

Virtuous Trickery

Royal Duty

Alaina Stanford

©2017 Alaina Stanford Fourth Edition by Alaina Stanford

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission of the author.

Chapter One

Francesca smoothed the silk fabric of her violet gown and looked out over the canals to watch the parade of floating lights. The torches revealed brilliant ribbons of color flowing in the summer breeze as the narrow boats sailed down the canal toward open water. The water sent ripples of reflected light rushing across the stone buildings where Francesca and her friends gathered on the balconies.

Her green eyes sparkled as she flashed a demure smile at the duke, bringing him closer. Her rose-oil scent caressed his senses as she leaned against him, saying, “I’ve never met anyone so easy to talk to as you, Randolph. You make me feel so alive. My sister and I are usually inseparable. Though we’re twins, she’s first-born and heir to the throne. I’ve learned to find contentment standing in her shadow, allowing her all the glory and attention. However, after my father’s recent injury from a fall off his horse, he seems to have grown a profound sense of his own mortality. As soon as he recovered, he quickly decreed that one princess shall remain on the palace grounds at all times, for the sake of the realm. Luckily Gabrielle was more interested in advancing her skill with a longbow than attending a ball in Venice. So, I’ve been set free to step into out from under her shadow and into the sunlight. I’ve become my own person, separate from Gabrielle’s wants and needs. I feel like a new woman.” She fluttered her eyelashes innocently at him and whispered, “Can you imagine being kept a prisoner in your own home?”

Duke Randolph of Parma slipped his arms around Francesca’s waist and pulled her against him. His pale blue eyes searched her large green orbs. He answered in a throaty voice, “I’m so thrilled that you’ve come to Venice. Fate has brought us together to bring your inner spirit alive. You’re a beautiful, desirable woman, Francesca. Your kisses set my soul on fire. If you are not opposed to some soft velvet ribbons, I would love to show you what new pleasures await...if you are willing to become a prisoner of my passion.”

He released the clip holding her long ebony hair high up on her head. It fell gently, swirling around her shoulders and trailing down her back. Randolph brushed the hair from her bare shoulder and kissed her neck. His mouth sought her moist red lips. The heat of his kiss sparked a passion deep inside Francesca she had never felt before. She moaned, and he released her, taking hold of her hand. He pulled her away from the balcony railing and into the darkness of his

bedchamber.

Several days later...

Gabrielle dismounted her horse and handed the reins to the stable master. Sir Gye rode up behind her with a ten-point buck tied to the back of his pack horse. She smiled at the stable master's knowing grin. He cocked his head and adjusted the black leather patch covering one eye.

"That's your second this month," he declared with a hearty chuckle. "I suppose next week it will be a wild boar?"

She laughed and kissed his cheek. "Joseph, I would love to bring you some fresh wild boar meat. Perhaps one day, I shall," she began. "Until then, I promised Sir Gye that I would gut today's prize. So, I can't stay and tend to Pokey today. Do you mind taking care of him?"

He grinned and replied, "It's no problem, Your Highness. He's a good horse. Pokey won't give me any trouble. But I'm sure your mother would appreciate my mentioning the use of an apron before tackling that monster of a buck. I'll get Palo to fetch one up to the butchering table behind the kitchen for you."

Gabrielle pulled off the longbow draped across her chest and slid off the quiver of arrows strapped to her back. Placing them on a high shelf inside the stable doors, she waited as Sir Gye dismounted and handed Joseph the reins to his horse. Sir Gye was a tall, slender man, with a large noble nose and mustache to match. He patted Joseph on the back and said, "Don't bother Palo. I'll take the buck up myself. The princess is short on time; her sister is due to arrive home this afternoon. If we want to get a full buck butchered and delivered to the chef, we need to get right to work."

Gabrielle walked beside Sir Gye, up the winding trail to the rear of the summer palace. A tall stone wall surrounded the small stronghold Gabrielle's family had used for decades to escape the heat of the summer. It sat on a tall hill at the base of Italy's northern mountains. A large open

stone bridge climbed the hill toward the castle. The stables lay outside the castle walls, keeping the stench of the horses and accompanying vermin at a safe distance from the living quarters. A narrow dirt trail wound up the hillside behind the castle, past the flower garden to a small iron-studded door. The door led into the storage area that lay under the kitchen, specifically designed for the woodsman to deliver his daily catch.

A warm breeze flowed through the trees around them, chasing away the cold spring air. Sir Gye shot her a serious look and asked, "Tell me, Princess, why was it necessary to remove the buck's entrails before loading it on the horse?"

She bit her lip to keep from smiling at his grave mood. She straightened her back and squared her shoulders as she answered in a serious tone of voice. "Removing the entrails allows for the animal's body temperature to cool. It helps reduce the gamey flavor of the meat, and lightens the weight of the animal for easier loading."

He nodded, keeping his gaze on the path ahead of them. "Excellent, Your Highness. Would you like me to assist you in butchering the animal, or are you ready to take the task on independently?"

This time she couldn't hide the smile. "I slaughtered the last buck on my own, Sir Gye. This time I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a rush, so you're going to have to get your hands dirty."

He chuckled and turned to her, adding, "I am your servant, my lady. I bend to your will."

"Very well," she replied. "I'll work on the inner loin, then we'll quarter the buck and place the meat in the storehouse to cool down and return this evening to butcher the meat. I want the meat salted and sent to the local butcher. He has a list of families in need of assistance."

A large shadow appeared in the doorway. "I'm the one who needs assistance!" Chef Arlond bellowed as he stepped into the afternoon light. "I have no time to play butcher's maid today, Highness. Kindly take that animal and throw it back into the wilderness where you found it."

Sir Gye ignored the chef and cut the ropes that held the deer in place, allowing it to slide slowly to the ground. Gabrielle waved the chef away, explaining, "We will take care of the buck ourselves. There's no need for you to fuss. All I require is a few hours in the corner of the storage shed to allow the meat to cool before we butcher it."

Chef Arlond reached inside the doorway and pulled out a long white apron. "Take this and

stay out of my kitchen. I have a giant cleaver inside, and I'm not afraid to use it."

Gabrielle laughed and took the apron from him. "You keep that cleaver away from my buck. It's mine to butcher. Keep your fat fingers to yourself."

His eyes sparkled with humor. He stared at Gabrielle with a raised eyebrow and added, "You know I'll not stand for stringy deer meat. If you're not back before dark, I promise you I will cleave that buck to my heart's content."

Chef Arlond helped Sir Gye drag the buck onto the grass, then disappeared inside as Gabrielle set to work cutting out the inner loin. With Sir Gye's help, they skinned and quartered the buck quickly. Gabrielle pulled off the blood-soaked apron and tossed it to Sir Gye as she headed inside to make her way up into the main palace.

Chef Arlond glanced up from the large wooden prep table in the center of the kitchen when she reached the top of the winding steps leading up from the storage area. He tossed Gabrielle a raspberry, her favorite treat. She flashed him a dazzling smile, and darted between the servants rushing to prepare dinner. Gabrielle hurried to find Francesca.

Gabrielle rushed up the steps from the kitchen and hurried through the dining room. When she reached the palace entrance, Francesca was stepping out of her carriage onto the stone drive. Francesca's fierce embrace surprised her. She grabbed Gabrielle's arm and hurried up the tall, stone steps of the palace entrance, into the building. Francesca pulled Gabrielle past the row of granite pillars, toward the blue-carpeted steps leading to the royal living quarters. She slipped her arm inside Gabrielle's and giggled with excitement as they climbed the stairs.

Walking arm in arm, it was easy to tell the identical twins had slight differences. Gabrielle was quickly declared the prettier one shortly after birth. Francesca's ebony hair was silky and smooth, but didn't hold the luster of Gabrielle's. The same could be said of their eyes. Gabrielle's big green eyes sparkled with a zest for life; Francesca's eyes were usually cast downward due to her shy nature. Gabrielle's features were more delicate than her sister's. Her long eyelashes, sharp wit, and quick smile enchanted everyone. Francesca hardly spoke in public, and when she did she stumbled nervously over her words.

Yet, today, Francesca was glowing. She held her head high and laughed like Gabrielle had

never seen her do before. When they reached their bedroom, Francesca could contain herself no longer.

“I’m in love!” she gasped, “I met someone, Gabrielle. He’s so wonderful! I met him at Cousin Isabel’s estate in Venice during my visit.”

Gabrielle hugged Francesca again. It was so nice to see her smiling and excited. “That’s so wonderful. Tell me all about him.”

Francesca continued, “He’s a duke, and he’s so incredibly wealthy. He’s tall and handsome. He’s not much of a sportsman, just like me. We spent most of our time just walking among the gardens and chatting about the plants and flowers. But our nights were filled with love!” She squeezed Gabrielle’s hands and said, “He told me he loved me, and at this very moment is on his way to ask Father for my hand in marriage!”

Gabrielle’s eyes welled with tears of joy. She hugged Francesca and gushed, “I’m so happy for you! Let’s find the perfect dress for you to wear when he arrives.” She turned toward Francesca’s mahogany wardrobe and pulled open the sculptured doors, suggesting, “Something bright blue or green perhaps, to accent your eyes?”

Francesca laughed. “You must be thinking of your wardrobe! I want the pale rose.” Francesca reached in and grabbed the dress. “It adds color to my cheeks.”

Gabrielle laughed. “You and I may be twins, but we have absolutely nothing in common!” She turned and headed for the door. “I’ll call the servants up to draw you a bath.”

“Wait,” Francesca followed her. “There’s one thing more I need from you.”

Gabrielle searched her eyes. “What is it, Francesca? You know I’ll do whatever you need.”

Francesca glanced at the floor and took a deep breath, then looked eyes with Gabrielle. “I need you to stay as far away from the duke as possible until the engagement is final, perhaps even afterward.”

There was fear in her sister’s eyes. Gabrielle took hold of her sister’s hand and asked, “You don’t want me to meet him?”

Francesca burst into tears. “I’m so sorry, Gabrielle. But you’re so much prettier than me. You walk into a room, and all eyes turn to watch you. You’re so vibrant and alive. I’m merely a

shadow in your presence. Every time I'm attracted to a man, I see his eyes float to you when we're together. I'm only asked to dance if you're already out on the floor. I'm the second choice of all our suitors. But this time it's different. This time the duke met me first. He fell in love with me first. I'm so frightened that once he meets you that will change, as it always does."

Gabrielle's heart ached for her sister. "Oh Francesca, it's not that I'm more beautiful than you. We're twins; we're identical. What you see happen is a result of the crown. Those men who turn from you toward me are fools not seeking love, but power. They strive to use me as a tool to win control over our father's kingdom. But this duke of yours, I'm sure he's different. What is his name?"

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Francesca answered, "Sir Randolph Cassini, Duke of Parma."

Gabrielle continued, "Sir Randolph is already in love with you. I doubt he notices any of the women around him anymore. But I'll honor your wishes, and will stay out of sight until you're ready to introduce me."

Francesca smiled and hugged her again. "I knew you'd understand!"

Gabrielle called for the servants to bring a bath. She chose her sister's accessories while Francesca bathed, then helped dry her hair with a linen towel. Francesca slipped into the dusty rose gown covered in pale pink rose vines. It had a high waist and a straight white neckline that showed off Francesca's full, round breasts. The servant brushed and wove Francesca's hair into a long single braid that trailed down her back.

A knock came at the door, and another servant appeared announcing, "The king requests you attend him in his study, Your Highnesses."

Francesca was giddy with excitement. Gabrielle hugged her and kissed her cheek. "Good luck!" she whispered, then stepped aside so Francesca could follow the servant.

The servant hesitated. "I'm so sorry, Your Highness, but the king requested you both attend him."

Gabrielle glanced down at her dusty brown linen tunic and explained to the servant, "I'm dressed in my riding clothes. I'm not suitable for an audience with the king."

The servant insisted. "I'm sorry, Your Highness, but the king said it was important. I'm sure

he'll understand."

Their father was alone in his study when they arrived. He sat behind his elaborately carved mahogany desk in his usual royal-blue tunic, reviewing a parchment before him. Rising as they entered, he kissed each one on the cheek and motioned toward the high-back chairs placed in front of his desk.

Returning to his seat, the king leaned back in his chair and said, "I have a surprise for each of you. Your eighteenth birthday took place less than a fortnight ago. I assume it comes as no surprise to either of you to know that I have received nearly a dozen betrothal offers over the last few years. Now that you are of age, I have finally chosen an appropriate suitor for each of you."

Gabrielle and Francesca exchanged a concerned glance.

The king continued, "Prince Eirik of Norway has made a generous offer which includes the protection of our merchant ships from his formidable naval fleet. The Duke of Parma is one of the wealthiest men in Italy. His influence, resources, large personal militia, and contacts throughout Europe will strengthen our kingdom beyond measure. Therefore, I have chosen the duke to be the future queen's consort." He turned to Gabrielle and added, "I'm told he's quite handsome and witty. I believe you'll find him a suitable husband." Without waiting for a response, he turned to Francesca. "Prince Eirik will one day be King of Norway, this marriage will make you a queen. He is a formidable force, one that I would rather have as an ally than an enemy. I'm sure he will make you happy."

Francesca burst into hysterical tears and ran from the room. Gabrielle rose and leaned across her father's desk. "Father, Francesca cannot marry a Norweigan. She is too fragile, too sensitive. The Norwegians are nothing less than Vikings, who live in longhouses with dirt floors and multiple families under one roof. They bring their goats and horses inside during the harsh weather to keep them warm. Can you imagine the smell? She'll be living like an animal. Viking women are expected to work outside all day in the harsh frozen temperatures. These women are hard and unforgiving. Francesca is shy and delicate. Her servants do everything for her. She can't even care for herself. She can't cook or hunt, or sew beyond a decorative cross-stitch pattern. Those women won't have any respect for her. They'll look at her with disdain. They will

be anything but kind to Francesca. They don't live like we do. She won't have any servants. She won't have any friends. She'll be all alone and helpless. She'll be dead within a year."

"Nonsense." The king waved his hand to dismiss her. "Yes, the Norwegians are, for lack of a better word, Vikings. But they're so much more civilized these days. The worst of the bunch have moved on to fight over that vast land of ice north of Britain. She'll be a queen. Of course, she'll have servants to care for her. She'll be all right."

"No," Gabrielle snapped at him, "this is insane. The Franks are gone. Italy is at peace. Francesca should be marrying the son of one of the small kingdoms that are now spread across Italy."

"The war is not over!" he growled, and slammed his fist on his desk. "Italy is in chaos. You're old enough to realize that a dozen small kingdoms scattered across Italy all claiming the right to rule can only result in war. I must form alliances if I'm to further my empire and oust these aristocratic pretenders. The Duke of Parma's family controls a large land force. The Viking has promised a steady supply of ships and men to sail them. With their aid, my reach will grow beyond northern Italy. I'll stretch out my hand, and Italy will once more become powerful. If we do not fortify our borders the Franks will return, and Italy will be lost. We must unify."

"Father..." Gabrielle stammered, "there must be another way."

He sighed, releasing his anger, and came around the table to take hold of her hand. "There's no other way, Gabrielle. I've made my decision. It's your royal duty to obey your king and create a strong alliance by marriage to serve your people. Prince Eirik arrives this evening. Introductions will be made, and a wedding will take place in less than a fortnight. If you insist on continuing with tears and arguments, then you may leave me in peace. But know this; I will not tolerate any display of negative emotions or defiance in the presence of your betrothed. Explain that to your sister, comfort her, then insist she control herself and act like the princess I know she can be. She will be introduced to Prince Eirik tonight. I expect her to be charming and engaging."

Gabrielle stared at her father. His dark brown eyes were filled with challenge. For the first time, Gabrielle noticed the dark circles under his eyes and his hollowed cheeks. Her eyes wandered to his speckled gray hair. When had he grown so old and fragile? The fight left her;

she could argue with him no further. He was doing what he thought best for his daughters.

Gabrielle rushed back to her chambers and found Francesca splayed out on her bed, sobbing uncontrollably. Gabrielle sat down on the edge of the white canopied bed and touched Francesca's hand.

Francesca yanked her arm away and bolted upright. "You did this! This is your fault. You planned this, didn't you? You hate me and want to send me far away to die!"

"No, Francesca..." Gabrielle began, but Francesca cut her off.

Her eyes were wild with rage. Francesca screamed at her, "All my life I've been pushed aside for you. Let Gabrielle wear the pretty dresses, she's going to be queen. Let Gabrielle have the cutest puppy, she's going to be queen. Let Gabrielle have the first dance. Let Gabrielle choose the theme for your birthday party. Let Gabrielle have all the suitors. She's going to be queen! You stole him! You knew I wanted him, so you took him for yourself! But it wasn't enough for you to break my heart. You want me dead! You're sending me into a frozen hell to be raped by a Viking and to die all alone!"

Gabrielle grabbed Francesca and hugged her. Francesca struggled and fought, screaming out her frustration and fear. Tears streamed down Gabrielle's face, but she wouldn't let her go. Finally, Francesca collapsed and buried her face in Gabrielle's chest.

"My darling," Gabrielle cooed, "you know I would never hurt you. I'm so sorry if you felt pushed aside. I never wanted that, and I don't want this. How could I possibly build a life with this man, knowing how much you love him? I can't. I won't. But Father has made his choice. I don't know what to do. Tell me how to fix this and I will, I promise."

Francesca shoved Gabrielle away and declared, "I'm going to find Randolph! He can fix this!" She jumped off the bed and rushed out the door.

Gabrielle stared after her. Her sister's heart was broken. She wanted to throttle her father. He was always making impulsive decisions. Without her mother at his side to calmly reason with him, he'd made a cold, harsh decision. Gabrielle's heart ached for her mother. A fever took her shortly before their sixteenth birthday. The palace seemed to die with her. All the laughter and cheer followed her to the grave.

That's why Gabrielle spent so much time outside the palace with the guards, learning to fight

and hunt. She only had to smile and flirt, and they would rush to obey her every whim. But laughing and flirting would not save her this time.

What would her mother have done when their father announced the engagements? Gabrielle glanced back at the door. Somewhere deep inside she knew the queen would have accepted his decision and set about preparing Francesca for life in Norway. Gabrielle shook her head. That wasn't possible. There was no way to prepare Francesca. She was a delicate flower that would freeze and wither in utter horror in the frigid North.

Gabrielle growled in frustration. She grabbed her riding cloak and headed for the stables. A ride would clear her head.

The stable master was quick to saddle her horse with a traditional saddle. Gabrielle refused to ride side-saddle. She snatched her bow and quiver off the shelf inside the stable doors and climbed onto her chestnut stallion, Pokey. She urged the horse through the stable doors and out into the open air.

The stable master called after her, "Your Highness, please wait for your escorts!"

She ignored him and raced down the road toward the palace gates. Soon she was galloping through the forest, headed toward her favorite glen. The narrow dirt trail ended in a small grassy field lined with large cork oak trees. The glen was a bed of tall grass speckled with wildflowers.

Heading for one of the large twisting oak trees decorated with white strips of cloth tied around the branches, she urged her horse into a slow walk and fired arrows at the targets. She hit every mark as she allowed her frustration to flow through her into the arrows, but no solution came to save her sister from an icy death.

From her saddle bag she pulled a strap lined with small silver knives and strapped it across her chest. She urged the horse into a canter and plucked each knife from its sheath, throwing it as she neared the tree. A line of knives climbed up the main trunk, equal distance apart. Bringing the horse to a halt, Gabrielle jumped off and tucked the front of her skirt into her belt as she approached the tree. The cork oak was nearly forty feet tall with long, stout branches reaching up toward the sky like an open hand.

She pulled out the knives and stuffed them back into the sheath on her chest, then climbed up onto the lowest branch of the tree. She grabbed her first arrow then headed up to a higher branch.

Scooting out onto each branch she pried the arrows free, tossing them to the ground. The last two arrows were close together on a high, crooked branch. She pried the first arrow free and bit down on it as she climbed until the branches below thinned out and she could toss it to the ground. The last arrow sat near the outside end of the branch beyond a V-shaped crook in the limb. Carefully, Gabrielle slipped past the crook and strained to reach the arrow, not wanting to move further out onto the narrowing branch.

Her fingers brushed the feathered end just as the branch creaked and cracked. Gabrielle gasped and lost her grip as the limb dipped slightly and began to sway. She took hold with her free hand as her feet slipped out from under her. Gabrielle's heart pounded as she dangled from the branch. She didn't dare look down. She knew the fall would kill her.

She swung her legs up to try to reach the branch, but failed. She spat out the arrow and tried again. She couldn't hook the branch with her foot. She tried to climb hand over hand toward the trunk, but the branch dipped lower, and she heard another cracking sound.

"No!" she cried, and glanced around for the nearest branch. It was too far! She swung her feet wildly and kicked for the branch again, but still couldn't catch hold with her foot. This time when her legs dropped back down, she swung them wide beneath her and tried again. Her foot hooked around the branch! She grunted and tried to pull her body up. She hooked her arm over the branch. *Snap!* The branch gave way!

Gabrielle screamed and plunged toward the ground. She heard a shout. Suddenly a man on a horse appeared beneath her. She crashed into his open arms, knocking him off his horse. They hit the ground as one. Everything went dark.

When Gabrielle woke, she was lying on top of the stranger with her head on his chest. She bolted upright and stared at the man. He was a large, muscular fellow with strange clothes made of dark brown linen and trimmed in fur. Everything was trimmed in fur, right down to his fur-lined boots. He was unconscious and wasn't moving.

"Oh, please, don't be dead," she whispered, kneeling beside him. She shook his shoulder. He gasped and sat up so suddenly Gabrielle fell backward onto the grass.

His eyes opened wide in surprise as he tried to catch his breath. Gabrielle's heart skipped a beat as his dark blue eyes turned to gaze at her. His long brown tunic was bound with a broad

gold-chain belt. His fur cape was lined in green satin. He was no pauper. His braided golden hair was longer than her ebony curls. He was the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

He reached out to touch her and asked in a deep, sultry voice with a strange accent, "Are you injured?"

His voice sent a shiver down Gabrielle's spine. She flinched from his touch and scrambled to her feet. "I am unharmed, sir. Thank you for saving my life," she answered, quickly glancing around for her bow.

The stranger moaned and clutched his head then fell backward onto the grass, unconscious. Gabrielle gasped and dropped to the ground beside him. "Oh no!" she cried. "Don't die! Please! Don't die because of me!"

She lay her head on his chest and sighed in relief. His heart was still beating. She glanced up at his face. "Sir?" she asked. "Sir, are you injured? Please wake up. How can I help you?"

His arms slipped around her waist as his eyes opened. "I need..." he whispered.

She leaned close. "Sir, what do you need? Water? Wine?"

In one swift movement, he rolled and pinned her on the grass beneath him. He smiled down at her and said, "I need a kiss."

His lips were on hers before she could respond. His lips were hot and moist. Her heart pounded from the sensation. When his tongue forced its way into her mouth, she pushed against him with all her might and flinched in pain. He instantly released her. He pulled her with up with him as he rose, and moved to push the fabric of her sleeve further up her right arm.

She slapped his smug face.

He chuckled and said, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you'd never been kissed before."

"I haven't!" she snapped, and raised her hand to slap him again.

This time he intercepted it and added, "Then you should know, one slap is sufficient for an unwanted kiss; especially when the culprit is the man who just saved your life." He pulled her closer and reached for her other arm, adding, "You're bleeding. Please let me examine the wound. Your arm could be broken."

The sincerity in his eyes caught her off-guard. She allowed him to cut the fabric of her sleeve with the large ivory-handled hunting knife from his belt. He smiled at her. "It's a flesh wound. You probably caught it on the branch as you fell."

He released her and tossed his fur cloak to the ground. She watched in fascination as he ripped off one of his shirt sleeves, exposing a sinewy arm. He tore the sleeve in half and dabbed at the jagged cut that ran from the inside of her elbow to her wrist. He then went to his horse and produced a wineskin from his saddle bag.

His voice softened when he returned, once again causing her pulse to race. "This is brandy; it will cleanse the wound. Then we can bandage it, and you can be on your way." He smiled and added, "I'll be happy to explain to your father why you smell of liquor."

She smiled for the first time and said, "You're a bold man, but I can assure you my father will not be amused."

He chuckled. "I have some experience with displeased fathers, and am still breathing. I think I can handle yours."

She gasped as he poured the brandy on the wound and wiped the blood away. Ripping his sleeve into several long strips, he wrapped her arm and added, "The bleeding appears to have stopped. Change the binding again once you're safely home and you should be fine."

"Thank you," she managed, glancing around for her horse.

He released her and stretched his back. "You're a lucky girl. I wasn't sure I'd reach you in time." He glanced around. "Horse!" he called to the black stallion standing a few yards away. "Come here, Horse," he said, and then turned back to her. "If I hadn't stopped to rest my horse a short distance from here, I wouldn't have seen you at all. I caught a glimpse of you through the trees. I was drawn close by your skill with the bow." He grabbed his horse's reins as it neared and patted its neck. "If your hair wasn't the color of a raven's feathers, I would swear you have Viking blood running through your veins. Regardless, I couldn't let you die such a sorrowful death. As it is, either my horse or I took the brunt of the impact. I pray that it was I, for my horse is stupid and had no idea he was racing into danger."

She couldn't help but smile again at his remark and said, "Not all horses are stupid; some can be trained quite well."

The stranger examined his horse quickly. He turned back to Gabrielle and countered, "The same can be said of a good woman. Given your prowess with bow and knife, and having tasted your full luscious lips, I'm curious to discover what other sweet skills you have to offer."

She caught sight of her bow out of the corner of her eye and stepped towards it. "I apologize, sir. I mistook you for a gentleman. I shan't make that mistake again. A gentleman would never speak to a lady in such a manner."

He feigned surprise and asked, "Have I offended you?"

Gabrielle snatched up her bow and grabbed a nearby arrow. She spun and aimed the arrow at him, explaining, "You kiss me without asking, and now you dare to question my virtue? I, sir, am a lady and, yes, you have offended me. I thank you for breaking my fall and rendering first aid. I sincerely hope you and your horse suffered no ill in your valiant effort to rescue me. But we are finished now."

Amusement filled his handsome face. He took a step toward her. "I apologize for my indiscretion. I meant no harm. Allow me to make amends. I'll escort you home."

Gabrielle said, "Thank you, sir, for your kind offer, but your actions and suggestive conversation have left me uneasy. Now, please continue on your way."

He raised his hands in feigned dismay. "I cannot, in good conscience, leave a damsel in distress alone in the forest; even if she is a spitfire that climbs trees like a raccoon. I must see you home safely."

She whistled, and Pokey strolled up to her. Gabrielle lowered the bow and arrow just long enough to climb onto her horse. "I, sir, am no damsel in distress. I'm warning you, if you try to approach me I'll put an arrow in your eye."

She didn't think it possible, but his smile broadened. He chuckled and lowered his hands. "I'd rather you didn't. I'm partial to both of my eyes. I prefer to keep them intact."

Gabrielle stared at him. "Leave now if you wish to stay alive. This is my last warning."

He laughed boldly. "Who is your master, woman? I'd like to make him a rich man."

"How dare you!" she gasped. "I am not an indentured servant to be bought on the whim of a madman!"

His hearty laughter filled the glen. He mounted his horse. "Ride on, woman. I shall keep a safe distance behind you until you are home. But I cannot promise I won't offer your father a bag of gold for your hand in marriage."

She spun her mount and bolted back through the trees toward the castle, slipping the bow string across her chest and shoving the arrow back into her quiver as she went. Pushing Pokey to his highest speed, she raced recklessly to the castle. Pokey always won any race she managed to talk the palace guards into, but the stranger had no trouble keeping up with her. Suddenly two guards sprang from the trees as she passed. She smiled in triumph and glanced back at the stranger.

The stranger dodged them easily and kept coming. The guards were in hard pursuit. Gabrielle urged Pokey on. Finally, she dashed through the palace gates. A row of guards waited for her, swords drawn. She galloped past them, then stopped and turned to watch the stranger receive his just reward.

The stranger slid to a stop in front of the guards. He stared past them at Gabrielle with a puzzled expression. The guards surrounded him. He raised his hands in surrender and flashed Gabrielle a dazzling smile.

Then Sir Gye helped Gabrielle from her horse, calling her by name. "Princess Gabrielle, are you all right? Did this man hurt you?"

Before she could answer, the king appeared at the top of the palace steps and shouted, "What in God's name are you doing? Drop your weapons at once!"

Gabrielle moved quickly to stand by her father. She waited patiently until the stranger was brought to them, and then boldly asked him, "I believe you wanted to speak to my father about a bag of gold?"

The king snapped, "Has everyone lost their senses this day? Gabrielle, mind your manners. This is Prince Eirik of Norway."

Prince Eirik smiled once more and answered her, "I have already paid your father many times that for your sister's hand. If she is even a shadow of her twin, I shall be most pleased."

He took hold of her hand and kissed it as he bowed. Gabrielle yanked her hand away and left her father to deal with the heathen.

When Gabrielle arrived back in her bed chamber, Francesca was once again sobbing into her pillow. All Gabrielle could think of was the brashness of Prince Eirik. She knew what that meant. He was bold and impulsive. Francesca needed a literary scholar, not a barbarian with a large sword. A man like that was only interested in conquests. He would quickly find Francesca dull and lackluster. He would bed her and toss her aside. Then forget her or hand her to one of his captains. She didn't stand a chance.

Gabrielle rushed to Francesca and wrapped her arms around her. Francesca clung to Gabrielle, sobbing, "Randolph said it was out of his hands. He'd asked for my hand and Father refused, insisting he marry you instead. It's not fair. How can Father expect me to live in Norway, surrounded by heathens? I won't survive a month. I don't have the skills. You can shoot an arrow and throw a knife. I thought you were so ridiculous, trying to take on a man's skills. But I was wrong, and it's too late for me now. I don't have enough strength to pull a bow string, let alone bring down a deer. Yet, Sir Gye told me you skinned a deer once. I faint when a servant has a nosebleed! How can I possibly survive in a wooden tent with only a bonfire to keep me warm? I can't do this! I won't do it! I want to stay here and marry the man I love. Father should be sending you to Norway, not me."

Gabrielle released Francesca and smiled in triumph. "That's it! Francesca. You're a genius! I'll marry Prince Eirik, and you'll marry Randolph. All we have to do is switch places. I become Francesca, and you become Gabrielle."

Francesca stared at Gabrielle, dumbfounded. "I become you?"

Jumping off the bed, Gabrielle explained, "Father wants a quick wedding. You'll go to him and insist it happen as soon as possible. In the meantime, when we're in public and around Father, we'll be ourselves. When the time comes to be alone with our suitors, I'll replace you as Francesca, and you'll become me. At all times, I'll try to be more demure and quiet. You'll try to be more outspoken confident. We'll slowly slip into our new roles. Then once we trade places, our new husbands will be oriented to our true personalities. Neither of them has seen us together, so they won't know the difference. Then, when the wedding day arrives, I'll take your place and marry Prince Eirik. You'll take mine and marry the man you love."

Francesca stared at her. She shook her head and said, “Gabrielle, do you realize what you’re saying? You’d be giving up the crown. You’ll be taken to a harsh, distant land, never to see your family and friends again, and I will become queen. Why would you do that?”

Gabrielle cupped her sister’s face with her hands and explained, “We’re twins. We shared a womb. Chance decided that I would be born first. There was no divine power pushing me out of mother’s womb to ensure I was queen. It’s ridiculous to allow a three-minute delay in your birth to determine that you’re not suitable to sit on the throne. Francesca, while I was outside riding my horse and acting like a boy, you were studying philosophy and art. When Sir Gye was teaching me how to throw a knife, you were playing chess with Father and learning strategy. You’ll be a wonderful queen. You’ll be married to the man you love. His wealth and power will strengthen our kingdom. Who am I to stand in the way of such a perfect union?”

Francesca took Gabrielle’s hands in hers and asked, “But what about Father?”

Squeezing her hands, Gabrielle added, “I’ll wear a thick veil at the wedding, and you’ll help me avoid him during the reception afterward. After I depart with Prince Eirik, you’ll maintain this farce until I’ve reached Norway. Then you’ll confess to Father what we’ve done. He’ll be angry, but it will be too late; there will be nothing he can do about it. I’ll be married and gone. He’ll have no choice but to allow you to marry Randolph. After all, in the end Father still gets what he wants: two strong political alliances and his daughter on the throne.”

“And you? What will you get?” Francesca’s voice was barely a whisper.

Gabrielle smiled. “I get the satisfaction of knowing you’re happy.” She sprang from the bed and rushed to her dress cabinet. “Now all we have to do is keep as much distance between each other as possible. Never let our suitors see us standing side by side, and find a way to keep Father so busy he won’t notice the switch.”

Other books by Alaina Stanford

[Alaina's Amazon Author's Page](#)

Hypnotic Journey – A Paranormal Fantasy

[Forbidden Quest \(Book 1\)](#)

[When Magic Fails \(Book 2\)](#)

[As Darkness Falls \(Book 3\)](#)

[A Sequence of Darkness \(Book 4\)](#)

[Necromancer's Whisper \(Book 5\)](#)

[The Price of Magic \(Book 6\)](#)

Treborel – A Sci-Fi Adventure

[Tempest Rise \(Book 1\)](#)

[Vengeance's Fire \(Book 2\)](#)

Archangel – A Paranormal Romance

[The Light of His Sword \(Book 1\)](#)

[The Power of His Touch \(Book 2\)](#)

[The Echo of Her Presence \(Book 3\)](#)

[The Defiance of His Conviction \(Book 4\)](#)

[Angel From Hell \(Book 5\)](#)

Royal Duty

[Order of Succession \(Book 1\)](#)

[Virtuous Trickery \(Book 2\)](#)