

## Chapter One

I close my eyes against the gentle breeze and twirl, my green silk surcoat swishing around my ankles in glorious abandon. The warm sun seeps into my skin, and it is as if the very air I breathe is saturated with happiness. Fourteen years of grooming to become a wealthy merchant's wife, two years toiling to suppress my sinful desires, and it all culminates in this moment.

*Pray let it be today!*

Five long days ago, Matteo—as he allows me to call him in private—asked me to meet him here so we could discuss our future. A future I am eager to begin. Every prayer and every thought since has been spent in anticipation.

The scent of freshly cut flowers from a merchant's stand fills the air as Mama's wise words float in my mind: *Nature is but a sign of Signore's provision, Alessandra*. My eyes open to the vibrant blue of the iris petals, a certain premonition of good things to come, and a giggle springs from my throat.

“The sun's light holds not a candle to your radiance today, Less.”

With a delighted smile, I turn to the sole person besides my beloved cousin Cat who refers to me by that peculiar name. “You and your flattering tongue are agreeably met, dear friend,” I tell Lorenzo, maintaining one eye on the crowded piazza. “Care to keep me company while I await Signor Romanelli?”

My brother's best friend sets down his easel. “It would be my pleasure.” He props his foot against the sandstone building behind us and rakes a paint-stained hand through his golden

curls. “Last week you believed he had intentions of betrothal in mind. Have you seen each other since last we spoke?”

An inkling of disquiet blooms, but I whisk it away. “No, but it is my suspicion he has spent the time in preparation to meet Father when he returns.”

Lorenzo nods, and we fall into a companionable silence, taking in the bustling life around us. The Mercato Vecchio is as noisy as ever, a cacophony of yelling, laughter, babies crying, and donkeys braying. A group of children races past, bumping into a nearby servant and jostling the basket she carries. A single red apple rolls to a stop by my feet.

A vision of our fairy-tale performance that day in the countryside plays before me, unbidden and poignant. The poisoned apple, the evil hag, the chance to shuck my dutiful daughter role and become someone wicked. I adore my cousin Cat for many reasons, but the gift of that afternoon most especially. Despite the church’s strident opposition to female actresses, she gave me the opportunity to experience the rush of performance. To live the dream I once thought sinful.

Unfortunately, it was after my dear cousin departed that sadness adhered to the memory as well. When Cat returned to the future, she left three powerful words in her wake: *passion*, *equality*, and *freedom*. Maidens of the twenty-first century may hold these ideals dear, but they are most unacceptable in the sixteenth—as much as I wish it otherwise. As a result, I have spent the last two years in turmoil, battling between my expected duty of propriety and my newfound desire for passion.

Lorenzo kneels to pluck up the apple, and I meet his gaze.

He, too, is remembering.

As he returns the apple to the woman, mouth set in a tight-lipped smile, I marvel again at the impossibility of it all. For a reason neither of us has come to understand, fate left Lorenzo and me alone in the ability to perceive the noticeable differences between Cat, my future descendant, and Patience, my sixteenth-century cousin—the girl Cat temporarily took the place of. Of course, there are the similarities that come from being blood relations. Hair near the same shade, lips just a touch wide. But gone are all the unique qualities that made Cat so wonderfully vibrant. There is no denying that the true Patience is lovely in her own right, but who could ever compete with such a dynamic, time-defying person?

I have never explained all the details surrounding Cat's implausible tale, but then, I have never needed to. With the fiery passion that only a true artist can understand, Lorenzo just *knows*. Eventually, he discovered an outlet for his misery, using the pain of Cat's departure to fuel his art, studying under a variety of masters, earning public commendation and creating masterpiece after masterpiece.

I stuffed mine into reinvigorated attempts at marriage.

Lorenzo gazes over the bustling piazza, and his previously sad smile becomes genuine. "I believe your suitor has arrived."

Giddiness bubbles inside me as I follow his gaze.

*Matteo.*

He has yet to spot me, so I take the opportunity to drink in the sight of him. The broad line of his strong shoulders displayed in his dark doublet. The enticing tilt of his mouth I can see even from this distance. Absent are the lines of stress that far too often mar his handsome face, and I watch as he laughs with someone to his right. My heart hammers.

He is truly *yummy*, as my fair cousin would say.

At twenty-eight, Matteo is eleven years my senior. He is a bit young for marriage, but our families are old friends, and a union will bring increased prosperity. We will make a good match. Being with him will quiet the rage inside me, the need for more. It has to.

The crowd between us parts, and I spot a young woman beside him. I tilt my head and squint.

“Novella d’Amico,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. Formerly Novella Montagna, daughter of one of the wealthiest families in Florence. Courted and desired by all the men of marriageable age last year, she married a Venice nobleman and moved away that winter. I turn to Lorenzo, my ribs an iron vise around my lungs. “Why has she returned to Florence?”

He shakes his head, his eyebrows furrowed. “I am not sure. But I shall find out.”

Lorenzo marches over to a band of women pretending to shop, obviously using the pleasant fall day as an excuse to prattle incessantly. As he approaches, Signora Benedicti, Signora Cacchioni, and Signora Stefani pause their chattering to gaze over his features as if he were an expensive piece of Venetian glass or a new onyx cameo. Completely undignified, but sadly, not uncharacteristic.

If gossip is desired, Lorenzo could not have chosen a better group.

I look away in disgust and fix my gaze on Matteo, willing him to glance my way. A few minutes later, I get my wish. My insides squeeze, but I force a smile, pushing every stolen moment and whispered promise into the gesture.

He does not return it.

Matteo reaches to clasp Novella’s hand, his once-warm eyes now emotionless stones.

All excitement and hope drain away. Air ceases to be a necessity. Time stops, and cold dread washes over me. The market fades away as my gaze locks on their interlaced fingers.

From the corner of my eye I see Lorenzo turn away from the gossiping horde, his amiable faced etched with pity. But I already know.

When he reaches me, he looks down and scowls. “Signora d’Amico returned home a widow last week, her full dowry intact.” He inhales sharply, and I close my eyes, steeling myself for the truth to come. This is not how I envisioned this day unfolding.

“They met with the notary just yesterday.”

*Good leads to good.* Somehow, the lesson from my childhood does not fit this new reality. I always do—have always done—the right thing, the proper thing. I do my duty. There should be a reward.

He is supposed to love me back.

Lorenzo clears his throat, and I know he is waiting for me to meet his gaze. With burning tears threatening to escape, I compel my eyes open.

He places a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Alessandra, Matteo and Novella are married.”

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The *click-clack* of footsteps on the cobblestone road muffles my sobs. After pleading with Lorenzo not to follow, I make my faltering escape from the piazza, away from the prying eyes of Mama’s friends and the smirk of triumph on Novella’s contemptuous face. Tearing through the streets of my beloved city, my gaze blurred, I pray my feet will somehow find their way home. And as my eyes alight on the familiar four-story, tan stone building, my knees nearly buckle in gratitude. Fate may not have ruled in my favor in matters of the heart, but it appears to have taken pity on my sense of navigation.

My toe catches on the cracked stone floor, and I stagger through the arched opening of our courtyard. I set myself to rights and press on, the quiet solitude of the garden beckoning me

onward, and sink to my knees in a corner covered in shadow. But today, the darkened retreat does not soothe. The scent of fragrant flowers and the melodic bubbling of the nearby fountain do nothing to ease the stabbing pain of Matteo's betrayal.

I still cannot bring myself to believe it. Months of secret assignations and declarations cannot end in such a way. Surely I must be in the midst of a nightmare. At any moment I will wake up, get ready again, and leave to meet Matteo, where he will whisper words of our future and how much he loves me.

I blink rapidly, but nothing changes.

With a trembling hand, I wipe at relentless tears. I cannot help but think that Cat would be stronger. In my place, she would have stormed across the crowded piazza, flung a cutting remark at Novella, and demanded an explanation from Matteo. Then she would have kicked him.

The image of my near betrothed's eyes popping out of his head eases my spirits a little, and I hiccup a laugh. Cat had been a storm of unquenchable strength, challenging the rest of us to either match her in vivacity or be left in the dust.

But alas, I am not my dear cousin.

In Cat's world, in the future, a girl is free to live with passion and blatant disregard for propriety. She can ignore the rules of etiquette and society and follow her dreams—even when they led her here, five hundred years into the past. Fate, mixed with a little gypsy magic, granted Cat the opportunity to experience the impossible. She glimpsed another way of life and, for a short while, was given rest from the worries of her own.

Crumpling to the ground, for once not caring if my surcoat gets soiled, I close my eyes and let fresh tears fall onto the damp earth beneath my cheek. "How I long for a gypsy adventure of my own."

As I lay there, unmoving, willing the world to end, a faint tinkling sound rings near my ear, yanking me from my despair.

A slow shiver creeps from the base of my spine. It quickly gains speed before bursting across the rest of my body. My eyes spring open to branches and petals dancing around me in a sudden breeze, a few snapping and fluttering away as the winds grow stronger. Ribbons of my auburn hair blow across my eyes. I clamor to my feet, fighting against the abrupt gust stealing my breath, and hold down the hem of my gown. The wind shoves me forward, and the storm swallows my shriek.

Then, as suddenly as it began, everything stops.

When I find my voice, I ask the stillness, “What, in Signore’s name, was *that*?”

Unsurprisingly, the now calm and quiet courtyard does not reply.

Glancing down, I brush away the debris clinging to my surcoat—but the sharp *crack* of a twig behind me causes me to freeze.

“*Buna ziua, Alessandra.*”

I spin around, and my gaze lands on a girl near my age. Her long raven hair is unruly and tousled, her costume one of bright-colored skirts and sheer veils. Her arms are bare, as is a slice of bronzed skin around her midsection. I avert my eyes as a whisper of a memory taunts the edges of my mind.

*How does she know my name?*

A small smile, unnatural and amiss on an otherwise somber face, plays upon the girl’s mouth as she says, “The stars have heard your plea.”