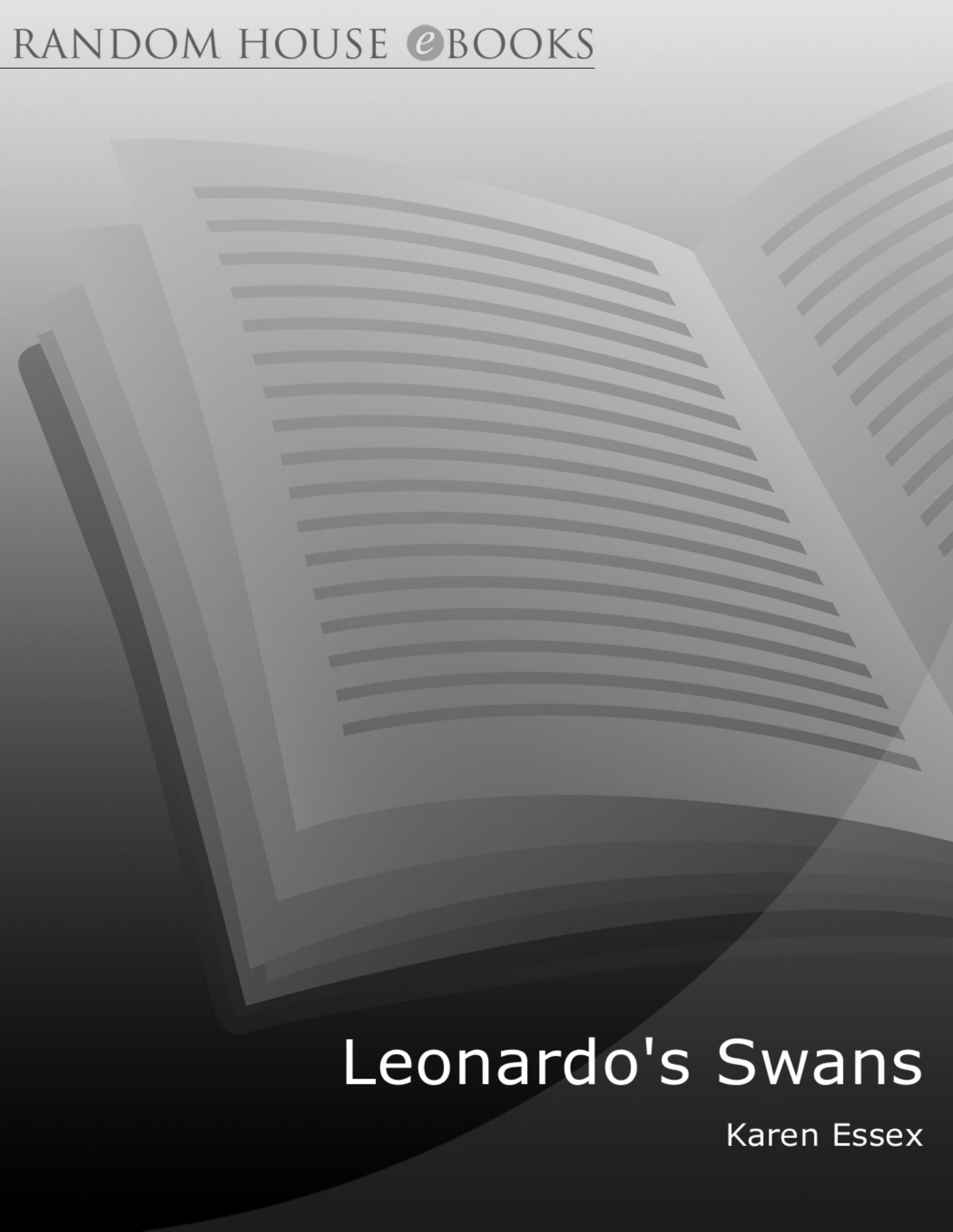


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Leonardo's Swans

Karen Essex

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La Fortuna and Our Characters

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About the Book

Sisters. Rivals. And the love of one man.

Isabella and Beatrice d'Este are as different as night and day. Wordly and ambitious, Isabella's beauty and intellect are legendary across the courts of Europe, while her younger sister, a tomboy, prefers horses and the hunt. When Isabella is betrothed to the Marquis of Mantua, all her ambitions seem to come true - until Beatrice marries Ludovico, the powerful Duke of Milan. Suddenly, Isabella finds herself drawn to her sister's husband, a man as charismatic as he is dangerous. Once close, the sisters are now fierce rivals, for Ludovico's affections but also for the larger prize, to be immortalized by Milan's court painter, Leonardo da Vinci. Da Vinci's glittering genius is at its zenith, with such masterpieces as *The Last Supper* and the *Mona Lisa*, but he constantly struggles not to let his noble patrons' incessant demands compromise his own artistic vision.

Meanwhile, the black clouds of war are looming on the horizon. As Ludovico's gamble for power in Western Europe begins to fall apart, the sisters must choose - between passion and family, loyalty and survival.

About the Author

Karen Essex is an award-winning journalist and screenwriter and her essays and articles have appeared in many periodicals, including *L.A. Weekly*, *Vogue*, and *Playboy*. She is also the author of *Kleopatra* and *Pharaoh* and lives in Los Angeles.

Also by Karen Essex

Kleopatra
Pharaoh

KAREN ESSEX

*Leonardo's
Swans*



arrow books

Prologue

*IN THE YEAR 1506;
IN FRENCH-OCCUPIED MILAN*

ISABELLA SPREADS HER arms like angels' wings over her sister's cold marble form, running her fingers down the exquisitely carved folds of her burial gown and tracing the delicate veins in her hands. Next to Beatrice, the exiled duke, Ludovico, lies as if in repose, though he is in fact still alive, breathing the dank air of a foul French prison. Isabella must be careful to lavish her grief only on the figure of Beatrice, face so serene upon the pillow of stone, and neglect that of the duke, now out of favor. Isabella knows that from the rear of the church eyes are pointed like daggers at her back, ready to report that her vow to be "a good Frenchwoman" is false. Kneeling, she presses hot, curled lips onto the cheeks of Beatrice's death mask and whispers.

So, my sister, it is true what we always joked—that once you had given birth to a few children, you would be as fat as mother. Only one and twenty at the time of your death, and yet they told me you had taken to wearing vertical stripes to disguise your weight. Still, I did not dream that you could have aged so much so quickly. And to think, for so long I considered you the lucky one.

Who could have predicted such a turn of events? Did you see from your crypt how the whores of the French soldiers made off with all four hundred of your spectacular gowns? The thousands of gems and pearls so delicately sewn and artfully placed have been torn off, I imagine, to buy a

potion to end some slut's unwanted pregnancy, or to treat a nasty canker, or to put food in a whore's soon-to-be-toothless mouth. These few years later, the dresses I so coveted are cast aside, filthy and frayed, and you are dust.

Ah, but at least you were buried still clutching a tiny portion of your innocence. You did not live to see the things I have seen, or to make the impossible decisions I have had to make, or to turn your back on those you love to survive their foolish choices. Remember our parlor games? You were always the winner, so clever at Scartino, surprising everyone with your moves and taking the purse. I have been playing a similar game, though every move has to be made with great care. I have chilled my own blood with some of my decisions. Beatrice, I am a figure on a chessboard of poison, where the players change from black to white and back without notice. Remember the elaborate system of trumps at which you were so adept? With which you, giggling hysterically, won game after game of cards? There is a new dimension to the landscape now that neither you nor your duke anticipated, but I did: France trumps Italy, and that is that.

If Fortuna had not been so fickle, so remiss in the proper arranging of things, and our roles had been reversed—if I had had my way—would I be lying in your grave? Or would the course of history have been changed? How is it conceivable that your illustrious husband, whose attention I craved, wastes away in a French prison with only a copy of The Divine Comedy and a pet dwarf to give him solace? Wouldn't you love to know whose face he tries to conjure as he falls asleep on his lice-ridden bed of straw—which sister? Which mistress? Poor Ludovico. He doesn't even have Magistro Leonardo's images of his lovers to console him now.

My own match of wills with Leonardo has continued. I wonder if you haven't reached out from the grave, Beatrice, to meddle with my ambitions. Without your interference,

and with the power I hold over his new patron, I should have concluded my business with Leonardo by now. I have pledges from the artist himself, but you know what a promise from Leonardo is worth. Sometimes I think he is the most adept player of us all. And yet, there are whispers that I might receive satisfaction from him on this very evening. Wouldn't that be lovely, my sister? Then, you and I might both rest.

The bell in the tower rings the five o'clock hour. I would love to stay with you past the twilight time. I remember that you do not like to be left alone in the dark. But I must go dress for yet another of King Louis's balls, where we shall all convene in the very rooms where you once lived, in the service of the new master, carefully avoiding any mention of the past—including yourself. Adieu, my love. Remember how we hated to speak the French language? One must speak it all the time now.

The bells have stopped chiming, and Isabella imagines that her attendants grow impatient with the visit. Still, she finds that she does not wish to leave. She stands, caressing Beatrice's peaceful visage one more time, touching her stony locks, and nestling a warm cheek against her sister's cold, chiseled one.

Beatrice, Beatrice, it's not that I didn't love you. You were like the swans in your pond—born awkward and ugly, maturing into beauty, bringing magic into the world, and singing at the hour of your death. You mythical creature, who on earth or above could not have loved you? It's just that for so long, I imagined that you had stolen my Destiny, when all the while, unbeknownst to us, you were preserving it for me.

Chapter One

X FORTUNA (CHANCE)

***FROM THE NOTEBOOK OF LEONARDO:
When Fortune comes, seize her firmly at the
forelock, for I tell you, she is bald at the back.***

IN THE YEAR 1489; IN THE CITY OF FERRARA

SHE GREW UP in a land of fairy tales and miracles. That is what Isabella is explaining to Francesco as they ride through Ferrara's streets. It is Christmastime, and though there is no snow on the dry stone road, the horses shoot clouds of steam into the frigid air through their nostrils.

This is the first time she has been allowed to escort her fiancé through the city on one of his visits. Francesco Gonzaga, future Marquis of Mantua, has come to Ferrara to romance his soon-to-be bride and to enjoy the city's many Christmas pageants ordered by Isabella's father, Duke Ercole d'Este, a great patron of the theater. Isabella believes that the more she tells Francesco of Ferrara's secrets and wonders, and the more she shows him of her father's spectacular building projects and improvements, the more he will realize her value.

In this very church, Isabella says, pointing to St. Mary's of the Ford, almost two hundred years ago on Easter

Sunday, the priest broke the Eucharist in two, and flesh and blood came spraying forth, covering the walls of the church and splattering the entire flock.

“The parishioners watched in awe,” Isabella says, eyes wide with drama. “The Bishop of Ferrara and the Archbishop of Ravenna came to see it. They instantly recognized it as the body and blood of Christ and declared it a true miracle of the Eucharist.”

Francesco solemnly makes the sign of the cross as they ride past the church, but his eyebrows arch skeptically, making him look entirely out of step with the act.

Beatrice trots ahead of the pair of lovers, her long braid swinging in saucy rhythm with the horse’s mane, as uninterested as her steed in their conversation.

“Isn’t that right, Beatrice?” Isabella asks her sister for confirmation of her story, hoping that the odd girl does not say anything to contradict her. Beatrice is a puzzle to Isabella, a fact that the older sister blames on the girl’s unsupervised upbringing in wild Naples. The girl is a feral, unformed thing, alternately shy, naïve, aloof, and bold—the latter especially apparent when riding or hunting. How such a small fourteen-year-old girl, who is not particularly courageous outside of these activities, excels at all manly sport is a mystery to Isabella, but the fact of Beatrice’s prowess remains, no matter how enigmatic.

“I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t there!” Beatrice finally answers without turning around, but they can hear her laugh at her own joke.

The animal’s swaying ass taunts Isabella, who knows that her sister is dying to break away from them to test the horse’s speed. Francesco has brought Drago, the pure white Spanish charger, from his family’s stud farm on the island of Tejeto, as a gift for the girls’ father. But Beatrice immediately took over the animal, talking to him in whispers that should be reserved for a lover, and hopping upon him and riding away, as if the painstakingly bred

horse was meant to carry a little girl in a pink riding dress and not a fearsome knight in armor.

“I’ll tell you a miracle that happened right here in Ferrara that is even better,” Francesco says, sidling his horse right up to Isabella’s so that their legs touch. She knows she should pull away, that her mother would rail against this sort of indiscriminate physical contact, even with leather riding boots providing a barrier to the couple’s much-craved intimacy, but instead, she rides with slow care so that they might continue to brush against one another.

“What miracle is that?” she asks, suppressing a smile.

“That your father agreed that you should be my wife,” he answers.

You have no idea just how miraculous, she thinks. If the timing had been slightly different, he would be marrying the jaunty girl riding ahead of them, but this, he does not know. When the marriage agreements were made nine years ago, Isabella was only six and Beatrice five. Who could have cared at that time which sister married what man, as long as both marriages were politically expedient for the city-state of Ferrara? Isabella wants to tell him the story but she would need him to say that if things had worked out differently, his life would have been a ruin. And he cannot possibly say that in front of Beatrice.

Duchess Leonora had long ago drummed into her daughters’ heads that marriage between noble houses was no whimsical arrangement based on ephemeral qualities of preference or attraction. The peace of Italy depended on these unions, especially at this juncture. The Venetians had become doubly aggressive since the Turks pushed them out of Constantinople. They began to push farther and farther inland into Italy because they needed land for their farms and their citizens. They hired condottieri to take over towns—Verona, Padua, and Vincenza, all near Ferrara. The Venetians wanted complete control over the trade routes and the rivers, as well as the land. Ferrara was venerable

and strong, but small. For her to remain independent, she must have strong alliances with the city-states of Mantua and Milan.

“You girls are ambassadors of Ferrara. Its welfare depends upon the success of your marriages. Therefore, you must do nothing, *nothing*, to endanger these alliances. You must do nothing prior to the marriages that may cause the families to renege on the commitments. Your behavior must be impeccable. You are as much the protectors of Ferrara’s welfare as our army or our treasury. You are, in fact, its greatest treasures. And when you enter your husbands’ houses, I expect you to act like it. Your bodies are the very bindings that will hold us all together and stave off conflicts and wars. Do not think that you can behave like the women in fairy tales and poetry. The duke and I will not tolerate it.”

Looking at Francesco now, Isabella thinks that she must be the most fortunate of women. Her fiancé is not handsome, but has a rugged quality that gives an ugly man appeal. Already three and twenty, he will never be tall, and his eyes bulge, a condition that she knows will worsen over time, because she has seen old men with this affliction, and they look like reptiles. Yet he is as solidly built as any man alive, and his courtly manners contrast so thrillingly with the wicked look in his protruding brown eyes. Besides being from one of the oldest noble families in Italy, he already is considered a brilliant student of warfare, destined for an illustrious career in the military arts. Undoubtedly he will lead one of Italy’s great armies to many victories. Isabella feels that Francesco is the perfect man to help her realize her destiny—which is to have a powerful husband and reign with him over a great and enlightened realm.

Beatrice, riding three lengths in front of them, begins to pick up speed. She turns her head to the side, giving the lovers a sprightly profile, before dashing off with the horse.

“We had better follow her,” Francesco says, a look of grave concern coming over his face.

“That will not be easy,” Isabella replies.

Isabella does not like to see any interest in her sister from her betrothed, though she cannot imagine why. With her exceptional qualities, she should not worry one bit. But worry she does. Francesco is from a family famous for breeding horses. Nothing arouses the passions of the Gonzagas of Mantua like a great horse, or a rider who can handle one. Beatrice looks back one more time before guiding Drago through one of the city’s grand arched portals to a road where she can ride faster. Francesco takes up the challenge and speeds after her on his dark stallion, the jewels in his silver saddle catching just enough of the winter sun to sparkle.

Isabella follows, but at a slower pace. It would be extremely unladylike for her to compete with her boyish sister in this game for Francesco’s attention. Besides, she does not want to sweat so badly under her new habit that she will be embarrassed later, when, helping her descend from the steed, Francesco will take her small hand and slyly raise it to his lips. Let Beatrice dismount in her typical disheveled state—damp, stringy hairs hanging about her face, and oozing sweat like the horses she rides into the ground. Isabella settles into a steady canter as the two race ahead of her, first Francesco taking the lead, then Beatrice gaining on him, so close that it looks from this distance as if she is trying to make her horse bite his stallion’s rear end.

If one is to look upon the two sisters objectively, as Isabella prays Francesco does, one has to observe Isabella’s advantages. Isabella has spent all her life at her distinguished mother’s knee, while Beatrice, from the ages of two to ten, was left behind at the court of Naples all the way on the other side of Italy as a peace offering to their grandfather, King Ferrante, whom everyone feared and

hated, but who had taken an instant liking to Beatrice. Isabella reads Latin impeccably and can recite Virgil's *Eclogues* to the satisfaction of her tutors and her father's eminent guests. Beatrice, on the other hand, has spent the four years since her return to Ferrara being pushed to catch up with her sister in their studies. She can barely spell. She can recite a poem or two in Latin, but Isabella doubts that she has any idea of what she is saying. Isabella plays musical instruments and sings like an angel. Beatrice loves music, but must be sung to. Isabella has studied rhetoric and mathematics and can take either side in an argument over at least one Platonic dialogue. Beatrice enjoys poetry, but prefers that others read it to her. Isabella is the loveliest dancer in all of Ferrara, turning her head elegantly this way and that. Not only does she have the correct timing, style, and balance necessary for the art, she also knows just where to place her smile as she turns, dips, and lowers her head, eyes lingering on their specific target, until the lids fall modestly in time with the music. Beatrice manages at dance, but is no match for her graceful sibling. Isabella has read all of the books in her father's library and all of her mother's romance novels about the chivalric days of old. She has watched carefully as her parents commissioned and acquired paintings and other works of art from the most illustrious talents of the age.

In addition to her intellectual accomplishments, Isabella has tumbling blond curls, large, wide-set black eyes, and a slender body. Beatrice shows signs of stoutness, with thick thighs and ankles, though only her sister, her servants, and her husband—should the man to whom she is engaged actually honor their betrothal—will ever know this. She has a round face, a small, uninteresting nose, and dark hair that lacks luster, so much so that she must wear it in a long pigtail down her back. She prefers the outdoors to all pursuits. She is the kind of person Isabella would not find terribly interesting if she were not her sister.

Isabella consistently outperforms Beatrice in all pursuits but this, the equestrian. Now, and in the presence of her betrothed, Isabella fears Beatrice is trying to make her pay for her crimes of superiority.

Suddenly Francesco stops, pulling in the animal, whipping him about so that he is facing Isabella. She realizes that he is looking for her, has stopped this competition with her sister because *she* has entered his mind, even in the midst of the wild ride.

Beatrice, who has bolted ahead, stops too. No longer enjoying the ride without the competitive aspect, she trots back to him. Isabella hears Francesco say, "I wanted you to show me the city's newest improvements, not race me to your death."

"You just don't want to lose to a woman," Beatrice retorts, flushed scarlet from her escapade, adjusting the velvet cap that she wears at a clever tilt.

"Do you fail to remember that I was not losing?" he answers.

"Settle down," Isabella says in Beatrice's direction, hoping that she does not sound too much like the admonishing older sister, the sour one who does not want to be a part of their game. "We are supposed to be showing him the city!"

"Be a good girl, or I'm going to take Drago back home with me," Francesco says to Beatrice in a tone that conspires with Isabella's parental attitude toward her sister.

Beatrice clutches the reins close to her chest. "He wouldn't go. He would run away with me first!"

"Don't be too sure, little princess," he replies, sounding like a father.

Thank God he considers her a child and Isabella a woman! Satisfied that she can recapture Francesco's attention with her more mature demeanor, Isabella leads them over the bridge and back inside the city walls.

“Now, Beatrice, do listen to what I am telling Francesco so that when your betrothed comes to visit Ferrara, you might show him these same things.”

Beatrice groans. The subject is a sore one.

Mistress once more of the little expedition, Isabella explains how the city of Ferrara has changed in recent years; how her father, the duke, had gotten it into his mind to rebuild the city along the enlightened architectural guidelines set by Leon Battista Alberti, the Genoan. She explains (to demonstrate her knowledge of not only architecture, city planning, and mathematics but political subtleties as well) how Ercole had sent to his ally, Lorenzo the Magnificent in Florence, for the ten manuscripts of Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, to set about modernizing his city and its buildings according to that great theorist's vision. Streets were widened into broad avenues. New structures were created with careful attention to classical values of proportion and harmony. Aesthetics were linked with and equal to the mathematical proportions of things.

While all this construction had flown up around her, Isabella had felt that, along with the old-fashioned city of pointed arches and endless spires, life itself was spreading out in broader directions. Narrow streets, dark halls with low ceilings, and cramped corridors were things of the past. Lamps and candles illuminated rooms once kept dark. People were reading and talking in these well-lit drawing rooms late into the night. Ancient manuscripts, once the property of the church and private collectors alone, were being translated from Greek and Latin into Italian right here at Ferrara's university, and Venetian and Milanese printers were making copies of them and selling them all over the country. In the years after her father had defeated and executed his rivals and made peace with the Venetian Republic, the old Castello d'Este with its famous four towers was quickly transformed from fortress to grand residential palazzo. The soldiers, along with their weapons

and artillery, were moved to the older, colder, more stern quarters, while the family and members of the court occupied the newer and more spacious halls and apartments, decorated with the works of the greatest artists of the decades, all of whom had passed through Ferrara in the service of the Este family—Pisanello, Piero della Francesca, the Venetian Jacopo Bellini, Cosimo Tura.

Isabella points out to her beloved Francesco and her uninterested sister an example of the new architecture, the Palazzo dei Diamante, the residence named from her father's sobriquet, the Diamond. Twelve thousand diamond shapes jut into the air from the palazzo's ominous façade—not exactly a subtle reminder of Duke Ercole's omniscient power over Ferrara, but an effective one.

"Do they call him the Diamond because he is worth so much?" Francesco asks.

"It's because he's thin and sinewy and his body is cut in hard lines," Beatrice pipes in, suddenly part of the conversation.

"It's because in negotiations, he's as hard as the hardest rock," Isabella says. "Something your family undoubtedly found out when they negotiated our marriage contract."

"I think he made a terrible deal for himself," Francesco replies.

"Why?" Isabella asks, now wishing to defend her father.

"Because you are priceless, that's why. If you were my daughter, I would know that you were too good for any man."

Beatrice skewers her face at Francesco, in mock disgust over his syrupy lover's comment.

"You probably stole that from some bad poet," she says.

"Or a stable boy courting a kitchen maid," Isabella teases. It would not do to let Francesco know how deeply his every word affects her.

BEATRICE looks restless. Isabella watches her sister's eyes scan the city walls as if she is looking for an escape. Isabella gets jittery when she sees this mood descend over the younger girl. She can tell by the sudden, secretive smile and the darting eyes that Beatrice has a new surprise and is searching for just the right moment to reveal it. Beatrice is often predictable in her unpredictability.

Isabella tries to distract her sister by beginning a new conversation. "My father's latest project is to rebuild the city walls," she says, gesturing to the towering redbrick fortifications, decorated with hand-carved medallions of the city's symbols, and the crests and portraits of the illustrious members of the ruling Este family from days gone by.

"At the top are wide footpaths. You can see all the way out into the countryside, beyond the Po River. If you like, you can circle the entire city."

"Or anticipate an invader, which is more likely what your father had in mind," Francesco adds.

"You men with your military minds!" Isabella says, flashing him a smile that lets him know that she is saying it with admiration.

Before she can bring her lips back together, the thing that Isabella has anticipated and feared begins. Beatrice breaks from the other two, pulls back her horse's head, and eggs him on up the brick stairs that lead to the top of the city walls. Isabella would like to simply be annoyed at her attention-seeking sister, but the problem is twofold. First, one is not allowed to take horses to the top of the wall. Second, and perhaps more serious, the project is not yet finished. Great gaping holes leave the brick walkways disconnected. But Beatrice is not one to think on these things. She is not particularly observant, nor does she plan ahead.

Duke Ercole's sentries on the walls' top tier anticipate the runaway rider, ready to apprehend the unruly person, until they recognize the duke's daughter. Everyone knows

that she spent too many years with her indulgent grandfather in faraway Naples. Without the watchful eye of her mother to restrain her, the girl was allowed to run wild, much to the king's amusement. It was said everywhere that the mean old man encouraged the girl in her antics, much the way that little boys tease their dogs until they bite. So that when the sentries realize it is just Beatrice, they shake their heads and jump out of her way, one even bowing as she rides by as if inviting her passage. Isabella knows that they assume, as does Francesco, that Beatrice will give a little performance for her companions below and then come down. Isabella knows her sister better.

Beatrice looks down at the astonished Francesco, taunting him by taking off her little cap and tossing it in his direction. "Remember me!" she cries. Then she cracks her leather whip on the horse's flank and is gone. When the sentries realize where she is headed and at what breakneck speed, they abandon their posts, futilely running after her on foot.

"Beatrice! Stop!" calls Isabella. The girl hears her, she is sure, but only looks down once with a fast and gloating glance to see that she is leaving the others behind. Isabella kicks her own beast, racing along the walls to catch up with Beatrice.

Isabella imagines her sister's big, round laugh freezing into a circle of panic when the girl sees what is ahead. The wall comes to an end, dropping off many feet below where a few bricklayers work lazily in the cold from wooden scaffolds. Perhaps ten feet of empty space separates the new path from the old. Isabella anticipates the calamity, and prays that her sister has seen the danger. She does not quite like or understand this untamed creature, spoiled by too many years of Neapolitan splendor, untempered by parental discipline, but she does not want to see her hurt.

Beatrice, long brown plait flying behind her like a kite, makes no motion to pull in the beast, but pushes him on,

faster and faster, toward the crevasse. Francesco and Isabella both scream madly for her to stop, but the girl either no longer hears them over the sound of her horse's hooves on the uneven bricks, or she does hear but is out of her mind, possessed by some demon that causes mental disease—something Isabella has considered about her before. The desperate sentries chase after the duke's daughter, and the others keep yelling her name louder and with increasing horror.

Beatrice's elbows pump wildly as if she believes she can take flight over the great gap in the wall. Like a creature in a fairy tale suddenly transforming into a bird, she leaps into the air on her animal's back, and he, like Pegasus, flies beneath her. Her body is aloft, high above the seat, as the horse stretches its length, trying to please the will of its rider.

The animal's natural stride is impossibly short to gap the distance, and Isabella wants to turn her eyes away to avoid seeing Beatrice tumble down the wall, the horse falling upon her and crushing her to death. But something about the way that her sister seems to float above the animal, relieving it of her weight, forces her to keep watching.

Francesco is now making the sign of the cross with the heavy silver crucifix he wears at his neck in utter earnestness and is calling upon his God. But Beatrice does not need Divine intervention. The horse's front legs close the distance, hitting hard the bricks of the old pathway. Before Isabella can feel any relief, she sees that the animal's back legs are slipping down the gap. The horse scrambles to achieve balance, his hinds churning as if he is trying to turn them into wheels. It looks for a moment as if animal and girl might careen backward down the wall and onto the bricklayers who, instead of leaping from the scaffolds to their own deaths, or at least to broken bones, hunch over, hands on heads, to try to protect themselves from the inevitable. But Beatrice, unfazed, yells, "Oh, come

on!" and pushes the animal, against all laws of motion, up the craggy wall and onto the footpath. Triumphant, laughing, she looks back at her two companions, gives a little cock of the head, and rides away.

Isabella, breathless, heart pounding, turns to Francesco expecting him to share in her anger. Instead, he does not even try to hide an admiring smile.

"Fearless," he says, watching the girl gallop toward the palace.

"If your father had waited a mere month to send his ambassadors to Ferrara, Beatrice would have been yours, and I would have been marrying Ludovico of Milan." Then Isabella adds coquettishly, though not without trepidation: "Would you have liked that?"

Isabella and Francesco are standing in a small parlor in the Castello where two portraits of the sisters are displayed side by side, waiting for Francesco's servants to pack Isabella's image in layers and layers of cloth for safekeeping through the journey back to Mantua. Isabella is scrutinizing Beatrice's portrait to see if there is anything Francesco might find more pleasing to his eye than in hers.

"Only if I had a taste for plump little boys instead of exquisite beauties."

Isabella is certain that Francesco should not be saying these kinds of things to her before they are married, nor should she allow him to pass such an unflattering remark about her sister, but his words make a flutter in her stomach, erasing all feelings of impropriety. Besides, she had nothing to complain over. Her betrothed—this manly figure who is to inherit the title of Marquis of Mantua from his father—is here in Ferrara courting her while Beatrice's affianced, Ludovico Sforza, who isn't even Duke of Milan, but regent to his young nephew, shows nothing but disinterest in their pending marriage.

One of the purposes of Francesco's visit, besides enjoying the renowned Christmas pageants, was to bring to Isabella's mother a painting she craved by Andrea Mantegna, Mantua's court painter, and to collect the betrothal portrait by Cosimo Tura of the lovely Isabella. Cosimo had been commissioned to paint betrothal portraits of both sisters, though Ludovico has been too busy with his latest mistress to send an emissary to pick up the one of Beatrice. This, after Messer Giacomo Trotti, Ferrara's ambassador to Milan, had to embarrass him into commissioning the piece in the first place. Other gossip circulating Ferrara's court is that Ludovico had to be invoiced three times for the four florins owed the artist before he finally paid.

Isabella had loved being painted, loved how the maestro's brushstrokes replicated her very existence. She loved being frozen in time at this precious moment, when her maidenhood was rapidly coming to an end. What magic it was to be able to halt fleeting time! Forever she would be remembered at this age, with her face and body and countenance in this state. That a portraitist could reproduce not only a physical being but a singular moment—in this case, one in which she turned her face slightly to the left but cast her eyes directly at the artist as if answering a question—was miraculous to her. If she could, she would be painted every day of her life to record her progress.

She had prepared arduously for the sitting. Cosimo was an old man now, but famous for having painted the exquisite altarpiece at San Giorgio in which the serene Blessed Virgin holds a sleeping Christ on her lap. Her eyes gaze gently downward at the angelic musicians playing celestial music for her pleasure. For Isabella, the painting had mysterious powers. Every time she attended Mass at the church with her family, her eyes remained riveted not to Our Lady or to the winsome child, but to the color green

that seemed to jump out of the painting and animate the wooden panel to life.

“The road to achieving all perfection in womanhood on earth, and eternal bliss in Heaven, is paved by meditation on the sweet face of Our Lady,” her mother assured her time and again, pleased that her daughter could not remove her eyes from the religious scene. But it was the composition and color scheme of the piece that intrigued Isabella. When she looked at the panel, she felt as if her ears were miraculously filled with saintly music. She could hear the lutes, trumpets, and chorus of voices, and she attributed this phenomenon to the life-giving powers of that strange green, which had not the verdant color of nature but the radiance of jewels.

Convinced of the color’s magical properties, she had asked her mother to have their favorite Venetian silk dyer replicate it in the dress she would wear to sit for Cosimo Tura’s portrait. There is no need, Leonora had replied. The painter already knows how to produce the color. But Isabella argued until her mother went to her parsimonious father with the request, and their Venetian agent was sent a color sample, a small block of wood with a swash of the paint placed upon it by Cosimo himself, and the fabric was produced and procured. Isabella had sat for Cosimo wearing the gown, which she accented with a brocade vest in the pinkish color also found in the upper reaches of the altarpiece because she had so loved the contrast of the two colors. Her parents complained of her exacting tastes, but what did they expect? “It is because I have been raised by two connoisseurs,” she countered.

The portraits further contrasted the sisters. Leonora had insisted that both girls wear their hair loose about the shoulders like Neapolitan princesses, a look that was most attractive to men of all ages. But the coif only suited Isabella, whose blond curls danced about her shoulders in springy coils. “Like little golden snakes,” her father had

said, curling one golden lock about his finger. "It is as if Our Lord, to make up for the sins and cruelty of the pagan gods, has re-created Medusa as an angel." Beatrice's dark hair, let loose from its plait, looked limp. She had sat for her portrait in a royal blue gown with tiny pearls sewn in crisscross patterns across the bodice. Her puffed sleeves were of an unusual scarlet, embroidered with blue roses that matched the body of the dress. Isabella had to admit that her sister, despite all her other oddities, did have nice taste in clothing, and was as meticulous about her dressmaking as Isabella herself. Yet the rest of her toilette lacked style, and her natural appearance was not the most impressive, at least not at this age. Luckily, the two sisters were not painted together, where their differences would be in sharp relief.

"I am going to take this beautiful picture back with me to Mantua," Francesco tells Isabella, reaching for her hand. "But I cannot decide whether to hang it in a place of great prominence, so that everyone can admire your beauty, or whether I will put it in a private place, where I alone might meditate upon it. It is only one year until our wedding, but for me, it will seem painfully long."

It is thrilling for Isabella to hear these words, which reflect her own thoughts, though she cannot resist interjecting her opinion: "If I were you, I would hang it where others can admire it as well. That should add to your meditations, not detract."

Why hide a thing of beauty?

To think that he can take a piece of her back with him to his Castello, which she will soon occupy. Isabella is grateful that in less than one year the portrait will soon be back in her possession. She adores collecting beautiful things, and would hate to have a portrait done by a master of painting lost to her. All that she has collected thus far she will be allowed to take with her into her marriage—the many cameos, the intaglios cut so delicately by Ferrara's

jewelers, the trunks painted by famous artists that hold her wardrobe, and the necklaces and belts that she designed with the smiths. Of these she is most proud because they are expressions of herself.

“Of course,” Francesco concedes to the request to display her portrait. “Why should I have all the pleasure of looking at you myself?”

Exactly.

He has been, thus far, the most delightful of potential husbands. Though he is twenty-three years to her fifteen, and possessed of superior maturity, over the years of their engagement, he has written her at least one letter per season, assuring her that he lives for the day when they will be husband and wife. If word reached him that she was ill, he always sent a fine gift in the form of a perfect pearl pendant, a foggy miniature landscape by a new Flemish painter, or once, when a high fever had held her too long in its grip, a tiny Spaniel puppy that licked the fever from her face, or so she believed.

“So one month might have changed our destinies?” Francesco asks. “Tell me the story of how I almost was made to live out my life in utter misery, without your companionship.”

So she tells him how, many years ago, when Isabella was only six years old, Ludovico Sforza had sent an ambassador to Ferrara to ask for the hand of Duke Ercole’s eldest daughter. Ludovico was a rising star in Italian politics. Already the Duke of Bari and the regent to his nephew, Gian Galeazzo, Duke of Milan, Ludovico was thought by many to be the most illustrious young ruler of his day. He did, however, have a reputation for a certain wickedness. But, as Fortuna had it, one month prior, the Gonzagas of Mantua, important because of its geographic location between the powerful city-state of Milan and the Most Serene Republic of Venice, had sent their own emissary to ask for the hand of Isabella. And because an alliance with

Mantua was crucial for the welfare and safety of Ferrara, Duke Ercole happily concluded negotiations for Isabella to marry Francesco Gonzaga, who would become marquis upon the death of his father. The Milanese messenger had to return to Ludovico to ask if the second daughter of Ercole d'Este would do. And the answer came with great swiftness—yes. Later it was discovered that Ludovico did not mind that Beatrice was only five years old and would not be ready for marriage for at least ten years. He was a supreme ladies' man, and was in no hurry—and indeed, perhaps had no particular intention—to settle down.

“I shudder to think how Fortuna might have played her cards differently, and I could have been saddled with an old man like Ludovico, who—goodness!—is already almost forty,” she says boldly to Francesco. He looks at Beatrice's portrait and Isabella's portrait and does the thing that he must know makes her whole body quiver, which is to kiss her hand, letting his lips linger two seconds or three past propriety. “I shudder too,” he says.

Oh, he was perfect! At the Christmas pageants, for which people came from all over Italy, he sat next to the duke at each performance, complimenting him on his devotion to reviving the theater. To please the clergy, Ercole always staged a religious tableau or two so they wouldn't complain about his more pagan theatrical endeavors. This year, Ercole chose the Annunciation for the opening pageant, in which a bold player wearing angel wings flew onstage on ropes to announce the Virgin's fate. The following evening they witnessed a re-enactment of the birth of Christ in a manger. The court artists had filled the stage with real barnyard animals, and at times the bleating goats drowned out the players' words. Still everyone agreed that this did not distract from the drama of the tableau, but added realism, since such animals were undoubtedly present at Our Lord's birth.

After Christmas, and to celebrate the New Year of 1490 as well as the beginning of a new decade, the duke let loose his passion for the sort of theatrical presentations he loved. In the old Palazzo della Ragione, remodeled into a theater, he presented ancient Latin comedies which he himself translated into Italian, hiring actors, dancers, and musicians from all over Italy. He collaborated with Niccolò da Correggio on a new version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a lavish production with music, dance, and recitation. Francesco sat with the duke during the performance, gasping in awe at how convincing the actors were in both behavior and costume as the gods of old, thus proving himself a worthy son-in-law.

Isabella did see her betrothed making flirtatious conversation with some of the ladies of the court, which she did not like at all. She had thought that this enticing demeanor of his had been her private reserve. But her fiancé had charm to spare, and virility too, and someday, she reminded herself, she would be the happy recipient of all of that. In the meanwhile, her mother, Leonora, counseled her that a woman must always forgive her husband any indulgences before the marriage. For it was natural for an unmarried man to give in to these urges. And besides, it did not do for two innocents to tumble into bed together after a wedding and have to figure out the entire map of lovemaking. If he carried these proclivities into the marriage, well, a woman could choose to rebel and demand fidelity, or to adjust and remain silent. Either way, the outcome would probably be the same. The man would do whatever he wished, quietly or openly, for that was the nature of men. Some Italian women were getting just as bad, but thanks to Our Lord and her own good discipline, Leonora was certain her daughters would not join the ranks of the promiscuous. The women of the House of Este must be above these things.

“So if Ludovico Sforza had been less interested in making mischief in Milan and more interested in arranging a good marriage for himself, I would be taking home the portrait of Beatrice? Is that what you are telling me?” Francesco smiles naughtily as his valet shakes out the thick muslin he will use to wrap the painting of Isabella.

“That is correct,” she says as she watches her image disappear behind the heavy white cloth. “The court records show that there were a mere thirty days between the arrival of the ambassador from Mantua and the arrival of the ambassador of Milan.”

“Then your family concluded the business of our marriage rather quickly. Perhaps they were afraid you would receive no more offers,” he teased.

“Sir!” she exclaims. Might he really believe that? “Have you so little regard for me?”

Francesco quickly takes her aside, away from the ears of his servants. “It was God Himself pushing your father to hurry because He ordained this union from Heaven. You are not meant for Ludovico of Milan or anyone else, but me. That is what our marriage is going to be, Isabella. Heaven.”

How does he always know exactly what to say to please her? He is right; marriage with any other man is unthinkable. How grateful she is that she will spend her life with the man she loves while her sister must go live in the strange city of Milan in a huge fortress where her husband pleasures himself with the company of other women.

“What about you, my dear Isabella? Do you not wish the ambassador from Mantua had slipped from his horse, or had run into terrible weather or a band of thieves or something else to detain him so that you would be going to Ludovico? He intends to rule a great portion of the European continent, you know.”

“Oh, how can you suggest that? Ludovico is old and terrible! He has no interest in marriage. Beatrice’s portrait will probably be eaten by worms before he sends someone

to collect it!" She leans as close to her fiancé as she dares to share her secret. "It is very bad, sir, what has happened. Please do not betray my confidence. My father had no higher wish than to marry his daughters in a double wedding, but Ludovico refused, making some excuse for why he could not marry next year. Messer Trotti, our ambassador to Milan, has pushed him as hard as he dares to set a firm date into the future, but Ludovico will not! They say he is in love with a woman named Cecilia, who is very beautiful, and that he holds her up as a wife in his court. But her family is of no use to him politically, and therefore he cannot marry her. My poor sister! Do you think I would trade places with her?"

Francesco does not seem at all surprised by this news, gossip in Italy being impossible to suppress. Perhaps the entire country knows of Ludovico's slight to Beatrice and to the Este family. Francesco does, however, take advantage of being this close to his beloved with no eyes upon them. He moves his lips to her neck. He doesn't kiss her exactly, but takes in a deep breath, as if he wishes to carry her scent with him back to Mantua. He runs his nose the length of her neck from the bottom of her ear to the nape, breathing her in. Then, he pulls away, whispering, "That will have to linger in our memories until our wedding day."

While she is still recovering, she realizes that he and his valet and her portrait are gone, and she will not see him again for three months.

To: Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Bari, Regent of Milan
From: Leonardo the Florentine, Master of
Engineering, Weaponry, and Painting

Most Illustrious Lord,

Having now seen the creations of all those who call themselves masters and inventors of the