easy he was to talk to.

Gradually, over several weeks, their friendship had deepened and, in an unprepared moment of closeness, they had declared a love for each other that had crept up on them almost unawares. She had trusted him completely. In her happy eagerness, she had allowed him a few innocent intimacies as a natural expression of her generosity and, it had to be said, her curiosity, too. They had talked of a future together while riding high on waves of desire, which Aphra now realised must have been Leon's way of securing both her interest and her loyalty. He would be back in the new year, he told her, to continue his work with Dr Ben, the details of how they would live being lost in a haze of sweet love-talk and affirmations of fidelity.

At the time, it had not occurred to her to press him, a student, for more than vague promises and even now she could scarcely believe how easily she had been deceived. For his elder brother to say that he still loved her was nonsense when he had made legal promises to another woman. Perhaps Signor Datini had said it hoping to soothe her wounded pride but, if so, it had no such effect. She wanted no more to do with the Datinis.

Of more pressing interest to her was to discover what she could about the manner of Ben's sudden death and the question of his prepared will. A man did not usually make a will until he knew his days were limited. Only then did he decide who would make best use of his belongings. Did this mean that Ben had anticipated his own death? And if so, then why? From what cause? And why had he told no one?

The moon had sailed on well past the window by the time Aphra found sleep at last.

* * *

Scarcely had she spooned the last of her porridge into her mouth when she was visited by the priest, Father Vickery, who had been a novice at Sandrock Priory with the late Dr Ben Spenny and whose long, lean frame signified a lifetime of austerity. His thick white eyebrows were almost hidden by a fringe of hair, the tonsure being a thing of the past. His voice, now several shades darker, was still musical.

'Father,' Aphra said, indicating a stool, 'what a pleasant surprise. Will you be seated?'

His grey woollen habit, now threadbare, could not hide bony knees poking into the fabric as he sat. 'Good morning, Mistress Betterton. I would not disturb you at this hour except for a matter of some importance,' he said, accepting with a smile the beaker of ale. 'It concerns our steward, Master Fletcher.'

'Ah,' Aphra said. 'What a coincidence. He's at the top of my list of people to see today.'

The priest was already shaking his head. 'You'll not be seeing him today nor any other day,' he said. 'I've just seen the back of him riding away on one of your horses, leading a packhorse behind him with all his possessions on it. And some of yours, too, I wouldn't be surprised.'

Aphra stood up, frowning in anger. 'How long ago was this, Father?'

'Just a few moments ago. I called to him, but he clapped his heels to the horse's belly and trotted away as fast as he could go. It was no good me running after him. Not with my knees.'

'Indeed not, but somebody should. I could go after him myself, in fact.'

'Nay, mistress. Best to let him go. We need a better man than him.'

'That's not the point,' Aphra said, peering through the window. 'If he's taken anything of mine, I want it back. And I want to know what he's done with the household accounts. They're private, Father.' She headed for the door. 'Perhaps you'd care to come with me? On horseback, of course.'

Father Vickery winced as he rose to his feet and gulped down the rest of the ale. 'Gladly,' he said, stretching the truth a little.

His willingness, however, was not put to the test for, as they walked into the cobbled courtyard together, the multiple clatter of hooves reached them from the arched gatehouse where a party of riders appeared led by Signor Datini. Behind him, flanked by two mounted men, rode Master Fletcher with hands bound behind him, followed by two packhorses led by a groom. Looking back on this incident, Aphra could never find adequate words to describe her emotions, especially when her expectations of seeing both Signor Datini and Master Fletcher ever again were nil. Not on that day or any other. Fortunately, it was Father Vickery who found suitable words of welcome, even though he and Santo had not met, until now.

'Well...well,' he said. 'Welcome back, Master Fletcher. Word gets round rather quickly in a village of this size, doesn't it? Well caught, sir,' he called to Santo. 'You see what a difference your presence can make? More difference than Ben's, I'd say,' he added under his breath. 'So this is your Italian lawyer, mistress?' he said to Aphra.

'He's not...' Aphra stopped herself. If word of an Italian lawyer had leaked out with the help of Richard Pearce, then why bother to refute it if this was what good it might do? So instead of arguing with him about being here when she'd sent him packing only yesterday, she introduced him to the priest as if everything the latter had said was true.

'You'll be staying with us for a while, signor?' said Father Vickery.

'Until Mistress Betterton has no more use for me, Father,' Santo said as if his invitation had never been in doubt. 'I took the liberty of changing the direction of our friend here, until we'd had a chance to check on what he's removed. He insists that everything here belongs to him, but I believe he didn't include the horses. They are yours, mistress?' His eyes twinkled mischievously as he saw how she tried to hide her embarrassment and he knew she was not finding the situation easy to accept.

'Master Fletcher knows they are. I am sorry to find he's a thief, as well as an inefficient steward, but I did not expect him to leave without any kind of explanation. Did you take my ledgers with you?' she asked him.

Stumbling down from the saddle, Fletcher stood uneasily with bound hands and the beginning of an angry bruise on his cheek, his expression loaded with guilt. 'No, mistress,' he said. 'I left them in the cottage there.' His nod indicated the neat little house built into the corner of the courtyard where the stewards of Sandrock had always combined home and office. Stewards were usually educated men with a good grasp of accounting and management skills, though Master Fletcher and his new employer had met only a few times, briefly, and now Aphra blamed herself for not attending to that side of things before it had come to this.

'He'd better be locked in the cellar until we can notify the magistrate,' Santo said, looking around him. 'Is that the door, over there?'

'No, wait!' Aphra said. 'Master Fletcher and I need to talk about this first. Untie him, take the horses back to the stable and unpack those bags.'

'One of them is mine,' Santo reminded her.

‘I know that, signor. Have it unpacked. Bring Master Fletcher into the house, if you will. You are welcome to come, too, Father. You know the steward’s duties as well as I do. And have the ledgers brought in here. We need to see what’s been going on.’

‘Nay, mistress...please!’ Fletcher pleaded, rubbing his wrists. ‘You’ll not like what you see. Give me time...’

Aphra turned away to the house. ‘I shall not like anything at all until I’ve seen them, shall I? At least I’m giving you the chance to explain yourself instead of running away from the problem. Come in here. Sit down. Have you eaten today?’

‘By the smell of him,’ Santo said, ‘he’s already helped himself to your wine. You’re surely not going to feed him, mistress?’ Protectively, he placed himself between her and the steward.

‘When he’s answered some of my questions, yes. A half-starved steward will be no good to me, will he? Is there not a Mistress Fletcher somewhere?’

Fletcher passed a hand over his eyes, pulling his features downwards in one heavy sweep. He was not an unhandsome man, though he was unkempt and showing signs of strain brought on by some deep unhappiness. ‘No,’ he whispered, glancing at the priest. ‘Father Vickery knows...she...’ His voice broke as his features screwed up in pain.

‘Last year,’ said the priest, quietly. ‘Died in childbirth. She and the babe. Their first. Only been married two years. Buried here, in the churchyard.’

‘Yes, I see,’ Aphra said. ‘Accept my sympathies, Master Fletcher. I take it that’s when you forgot to keep the accounts, is it? Since then?’

Fascinated, Santo watched as she took control of the situation, sending for porridge, bread, cheese and milk for the man who had just tried to make off with her belongings from the cottage after cheating his way through years of work poorly supervised by her predecessor, Dr Ben. No wonder the thought of an Italian lawyer on the premises had been the last straw. He thought what a remarkable woman she was, more concerned for the man’s genuine distress than for her own inconvenience. He watched the man begin to eat, his table manners perfectly acceptable, although the absence of a wife had clearly had an effect on his personal hygiene. Santo drew Aphra away to one side, leaving the priest and the steward to talk. ‘What do you intend?’ he said. ‘To keep him on? It’s a risk, you know. As your new Italian lawyer, I ought to advise you against it. He was taking your property.’

‘As my new Italian lawyer,’ she said with a sideways glare, ‘you lack compassion, signor. As a merchant, you could oblige me by justifying your decision to ignore my request to go away and by going through the accounts with him and Father Vickery. He knows what ought to be included in them, so between the three of you, you should be able to come up with some results. If he has nothing to look forward to, he has no reason to co-operate, does he? If we put him back...’

‘You’re going to give him another chance?’

‘Of course I am. It’s obviously the loss of his wife and child that’s caused the problem and, anyway, where am I going to get another steward who knows as much about the place as he does? They don’t come two-a-penny, you know.’

The handsome face widened into a smile, making her heart flutter. ‘I like that. Two for a penny. That means, not easy to find. Yes?’

‘Yes. Unlike some Italian merchants who cannot take no for an answer.’

The smile stayed. ‘I did not think you really meant it, mistress.’

‘I did really mean it,’ she growled, returning to the table. ‘But now you’re here, you may as well make yourself useful.’

* * *

So for the rest of that morning and well into the afternoon, Santo and Father Vickery sat with the steward with the ledgers spread out before them while they ate, drank good ale and tried to rectify the housekeeping mess. After seeing a similar kind of disorder in the steward’s cottage, Aphra got three women from the village to scrub the place out, to wash the stale bedlinen and clothes, and to

replace them with some that had been used by Dr Ben's students. The few items of furniture were polished and supplemented by others, the little cot removed, food placed in the kitchen, oil in the lamps, firewood in the hearth, and a widow found to housekeep and cook for him who needed just this kind of employment to put money into her purse. Aphra's money.

To his credit, Father Vickery offered to double-check the accounts with Fletcher before submitting them to Aphra each week, which they all understood to be both a help and a safeguard against any back-sliding. Unintentional the deceptions might have been, but Aphra could not afford to turn a blind eye to mismanagement, as Dr Ben had apparently been doing.

* * *

'I think,' said Santo, sitting down to supper in Aphra's comfortable parlour, 'your uncle was more interested in his medicinal studies than in household management.'

'And I,' said Aphra, arranging her skirts as she sat opposite him, 'failed to deal with that side of things as soon as I came to live here. Have we lost a lot?'

He liked the sound of the 'we' in her question. 'That's difficult to tell now,' he replied, 'but the purchases and sales have not all been recorded properly so it's quite likely that your uncle has been cheated over the year. That will have to stop. Perhaps it's a good thing that word is getting round about your lawyer being here to keep an eye on things.'

'That,' said Aphra, primly, eyeing the dishes being placed on the table, 'is something I must discuss with you. As you say, word is getting around, and that's what I don't want. That's why you should go back to Italy, signor.'

'But now you've changed your mind.'

'I have not changed my mind. I would not want you to return to Reedacre Manor in the dark, but you cannot stay more than one night. You and your men can use the rooms across there.' She pointed through the window to the stone-built dwelling across on the other side of the square garden. 'It was once the visiting abbots' house. Plenty of space on both floors. I've given a man the task of looking after your needs. And tomorrow, you must leave Sandrock and return to my parents' house. Your help today is appreciated, but now I shall manage on my own.'

'But you may recall,' Santo said, 'that Sir George and Lady Betterton have now left Reedacre Manor for London. When we said farewell this morning, they were of the opinion that my help here would be a good thing for you.'

'They would. It's a big place.'

'And you really do not need a man's help?' he said, persuasively.

'Not the help of a man like you.'

'A man like me?'

'The brother of the man who deceived me,' she said. 'Did you think I'd welcome you with open arms, signor? My memory is not so short as all that.'

'I believe that's what the English call "tarring everyone with the same brush", isn't it? I am not to be confused with my brother, mistress. He was guilty of a gross misjudgement. I am a merchant and I've learnt not to do that. Laws are there to be kept. If I were untrustworthy, no one would do business with me. My family's good name would suffer, which is why my father insisted on Leon keeping his word.'

'I'm glad he did so,' Aphra said, daintily picking up a rabbit's roasted foreleg and deciding which bit to nibble. 'I would not want a husband who breaks promises so easily.' She pushed a dish towards him. 'This is sage and onion stuffing,' she said. 'It goes well with rabbit. I did not mean to tar you with the same brush as your brother, Signor Datini. I am sure you are honourable in all your dealings. But I made a decision to be alone here, after what's happened, to give me time to reflect and to carry on some of the work my uncle began with his plants. I intend to supply London doctors with the raw material, as he did. They don't all grow the plants they use in medicines, you know, nor do they buy them from just anyone. Only from growers they can trust.'

‘That’s an excellent line to pursue, mistress. You have the gardens and the men to tend them, and your uncle’s research, too. One cannot allow years to elapse before picking up where he left off. They’re not all perennials, are they?’

Not looking at him, Aphra continued to nibble at the meat. ‘What do you know about perennials?’ she said. ‘Was that a shot in the dark?’

That smile again, diverting her thoughts, fractionally. ‘Another one,’ he said. ‘A shot in the dark. No, I know that perennials seed themselves and multiply each year, and that others are known as biennials, appearing for only two years, and that others must be re-sown every year. Annuals. My brother told me that.’

‘He was Dr Ben’s most talented student.’

‘Was he? I didn’t know that. He didn’t say. But I know he was trying to establish a system for naming plants that everyone would understand. He found all the various names very confusing, to say the least.’

‘It can be dangerous, too. Mistakes have been made because of wrong identification.’

‘Which is why apothecaries and doctors trusted your uncle and a good reason why you should follow in his footsteps, mistress. And if you could manage to keep the apothecary’s foreign imports separate from your household accounts, Fletcher would be able to give you a clearer picture of exactly what materials you’re buying and for how much. You also need records of what herbs you’re exporting, too.’

‘What do you mean?’ Aphra said, pausing in her eating. ‘That the medicinal plants are mixed up with supplies of sugar loaves and spices? And barley?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid so. I cannot believe that your household needs bulk supplies of alkanet and juniper berries and senna, does it? All that ought to be in a separate book kept only for the apothecary department, or the stillroom, or wherever you prepare it. Some are very expensive items. I import some of them myself.’

Wide-eyed, Aphra studied his face and knew he was not making this up. ‘I didn’t know that. You’re right, Dr Ben was perhaps not as concerned about balancing the books as he was about obtaining the very best ingredients. We have to do something about this, immediately.’

‘Would you allow me to look through Dr Ben’s records to see what he’s been ordering for his work? It could make a significant difference to costs.’

Aphra looked down at her pewter plate, realising that this was the first time she had wanted to eat everything on it. Yet she hesitated, knowing what this would mean. He would need to stay longer.

Santo saw her doubts. ‘We have to find that map, too, you know. You have to know exactly where your estate boundaries are. Did your father not go through that with you?’

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘Well, he might have done, I don’t remember. Those first few days here were a blur. There’s quite a lot to be done. Yes, I suppose we’d better take a look, but you see...’ Spreading her hands, she sighed and shook her head. Her hair was dressed loosely in a thick plait with wisps floating over her neck as if she cared nothing for how she looked in his company. She had not expected him to be here. As for the next day, and the one after that, she was sure he would make out a good case why she needed him around. ‘You see, I don’t want people, anyone, looking through my uncle’s things. It’s too soon. They’re too precious. Sacred, almost. Do you understand what I mean?’

‘Of course I understand. But think. Dr Ben would not have wanted to make it easy for other landowners to take advantage of you, like Pearce, for instance. He left his estate to you, presumably, so that you could support yourself and not be reliant on a husband. That means you must know all about it. Nor need you do it alone. If the villagers think I’m a lawyer as well as a merchant, well then, let them. Many households have their own lawyer.’

‘Does yours, signor? In Italy?’

‘Indeed it does. A company lawyer for my father’s glassworks on Murano.’

‘And what about your work? Do you not have business in Padua to attend to?’

‘You asked me that before and I told you. I have managers, couriers and captains. They are in constant contact with me.’

It was dark by this time and, looking out of the window before answering him, she saw only their reflections in the glass, the cluster of candles casting a brilliant glow between them. She saw how he watched her and once again knew that this was not only about assisting her on the estate, but something else that required him to stay at Sandrock until his mission was completed. She wished she knew what it was. His eyes were dark, admiring and perceptive, and she knew that he found her attractive. She had learned to detect that look in men, though it made no difference to her unreceptiveness. Never again would she allow herself to fall in love. Never again would she be so generous, or so foolish. Perhaps she would allow him to stay for another day or two—after all, her heart was still hard and cold, and not for sharing.

‘Then I shall let you know tomorrow, signor. That will give me time to sleep on it. Now, will you try one of these desserts? Last year’s plums, I believe.’

* * *

The rooms allocated to Santo, opposite Aphra’s, were comfortable enough to encourage any visiting abbot to overstay his welcome, which he also had in mind to do. Reasonably sure of the lady’s decision and of his own ability to make himself indispensable, he had his two men, Enrico and Dante, arrange his belongings around the room while he stood to one side of the window to watch the lights being extinguished in the rooms across the garden. His brother had known this place well. His foolish brother. Now, however, it was becoming easier for Santo to understand what had possessed him to behave so badly, to give his heart when he had already pledged it. Their father had been adamant and Leon ought to have known better than to expect any flexibility. Certainly marriage to the niece of the famous Dr Spenny would have boosted his career, but not at any price.

Her anger was understandable, he thought, watching the two men place things exactly as he liked them. He supposed he would feel the same way about having a man’s company imposed upon him when all he’d wanted was to be alone. But that was not all, was it? His presence reminded her of Leon, the terrible bitterness of rejection and the foolishness she now felt after love had blinded her to common sense. No woman would be unaffected by that blow to her pride and to have him there, even as an aide, would keep those wounds open longer than need be.

The thought of finding an acceptable way to comfort her was not new to him. It had kept him awake for hours last night. But she had given him not the slightest indication that she might accept any comfort he could offer. Prickly, resentful and defensive, and certainly under no obligation to charm him, not even for the sake of courtesy. He would have to tread very carefully if he wished to stay long enough to find what he was looking for, for if he asked her outright, she would most certainly refuse to help. So would he, in the same circumstances.

* * *

It began to look as if Aphra’s faith in Master Fletcher, her steward, had paid off when, early next morning, she passed his cottage on her way to the kitchen gardens and heard him whistling. He came to the door as she drew near, presenting his new morning face, shaved and bright-eyed, his hair washed and combed. ‘Morning to you, mistress,’ he said with a smile. ‘I’m about to take a look at the gardens over there. I’ve got three men and two lads on my payroll, but now there seems to be eight of them. We’ll be having half the lads in the village there, if we don’t watch out.’

‘Before you send them off, Master Fletcher, find out exactly who they’re related to, then see if the head gardener actually needs the extra help. It may be that he needs them, with things starting to grow.’

‘Right, mistress, I’ll do as you say. Then I’ll go and—’

‘Ah! There you are!’ Santo’s deep voice reached them from across the courtyard just as the steward turned to walk away. ‘Don’t go, Fletcher. You’re the one who’ll know exactly where the estate boundaries are. Yes? Good morning to you, mistress. Would you give me leave to take Master Fletcher

and the bailiff off to ride round the Sandrock lands this morning? It's a matter of some urgency, you'll agree, if we're to understand exactly what belongs to you.'

'Well, I...'

'Your lawyer is correct, mistress,' Fletcher said, nodding in agreement. 'I know a few bits changed hands with Dr Ben and I have the newest map that shows the changes. You really do need to know about it. I can take you round, sir. Shall I go and get it?' He was half-inside the cottage before Aphra could think of an objection. So that was where the map was.

'You were supposed to be leaving,' she said, attempting some severity.

'Yes, but I've been thinking...'

'Of a reason why you should stay. Yes, I can see that. Have you broken your fast yet?'

'In the kitchen, with the men,' he said. 'You could come with us?'

She caught the sunlight shining in his eyes and on white teeth. 'No, I have other things to do. Go on, then. Get on with it, if it's so important.'

'One of us needs to know,' he said, reasonably. 'Four of us is better.'

Aphra turned away, speaking to herself so that he would hear and not be able to reply. 'And what will it be tomorrow, I wonder? Something equally urgent?' She did not see his smile, but felt his eyes on her as she walked over the uneven cobblestones, and she knew that her hips swung and that her hair shone silvery in the bright light. She had not exaggerated when she'd made her excuses not to ride out with him and the men, for there was indeed much for her to do that she had ignored in previous weeks while revelling in being her own mistress. Without quite knowing why, she experienced a new, different kind of energy and a realisation that the tasks of managing a large estate on a day like this were well within her capabilities and enticing, too. There was a spring in her step as she walked down to the high-walled kitchen garden where, after watching the men at their tasks, she decided that there was enough work for all eight of them.

But as the sunny morning wore on, her involvement with the gardens, the stillroom, the store rooms and dairy, the bee skeps and the brewhouse did not prevent her ears straining to catch the sound of Signor Datini's return from his ride. Even while she gave instructions, spoke to Father Vickery and examined the church register for details of Dr Ben's funeral, her thoughts refused to stay on track, teasing her with his next attempt to stay another day and the way she would allow it while giving the impression of irritation. Tonight, at supper, he would present her with some necessary task that only he, a man, could perform and she would argue and pretend to refuse, already feeling the disappointment if he should accept her decision. Was that why she had given him the comfortable visiting abbots' house instead of a humble pallet in the students' dormitory which had once been the infirmary? It was perfect for rows of beds and the basic necessities, but not exactly homely. Perhaps she was sending out the wrong kind of message.

In an attempt to refocus her thoughts, she returned to Dr Ben's great library which she had earlier decided to make her own place of study, where his writings would have some influence on her. Botany was a complicated subject and, although every good housewife had some knowledge of plants and their medicinal properties, Dr Ben had taken it to new levels, specialising in particular qualities and remedies. She had not yet discovered what these remedies were for, though Leon had once mentioned that he and Ben were working on the same area and that on one occasion, Ben had given him access to his notes. A rare act of selflessness for a tutor to bestow on a pupil. Little wonder, then, that Ben had been so upset to hear from her, Aphra, that his best student would not be returning, after all. Did Leon have some of Ben's notes with him? And had this bad news, together with her own distress, somehow contributed to his death in London, only two days later?

Up in the library, she looked through his meticulously written recipe books and then found, in neatly labelled ivory boxes, the powdered pigments he and his students had used to illustrate certain plants, a skill they needed in the accurate compilation of herbals. There were fine brushes there, too, stacks of prepared paper and stiff vellum, and some of his drawings, exquisitely detailed, labelled and

described. It was as if, she thought, he was showing her how to go about observing and recording the plants, some of which he had brought back from his foreign travels, pressed flat between the pages. So it was here, amongst Ben's painting materials, his boxes and pots of vermilion, green and blue byse, verdigris, yellow orpiment, lampe black and white lead, that the painful memories of betrayal and loss were replaced by the gentler ones left by a beloved uncle for exactly that purpose. Amongst the notes and sketches, she felt his presence next to her, pointing a finger to show her what to see and how to portray it.

* * *

As the light began to move away, Santo's quiet step upon the stairs did nothing to disturb her, though he saw in one glance how the art materials spread across the table had brought to her a peace which he himself had not. This was something he had not foreseen when he had agreed upon this mission, that not only did he have his brother's latent presence to deal with, but also that of her uncle, who had thought so highly of her that he had left her everything he owned.

He sat on the stool opposite her and waited to be noticed, half-amused by the lack of any greeting. Finally, her silver point lifted from the paper on which delicate lines had appeared as fine as a spider's web, filling him with admiration. 'So, you've returned,' she said, unwelcoming, unsmiling.

She was priceless, he thought, with her emotions still all over the place. He smiled at her, resting his arms on the table and hunching his great shoulders. 'Indeed I have,' he said. 'So now we can deal with Master Pearce and his claims. You see, that was a good enough reason for me to stay, don't you think? Apart from the other reason, of course.'

'Which you are about to remind me of, naturally,' she said, laying down the pencil.

'Naturally. I promised to assist you with estate matters. I owe you that, at least.'

'You don't owe me anything, signor,' she said, looking beyond him, arching her back against the strain of bending. Her white coif lay on the table where she had been resting her elbow on it, squashing it flat. 'Was the map useful to you?'

He brought the roll of parchment forward and waited as she found weights to hold its corners. "The Priory of Sandrock and its Estates," he read, "at its Acquisition by Sir Walter D'Arvall in the Year of Our Lord 1540, with Revisions made in 1559." That's only last year,' he added.

His hands smoothed over the fields and woodlands to show her how some boundaries had been moved. The fields and grand house of Master Pearce were given some attention, too, though Santo suspected that Aphra's attention lay elsewhere.

He was correct. 'If you leave this with me,' she said, tonelessly, 'I can memorise it by supertime.' She looked up at him, surprising him with a shadow of guilt in her eyes, like those of a child caught with its mind wandering off the subject. Her long fair hair, freed from the linen coif, had fallen over her face as they had pored over the map, her eyes meeting his through a veil of pale gold that she seemed in no hurry to rearrange.

In the fading light, he found it difficult to be certain of the message sent from beneath drowsy lids, but her uninterest, together with her parted lips, her seductively tousled hair and her fragility combined to knock him off course in the same way, he supposed, his brother had been when he'd offered her his entire world. Was this how Leon had seen her before they'd made love, or after? Had she looked at him like this, driving him mad with desire? Did she know how she looked? He would swear she did not, having consistently shown him her coldest demeanour and, anyway, she was not the kind of woman to care overmuch about the effect she had on men. It was one of her attractions. Her naturalness. Her artlessness. A woman completely without guile.

'Madonna?' he said, gently.

She blinked, breaking the spell with a sudden surge of activity, brushing her hair back with an impatient gesture, embarrassed to have been caught daydreaming. 'Yes? What?' she said. 'I should be clearing this away.' Closing the notebooks and covering the paints, her methodical hands gave no hint of the confusion in her mind and the wanton thoughts that had sneaked across the map as his

hands had smoothed and stroked, tenderly caressing the parchment to the musical murmurs of his deep velvety voice. Some distant ache around her heart made her frown and turn away quickly before he saw something she did not know how to explain, not even to herself.

Chapter Three

After that fleeting moment in the library when the hypnotic sweep of Signor Datini's hands over the map had caused her body to respond with an uncontrollable ache for their comfort, Aphra was determined that he must go. She had seen his expression and knew from experience with his brother how easily a man's thoughts could be diverted into dangerous channels. Her own, too. After all that had happened, it seemed inconceivable that she could experience the stirrings of her heart again, so soon. Yet there was nothing to be gained by pretending it hadn't happened. He must go. Now, before such feelings assailed her again.

But Santo arrived at the supper table well prepared for the dismissal he knew would come and, before she could launch into all the reasons why he ought to return to Italy, his own excuses came with such conviction that she was obliged to take them seriously. He had noticed, in the ledgers, not only how the supplies needed for the kitchen were being mixed up with those for Dr Ben's apothecary's business, but that imports ordered last year had not yet been collected from the warehouses in Southampton and, if they were left any longer, would either deteriorate or disappear altogether. The situation must be remedied, urgently. He showed her the ledgers.

'These goods have been paid for, have they?' Aphra said, laying down her knife.

'According to our records, yes. Sums amounting to hundreds of pounds.'

'Hundreds? Are you serious? Whatever for?'

'Valuable ingredients, mistress. Precious stones and seed pearls. Sandalwood, root ginger and musk. Gum arabic and theriac from Venice. I import this kind of thing myself. It cannot be left there indefinitely. Besides which, Dr Ben's recipes will be needing them.'

'What...precious gems? Pearls? What on earth did he do with those?'

'I have no idea, mistress. But that's no reason not to collect what he ordered, is it? They've been paid for, so they should be here. You can always sell what you don't want. I could do that easily enough, through my contacts.'

'Who would I send to Southampton? Anybody?'

'Someone dependable and honest, with your authorisation in their pockets. I could send Enrico and Dante first thing tomorrow, if you wish. They know their way round the warehouses, and the customs house, too.'

Aphra picked up her knife and handed it to him. 'Would you mind cutting me a slice of the pork, please?'

Santo took it from her, trying not to betray the victory he felt. 'Certainly, mistress. You are agreed, then, that they should go without delay?'

The pork slice, transparently thin, crumpled on to her platter. The ambiguous nod of her head was taken for both agreement and thanks. She could not waste time in arguments when there was precious cargo to be identified, signed for and conveyed safely to Sandrock. He was right. Such rare and expensive commodities were too valuable to leave uncollected. So Aphra's decision to send him away was delayed once more. Instead of fuming over the change of plan, she felt it best to accept, for the time being, the unorthodox situation of having her ex-lover's brother on site to handle the complexities of an apothecary's trade, amongst other tasks that appeared, suddenly, to require immediate attention.

* * *

Before the end of their meal, however, an additional complication arrived in the form of a message just received from a breathless rider to say that Dr Ben's elder brother Paul would arrive on the morrow, bringing with him his lady wife, their daughter and Aphra's brother Edwin. Those four were the bare bones of the party, for Uncle Paul and Aunt Venetia never moved far these days without

a retinue of servants, packhorses and grooms, assorted maids for this and that, and hounds. Always the hounds. Uncle Paul, and Edwin, too, liked to hunt and Aphra had no illusions whatever that the first visitors to her new tenancy had come as much for the hunting as to offer her some comfort. As she read the message, she wondered if they realised how much she preferred to be on her own at this time, taking each day at her own pace. Already that preference had been compromised and now she would be obliged to introduce Signor Datini to them when she would rather not. 'Damn!' she muttered, laying the paper to one side.

'Bad news, mistress?'

She sighed. 'No. I like them. But...'

'But what? Who?'

'Uncle Paul is coming for a few days. He's a buyer for the Royal Wardrobe. My brother Edwin works as his assistant. Aunt Venetia is always very well dressed, as you might imagine. And Flora.'

'Their daughter?'

'She's twelve. She has a twin brother called Marius and an older brother, Walter. I'm surprised they won't be coming, too.' Her eyes swept up and down the long polished table, imagining how it would look loaded with food each day and how much notice she had been given to prepare it. The kitchen staff were competent, but food needed to be either caught or made. 'I suppose I shall have to take this kind of thing in my stride. Heaven knows I've had enough practice at it.' Glaring at him from beneath her fine brows, she allowed her resentment to show, though Santo could see that there was something she was not sure how to express without incivility. 'You wouldn't like to...er...?' Hiding her eyes with one hand, she tried to rephrase the question in her mind.

'Wouldn't like to what?' he said, leaning forward. 'To disappear while they're here? Is that what you're about to say?'

Guiltily, she nodded. 'Yes. If you could just—'

'No, madonna. That would not do. Nor can you pretend to them that I'm your lawyer. They are family. They will find out who I am soon enough, but you are mistaken if you think you owe them an explanation.'

Her head came up, defiantly. 'Oh, yes, of course you're right, signor. I simply say that you are the brother of the man who deceived me and that for some inexplicable reason I have offered you my hospitality instead of showing you the door. Now, what's wrong with that as an explanation? Poor little Aphra. Desperate for a man. Any man. The first one who comes knocking. What an idiot, they'll say.' With fists clenched upon the table, she sat back and waited for him to speak, half-expecting him to find reasons, arguments, excuses, comforting words, justifications. But he said nothing and after a moment or two of silence she realised that he was about to agree with her, that the situation both of them accepted and understood would not be seen so charitably by others. Her parents had met Santo and seen how his presence might help her, but she could hardly expect the same kind of perception from relatives to whom he was a complete, and presumably unwelcome, stranger. Particularly Uncle Paul, who would get hold of the wrong end of the stick, so to speak, for although he was Dr Ben's elder brother, he had little of Ben's deep understanding of the foibles of human nature.

'You could pretend to be my lawyer, as you've done so far,' she said with a lift of her brows.

'Not to relatives I couldn't. I prefer to be honest unless there's a very good reason to stretch the truth, as I have been doing.'

'And if that doesn't work, you lie.' Her sarcasm was delivered more like a compliment.

'No. But nor do I believe either of us owes anyone an explanation when it is none of their business. If that is truly too much for you to bear, then it would be best for me to leave first thing tomorrow to save you any embarrassment. If that is what you wish, I shall respect your decision. You have only to say.'

One fist unclenched to smooth a crease from her table napkin while her mind spun and asked questions she hardly dared to answer, so preposterous were they. ‘What about the seed pearls and gems?’ she whispered. ‘And the theriac?’

‘That depends on how much you want them. Do you?’

‘Want them? I certainly do. Hundreds of pounds?’

‘Well then, we’d better collect them.’

‘But what about...you know...explanations?’

‘Keep it simple. I am Santo Datini, merchant of Venice trading in glass and exotic spices, rare products from the East Indies, Persia, Egypt and wines from Cyprus. My ships come into Southampton every springtime.’

‘Is that how you got here, signor?’

‘It is indeed. It is also how my brother came to England and returned home. You mentioned that your aunt’s name is Venetia. So she’s not English?’

‘Italian. Her father was a silk merchant. Pietro Cappello. That’s how she met Uncle Paul, trading in silks for the Wardrobe.’ She saw how Santo was nodding, a bemused expression in his eyes as he followed her words. ‘You know him?’

‘Every Venetian merchant knows the Cappellos. A very wealthy and powerful family. Your uncle made a good match there.’

‘So is it likely that my aunt will know your family, too?’

‘It’s possible. Her father will, but he’s an old man now.’

‘I see. So you suggest we give them no more explanation than that.’

‘If they want to know more, they’ll ask. When they know I’m a Datini, they’ll make the connection, I expect. But it’s really none of their business, is it?’

‘But what if they ask you what your business is here at Sandrock? What exactly is your business here, signor?’

‘I thought I’d explained that to you.’

‘You tried, but I’m afraid I never found your explanation very plausible. My credibility has suffered, you see, along with other faculties.’

‘Then I shall have to do more to convince you, mistress. Let’s get this dreaded visit out of the way first, shall we? After that, you might find my help so useful to you that you no longer wish to send me packing. Is that how it’s said in English?’

Aphra’s deep breath was an attempt to maintain some seriousness, suspecting that he might be trying to sweet-talk her out of her enquiries into his business, which he had never answered to her satisfaction. Clearly, he did not intend to. For the moment, however, she would accept his help, for the idea of playing lone hostess to her relatives did not appeal to her at all. One at a time would have been more than enough.

* * *

Later, when Santo had returned to his rooms, such thoughts began to shame her. She and Edwin had always got on well together, even after he had left home to work as Uncle Paul’s assistant instead of his father’s. A year younger than herself, he had been a great comfort to her during those bleak winter months when everything had seemed black and despairing. They had not seen each other since then, when they had been too full of grief to speak of anything much except their loss of Dr Ben and Master Leon’s betrayal. Now she had the chance to thank him for his brotherly concern, not resent this interruption to her peace but put on her best face to show how well she was recovering, how capable her management. She would feast them each day, bring out all the best tableware that had not seen the light of day since Ben left and send them back with praise on their lips instead of pity for her.

* * *

So, on the following day, she recruited women from the village to help the house servants prepare rooms for the guests, feeling a certain satisfaction that so many people could be

accommodated without the slightest problem in a place as large as this. Soon the rooms were transformed from echoing spaces into cosy chambers with sweet-smelling rushes on the floor and polished panelling, colourful bed curtains and coverlets, new beeswax candles and gleaming windowpanes. Inspecting the food stores, she found the shelves bending under boxes of last year's fruits, preserves, pickles and honey. The grain bins were full, the cold stores filling up with rabbits and pigeons, capons and eggs, wild boar, sides of bacon and racks of fish from the monks' fish pond. The dairy, cold and spotlessly clean, clanked and thudded to the sound of the butter churn, the skimming of cream, the soft clack of wooden butter pats and clogs on the white stone floor, while muslin bags of whey and curds dripped from hooks to make sage-flavoured soft cheeses. The aroma of baking bread and fruit cakes wafted through open doors, the sound of crashing pans and whistling kitchen boys telling Aphra that, by suppertime, she would set before her guests as fine a meal as any in London and probably fresher.

Recalling how Ben had had a fondness for good wine, she had a selection brought up from the cellar to add to her own brew of best March beer and was relieved to see that the stock was not as depleted as she feared. She had been drinking only Ben's home-grown fruit wines made from elderflower and cowslip, cherry and blackberry, but for her guests she found casks of malmsey from Crete, claret from Gascony, sack from Spain and white wines from the Rhineland. With the ale and beer, there would be plenty to choose from.

As she suspected, the huge oaken dresser in the dining parlour, which she had not bothered to look into until now, revealed an astonishing collection of glass and silverware which she assumed Ben had kept for special occasions. As she received each piece from the young man whose head had almost disappeared inside the cupboard, she murmured in astonishment at the design, workmanship and probable value, for only at the court of Queen Elizabeth had she seen anything like this hoard. A few of the most astonishing vessels were mounted in silver gilt, made of materials she recognised. 'Surely,' she said to the young man, 'this one is made of rock crystal. But what's this one? It looks like half of a giant's egg.'

'Half an ostrich egg, mistress,' her helper said. 'Polished. The lid is mother-of-pearl. And this one, see, is half a polished coconut with silver mounts. And this one is a nautilus shell. See how it spirals? The other one is beryl, and here is serpentine marble. That's quite heavy.'

'How do you know all this?' Aphra queried.

'Doctor Ben told me, mistress. He trusted me to treat them with care. Rare materials are antidotes against poison, you see. In his business he had to use every method known to guard against mistakes. He knew how accidents can happen, even when you know what you're doing. So he collected precious things from all over the world.'

'Yes, so I see.' The impact of his explanation did not reveal its full meaning to her as she peered into the darkness of the cupboard. 'Are those drinking glasses?' she said. 'If so, we should be using them.'

The young man brought them out, one by one, catching the glint of light on the patterned surfaces, engraved, gold-tinted, intricate, astounding. Not even at the royal court had she seen glasses like these. But the unmistakable clamour of arrivals in the courtyard, the yelping of dogs and shouts of greeting put an end to her viewing of the tableware. 'Put them on the table,' she said, briskly. 'We'll use them all.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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