



HISTORICAL

*Amanda
McCabe
Betrayed by
His Kiss*

Mills & Boon Historical

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«HarperCollins»

McCabe A.

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IN A CITY OF SHADOWS... Orlando Landucci knows all too well what darkness lies beneath Florence's dazzling splendour. And when his beloved sister is torn from him he will stop at nothing to avenge her death.... ONLY A KISS CAN LIGHT UP THE DARKNESS But from the moment he lays eyes on innocent Isabella Spinola something inside him shifts. She is the kin of his sworn enemy, yet he feels compelled to protect her. With every forbidden kiss Orlando's sense of betrayal deepens – so when the time for vengeance comes will their bond be enough to banish the shadows for ever?

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That kiss had been like nothing else she had ever known or could even imagine.

The very ground beneath her feet had swollen like the wave of a flooding river and burst, drowning her, and surely nothing could be the same again. It was as if she'd glimpsed the emotions only evoked by paint or charcoal on canvas.

Yet then he had vanished. Disappeared as if he was one of her dreams—half-hidden, desperately sought, but always elusive.

She closed her eyes for an instant and in that darkness she saw again the way he'd looked at her after they'd kissed. The sadness and longing, the burning fire of passion that had made her want nothing more than to leap into those flames and be completely consumed.

She knew she couldn't have been fooled by that glow in his eyes. There had been no artifice there in that instant—only raw, burning life.

Yet there had been that fathomless darkness, too. The darkness that had frightened her the first time she'd met him, when she'd seen the depths of anger he held deep inside himself. That had been there as well, fighting with the light of desire.

Praise for Amanda McCabe:

THE TAMING OF THE ROGUE

'McCabe sweeps readers into the world of the Elizabethan theatre, delighting us with a lively tale and artfully drawing on the era's backdrop of bawdy plays, wild actors and thrilling adventure.'

—*RT Book Reviews*

RUNNING FROM SCANDAL

'Including a darling little girl, meddling relatives and a bit of suspense, McCabe's story charms readers.'

—*RT Book Reviews*

HIGH SEAS STOWAWAY

'Smell the salt spray, feel the deck beneath your feet and hoist the Jolly Roger as McCabe takes you on an entertaining romantic ride.'

—*RT Book Reviews*

Betrayed by His Kiss

Amanda McCabe



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This book is for Kyle

‘I love you with so *much* of *my heart* that none is left to protest.’ —*Much Ado About Nothing*

AMANDA McCABE wrote her first romance at the age of sixteen—a vast epic, starring all her friends as the characters, written secretly during algebra class. She's never since used algebra, but her books have been nominated for many awards, including the RITA[®] Award, RT Reviewers' Choice Award, the Booksellers Best, the National Readers' Choice Award, and the Holt Medallion. She lives in Oklahoma, with a menagerie of two cats, a pug and a bossy miniature poodle, and loves dance classes, collecting cheesy travel souvenirs, and watching the Food Network—even though she doesn't cook.

Visit her at <http://ammandamccabe.tripod.com> and www.riskyregencies.blogspot.com

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Tuscany—1474

The church was silent and marble-cold. Candles were lit over the altar, sparkling on the gilded image of the Virgin Mary surrounded by saints and solemn angels, but everything else was in darkness. Orlando Landucci was alone.

Except for the woman who lay on her lonely bier before the altar steps. His sister, gone from him now.

He knelt beside her, his hands clasped before him, but he could not pray. Even in this holy place he couldn't let go of the fierce anger burning inside of him.

Maria Lorenza's face, so delicately pretty in life, was pale and still. Her blond hair was hidden by the white linen wrappings and her brown eyes were closed for ever. A rosary was threaded through her cold fingers. Perhaps she was at peace now, at last. Her torment had been so great for so long. Yet how could she be, when her murderer was still out there?

Matteo Strozzi had not held the poison bottle to her lips, but he had surely guided her hand as she swallowed. The memory of his betrayal haunted even after all those months. The deep-dyed villain.

She wouldn't take Orlando's help before, but he would give it to her now. He owed it to her for the sisterly love she had long given him.

As he tucked a small bouquet of spring flowers into her hands with the rosary, he remembered Maria Lorenza as she had once been. The two of them as children, climbing trees, chasing through the barley fields, laughing. Her whispered jests and giggles in their father's chapel, when they were meant to be solemn. Her tears, the raw fear in her eyes, when Matteo Strozzi had betrayed her and she had only Orlando to turn to.

Maria Lorenza had been there as long as Orlando could remember. His sweet, beautiful baby sister. She never deserved the torment that had driven her to this.

A baby's piercing cry suddenly broke the silence of the church. Orlando pushed himself to his feet and turned to see one of the nuns standing in the doorway. Maria's new daughter was cradled in her arms, a fragile new life that bloomed in the face of her mother's death. His niece, who had only him now to look after her. Who had lost her mother in the most horrible of ways. Maria had been so sure she could not look after her child, that the shame of having a bastard daughter would drown them both, and thus she had chosen to leave them all. She could bear the humiliation no longer.

Matteo Strozzi had caused all of this. And he would pay. Orlando would make sure of that.

[Chapter One](#)

The Tuscan countryside—spring 1478

My Most Illustrious Lords:

My brother Giuliano has just been killed and my government is in the greatest danger. Now is the time, my lords, to help your servant Lorenzo. Send all the troops you can with all speed, so that they may be the shield and safety of my state, just as they have always been.

Your servitor, Lorenzo de' Medici.

Letter to the Lords of Milan, April 26, 1478

'In a short time passes every great rain; and the warmth makes disappear the snows and ice that make the rivers look so proud; nor was the sky ever covered by so thick a cloud that, meeting the fury of the winds, it did not flee from the hills and the valleys.'

The girl's voice, reading from the volume of Petrarch, flowed low and sweet on the warm breeze. It mingled with the hum of bees, seeking the most luscious of the early summer flowers, with the twitter and chatter of birds. The wind whistled through the gnarled branches of the heavy-

laden olive trees and the tall cypresses. It was the slowest, most lazy of days. Steps grew heavy in the sunlight, laughter rich. Work was only an afterthought.

Perfect for Isabella's own task. There were few tasks for her to undertake at her father's villa. Meals were lighter, the rich curtains and carpets of winter folded away and replaced by thin, airy linens. The servants gossiped by the open windows, peeling vegetables for a light pottage as the chickens, their feathery lives spared for the moment, scratched in the dirt of the back courtyard. No, she would not be expected at home until sundown, when her father stirred from his books and began wondering where his supper was.

Isabella leaned over her sketchbook, easing the side of her thumb to smudge a harsh charcoal line. 'The fury of the winds...' The girl's voice faltered.

Isabella glanced up to find that Veronica, their neighbour's young daughter, still sat in her spot of sun, the book she was reading from open on her lap. She was a perfect model, with her pale golden curls limned by the sun into a halo, her oval face lightly touched with the bronze of summer. Her pink-striped skirts spread around her on the grass like the ruffled petals of a rose against leaves. But, by St Catherine, the girl would not sit still!

'What is it, Veronica?' she asked.

'May I see the drawing yet, *madonna*?' the child said, eagerness hidden low in her gentle voice. 'We have been sitting here for ever so long!'

Long? Isabella glanced at the azure sky above them to see that the slant of the light had changed subtly, its rays shifting to a deep caramel. The *sfumato* of morning, that silvery-grey haze so peculiar to hot Tuscan days, had long ago burned off. Yet to Isabella, so absorbed in capturing the girl's face on parchment, infusing the cold, black lines with Veronica's sweet, innocent spirit, it seemed only moments had passed.

'All the better to practise your reading, Veronica,' she said, placing her charcoal back in its specially slotted box and flexing her fingers. Her skin and nails were stained deep grey, so engrained that surely she could not scrub it clean before her father saw. Ah, well. After all these years of living alone together, he was accustomed to her doings, as she was to his.

'You read that poem so beautifully,' she continued. 'Your parents will be very proud.'

Veronica closed the precious, green leather-bound book and held it tightly to her stomach, a shy smile touching her rosebud lips. 'Do you think so, *madonna*? They say I must go to my aunt's house in Florence once the summer is over, to learn to be a true lady and find a suitable betrothal.' She glanced uncertainly down at the book. 'I shouldn't like to shame myself there.'

Ah, Florence. Isabella repressed a flash of envy, of longing. Surely it was foolish to be jealous of a child, when she herself was a great, grown lady of nineteen! But to see the treasures of Florence, the art of Bellini, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, the glorious churches and galleries and *palazzi*—it must be great indeed. A glory of unsurpassed beauty, of vast sophistication. A world completely unlike their quiet country existence.

It was a world she knew only from her cousin Caterina's letters and likely to remain that way for as long as her widowed father needed her. After he had lost her mother so many years before, he'd retreated into his own world of books and was likely to stay there, grieving over his wife. Isabella never wanted to face that herself.

'Then we shall gift them with this drawing before you leave,' Isabella told Veronica. 'But you cannot see it just yet! Not until it is finished.'

Veronica sighed deeply with disappointment and Isabella laughed at her pout. Surely the child had a long distance to go before she found that betrothal and set to running her own household! Much like Isabella, who was long past the age to marry, but who couldn't imagine being a wife. She liked being herself far too much to submit to the will of a husband.

And she had watched what had happened to her father when her beautiful mother died all those years ago. The way he had retreated into himself, giving into the grief of losing his wife so completely

he even forgot he had a daughter for a time. She could not bear to feel thus herself. Her art took all her emotion.

‘Run along now, little bird,’ Isabella said. ‘Your mama will be looking for you.’

Veronica stood up, shaking out her skirts, the book tucked beneath her arm. ‘Shall we meet again tomorrow, *madonna*?’

‘Of course, if it does not rain. We want to finish this before you go, no?’

Veronica gave her one last giggle, then spun around and dashed out of the sunny grove, her gown a pink blur until she disappeared down a slope towards her parents’ villa.

Isabella slid a thin piece of paper over the sketch to keep it from smudging before carefully closing the book. The pages were almost full now, the pristine whiteness covered with black-and-grey images of flowers, trees, houses, people, imaginary scenes. Anything that caught her eye and challenged her to capture its essence in lines and planes.

She packed the precious volume carefully in a basket, along with her charcoal box and the remains of a long-consumed picnic meal. She would have to leave soon, as well, and abandon this secret, enchanted grove for the prosaic real world of the villa. Her father would be emerging from his library, looking about for her in his absent way.

Not just yet, though. Isabella lay back in the warm grass, staring up at the sky through the long, lacy pattern of the olive branches. The bright blue of afternoon had faded to a paler, rose-tinged hue, but the air still hung heavy, not yet cooled by the onrush of evening. She smelled the green freshness of the grass, the sulphur-tinged sweetness of wild jasmine. It was a beautiful time of day, her favourite, when it seemed she was all alone in the world, that nothing could touch her, hurt her, change her. There were no responsibilities, no demands. No wild longings.

Isabella closed her eyes, feeling the soft caress of the wind across her cheeks, through the fall of her loose, thick black hair. The song of the birds was muted now, as if they were far away. What would it be like to fly free as they did, to feel the breeze bearing her up, up, up? To soar above the earth.

She imagined a painting in her mind, a canvas washed with an expanse of clear, priceless sky-blue, dotted with grey-tipped white clouds. At the very bottom of the scene, a string of buildings, villas, farms, the dome of a church. Perhaps the tiny dots of people going about their daily business. And above, hovering in the heady, thin air of perfect freedom, Icarus. A handsome young man, naked but for the pointed wings arcing above his head. A single moment of untainted glory. But high above, at the top edge of the canvas, the hot, waiting rays of the harsh sun. The fall that lurked for all men who dared fly too high.

Isabella opened her eyes and for an instant she fancied she saw a tiny figure soaring towards the sunset. His face was indistinct, she couldn’t yet envision it, though she dreamed of just such a man. Somewhere out there, waiting for her.

She laughed wryly. That was hardly likely. Their home here was beautiful, safe, tucked far away from the dangerous doings of the great men in Florence. The men of her Strozzi cousins’ circle. There were no dangerous suns here. But neither were there wax wings to bear a soul to freedom.

The sky was streaked with vivid orange and gold now, a paint palette that signalled the close of one more day. She had stayed here too long.

Isabella pushed herself up, rising slowly to her feet. Her legs were stiff from sitting too long, from balancing the sketchbook on her knees. Her dark blue skirts were streaked with ochre-coloured dust and grass blades, but she had no time to worry about that now. She had to get home, to make sure supper was waiting for her father.

* * *

The farm was slowly coming to life for the evening, after the long siesta of the sleepy afternoon. Outside the cottages, tables were being set up beneath the trees, candles lit against the gathering darkness. Children raced around, energized by the cool breeze that crept over the dusty land, banishing the heat of the day. Laughter, the barking of dogs, the fresh song of awakening night birds

followed Isabella as she hurried down the pathway, dirt billowing around her sandal-clad feet, the hem of her gown.

'*Buona notte!*' people called after her and she answered with quick waves, smiles. At last she came to the top of the slope that led to her father's villa.

It was quieter there, the ebb and flow of life in the rough stone cottages muffled by a ring of scrubby olive trees, and by something else, something intangible yet ever-present. The barrier of being different. Her father's family had lived on this estate for decades, had overseen the fields, the orchards, the grapevines. Isabella had known all those people since she was in swaddling clothes, the poor little *bambina* with no mother who thus became the child of all. Or none.

But truly they *were* different. She and her father. The scholar, the man so wrapped in his dusty books, his ancient world, his memories of her mother, that he never walked the fields as his own father had. He cared little for the things that absorbed the days of others, the mundane work of feeding families, worshipping God, living life. And she, his daughter, his only child, was worse. A woman who would rather scribble strange images on parchment than marry and raise children.

Isabella absently twisted her untidy black hair up into a knot, thinking of the whispers people thought she couldn't hear. This was her home, the only one she had ever known. Yet she didn't belong here. She thought again of Icarus, soaring free on his fatal wings. What she would not give for just a taste of that freedom! Yet it was impossible. She was a woman, she had her duties, her destinies. Wings could not be hers.

But there was one choice she *could* make, a gift of her father's hazy unworldliness, his carelessness. She could choose not to marry some country lordling and lose her youth and vitality in endless tasks, endless childbearing. Even if it meant she stayed frozen for ever.

Isabella secured her hair with a comb from her pocket, brushed off her skirts and tugged the ruffled cuffs of her chemise down to cover the worst of the charcoal smudges. She was as tidy as she could make herself, so she continued on her way down the shadowed slope towards the villa.

Their house had once been the grandest in the neighbourhood, back in her grandfather's youth, when it was newly built. The latest design, with all the most modern conveniences, the most luxurious furnishings. Her grandmother was a great beauty, a daughter of the Strozzi family, and she gave banquets and dances that were talked of even in Florence.

That was a long time ago.

Isabella's grandparents had been gone for many years and under her father's stewardship the villa had fallen silent. Isabella heard tell that her mother, another Strozzi, had also given banquets, had danced under the moonlight with all her stylish Florentine friends. But she'd died at Isabella's birth and that sparkling life ended for all of them. Her father detested dancing without his wife, was indifferent to food and feasting. Oh, they did sometimes have guests to be sure, other scholars who came to debate with her father over the philosophies of the ancient Greeks, the concepts of higher mathematics, the nature of man's highest vocation.

They did not care for dancing, either. Or even for the art that was Isabella's life-sustaining joy. And her mother's relatives had no use for a connection who was only a scholar, no use in a battle or at forming new alliances.

The house came into view at last and Isabella paused to catch her breath at the edge of the wild, overgrown garden. When the villa was new-built, it had been a deep ochre colour, thickly stuccoed, set off by the green-painted shutters and carved wooden doors. Now it was faded to the uneven colour of a ripe peach, the stucco flaking away in places to reveal the stone beneath, the shutters peeling. A few of the terracotta tiles of the roof were missing and the garden where Isabella's mother had danced was a wild snarl. Statuary that once came all the way from Rome tilted this way and that amid the tangled vines, the haphazard spill of flowers. A chipped Cupid with bow drawn, a smiling Venus, Neptune with no trident.

The windows of the upper floors were dark, blank, but the doors were open, casting golden light out into the courtyard. The lower windows were thrown wide to the twilight breeze and Isabella could hear the laughter and chatter of the servants as they finished preparing supper. A table was set up near the old fountain, laid out with pitchers of wine, loaves of fresh-baked breads and ewers of olive oil.

The conversation was a high hum, an ebb and flow, but it became clearer as Isabella moved ever closer to the open doors, coalescing into words.

‘...wasn’t sure his grand relations even remembered he was here,’ she heard the cook, Flavia, say. The woman’s comments were punctuated with the click of pottery bowls. ‘He hasn’t heard from them in months.’

‘And a messenger came today?’ Mena, the housekeeper who also served as Isabella’s maid, said.

A messenger? Isabella paused, her foot on the stone step. Flavia was right—they seldom heard from their relations, not that there were many of them left. Her father’s family was not a fertile one and her mother’s cousins, the Strozzi, were people of high position in Florence. Isabella had only met them a few times, and knew little about them except that their lives sounded like a dream of beauty and culture. Why would they send a messenger now?

‘I saw him myself,’ one of the footmen commented. ‘Very grand, in a livery of blue-and-cream velvet.’

‘The Strozzi colours,’ Mena murmured. ‘What would they want now? I did hear...’

Her words were shattered by the crash of a falling bowl, the excited bark of one of the kitchen dogs.

Maledizione! Flavia cursed.

Isabella glanced back over her shoulder, as if she could see the ‘grand’ messenger, but there was only the empty garden.

‘Signorina Isabella!’ Mena called, startling Isabella back to the present moment, the reality of her place. Her head whipped back around to find Mena standing before her in the doorway, balancing a large bowl of boiled greens. ‘So, here you are at last. Are you quite all right?’

Isabella blinked at her, the woman’s familiar, creased, olive-complexioned face coming into focus. Her dark eyes were narrow with concern. Isabella gave her a reassuring smile. ‘I am very well, Mena. Just a bit too much sun, I think.’

Mena gave a disapproving cluck and moved around Isabella to set the bowl on the waiting table. ‘You spend far too much time wandering about outdoors, *signorina*. Soon you will be dark as a Moor!’

Isabella laughed. ‘I hardly think it matters! No one will see me, dark or fair. Besides, I need the light for my work.’

Mena tossed her a speculative glance but said nothing. She merely made that clucking sound again, a symbol of disapproval Isabella had known since she was a babe in arms. ‘Go fetch the pottage.’

Isabella nodded and stepped into the kitchen. The heat of the cooking fires hit her in the face, thick and humid after the cooling evening air, filled with the scents of roasted chicken, spices, boiling vegetables, burned sugar.

Flavia, a plump, red-faced woman who had also been with their family for as long as Isabella could remember, was stirring a vat of stewed chicken in cinnamon. She merely nodded towards the pottage and Isabella snatched it up to carry it back outside, away from the scalding heat.

Mena lingered by the table, pouring wine into pottery goblets. As Isabella set down the pottage, she leaned close and whispered, ‘Cousin Caterina sent a letter?’

Mena did not meet her gaze. She shrugged, fussing with the wine. ‘A letter *did* come, but who can name the sender?’

‘Mena! How many other Strozzi do we know? What do you think she wants?’

Mena’s lips tightened. She was a country woman, bred of sturdy Tuscan stock, and had lived all her life in this spot. She knew little of Florentine doings, and what she did know she disapproved of. Learning old, pagan ways, looking at paintings of naked goddesses and gods—it went against God

and the saints. Even as she loved Isabella, had practically raised her after her mother died, Isabella knew well she did not understand Isabella's longing for a life that was not her own.

'Oh, *signorina*,' Mena said, strangely sad. 'Why can you not just...?'

'Is this my supper?' a puzzled voice enquired, thin, confused.

Isabella gave Mena one more searching look, but it was obvious that the maid knew no more of their mysterious messenger. She had only lectures about appreciating one's place in the world, the place where God placed one. Isabella had heard it all before.

She glanced over to see her father standing at the edge of the garden. It was his practice every evening to emerge from his library when it grew too dark to see the pages of his books and wander out the front doors around the house until he found someone to tell him what to do, where to go. It was no use to have servants remind him of the time, or guide him to the supper table—the same table they ate at every night.

Isabella smiled at him gently. His long, white hair stood out in a thick, uneven corona around his round, ruddy face and his beard was too long, his brows wild above faded green-grey eyes. The green-grey eyes Isabella inherited. Despite the warmth of summer, he wore an old, patched velvet robe trimmed with moth-eaten fur.

'*Si*, Father, it is your supper,' she said, hurrying over to slip her arm through his and lead him to his chair.

'Vegetables?' he asked, absently surveying the offerings.

'And some stewed chicken with cinnamon,' said Isabella, sitting down next to him. 'You like cinnamon. Flavia is just finishing with it.'

'I will go fetch it,' Mena said and left them to return to the kitchen. The hum of voices resumed in there as Isabella pressed a cup of wine into her father's hand. How she yearned to ask him about the letter, to discover what was happening with their Florence relations! But she knew full well it would never work to press him. Until her father had some food, some wine, emerged from his dream world of study, he would not even remember what she talked about.

'How was your day?' she asked, spooning out a portion of the pottage on to his plate. 'Did you finish the new essay on the *Aeneid*?'

'No, no, not yet. But I am close, I think. Very close. I must write to Fernando in Mantua. He has documents that will be of great use to me in this matter.'

'Perhaps he would even travel here himself, then you could discuss it in person,' Isabella said. 'We have not seen him in many months.'

'Hmm,' was all her father said.

Mena returned with the chicken and they ate in silence as the night shadows lengthened and the stars emerged above them. It was a clear, cool evening, the moon a mere silvery sliver on the horizon. Gradually, Isabella felt the tension of the day easing from her shoulders, sliding away on wine and serene silence. When the dessert of rice cooked in honey and almond milk was consumed, the lanterns strung high in the trees were lit and Isabella and her father were left alone. The conversation in the kitchen slowed, until there was only the distant song of the nightingale.

Isabella leaned her chin in her hand and closed her eyes, envisioning the sketch of young Veronica. There was still something not quite right about the line of the cheek, the flow of the hair, something she could not quite decipher...

'Perhaps I *shall* invite Fernando to visit,' her father suddenly said.

Isabella's eyes flew open. 'What? Father, I mentioned that above an hour ago!'

Her father just smiled. 'Ah, Bella, you think I do not listen to you. I do. It simply takes time for me to absorb your words.'

Isabella laughed and reached out to pour more wine into their goblets. 'That is very good to know, Father. And, yes, it will be a fine thing to have your friend here for a visit. He could help you so much with your studies. I fear you must find it a lonely task, with none to share your interests.'

‘I enjoy the quiet,’ he answered and took a slow sip of his wine. ‘After the great clamour at university so long ago, I found that only peace is conducive to true study. Do you not find it so, Bella, in your own work?’

Isabella frowned, puzzled. She did not know her father even realized she *had* ‘work’. ‘My art?’

‘Hmm, yes. Oh, but then art is different from history. I deal with men who are dead, events that are dust. Art is—well, it is life. How can you progress here, when there is nothing to inspire you? No one to help you?’

Isabella was utterly astonished. Every evening, winter or summer, rain or star-shine, she and her father supped together here at this table. Yet these were the greatest number of words they had shared in a long while, the most true understanding he had ever shown her. He loved her, she knew that. He just lived so much in his own mind. ‘I am content,’ she said.

‘Content. But not happy.’ Her father slowly shook his head, his wild hair drooping over his wrinkled brow. ‘Bella, I forget how young you are. This is the life I want, the life I have chosen. You deserve the chance to choose, as well. To look beyond our home and perhaps find a new way. A fine husband. A wider world.’ He sighed. ‘You are really so much like your mother.’

‘Father, what has brought this on?’ Isabella asked, bewildered. ‘Are we *not* content here together? Are you...?’ A horrible thought struck her. ‘Are you ill?’

He laughed. ‘Not at all. Just the aches and pains of age. I merely had a reminder of the outside world today. A reminder long overdue.’ He reached inside his robe and withdrew a small scroll. The blue wax seal was broken.

Ah, yes. The letter from Caterina, the letter that caused such a furore of curiosity in their house. ‘What is that, Father?’

‘A letter from your cousin Caterina Strozzi. She writes to enquire after you.’ He unrolled the scroll, flattening it on the table. ‘She has shown an interest in you before, but, well, with relations such as they were between myself and her father, how useless I was to them after your mother died—I thought it better to leave things alone.’

‘What has changed?’ Isabella asked.

‘Caterina writes that she knows of your great interest in art, an interest that the two of you share. She says she has not been well of late and she would like a companion to help her, to be her friend. Someone she could trust, a kinswoman. She asks if you will come to live with her in Florence. For a time, anyway.’

Live in Florence? Isabella’s stomach seized and fluttered with a sudden, icy rush of joy and fear. She turned away, pressing her hands hard to that ache. Could this be real? It was what she longed for, prayed for! A wider world, a journey to a place of art and beauty and culture, where she would no longer be alone. Her greatest wish, held out to her now, a gleaming jewel she had only to reach out for.

And yet—and yet...

This was her home, all she knew. What if her bright dream tarnished, turned to ashes in the harsh glare of real life? And what if the nightmares she’d had when she was younger came to torment her in the new house? They hadn’t visited her in a long time, but when she was tired or worried, the visions came back. What would she do then?

‘It is entirely up to you, Bella,’ her father said quietly. ‘Florence was poison for me, but it could be good for you. You are so smart, so lovely. But if you do not wish to go, that is very well, too.’

‘Who would take care of you, Father?’ she whispered, still surrounded by that buzzing brilliance of unreality.

‘Why, the servants, of course! You could take Mena with you, but the rest of us will rub along well enough. My needs are few. And I will invite some of those friends to visit. It is past time I did that anyway.’ He reached out suddenly and took her hand, his fingers gnarled, ink-stained, gentle. ‘I cannot stand in your way any longer, Bella. You must find your own path now.’

Isabella curled her hand around his tightly. ‘Is my path in Florence?’

He nodded. 'I think it may be.'

She drew in a deep, steadying breath. All her trepidation, her wild fears, unspooled like a skein of wool and floated free. This was right. This was her destiny, what she waited for all her nineteen years. She laughed aloud, her heart alight with all the shimmering possibilities of the future.

'Very well, then!' she cried. 'I will go to Florence.'

* * *

'There is the sea and who will drain it dry? Precious as silver, inexhaustible, ever-new, it breeds the more we reap it—tides on tides of crimson dye our robes blood-red...'

Orlando Landucci stared out of the window into the Florence dusk, barely hearing the soft voice of Lucretia, his former mistress and now his friend, as she read from the *Oresteia*. Evening was gathering fast, always the most beautiful time in the city. A moment when the stone towers turned to spun gold in the torchlight, when ordinary faces turned mysterious and beautiful. All the filth and ugliness were hidden away in the darkness. And so were wicked deeds.

He could hide, too, could forget, even if it was only for few hours. He loved the night.

But tonight the veil was very thin and he couldn't lose himself in the illicit pleasures of Florence as he usually did. Trouble was bubbling just below Florence's serene, elegant surface. A tension that simmered and crackled, soon to snap and release the winged evils of Pandora's box into the world. None of them could deceive themselves much longer. Not even the great Medici and their allies.

Soon Orlando would also have his chance. He wouldn't have to hide in the night any longer.

As the twilight slipped into black darkness, the fine cobblestone square below Lucretia's window transformed. Respectable families retreated behind the stout walls of their *palazzi*, closing their shutters. Merchants shut their shops in the *mercato* and beggars took refuge in church doorways.

Yet Florence was far from forsaken. Soon the *calles* would fill with new crowds, young men in brightly striped hose and pearl-sewn doublets, plumed velvet caps on their curled hair. They sang bawdy songs as they passed wine flasks between them, waiting for the courtesans in their crimson-and-yellow satins to emerge from their houses. Music could be heard in the distance, flutes and tambours, a merry dance that grew louder and louder as the night became darker.

Suddenly, as he watched lazily, a large group tumbled into the square, led by the musicians. At their head was the greatest rogue in all Florence, Giuliano de Medici, the handsome younger brother of the all-powerful Lorenzo, followed by his ever-present friends.

They had obviously started on the strong wine a long time before, for they stumbled on the paving stones, laughing uproariously as one of them tumbled to his knees. Their voices, raised in out-of-tune song, floated up to Orlando's window. They spun and flowed in a stained-glass kaleidoscope of bright greens, blues, reds, waving plumes and flashing jewels. Like a painting come to life.

Orlando eased the window open an inch, letting in the music and laughter, borne on a cool, perfume-scented breeze that seemed to spread their merriment to every corner of the city. There was no danger yet to their merriment, no sadness, no dread. Only their youthful, privileged certainty that all would be well for them, that beauty and merriment would always prevail.

Orlando had once been just like them. So sure nothing could touch the brightness of his life. Now he knew how very false that was. How delicate, like a puff of dust blown away by a hot summer wind. They soon would know that, too.

He saw Eleanora Melozzi hung on Giuliano's velvet-clad arm, the most expensive courtesan in all Florence. The torchlight glowed on the loose fall of her golden hair as she turned to laugh with the couple who tripped behind them.

The red-haired woman who was Eleanora's friend held on to a tall, fair-haired man's arm, her jewelled hand curled tight and possessive around his velvet sleeve. He threw back his head in a burst of raucous laughter, a ray of flickering light falling over his face.

It was Matteo Strozzi.

Orlando's fist tightened on the edge of the window until the glass bit into his skin. He felt it not at all. He could only see Strozzi, the vile bastard. The man he had vowed to destroy.

Suddenly, through his crimson haze of anger, he felt a soft touch on his sleeve, drawing his hand down. Startled out of his anger, he looked down to see that Lucretia had left her book and come to his side. She stared up at him, her green-gold eyes wide with concern.

He flashed a quick grin, trying to reassure her. He didn't want anyone to know the secret fury that burned inside of him. Lucretia had been his first mistress when he was a wild youth and now that she was retired she was his friend. Her *palazzo* was a place where he could go for gentle quiet and for someone to talk to, share his love of books and art. Lucretia knew him too well to be put off by a careless smile, a teasing word, as everyone else was. Florence was city of facades and Orlando was a master of them.

'You are very distracted this evening, Orlando *caro*,' she said. 'What is amiss?'

He knew he couldn't fool Lucretia, but neither could he confide in her tonight. The wild darkness was wrapping around him, seizing hold of him, and soon he would be lost to it. Only rougher pleasures could drown it tonight.

He laughed and wrapped his arm around Lucretia's waist, drawing her closer until her jasmine scent drowned out the night breeze. 'What could be amiss on a night such as this, my fair Lucretia? The stars are like diamonds, sprinkled in your beautiful hair...'

'You are a terrible poet.' Lucretia laughed, but her gaze slid to the street below, where the merry Medici retinue was retreating from the square. 'Were you thinking of them?'

'Why would I do that? Everyone else thinks of them. At least one thought in this city must be for something else.'

Lucretia frowned. 'My friend Jacopo Pazzi says...'

'Something he has no business saying in front of you, I am sure,' Orlando said. He didn't want to think of Matteo Strozzi or his friends the Medicis, not now. The old wildness was coming over him again. He, too, knew some of the Pazzi family, the great, wealthy rivals of the Medici, and he knew how indiscreet they could be when the wine flowed. It was very dangerous. 'Men's discontent grows when they are in their cups, as you know better than anyone, my Lucretia.'

She still stared down at the square, where the Medici—and Matteo Strozzi—had been. They seemed to leave a shadow behind them. But she said nothing more about them. 'I do wish you would come with me to Bianca's tonight. She has a new pet poet, they say he is very amusing. It could distract you.'

'I fear not, *bella* Lucretia. I've already agreed to another engagement with some friends.'

Lucretia laughed. 'An engagement at a disreputable tavern outside the city walls? Are we too refined for you now, Orlando?'

A tavern was exactly where he was going, but he wouldn't admit that to Lucretia, who had once been the most educated, most witty courtesan in all the city. He loved the cultured life she created around herself and her friends. But some nights, when the dark demons were creeping up on him, grabbing at him with their cold, skeletal fingers, only rougher pleasures could distract him. Cheap wine, pretty women, rude music.

'Oh, Orlando,' she said with a laugh. 'One day you will find whatever it is you seek and it will make you want to be a better man. You are like a questing knight.'

'Me?' he scoffed, laughing. 'A questing knight? I search for a fresh barrel of ale, mayhap, but a rare jewel? You have become a romantic in your retirement, I fear.'

She shook her head. 'I know you. One day you will see, I promise you that. And your life will change.'

'I will see you next week, Lucretia,' he said. He took her bejewelled hand and raised it to his lips.

She gently touched his cheek. A sad little smile touched her lips. 'I do hope so. I worry about you, Orlando, when you get that look in your eyes.'

‘No need to worry about me, *bella*,’ he said, trying to give a careless laugh.

But it was obvious Lucretia was not fooled. She stepped back and waved him away. ‘Go, then, if you must! You young men and your taverns...’

Orlando kissed her once more, and strode out of her elegant *palazzo* and into the increasingly crowded streets. He slipped on a black half-mask and made sure his daggers were strapped at his belt. The crowds grew thicker, louder, the farther he went into the city’s centre. The houses were taller, packed closer together until the stucco walls nearly touched above his head. The window shutters were thrown open to the night, women in loose *camicie* and bright gowns leaning out to call down to passers-by. The smell of cheap ale and rose water hung in the warm air. Only in a place such as this could Orlando forget what had happened to Maria Lorenza. Only there could he be free.

Yet that freedom never lasted long. The demons always caught up with him in the end.

Chapter Two

‘*Pesce, pesce!* The finest, freshest fish in all of Florence, *madonna*, you will not be sorry.’

Isabella laughed at the fishmonger’s solicitations, waving him away as she guided her horse around the edges of the *mercato*. He shrugged and turned to the next passer-by and soon the acrid scent of fish rotting in the sun faded behind her, giving way to the sweetness of ripe fruit, the spiciness of cinnamon-coated nuts.

How odd, she mused, to find something so prosaic as fish in such a dreamland.

Ever since they’d entered through one of Florence’s twelve gates, the Gate of Fortune, and headed towards the Strozzi *palazzo*, Isabella felt caught up in a swirling fantasy, a land she could not have summoned up even on a canvas. Descriptions in books, and from her father’s friends, could never fully conjure such a place.

It was slow going on their horses; Isabella was trailed by Mena and two footmen, plus mules for their baggage. It gave her time to stare, to inhale deeply of the scents and sights, to absorb all of it into herself. She had to remember all of this, all the faces and facades, so she could commit it to her sketchbook. Then one day, when she was an old woman buried again in the country, she could gaze at the faded drawings and remember the day she came fully to life.

Florence was a city of twisting streets, some of them so narrow she and her party were forced to move in single file, their horses’ hooves clacking on the uneven flagstones. There were open squares, tall towers, fortresslike *palazzi* with massive, unbreachable stone walls, overhanging balconies where beautifully dressed ladies lounged and laughed on this sunny day, their hair spread out to catch the golden rays.

The old churches, silent and dignified in their ancient sanctity, presented facades of geometrical patterns of faded marble in black, white, green, pink. Behind them were high, crowded buildings where the workers and artisans lived, bursting with shouts, cries, shrieks of laughter. Behind *them* were convents and abbeys, barred, secure, mysterious.

The sheer *life* of the place was overwhelming. Isabella was used to her Tuscan home, a place where olive trees outnumbered people, where quiet contemplation reigned. Here, a rich cacophony blended and echoed all around. The patter of merchants selling fabric, vegetables, candles, feathers, perfumes. The pleas of beggars, the screams of children chasing down the *calles*, the barking of stray dogs, and snorts of pigs as they were led to market. It was crowded, hot, the air close with the smells of cooking meat, spilled wine, pungent perfumes, unwashed skin, sweet flowers in hidden courtyards.

Isabella loved it. She adored every reeking, noisy fragment of it all. Her heart lifted in her breast, rising up on those first tentative wings of freedom she had thought never to find. Life had been waiting here all along, in these narrow streets of Florence.

Isabella twisted her head around to study a church tower laid out in an intricate pattern of coloured marbles, all green and pink and bright white in the sun. She wished she had her sketchbook with her, so she could capture the lines and shapes of it all. It held her spellbound for a long moment.

She heard a shout somewhere ahead of her and spun back around, startled. Mena and the others had vanished and all around her was the press of strangers. People jostling together, roughly dressed, loudly laughing.

She felt a sudden cold stab of panic. At home she wandered alone everywhere, but those were fields and vineyards, her own gardens. This place that had seemed so beautiful and enticing only a moment ago suddenly seemed frightening, strange, an alien world, and she had no idea how to make her way in it.

She steered her horse down a narrower, quieter street. She tried to remember Caterina's letter, which was tucked up now in one of the footmen's saddlebags, the location of her cousins' *palazzo*, but suddenly all the lovely buildings that held her so captivated seemed so very alike. The children who dashed past, the women who peered out from behind latticed windows, seemed as if they watched her with suspicions.

Confused and growing a little frightened, Isabella turned another corner and found herself in a small courtyard, tall houses leanings in on all sides, casting a shadow on the cracked cobblestones under her horse's hooves. These buildings were certainly not as fine as the ones that lined the river. The plasterwork was flaking, the windows free of fine glass and velvet curtains, and the fountain at its centre was broken and silent. Surely this was far from where Caterina lived.

She tugged on the reins to turn the horse. But the entrance to the courtyard was blocked by two men she hadn't noticed before and it angered her that she had let her guard down. They were both tall, brawny in their rough russet doublets, their bearded faces shadowed. One of them grinned at her, a horrible flash of yellowed, broken teeth behind his black beard.

'Look what pretty little bird just landed here,' the smiler said. His companion just grunted, which seemed even more fearsome.

'*Scusi, signor,*' Isabella murmured, keeping her head high even though she was shivering. She tightened her grip on the reins and tried to slide past them in the narrow passageway.

It all happened in an instant. One of the men reached up and grabbed her horse's bridle and the other seized her arm in a bruising grip. He dragged her towards him and a sharp bolt of pain shot all down her side. She screamed and tried to kick out at him, but her skirts wrapped around her legs. She managed to catch his cheek with her nails and he cursed and drew back his fist.

Just as suddenly as she was attacked, the man who held on to her was wrenched away and she stumbled over the uneven cobblestones. Her hat tumbled from its anchoring pins and blinded her for a moment. She felt dizzy, nauseated, as the sound of shouts and a loud, bruising thud hit her ears.

Isabella tossed her hat aside and shook back the tangle of her loosened hair. The scene that flashed in front of her was like something in a painting, a judgement fresco in a church, a violent swirl of movement and blurred faces against a swirl of colour. She instinctively scrambled out of the way and pressed herself tight to a stucco wall as she tried to make sense of what was happening right before her horrified eyes.

One of her would-be attackers lay still on the cobbles, a dark stain spreading beneath him. The other man was locked in combat with a tall figure all in black, like some avenging spirit. He moved with a terrible grace, as if mortal combat was nothing to him at all, his fists and booted feet like lethal weapons that looked so elegant and moved with sudden, sharp force.

The man who had tried to attack her landed with a horribly soft crack on the stones near his cohort. He scrambled to his feet with an inhuman cry, lifted up his groaning companion under the shoulders and the two of them fled from the deserted courtyard. In their wake there was an almost deafening silence, where the sound of the dark angel's breath seemed to rush past her like feathered wings.

Isabella was astonished, appalled—and fascinated. How had the world changed around her so suddenly?

She wanted to flee, to run and hide from the sudden violence and fear that had grabbed hold of her and shaken her. Yet somehow she was held there, staring at him in astonishment.

Her rescuer slowly turned to look directly at her and she bit her lip to hold back a gasp. He did look like an angel in truth, a fallen angel. Glossy dark hair was tumbled over his forehead and a bleeding cut arced across his sun-bronzed cheek, but nothing could detract from that strangely otherworldly beauty. His face was all austere, sharply carved angles, his lips full and sensual, just as she would paint an angel in need of redemption.

But his eyes—his eyes were a bright, pale sea-green, almost glowing in the shadowed courtyard. She glimpsed a flash of something in them that spoke to her of his deep-down soul, something dark and haunted. She knew she should be afraid, but somehow she was not at all. She wanted to move nearer to him, to touch that hair and look into those eyes. She pressed herself back harder to the cold wall, as it seemed to be the only thing holding her up in that moment.

He swiped his narrow black sleeve over his damp brow. It was the only sign it had taken him any effort at all to dispatch two brigands. ‘Are you hurt, *signorina*?’ he asked. His voice was rough, deep, but calm.

She swallowed hard past the dry knot in her throat. ‘I—nay. You came upon us very quickly. I can’t thank you enough. I—I was lost, you see, and those men...’

A faint, reassuring smile touched his lips. ‘You should be very careful where you go in Florence, *signorina*. These streets can be most deceptive.’

Isabella thought of the sparkling beauty of the river, the bright life that had surrounded her there. How swiftly it all ended. And now—now there was this man in front of her. A man such as she had never seen before.

‘I see that now,’ she said simply. All the words she had ever known seemed to have fled. Was this how it was for her parents when they met, struck dumb by each other? She had to be very careful.

He took a step towards her and held out his hand. He appeared to be trying to move very slowly, very carefully, as if she was a wild animal he had to calm. ‘Come, let me see you home. I assure you, I mean you no harm as these men did.’

Somehow, she believed him, even against all that she had just seen. He had been so violent with those men, but now—now there was only that pale light in those extraordinary eyes. She gave a rueful laugh. ‘I am not sure where that is. I have only just arrived in the city.’

Disbelief flashed across his sculpted face. ‘But you must have family here.’

‘I do, but...’ Her words trailed away as she was beset by new doubts. She wasn’t sure she should mention her cousins, tell him where she was going.

He gave a short nod, as if he understood. ‘Come, I will find a guard to see you where you wish to go. Someone we can both trust.’

That did not sound a great deal safer. After all, his guards would surely know where she went. But she could see no other alternative. She had to find Caterina somehow and she certainly did not want to wander into another brawl. She studied his face carefully for a moment. That flash of darkness she had glimpsed in him was gone now, covered in a small smile, but she remembered it had been there and it made her shiver.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I am in your debt, *signor*.’

He shook his head. ‘I have now done my good deed for the day.’

‘And need no more penance now?’ she asked, surprising herself.

He looked surprised for an instant. ‘I must always do penance, *signorina*. But come now, we will find someone to see you safely home...’

* * *

‘Signorina Isabella! Thank the saints you are safe,’ Isabella heard Mena cry from the thick crowd around the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, where her dark angel’s two guards had led her safely. They looked much as her original attackers had, brawny, bearded men, but they were silent

and courteous, watchful of everything that went on as they took her from the tavern where her rescuer had found them. She had no idea who they were, but they had listened to the man closely, nodded and taken her here, to the most crowded place in the city. She did not even know their names.

Nor did she know her angel's name, or anything about him but the fascination she had glimpsed in his face so briefly. She would not forget him, she was sure. That was a face she would see in her dreams.

But would she ever see it again in real life? She longed to—and yet she feared to at the same time.

'Mena!' she cried, straining up in the stirrups until she could see her maid pushing the crowd aside to make her way towards Isabella. A vast relief flooded over her, warm and familiar. 'There you are!'

'You vanished and we could not find you!' the maid said, tears on her wrinkled cheeks. 'This place is wicked. We should go home.'

'We cannot go without seeing Caterina,' Isabella said. She thought it better not to tell Mena *all* that had happened. There had been too much darkness in the day already. She only wanted to find her cousins' home, have a bath and a meal—and think about her rescuer. Sketch his face before she could forget it. 'These men helped me find my way...'

She glanced back, but her guards had gone, melted away as if they had never been her silent escort at all. Had she only dreamed the whole strange scene? It had happened before.

But, no. She remembered all too well the touch of her rescuer's hand on her skin, the glow of his eyes. It had been no dream.

She quickly leaned down to give Mena a reassuring hug and followed her maid back to the servants who awaited them in front of the cathedral.

They left the market behind, the crowds thinning as they moved closer to the Arno. Once over the famous Ponte Vecchio bridge, they turned towards a neighbourhood of *grand palazzi*, towards the Via Porcellatti. This was nothing like the terrible courtyard where she had become so lost—and then found.

It was quieter here, the shouts of the merchants and beggars behind them. There were still people, to be sure, many of them, going about their own business at a dignified, luxurious pace. Ladies in silken gowns and sheer veils anchored with jewelled bands emerged from the church of San Lorenzo as the bells tolled above them, trailed by their vigilant maids. Men in embroidered velvet doublets and sleeveless robes spoke together in hushed, intent voices, their gazes following her as she moved past. Servants scurried about on errands, heavy baskets over their arms. The shops were shaded with green awnings, offerings of gold, jewels and silks displayed to shining perfection.

The structures here were vast, solid, but built of plain, greyish-pink stone. Their heavy doors and lacy-screened balconies whispered of power, security, wealth. This was where the Strozzi lived.

Just as Caterina had directed in her letter, it was a perfect square of a *palazzo*, three storeys high, at the corner of a half-hidden square on the Via Porcellatti. In the distance, soaring high over the red-tiled roof, could be seen the ochre-coloured brick dome of the Duomo, Brunelleschi's famous achievement.

The shutters were half-open, offering shade in the warm afternoon, the doors closed and barred. But it was unmistakably their destination—the Strozzi arms hung over the portal.

'This must be it,' Mena murmured, her voice heavy with exhaustion. 'At last.'

Isabella glanced towards her maid. Mena's face was grey and drawn beneath her wide-brimmed straw hat, her eyes bloodshot. Their journey, such a rare source of pleasure and inspiration to Isabella until she was lost, had been only a trial to Mena. Had she been wrong to bring Mena with her? Or perhaps wrong to have come here herself? She should have been frightened, surely, but somehow she just felt—excited. She knew she could not leave now.

Isabella gave her a sympathetic smile. 'We *are* here, Mena! In no time at all we will have warm baths, good food and a clean bed to rest in.'

'Praise be to St Catherine!' Mena murmured fervently.

One of the footmen left his horse to bang the great brass ring against the heavy, iron-bound door. The sound reverberated through the courtyard within, echoing, and after only a moment they heard the inner bars being drawn back, the creak of hinges as the door opened to reveal a page clad in the embroidered Vespucci livery.

'The Signorina Isabella Spinola has arrived,' the footman said.

The page's gaze flickered past him, taking in Isabella and her ragged retinue. Surely, she thought, they were not an auspicious sight. She did not arrive in a silk-draped litter, followed by carts filled with clothes' chests and furniture. She had no large train of servants. And they were all covered in the dust and grit of the road, her plain, dark-blue-wool travel gown creased and dirty. She thought of the sheer veils and jewelled headdresses of the ladies they passed and reached up to touch her own hair. The thick, black length was simply braided and tucked into a net, covered by a flat velvet cap.

Doubt touched Isabella again. She was a country mouse, about to enter the palatial halls of the most sophisticated society in the world. What if her clothes, her manners, her *everything* were just wrong? So wrong Caterina laughed her out of the house, sending her back to where she started. Back to lonely ignorance. To men who were nothing like the angel in black she had met earlier.

But the page, rather than insisting she could not be Signorina Spinola and slamming the door, merely nodded. 'Of course. Signorina Strozzi is expecting you.'

He swung the door wider and several more liveried servants streamed out, hurrying down the steps to take their animals' bridles. 'They will take your horses around to the mews, Signorina Spinola. If you would care to follow me, the mistress has instructed me to take you to her at once.'

'Of course,' Isabella echoed, sliding down from her stiff Spanish saddle with the help of one of Caterina's servants. Her legs felt turned to ice water, unsteady beneath her. Once she stepped through those doors, she could not turn back. Could not run away.

Coward! her mind whispered. *What are you waiting for? Has this not been what you wanted for so very long? Your blood is as fine as hers, as ancient and noble. Don't shame your father—or yourself.*

Isabella stiffened her back, straightened her shoulders. She was no coward. She never had been. She just had to go forward, even if the stone facade of the *palazzo* contained the mouth of hell itself. There was no other choice. Not now. And surely she would have it no other way.

Her head tilted high, she followed the page through those doors. Only to find an earthly paradise, untouched by even a hint of fiery torment. Even the modern tumult of the city seemed leagues away.

Isabella stood still for a moment, gazing around in silent wonder. The courtyard was open to the sky, but the overhanging roof that covered the second-floor gallery gave shade and coolness. A tall marble fountain presided in the very centre, sparkling water spilling from a stone nymph's urn into a shimmering, bubbling stream. The pale pink flagstones were swept and scrubbed, lined with classical statues, gods, goddesses and heroes interspersed with backless benches and chairs that invited quiet conversation, solitary contemplation. It looked just like one of the etchings in her father's books, a Roman villa come to life.

How her father would have loved it.

'Signorina?' the page said softly.

Isabella glanced at him, startled. She had forgotten he was there, forgotten she was not alone in the midst of this perfect beauty. He smiled—obviously he was accustomed to such reactions.

'Shall I take you to Signorina Strozzi now?' he asked. 'She is most eager to greet you.'

'Of course,' Isabella murmured. '*Grazie.*'

She followed the page across the courtyard, past the rows of statues, whose blank stares seemed to follow her just as those of the men in the street had, judging her. At the far end rose a wide stone

staircase, ascending in a soaring arc to the terrace. They were only halfway up these steps when a door at the top opened and a painting come to shining life stepped out.

It had to be Caterina. Isabella had not seen her kinswoman since she was a child, but she well remembered the occasion. She remembered how she, a dark, shy little girl, stood in awe of her older cousin, who seemed made of the rays of the sun, so beautiful and graceful was she. Everyone whispered that Caterina was destined for great things, for a place of fame and renown, and soon after that she seemed off to a fine start in her glorious life. Once she had even been betrothed to one of the Vespucci family, but rumours of her ill health had made that false.

Awe was a fine word for Isabella's emotions on that long-ago day. Awe that a human being could be so perfect, could be all that she herself was not. Fair, serene, accomplished, self-possessed. Awe and—and envy.

Those feelings hadn't changed with the years, Isabella found, as she stared up at her cousin. Caterina stood framed in the arched doorway, one of her statues come to life. Her skin was pale as marble, touched with pink only along the high, smooth cheekbones, the perfect foil for the loose fall of waving, red-gold hair that flowed to her waist. She wore an open robe of sky-blue silk over an even paler blue muslin gown, shades that matched her eyes. If Isabella were to paint her, she would use priceless blue marine.

Caterina gave a welcoming smile and hurried along the terrace. Her arms, draped in long, gold-lined sleeves, were outstretched in welcome.

'My dear cousin!' she cried, enveloping Isabella in a rose-scented embrace. 'You are here at last. Was your journey terribly taxing?'

Caterina was not very tall, yet still she was taller than Isabella, who had to go on tiptoe to kiss her smooth cheek. Caterina was all that was lovely, but Isabella found, as she returned the greeting embrace, that her cousin had grown thin, her shoulders all sharp-edged beneath her sumptuous robe. She felt warm, too, as if feverish and her blue eyes glowed with an unnatural light.

Once again, Isabella was sure she should conceal what had really happened to her on the journey. The danger *and* the rescue. 'Not at all,' she answered with a smile. 'We travelled in easy stages. I am very glad to be here, though. It was most kind of you to invite me.'

Caterina shrugged, still smiling as she stepped back, her eyes quickly taking in Isabella in a barely perceptible sweep. What could she think of her small, black-haired country cousin? She gave no indication, merely widened her smile, a dimple appearing in the alabaster of her cheek.

'What is family for, my dear Isabella? You have done me a great favour by leaving your home and coming to stay with me. This house will be less quiet and lonely with you here. But come, you must be hungry after your journey. Paolo, will you fetch a repast for us and tell the maids we require a bath? And now, Isabella, you must tell me how your father fares. He was always one of my mother's favourite kinsmen. She constantly spoke of how learned and wise he is.'

The page—who must be Paolo—bowed and turned back down the stairs, as Caterina linked her arm with Isabella's and led her upwards. As Isabella assured Caterina that her father was well and still learned, they passed through that arched doorway into what surely must be Caterina's own rooms. They lacked the stiff formality of the public rooms of the house, the grand *sale*, the banquet halls and counting rooms. What they did not lack, though, was luxury.

The marble floors were covered with rare carpets, woven of glowing jewel shades of red and blue, while the walls were hung with tapestries depicting the wedding at Cana, and Diana at the hunt. Any thread of chill that might dare to creep through was banished by those rich, muffling threads. There was little furniture in this room, a few painted chairs and tables, and a lute and a set of virginals waiting in the corner.

Caterina led her through another doorway into the bedchamber, a sunlit expanse where the velvet curtains were drawn back from the leaded windows to let in vast, buttery swathes of light. The beams fell across the floor, covered with yet more rugs, along the immense carved bed on its

raised platform. The mattress was draped in thickly embroidered blue-satin hangings and spread with a blue counterpane, but the bedclothes were rumpled, as if Caterina had only recently risen from their embrace. There were carved chests, upholstered chairs, polished-looking glasses and the sweet scent of smouldering herbs from the pierced brass globes suspended from the frescoed ceiling.

Isabella stared around her in amazement. A space more different from her whitewashed chamber at home could scarce be envisioned. 'I cannot imagine such a house ever being quiet,' she murmured.

Caterina laughed. 'I assure you it is! Such a vast, echoing space just for Matteo and me. That is why I go out so often. And why you will, too.' For an instant, a flicker of shadow passed over Caterina's face, a cloud on the bright sun. Then, it was gone and she smiled again.

'Let me show you your chamber, Isabella,' she said. 'I had it arranged just for you.'

The room was next to Caterina's, a smaller echo of it in furnishings and decorations. The bed was draped in dark rose-pink, as were the windows. Two carved chairs, a small table and an empty embroidery frame sat by the hearth and the clothes' chests were open, waiting to receive her possessions.

'It looks most comfortable,' Isabella said. 'I am sure I will be happy here.'

'*Va bene*. If you have need of anything, you have only to ask. I want you to feel this is your home, for as long as you care to stay.' Caterina strolled over to one wall, hung with tapestries woven with scenes of a Grecian banquet in soft creams and greens. Between them was a painting, not large, but exquisitely framed in gilt scrollwork. 'And this is one of my treasures. I thought you might enjoy it.'

Isabella drifted after her, completely mesmerized, drawn closer by the lure of the vibrant, unearthly colours. She had never seen anything like it in her life. The scene was a typical one, a Madonna with the infant Christ on her knee, set before a hazy, pale green-and-gold landscape. Isabella saw such subjects every day, in churches and country villas. She herself sketched visions of the Virgin. But never like this.

The blue and white of the Madonna's robe, her golden hair, the peachy warmth of her skin and that of her child—it glowed with pure, real life. As smooth as satin on its base, there was not a flaw to be seen. There was such an ineffable grace about the scene, an accuracy of line and a delicacy of feeling. The Virgin's outstretched hand was so fragile in its long grace, so beckoning, Isabella almost reached out to touch her. She curled her own fingers tightly in the folds of her skirt before she could do something so foolish.

Caterina studied the painting, too, her head tilted slightly in unconscious imitation of the Madonna.

'Is it not exquisite?' she said. 'It is by Giovanni Bellini of Venice, using the new method of mixing pigment with oil.'

'I have never seen anything so beautiful,' Isabella answered truthfully, vowing to herself to learn more of this new, magical technique.

Caterina smiled. 'I was told that you enjoy art, cousin. That you are a fine artist yourself.'

'I am no artist,' Isabella said. 'No true artist, like this Signor Bellini. I have had little training. But I do love art. Its beauty is the best of what it means to be human, is it not? It raises us—higher.'

Caterina gazed at her steadily, one golden brow arched, and Isabella felt her cheeks slowly heat. 'That is well said, Isabella. Art does indeed raise us above the daily struggle of our lives. It helps us to imagine what it might be like to touch divinity.' She reached out suddenly to clasp Isabella's hand. Her fingers were as dry and delicate as paper. 'I know our families have not always been the most harmonious, cousin, but I am so glad you are here now.'

And, suddenly, so was Isabella. Those silly doubts she had on the street were gone. The thieves, the gloriously handsome man who had rescued her—they just seemed part of the dream of the city. An adventure. She glanced back at the painting, that object of perfect, unattainable beauty that now seemed just the merest bit closer. 'I hope that I can be of some help to you.'

Caterina shook her head. 'You help me just by being here. We will be great friends, I am sure.'

The chamber door opened behind them, admitting a parade of servants bearing platters of food, ewers of wine and water, even a large wooden bathtub.

'At last!' Caterina said. 'You must be so famished by now.' She moved away from Isabella's side, becoming every inch the stern chatelaine as she supervised the servants in their pouring of the bath and serving of the food.

As Isabella turned back to the Bellini for one more glance, her attention was caught by yet another painting. This one hung by the open door, framed more simply but just as lovely. The colours were more muted than the Bellini, giving it an air of ethereal fancy. The subject was Caterina herself, depicted from just above her waist in a low-cut gown of pale pinkish-red. Her glorious hair was piled atop her head in loose waves, anchored with loops of a white scarf. She gazed off somewhere to her right, a half smile on her lips.

Around her neck was draped a heavy gold necklace, in the ominous shape of a serpent with ruby eyes. Was it a symbol of her mysterious illness, her withdrawal from the world?

Startled by the image, Isabella glanced back at her cousin, who was still overseeing the servants. Caterina was smiling, yet still Isabella fancied she saw that shadow lurking. She thought again of her rescuer and the darkness held deep in his sea-green eyes.

'Now, cousin, you must eat,' Caterina said, oblivious to any shadows at all. 'And then I shall loan you one of my own gowns. We have somewhere very important to go this afternoon.'

Somewhere important? Was she to be tossed into this strange new life already, feet-first into cold waters? Isabella's stomach tightened. 'Caterina, I think...'

Before she could finish her words, there was a noise from outside the luxurious chamber. The clatter of heavy booted footsteps, dogs barking, the deep rumble of masculine laughter. The door flew open and a golden giant of a man strode inside.

Isabella was sure this was Caterina's brother, her own cousin Matteo, for he had his sister's tawny hair. But where Caterina was pale and slight, he was tall and broad-shouldered, exuding an exuberant energy. He wore a plain dark doublet and tall, mud-splattered leather boots, his pack of dogs crowding close behind him as if he had just come in from hunting.

'This must be our fair cousin, arrived at last!' he said, his voice booming incongruously in the delicacy of his sister's chamber. 'Isabella, Caterina has been able to speak of nothing but your arrival for weeks. 'Tis good for her to have a companion at last.'

'And I am most pleased to be here,' Isabella answered, a bit flustered at his sudden arrival. She had only really glimpsed Matteo in the past; he was always a moving blur of laughter and raw energy. Today was no different. He was a large, sunny presence, seeming to take over the whole space.

He seized her hand and raised it to his lips, holding on to it tightly for a moment longer than she would have expected. He had the gift of making a woman, of making anyone, feel they were the one he most wanted to see at that moment. Isabella wondered how she would paint him. As Apollo, dragging the sun behind him? No, Hercules, conquering the world.

For some reason, she thought of her dark rescuer, the mysteries in his eyes. These two men seemed so different, but which would be more dangerous?

'And so pretty, too,' he whispered with a laugh. 'Florence needs more pretty ladies.'

'No teasing our poor cousin, Matteo,' Caterina said. 'I am taking her to Signor Botticelli's studio this afternoon, so she can meet our friends.'

'*Va bene*. Mayhap he will want to paint her, as he has you, sister.' Matteo threw himself down on a *chaise longue* and reached for the pitcher of wine. His dogs tussled at his feet as Caterina gave them a disapproving glance. 'We will find you a husband while we're here, shall we, Isabella? A rich *condottierre*, mayhap?'

Isabella laughed. She had long known marriage was not for her. Art was everything. A husband would surely only get in the way. 'I look not for a husband now,' she said. She would never repeat her parents' mistakes, the grief that came from loving too much.

'You cannot steal her away from me just yet, Matteo, and give her as a prize to one of your friends,' Caterina said, reaching for a sweetmeat to nibble. 'There will be time for marriage later.'

'Si,' Matteo muttered. He studied Isabella over the rim of his goblet with a strange glint in his eyes. She had the strangest sense that her cousin, for all his exuberant good humour and charm, was not entirely to be trusted. 'Later...'

* * *

'You saw the lady to her destination?' Orlando asked as his guardsmen came into the sitting room of his lodgings. He stared down at the street below his window. The bustling crowd moved past on their usual early evening errands, full market baskets over the arms of maidservants, courtesans tottering on their high-heeled pattens, gangs of young men with garish-striped hose and clanking swords.

They all went by as if it was merely an ordinary day. As if something hadn't cracked and shifted, changing beyond recognition.

'Nay, my lord, she found her party again and rejoined them,' one of the guards said. 'She seemed safe with them.'

Orlando watched a lady in black drift past, like a ghost. Or a dream, like the young dark-eyed woman had been. 'You were not seen by them?'

The man snorted. 'If we have no wish to be seen, my lord, then we are not seen.'

Orlando gave a wry smile. He glanced back over his shoulder at the cluster of men hovering in his doorway. It was true—they were most adept at blending into any crowd, with their dark clothes and bearded faces. Neither handsome nor plain, too grand or too ragged. Perfect for his own purposes. That was why he employed them, to help him keep an eye on the shifting loyalties of Florence.

And, it seemed, to help him rescue fair maidens.

He reached for a bag of coins and tossed it to them. 'My thanks. You did a good deed for your souls today.'

The guardsman grinned, revealing cracked teeth. 'Twould take more than that to save *our* souls, my lord.'

Orlando had to laugh. His soul, too, was irreparably stained, beyond hope. Yet there had been something in that lady's eyes as she looked up at him, an openness, a light that seemed to pull him up...

'Is there anything else, my lord?' the guard asked. 'Shall we find out where the lady is dwelling? Or track down those thieves and finish them off?'

Orlando shook his head. 'The thieves will come to a bad end soon enough. And the lady is safe now.'

Especially safe from *him*. He found he did want to know where she was, far more than he should. That light in her eyes had been so fascinating. But he knew that would not be wise. He was much too intrigued with her after only one meeting. It should go no further.

He turned back to the window. 'I will send for you if you are needed again.'

They left in a scuffle of fading footsteps, the metallic click of their swords and daggers, and Orlando was alone again.

The sudden fight in that quiet square had made his blood hot, made it sing through his veins as it once did when he was a high-tempered youth. Tavern brawls held little attraction for him now. Such fights were a waste of his energy when far more serious matters pressed in around them. But when he came upon those filthy villains circling the lost, frightened lady, the old Orlando had surged back to life and a fury such as he had rarely known of late came back upon him.

And those eyes of hers, the delicacy of her hand as he helped her to her feet, aroused a lust just as sudden and fierce. He had wanted to kiss her, hard and deep, feel her body against his, as the

furious rush of life carried them away. The tremble of her fingers, the wary gratitude on her face, held him back. He had done a fair deed; he couldn't ruin it by scaring her all over again.

Now the anger and the desire had ebbed away, leaving him cold again. But the memory of her wouldn't be erased from his mind. She wasn't beautiful, not really, not in a city full of golden courtesans, but there was something much more than beauty in her face. Something he wanted to read.

So, nay—he should *not* find out where she lived. He should not see her again, for the sake of her as well as himself.

There was a knock at the door and his hand automatically went to the hilt of the dagger at his waist. The guards would not return without his summons. 'Yes?'

The manservant who usually watched the door below came in with a low bow. He held out a sealed letter. 'A message from the convent of St Clare. You asked that any word from them be brought to you right away.'

Orlando nodded and reached for the letter to break the seal and hastily scan the neatly penned words. He half-feared every time he heard from the convent that something ill had befallen little Maria. An illness, an accident—perhaps even a kidnapping if Matteo Strozzi discovered her existence. Little Maria was always in his thoughts, his plans.

But the message was only an account of Maria's progress since he last visited. Her lessons in music, languages and her religious instruction went on well. She was a quick, bright child, as well as a beauty. Just as her mother had once been.

Orlando carefully refolded the letter. His sister's dark despair, her terrible love for a villain who was nowhere near worthy of her shining spirit, had taken her away from her daughter. Maria Lorenza would never hear her child's laughter, see her run through the sunshine. Everyone had betrayed her in the end.

Orlando would not.

And he could not afford to be turned from his avowed duty by maidens in distress—no matter how very intriguing they were.

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