

He was vital, larger than life. Vulgarly handsome, Charlotte thought—with the accent on vulgar. His face and muscular frame seemed painted in broad brushstrokes, unlike the smaller more fine-boned French and Breton noblemen she had grown up amongst. Eyeing his orange and royal blue dagger-slashed sleeves, she noted the sauce stain at the end of one of them.

Revolted. If he wiped his hands again on the loaf of bread from which he had just offered her a piece, she would get up and leave. Already she had lost her appetite, although it looked as if her dining partner was just getting started.

“*Princesse*, are you enjoying the duck?” Cesare Borgia leaned toward her, the grease from the sauce in which he had dipped his bread glistening in his moustache.

“I—I have had enough.” *Of you*. She took a sip of wine, anything to avoid further eye contact with the handsome foreigner who sat uncomfortably close. A moment earlier he had brushed his knee against hers, making her feel as if she were being untrue to the one with whom she was still angry. Utterly confused, her thoughts were leagues away from the man sitting next to her.

Where was her queen when she needed her? Anne, Duchess of Brittany and Queen of France, would have stomped on the man’s foot under the table to let him know what she thought. But this one might take it as a sign of interest, an invitation to a subsequent skirmish.

Wistfully, she thought of Nicolas. He would never have taken such liberties as the ones the ruffian beside her was now attempting. Thinking back to her hand in his, she admitted to herself it had been she who had offered it. As for the kiss, she knew very well whose lips had sought whose. Perhaps she had judged him overly harshly.

“Try the rabbit instead,” Cesare interrupted her thoughts. “I bagged it myself this morning with the king.” He held out a morsel of meat to her, brown sauce dripping onto the table. Did he really think she would deign to lean toward him and take the morsel into her mouth from the end of his knife?

“Thank you, I will serve myself when I am ready.” Instantly she regretted her rebuff. Was it his fault that he had no manners, no upbringing, no skills whatsoever in conversing at table with a princess royal?

“Do you not wish me to serve you then, *ma princesse*?” The slight edge to his voice warned her that she had no idea who she was dealing with. Already she knew this man was not gently raised. But was he dangerous?

Rumors from Rome had floated to her ears. She would proceed carefully.

“You may serve me some more wine, if you please, Monsieur.” Anything, just to give him something to do with his hands other than try to touch her. Despite his undeniable good looks, she froze at the thought of a man with no background and no breeding putting his body anywhere near her own. Who knew if he was familiar with basic rules of cleanliness? Had he washed his hands before coming to table? He appeared to have washed his body; he smelled strongly of some spiced oriental scent. But the fact that she could smell him at all warned her he was too close for comfort.

Her queen should never have allowed this. Yet it had been her sovereign herself who had insisted on her joining them for dinner that evening. How could her own beloved mistress and queen have sold her out like this? There was only one reason Charlotte could guess at.

The king.