

CHAPTER ONE



FERRARA

5 December 1565

“He murdered his first duchess with his own hands, they say,” the Ferrarese hairdressing-woman whispered as she braided a string of pearls into my hair. “She was so young, so beautiful.”

And I, Barbara of Austria, neither young nor beautiful, would be the duke’s second duchess before the pale December sun set. What did the woman expect me to do, shriek and fall down in a faint? Jump up and swear I would not marry the Duke of Ferrara after all, but return straightaway to Innsbruck with my household and dowry and bride-goods down to the last box of silver pins? For all practical purposes I was married already, the contracts signed, the marriage-by-proxy performed. And truth be told, half-a-hundred people had already told me Alfonso d’Este had murdered his first wife.

I looked at my reflection in a hand glass. One loop of the pearls remained unfastened. “You forget yourself, *parruchiera*,” I said.

The woman stepped back, a pointed braiding-bodkin gleaming

in her hand, and for one incredulous moment I thought she meant to stab me with it. “Do you think you will be safe here, Principessa, when she was not? The court of Ferrara is like a love-apple, beautiful and rosy-red and alluring to the senses, but poisonous, so poisonous—”

I put the glass down hard. “Enough. You are dismissed.”

“The very pearls in your hair might be poisoned,” she whispered, sibilant as a serpent. “That posset you have been drinking. Any piece of fruit, any flower you are offered. Your gloves. A flask of perfume. There are a thousand ways to envenom—”

“*Enough*. Madonna Lucrezia, ask the gentlemen-ushers to step onto the barge for a moment, if you please, and take this woman away.”

The duke’s elder sister raised her hand to the men waiting on the quay; her face was turned away from me and I could not see her expression. The men obeyed her gesture smartly and a scuffle ensued; there were a few cries of surprise and excitement from the ladies crowding the barge, and then the *parruchiera* was gone. My Austrian ladies, my lifelong friends, closed in around me. Lucrezia and Leonora d’Este whispered to each other behind their hands, their eyes glinting with things they knew and I did not. They had assembled my Ferrarese household, or so they told me, at the duke’s command. Holy Virgin—had they deliberately chosen a madwoman to arrange my hair, so as to spoil my pleasure in my entrance into their city?

I picked up the glass. Fortunately, it was not broken. I could see them behind me, watching me, waiting to see what I would do.

“Sybille.” I spoke to one of my own women with deliberate steadiness. “These pearls are too tightly braided. Would you loosen them, please?”

Sybille von Wittelsbach stepped forward at once. I watched in the glass and felt some of my distress evaporate as the arrangement of the pearls became less severe. Sybille often brushed and dressed my hair at home; her light, familiar touch calmed me further.

“I warned you, Bärbel,” she said under her breath. “No foreigner can arrange your hair better than I. Did they think I meant to steal the pearls?”

“Of course not. It was the duke’s wish for me to be dressed entirely by Ferrarese women before I entered the city. A symbol, nothing more.”

“A fine symbol. I thought she meant to stab you with that bodkin.”

As had I, although of course I did not say so. I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and willed myself to be still. The magnificent ducal barge shifted and creaked beneath me, rocking gently on the waters of the Po di Volano. I could hear the rustle of a cold morning breeze in the imperial standard flying over me, and the faraway cries of cormorants and herons. I could smell the ancient river-scent, weeds and marshes and fish, and the milky sharp-sweet tang of the hot wine posset on the table in front of me.

The posset you have been drinking . . .

“Katharina,” I said to another of my Austrian ladies without opening my eyes, “take the posset away, please.”

I heard her skirt rustle. The scent of the posset disappeared.

It was my wedding day, and posset or no posset, bodkin or no bodkin, whispers or no whispers, I would marry the Duke of Ferrara. It was my chance to grasp the thing I wanted more than anything else in the world: an establishment of my own away from the Austrian imperial court of my brother Maximilian and my Spanish sister-in-law. It was also my chance to escape the convent at Hall where three of my sisters were already preparing to immure themselves.

Of course I did not delude myself that the Duke of Ferrara wanted me for my personal charms. His great rival, Duke Cosimo de’ Medici, had betrothed his eldest son to my youngest sister, and if the Medici were to acquire an imperial bride, well, then, the Este must snap one up as well. That Duke Alfonso’s ill-fated first wife

had been Duke Cosimo's daughter simply added to the enmity between the two men and the titillation of the gossip. I did not care. With Alfonso d'Este came the magnificent court at Ferrara, the sun, the stars, the court of my own I had coveted for so long.

The court of Ferrara is like a love-apple, beautiful and rosy-red and alluring to the senses, but poisonous, so poisonous—

The ravings of a madwoman, nothing more. I opened my eyes. My hair was finished. Ferrara lay before me, wreathed in icy river mists, my demesne, my dream, my golden city of courtesies and delights. I would embrace it and marry its duke and become its duchess and reign over its court. And I would never look back.

ALL FERRARA MADE merry that day for my entry into the city, with my train of ambassadors and bishops, courtiers and crossbowmen, musicians and ladies and gentlemen from Austria, from Ferrara, and from all over Europe. My first impression, despite the pomp and clarions, was of narrow, twisting streets with buildings of stone and rose-colored brick close enough to touch on either side. The air was dusty and ripe with the smells of ordure and rotting fruit despite the cold. The bells for sext pealed from half-a-dozen directions at once, and the horses' hooves struck hollowly on the ancient, uneven paving stones.

Then, all of a sudden, we crossed into a different quarter, and it was as if we had entered another city entirely. Sunshine. Fresh, crisp air. Broad, straight avenues. Trees, gardens, canals, beautiful open squares in the classical mode—this, then, must be the famous new section of the city. No wonder the duke had wished me to pass through the old city first, so I might properly appreciate the new city's wonders. Crowds of townspeople surged around my litter, cheering and waving. I gestured to my gentlemen to scatter coins and favors. What did I feel? Excitement? Delight? Apprehension? I was not sure—first one, then another, then some unnameable confusion of them all.

I wanted to remember every detail. I imagined myself as if in a great painting: the old city and the new city of Ferrara, the people of Ferrara, and at the center of it all a woman, white-skinned, unveiled in an open litter, wrapped in an ermine mantle and with ripples of reddish-blond hair streaming down her back. It was the fashionable color, and I am sure many of the dark-haired Ferrarese ladies employed cosmetic means to achieve it, but mine was natural, the pure rosy-gold color of fresh apricots in sunlight.

Every eye would be taken by that shining spill of hair, by the pearls gleaming at my forehead and temples, by my scarlet satin gown embroidered and reembroidered with gold and pearls and rubies. Few would notice my long narrow face like a highbred filly's, or the unfortunately prominent lower lip that was the mark of my family. Few would realize I was twenty-six years old.

I could have made myself young and beautiful in my mind's-eye painting. I did not.

A girl-child stepped into the street before us, singing in a high, sweet voice, comparing me to some remarkable amalgam of Saint Barbara, Lavinia the wife of Aeneas, and Vesta the Roman goddess of the hearth. When she finished her song, she came forward, curtsied, and offered me a sheaf of magnificent out-of-season flowers, clearly from the duke's forcing-houses—roses and lilies and lavender and thyme. Their scents were dizzyingly sweet in the clear December air.

Any piece of fruit, any flower you are offered . . .

I took the flowers from the child, gave her back one perfect pink rose, and kissed her on either cheek, much to the delight of the crowd. Neither she nor I fell over dead, thanks be to God. The procession passed on to the heart of the city—the four looming red-brick towers of the Castello di San Michele, the centuries-old fortress of the Este.

TWO MEN AWAITED me on the far side of the Castello's famous moat, each with his own household and retinue. Although they

were somewhat alike in looks, it was easy for me to tell them apart, even at a distance. One of them, of course, was the Duke of Ferrara himself, in purple velvet so dark it looked almost black, while the other, shorter man wore the scarlet of a prince of the church. This cardinal had to be Luigi d'Este, the duke's younger brother. With the duke's two unmarried sisters immediately behind me in the procession, I was surrounded by the Este, and the family in Ferrara was complete.

The duke I had met before, in the summer, in Innsbruck. He had courted me—what a mockery! Courted!—in a series of stiff, meaningless meetings, because the contracts were already signed, the dowry agreed upon, the bridal gifts proposed and accepted. The peculiar thing about the whole business was that had I not heard the blood-chilling whispers about the Duke of Ferrara murdering his first wife, I would not have disliked him. He was proud and vainglorious, true, and immoderately attentive to detail; all in all he gave me an uneasy impression of a glittering surface, like a calm sea, with ferocious serpents and dragons swimming in ritualized patterns beneath. But at the same time he was intelligent and cultured, a genuine lover of music and art, athletic, well-dressed, and cleanly in his personal habits. I would have to live with him, and for that matter bed with him; from what I could guess it would not be too unpleasant. He appeared to have much the same reaction to me. If anything, he seemed pleased I was not a lovely, alluring girl of fourteen—but then his first wife, of whom no one spoke, had been a lovely, alluring girl of fourteen. So perhaps I provided a refreshing contrast.

The procession came to a halt at the great gate of the Castello. I felt cold . . . hot . . . light-headed . . . resolute. I put my ermine mantle aside, and my master of horse assisted me to alight from the litter; the duke's sisters and my Austrian ladies formed themselves into ranks of precedence behind me. I stood very straight. The duke stepped forward and bowed with precise formality.

“Welcome to Ferrara, Principessa,” he said in his deep, rather cold voice. He had dark eyes, swarthy skin, black hair cut short in the current Italianate fashion, a close-cropped dark beard along the line of his jaw. His height was slightly more than my own; the true shapes of his shoulders and upper body were lost in the padding and slashing and pleating of his skirted coat and furred overgown, but his legs in their tight hose were the fine, sinewy legs of an athlete.

He looked the same, yet he was not the same. Here in his own city, backed by the great fortress of his ancestors, his blood gave him power I had not fathomed in the salons of the Hofburg: the ancient princely blood of the Este, the royal Valois blood of his mother, the ruthless Borgia blood of his grandmother. My own blood responded. I sank into a curtsy, my gemmed scarlet skirts rustling and flowering out over the dust of the paving stones. I made it a point to be careless with them, as if to say, *What is silk, what are jewels, to ones such as you and I?* Then I straightened and placed my gloved hand upon his.

“Thank you, my lord. I bring you my brother the emperor’s greetings and goodwill, as well as my own person and the first portion of my dowry, in token of his lasting friendship.”

“Let us not speak of dowries or policy today.” His face was an unbroken surface that gave no hint of what was concealed beneath. “May I present my own brother, Luigi, the cardinal-deacon of Saint Lucia Septizonio, archbishop of Auch, and bishop emeritus of Ferrara? He will bless our union and offer the Mass.”

Undaunted by the weight of his ecclesiastical offices, Luigi d’Este bowed and held out his hand, his ring of office heavy and glowing upon his index finger. His resemblance to his brother was in his bearing more than in his features; he was clean-shaven and his coloring was somewhat fairer, his eyes more hazel, his hair more brown than black.

I withdrew my hand from the duke’s and made another curtsy, a fraction less deep but with my head bowed. It caught to a nicety,

I thought, the lesser respect due my husband's younger brother, and at the same time the greater respect due a prince of the church.

"My Lord Cardinal." I touched my lips to his ring.

"My daughter." He seemed to think something was an excellent joke—probably the fact that he was all of one year older than I. "Welcome to Ferrara."

"Thank you, Your Eminence."

He lifted his hand and sketched the sign of the cross over me, then over his brother. The duke bowed his head briefly, then returned his attention to me; his hand was now resting on the hilt of a very fine dagger at his belt. Its design was unusual, but I would not have noticed it in particular if it had not been for the way he stroked his thumb over the damascened pattern, as if it were speaking to him in some way no one but he could discern.

"Your dress and jewels please me," he said. "Crezia and Nora chose your tiring-women well."

Particularly the madwoman they selected to braid pearls into my hair, I thought. Aloud I said, "I am pleased also. Although perhaps I will make one or two changes once I am settled."

"Make what changes you wish. Have a complete inventory made of your costume, if you please, before the end of the day. I desire to have you painted as a bride."

"Yes, my lord."

With great formality he handed me back into my litter for the procession to the cathedral. The duke's sisters took their places again; the cardinal's servants led forward a white mule saddled in scarlet and gold and shod in silver, and placed a gilded stool for the cardinal to mount. The duke needed no such assistance to mount a white Andalusian stallion, trapped in blue and white and embroidered with the eagles and fleurs-de-lis of the Este, and the stylized flame that was his own personal device. He took control of the animal with one hand on the reins; with the other he acknowledged the cheers of his people. We moved forward; behind us a swarm of

lackeys in ducal livery began throwing gold and silver coins to all parts of the crowd.

At the cathedral door we were married again, this time without proxies. Afterward we passed under a magnificent bas-relief of the Universal Judgment and into the nave for the nuptial Mass. *Jacta alea est*, Caesar said when he crossed the Rubicon—the die is cast. I also had cast my die, and for good fortune or ill, I was now the second Duchess of Ferrara.

As I stepped into my litter for the procession back to the Castello, Sybille murmured into my ear that the Ferrarese *parruchiera*, with her mad whispers of love-apples and poisons, had escaped from the duke's guards and disappeared into the alleyways of the old city.

I SEE THEM, kneeling at the altar rail, looking chaste as two angels. How dare he? I hate her. I never loved Alfonso, but I hate the emperor's long-faced sister anyway, for taking my place.

My name is Lucrezia de' Medici. I suppose I should say Lucrezia, Duchess of Ferrara, but I'm not the duchess anymore. I'm dead. Mostly. Actually, not all the way dead, but in between—I'm an immobila, a still one, a watcher. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because I didn't want to die.

When I was alive, I was the daughter of Cosimo de' Medici, Duke of Florence. He called me Sodona, "Hard One," because I hated my lessons and ran away from my tutors. He'd laugh and cuff me and swear that in my hardness and stubbornness I took after him. Maybe I did. He had a will of iron, my father, and a ruthless temper when he was crossed.

My mother, on the other hand, was melancholic and full of herself. I learned from her that acting frail was a good way to avoid doing anything I didn't want to do. The more my nurses and tutors scolded, the sicker and weaker I became. How I laughed when I was alone, or with my sister Isabella! I wanted no lessons, no books, no embroidery or dancing. I wanted to run free in the gardens and ride the horses in the stables. I wanted to

sleep late every morning and wake up to cream custard with honey and little almond cakes with crisp, shiny sugar on top. Sometimes I managed to slip away and do as I pleased. Other times I was watched too closely.

Alfonso gave out I'd retired to the Monastero del Corpus Domini by my own will, but nothing could be farther from the truth. He had me taken there. Imagine—only two rooms and not even a window, for me, a princess of Florence, the Duchess of Ferrara! And the door was locked. Alfonso knew I couldn't stand being locked in. He did it deliberately, because he knew eventually I'd confess anything just to be free again.

That last night, I never expected to fall asleep, but I drowsed. I didn't hear the door open. All out of nowhere something was pressed down over my face, so hard its softness molded around my eyes and nose and mouth. It terrified me beyond anything I'd ever known. I felt as if my chest was going to collapse in on itself as I scratched and thrashed and struggled for air.

Then in one awful moment I burst free of my flesh. I didn't really, of course, but that's the only way I can describe it. The pain and fear stopped. Life stopped. I felt nothing. I was still there, in the monastery cell; I could see and hear and understand, but I couldn't make any of the living see or hear or understand me. I had become immobila.

I was seventeen, and it was April, and I was only just beginning to live! I can look at my favorite cherry tree now, but I can't breathe the scent of the blossoms, or bite down on the scarlet fruit and feel the sweet-tart juice explode in my mouth.

I want Alfonso to suffer. I want them all to suffer, all of them, damn them. I want them all to suffer for what they did to me.