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A heavy heat had draped itself across the afternoon, pinioning the landscape into shimmering immobility. The great house stood tall, bulky and square, the fortress-like appearance of the walls softened by the ochre of the stone and the bleached red of the pantiled roofs; in the bright light, the deeply arched crenellations of the roofs cast dark blue scoops of shadow all along the length of each wall. Cicadas chirred rhythmically, ceaselessly, falling into and out of time with each other, and a soporific feeling of warm lethargy hung above the castle like a sun-baked blanket.

A door banged open at the back of the house and, with a scream, a young woman burst out into the heat at a scrambling run, her skirts clutched in her fists, her breathing audibly ragged. She threw a glance behind her, gasped and increased her speed.

Another figure ran through the same door in pursuit, his shadow an untidy ink-blot below his thudding feet.

For a moment it seemed as though the cicadas held their breath: the only sounds in the torpid stillness were the panicked footsteps of the girl and the heavier tread of the young man who was fast

closing in upon her. She ran along a path between formal beds of flowers and herbs, kicking a frantic way right through one of them, as, with a wordless whimper, she headed for the longer grass by the gates that led to the walled vegetable garden.

He caught up with her and threw himself at her. Locking his arms around her knees, he brought her down. She flung her hands up to protect her face and, as she landed, the wind was knocked out of her with a grunt. Before she had had time even to draw breath, the boy let go of her legs and rolled her onto her back, his fingers gripping her wrists, pressing them into the grass on either side of her head. She struggled, but his hold was too firm. His knees held her hips, his face was no more than a foot above hers. For a wild fraction of a second they held each other's gaze.

'You bastard, Giovanni!' said the girl, coughing out a laugh. 'Get off me!'

'You're just –' said Giovanni, his chest heaving '– just too slow, that's all there is to it. Go on – admit it!'

His fingers still encircled the thin wrists and he leaned his weight more heavily on them as he spoke; despite her continued struggles, the girl could not sit up. She worked spit into her mouth and lifted her head.

Giovanni grinned. 'You wouldn't dare!' he said, but she drew in a long breath through her nose. Giovanni rolled backwards out of her range. 'God, you're disgusting, Lucrezia!' he said.

Lucrezia sat up, spat her mouthful into the grass, then poked her tongue out at him. Giovanni lay flat on his back, his face half-hidden by tangled grass blades; he raised an eyebrow and smirked at her. She kicked out towards him, but he grabbed her foot and, lifting it, tipped her back into the grass, where they both lay sprawled, laughing at nothing.

A distant voice startled them.

‘Lucrezia!’

They looked at each other.

‘Lucrezia, *cara*, where are you?’

Sighing heavily, Lucrezia said, ‘I must go – I should have been back hours ago. Come with me, Vanni.’

The boy jumped up, all long limbs like an eager puppy, and reached out to pull his cousin to her feet. She took his hand and stood, smiling, but, to her surprise, Giovanni did not smile in return. Instead a crooked little frown creased between his brows – he seemed suddenly awkward and ill at ease – and as she watched, he rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand, and flushed.

The voice called again.

Lucrezia ran her fingers into her hair and found crusts of earth on her forehead; scratching at it, she examined the dirt now lodged under her nails. She turned her hands over. Her palms were grazed and grass-stained and she had badly torn yet another dress: the great three-cornered rent that hung down across one hip was not the sort of tear anyone would be able to mend. Flapping the ripped corner back and forth, she began walking back towards the house with her cousin.

‘Giulietta is going to be angry with me again, Vanni,’ she said. ‘She thinks I should . . .’ Lucrezia’s voice deepened and her features pinched into a parody of her nurse’s beaky dignity, ‘. . . behave as befits a Medici heiress, of the *impressive* age of sixteen.’ She jutted her chin forward in a scowl and Giovanni’s face brightened again.

He grinned at her. ‘Poor Giulietta,’ he said. ‘You’re such a disappointment to her.’

Lucrezia gasped. ‘Me?’ she said. ‘You bastard, Giovanni – she thinks *you* are a very bad influence on me, if you must know. It’s all your fault.’

‘What is?’

Lucrezia thought, then said, ‘Everything.’

‘You’re not wrong,’ Giovanni said. He scuffed at the path with one heel.

Lucrezia leaned across and kissed his cheek. ‘Come on,’ she said, ‘run with me.’ She began to run; Giovanni caught up easily and together they jogged back through the knot gardens. A strong smell of sun-warmed lavender rose up as Lucrezia’s skirts brushed the bushes.

‘You’ve completely destroyed that bed,’ Giovanni said, nodding towards a sad mess of trampled plants.

‘Your fault.’ Lucrezia shrugged. ‘Told you everything’s your fault.’

Giovanni pushed her and she stumbled into another bed. More crushed herbs. A pungent scent of thyme. Regaining her footing, Lucrezia stretched out her arm to shove back at her cousin, but he dodged out of her reach, running faster now, and disappeared around a corner. The hard-packed stones of the path scrunched under Lucrezia’s feet as she followed, passing the wide, castellated archway to the courtyard.

Giulietta stood on the stone steps, dwarfed by the great oak doors. Her lined old features crumpled with disapproval as the two figures ran up to her, barely out of breath. Glancing at Giovanni, Lucrezia saw the corners of his mouth twitch, before he bowed with an ostentatious flourish to Giulietta. The old woman clicked her tongue in annoyance and glared at him. He straightened up and, without a word, ran off towards the stables at a steady lope.

Lucrezia watched him go, then turned to Giulietta, her face stinging with the heat now that she had stopped running. The old woman was grumbling under her breath, though Lucrezia felt sure she was meant to hear every word. Giulietta held out an arm

behind the girl's back to shepherd her into the cool gloom of the entrance hall.

'That boy will be the death of me,' she clucked. 'Oh, he is a—' She broke off. 'Every day something else, and you never seem to learn, either of you – and now look at the state of you, and there's the banquet being prepared as we speak, and—'

'Banquet?'

'Yes, *cara*, the banquet. How many times have I told you that it will be tonight? *He*'ll be here by sunset – and just look at you! What sort of a fright are you?'

'Him?' Lucrezia stopped, her eyes wide. 'I had forgotten it was tonight.'

Giulietta swung her round by the shoulders and bent so that their faces were on a level, her eyes bright with concern. With her prominent nose and her close-set eyes, she reminded Lucrezia – as she so often did – of an anxious eagle. Giulietta stroked the tangled hair back from Lucrezia's face. 'Yes, *cara*, him. The duke. It will not be long now, will it, before you are his wife?'

'I must put on clean clothes,' Lucrezia said, and Giulietta held out one of her gnarled hands. Lucrezia took it and then gasped as the hard old fingers squeezed the fresh graze on her palm. She pulled away.

'What is the matter?'

'Nothing.'

But Giulietta had turned the hand upwards and seen for herself. Clicking her tongue again in grumpy disbelief, she nonetheless planted a swift, dry kiss on the graze, turned Lucrezia's hand back over again and patted the knuckles with her other knobbly hand. Together they walked down the vaulted corridor and out into the central courtyard, entering the house again at the far end and climbing the wide staircase that led to the bedchambers.

Inside Lucrezia's chamber, where the shutters were closed against the fierceness of the sun, the light was cool and dim. At the centre of each shutter was a small round hole; a blade of light from each hole sliced diagonally downwards across the room, as slim and straight as a pair of jousting lances. Lucrezia bent to peer through one of the holes, her hands cupped around her eyes, but the sun was too bright for her to see anything and after a second she screwed her eyes shut and drew back.

'Come here, *cara*, and I'll undo your laces,' Giulietta said.

Blinking, Lucrezia stood with her back to her nurse, and Giulietta started to pick at the knotted fastenings. She began to hum.

'I love that song,' Lucrezia said.

'I've been singing that to you since you were a baby.'

'I wonder if *he* will sing to me when he unfastens my laces,' Lucrezia said, more to herself than to Giulietta. She imagined unfamiliar fingers working unseen at her back, and as she pressed her hands flat onto the stiffened front of her bodice, the skin on the nape of her neck prickled. Would he sing? Would he speak? Would he laugh with her – or would he perhaps prefer to undress his new wife in expectant silence? She pictured in her mind the duke's shadowed eyes and his slow smile and, with a whisper, the dress slid from her and fell to the floor around her feet.

Giulietta paused, but made no comment.

'He's very handsome, isn't he, the duke?' Lucrezia said, stepping out of her skirts. She crossed the room to the small table near the window and picked up a miniature portrait in an elaborate gilt frame.

'He is.'

'And very clever, so Papa says. That's so important, don't you think, Giulietta? I shouldn't want to be married to anyone who

wasn't clever.' She put down the little picture, dropped her voice and said with conviction, 'I would never say so to Papa or Mamma, but I really think I should rather be married to somebody poor but clever than to a noble idiot.'

'Well, you are a very fortunate young woman, then,' Giulietta said, 'as your parents seem to have found you an intelligent aristocrat.'

'Who is handsome as well,' Lucrezia said.

'As you say.'

Lucrezia stood in her shift. What would it be like to stand like this in her chemise in front of him? What would he think of her? She imagined his eyes on her and felt a catch behind her nipples. Breathing slowly, she watched the light paint a bright stripe up and across Giulietta's back as the old woman bent over a long, carved chest at the foot of the bed.

'What would you like to wear, *cara*?'

'I think the russet,' Lucrezia said, and Giulietta knelt, pushed her arms under layers of folded fabric and tugged out a richly embroidered, bright brown damask skirt and bodice. Lucrezia crouched down to help her unfold it. She stood then in front of Giulietta, sucking in her breath as the old woman pulled the new dress down over her head and laced it tight.

'Plum sleeves?'

Lucrezia smiled assent. Giulietta opened a smaller oak chest and found two deep reddish-purple silk sleeves. Long laces dangled from the shoulder ends.

'Arm,' Giulietta said absently and Lucrezia stretched out an arm, pale and thin in the gloom. The lawn of the shift showed creamy-white through the slashes in the silk.

'When I'm ready,' Lucrezia said, 'I'll run to the stables and see if Vanni has finished.'

‘You will do no such thing, my love.’ Giulietta’s voice lost its customary warmth. ‘He will be in presently and if you go down there you will only get yourself dirty and we will have to change your clothes again.’

‘Who will be at the meal tonight?’ A deliberate change of subject.

Giulietta considered. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘the duke will bring his party, of course – there will probably be about a dozen of them – and then there’s your father and mother and—’

‘And Vanni . . .’

‘Of course – and I believe your father has asked several dignitaries from Firenze. Other arm, my love.’

‘And you – you’ll be coming, Giulietta, won’t you?’

‘No, *cara*, not tonight. I have asked your mother if I might eat quietly up here.’

‘Oh, Giulietta, are you unwell?’ Lucrezia took the old woman’s hands in hers. The second sleeve, still unfastened, drooped from her shoulder.

‘No, *cara*, not at all, just a little tired.’

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Why do you say that, child?’

Lucrezia pointed at the crumpled dress on the floor at the far side of the chamber. ‘I always seem to cause you so much work. I’ll pick that up and put it away and—’

Giulietta rubbed the side of her thumb back and forth along the girl’s forehead like an episcopal blessing, then patted her cheek. ‘You just enjoy this most important occasion, *cara*. I am very happy to be up here quietly on my own. That poor dress is no longer fit for anything but throwing away. Give me your arm, now, and let me finish lacing that sleeve.’

Lucrezia paused, gazing intently at the old woman. Then, a

wrinkle of concern still creased between her brows, she lifted her hand out sideways and said, 'Shall you mind the move very much, Giulietta?'

'The move?'

'To Ferrara. I hope you won't find it too dreadfully tiring.'

Giulietta did not answer. She shifted position and unwittingly moved into the stripe of light from the shutter. It ran down the centre of her face and body, cutting her in two. 'I . . . I will not be coming,' she said.

Lucrezia stared at her.

'Your mother thinks it best you start afresh, with a younger woman to care for you.'

Giulietta's voice was flat, and the finality of the decision was immediately obvious to Lucrezia. 'But—' She felt hot tears behind her eyes, nipped the end of her tongue between her teeth and swallowed a few times before she spoke. 'But . . . I want you to come with me.'

'I know, *cara*.'

'Is it quite certain that—?'

Giulietta nodded.

'But why? And why did nobody tell me until now?'

No reply.

Lucrezia held her breath, unsure whether she wanted to cry or to rage at her nurse. The enormity of the changes that were about to happen to her loomed up, unstoppable and inexorable as a battalion of soldiers on the march, real to her suddenly as they had not been before this moment. She had not even considered the possibility that Giulietta might not come with her to Ferrara. Lucrezia looked at the old woman and saw – perhaps for the first time ever – the infirmity of age. With a pinprick of shock, she imagined the skull beneath the lined skin, the bones within the meagre flesh, and

then – as though it was her own pain – felt Giulietta’s anticipation of loss as keenly as her own.

She put her arms around her nurse, aware of the old woman’s bony stiffness as she held her, and they embraced for a long moment.

Breaking away, and making herself smile at Giulietta, Lucrezia said, with deliberate lightness, ‘Where would you like me to put the poor ruined dress?’

Giulietta wiped her eyes with a small square of linen. ‘In that old chest by the door. Don’t bother to try to fold it, *cara*. It can’t be mended.’

Lucrezia gathered the wrecked dress into her arms, went to the big carved box by the door and lifted the lid. Something unexpected caught her eye. ‘Oh!’ she said. ‘Oh, Giulietta, see what I’ve found in here! I’ve been wondering where that was – I haven’t seen it for months!’

Giovanni scratched his mare’s neck and grinned as she puckered her muzzle in pleasure, stretching forward and half-closing her eyes in lazy abandon. He glanced up as a stocky young man of about twenty-five walked into the stableyard, grinning at the pony’s expression. ‘Likes that, doesn’t she?’ he said.

‘Pietro.’ Giovanni nodded a greeting.

Pietro reached out a hand, cupped it beneath the mare’s nose and tilted her head towards his face. ‘Just like women, mares are – all you have to do is scratch them in the right place and they’ll do anything for you,’ he said, with an air of authority. Checking to either side to make sure they were alone, he added, ‘Spent a fair bit of last night scratching young Maria Fabbro in all the right places.’

‘Paolo’s daughter?’

Pietro nodded, a smug grin on his face. Giovanni swallowed. An image of the saddler's ripe peach of a daughter pushed into his mind. He caught his breath. He often saw Maria around the stables and each time he did, he found himself thinking rather too much about breasts. His face felt hot.

'Hope her father doesn't find out,' he said. 'I wouldn't give much for your chances if he does.'

Pietro grinned again, hoisted a net of hay over his shoulder and strolled the length of the yard, whistling as he ducked under the low lintel into the feed store.

Giovanni gave his pony a final pat. He began to walk slowly back towards the great house, kicking a single pebble along in front of him, scuffing dust up from the track as he went.

He might well be nearly fifteen, but today everything was conspiring to make him feel like a child. When he had pulled Crezzi to her feet this afternoon, out by the vegetable garden, she had suddenly seemed quite different. So grown-up, even if she was so small and thin, and so *beautiful* – it had made him feel clumsy and stupid. As if his hands and feet were too big and didn't fit him any longer. Normally, the year and a half's difference in their ages was not so noticeable. Then, though, she had pulled that face at him, and she had looked like herself again, and it had been all right. And now Pietro – so confident, telling him about his conquests. Not that last night was much to boast about though – Maria would go with anyone.

As he reached Lucrezia's bedchamber window, he stopped.

'*It's all your fault.*' He heard her voice from this afternoon.

'*What is?*'

'*Everything.*'

He snorted, and called up to her. Waited. Called again.

There was a moment's noisy fumbling with the fastenings, then

the two shutters were banged back against the wall. Lucrezia leaned out of the window, face screwed up against the light.

‘I’m almost ready,’ she said. ‘Don’t go away.’

Giovanni flicked his head in acknowledgement.

Lucrezia said, ‘Is something wrong?’

He shrugged.

‘Wait!’ She moved back inside. Giovanni stood with his weight on one foot, looking up at the window. After several moments, Lucrezia reappeared with a small straw basket in one hand; a long, rather hairy length of twine was looped over the other. She leaned out, bottom lip caught between her teeth, and began to lower the basket. Giovanni raised his arms as it reached him; he peered inside and, despite his unease, grinned to see a knot of flame-coloured ribbon, twisted into curls like a small orange lily. He picked it out and began to fiddle with it.

‘Don’t spoil it!’ Lucrezia said. She jerked the basket back up, hand over hand. ‘It’s supposed to be a *favour*. As if you were a knight. I’m . . . I’m practising being a duchess.’

Giovanni gave an exaggerated bow in apology and, head near his knees, heard a soft laugh from above him. He straightened.

‘I found my basket again just now in an old chest. Do you remember it?’ Lucrezia called.

‘Of course.’ He tilted his head back to see her better and the sun caught his eyes. He raised a horizontal hand to shade them.

‘After Papa was so angry that time – about the roof.’

‘I didn’t know you still had it.’

‘Neither did I. It was a good game, though, wasn’t it?’

Giovanni looked back down and fingered the ribbon, remembering how fiercely his buttocks had been stinging, the last time he had taken this basket in his hands. Lucrezia might have been confined to her chamber, but he had been beaten, the day they had

both climbed out onto the roof of the castle, stupidly reckless in their search for adventure. It had been her suggestion – she had admitted as much to Uncle Cosimo – but it was *he*, Giovanni, who had been the more soundly punished for it. The injustice still rankled after two years.

Crezzi was right, though: it had been a good game – the only one available to them for the three days of her confinement. He had searched for little treasures, he remembered, and had stolen food from the kitchens, and put it into Crezzi's basket for her to pull back up to her room, and she had sent back silly scribbled messages for him. It all seemed a very long time ago.

'Don't go away,' Lucrezia said. 'I'll be down in a moment.' Her voice sounded thick, as though she had been crying, Giovanni thought, or perhaps more as though she was trying not to cry now. He wondered why.

The shutters were pulled together once more and the noise of the cicadas was loud again as Giovanni sat down with his back against the wall, knees bent, hands hanging loosely over them, turning the knot of orange ribbon over and over in his fingers.