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Opening extract from

Fools' Gold

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Philippa Gregory

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The four horse riders halted before the mighty closed gates of the city of Ravenna, the snow swirling around their hunched shoulders, while the manservant Freize, rode up to the wooden doors and, using his cudgel, hammered loudly and shouted: 'Open up!'

'You won't forget what to say,' Luca reminded him quickly.

Inside, they could hear the bolts being slowly slid open.

'I should hope I can – though naturally truthful – tell a lie or two when required,' Freize said with quiet pride, while Brother Peter shook his head that he should be so reduced as to depend on Freize's ready dishonesty.

The gateway pierced the great wall that encircled the ancient city. The defences were newly rebuilt; the city had just been occupied by its conquerors the Venetians, who

were spreading their unique form of government – a republic – through all the neighbouring cities, fuelled by gold, driven by trade. Slowly the little sally-port door opened and a guard in the bright livery of the victors presented arms and waited for the travellers to request admission.

Freize, launched himself into a mouthful of lies with ill-concealed relish. 'My lord,' he said, gesturing to Luca, 'a young and wealthy nobleman from the west of Italy. His brother: a priest.' He pointed to Brother Peter who was indeed a priest, but was serving as Luca's clerk and had never met him before they were partnered on this series of missions. 'His sister is the fair young lady.' Freize gestured to the beautiful girl who was Lady Isolde of Lucretili, no relation at all to the handsome young man but travelling with him for safety. 'And her companion the dark young lady is riding with her.' Freize was nearest to the truth with this, for Ishraq had been Isolde's friend and companion from childhood – now they were exiled together from their home, looking for a way to return. 'While I am . . .'

'Servant?' the guard interrupted.

'Factotum,' Freize said, rolling the word around his mouth with quiet pride. 'I am their general factotum.'

'Going where?' the guard demanded, putting out his hand for a letter which would describe them. Unblushingly, Freize produced the document sealed by Milord, the commander of their secret papal Order, which confirmed the lie that they were a wealthy young family going to Venice.

'To Venice,' Freize said. 'And home again. God willing,' he added piously.

'Purpose of visit?'

'Trade. My young master is interested in shipping and gold.'

The guard raised his eyebrows and shouted a command to the men inside the town. The great gate swung open as he stood deferentially to one side, bowing low as the party rode grandly inwards.

'Why do we tell lies here?' Ishraq asked Freize very quietly, bringing up the rear as servants should. 'Why not wait till we get to Venice?'

'Too late there,' he said. 'If Luca is going to pass for a wealthy young merchant in Venice someone might ask after his journey. Someone may see us here at the inn. We can say we came from Ravenna. If they bother to enquire, they can confirm here that we are a wealthy family and hope that they won't trouble to look beyond, all the way from Pescara.'

'But if they do trace us back, beyond Pescara, to the village of Piccolo then they'll learn that Luca is an inquirer, working for the Pope himself, and you are his friend, and Brother Peter his clerk, and Isolde and I are no relation at all but just young women travelling with you for safety on our way to Isolde's kinsman.'

Freize scowled. 'If we had known that Luca's master would have wanted him to travel disguised we could have started this whole journey with new clothes, spending money like lords. But since he only condescended to inform us at Piccolo, we have to take the risk. I will buy us some rich elegant capes and hats here in Ravenna and we'll have to get the rest of our clothes in Venice.'

The guard pointed the way they should go, towards the

best inn of the town, and they found it easily, a big building against the wall of the great castle, on the little hill above the market square. Freize jumped down from his horse and left it standing, as he opened the door and bellowed for service for his master, then he came back out and held the horses while Luca, Lady Isolde and Brother Peter swept into the inn and ordered two private bedrooms and a private dining room, as befitted their great rank. Freize helped Ishraq down from her horse and she went quickly after her mistress as Freize led all the horses and the pack donkey round to the stable yard.

As they settled into their rooms they could hear the bells of the churches chiming for Vespers all over the city, the air loud with their clamour, birds whirling into the sky from the many towers. Isolde went to the window, rubbed the frost away from the panes, and watched Brother Peter and Luca leave the inn and head towards the church through the occasional swirls of light snow.

'Aren't you going to church?' Ishraq asked, surprised, as Isolde was usually very devout.

'Tomorrow morning,' Isolde said. 'I couldn't concentrate tonight.'

Ishraq did not need to ask her friend why she was so distracted; she only watched her friend's gaze follow the young man as he strode down the cobbled street.

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When the men came back from Mass they all dined together in the private room, Freize bringing up food from the kitchen. When he had spread all the plates: the pie, the pitadine – a sort of pancake with rich savoury toppings –

the venison haunch, the roast ham, the braised chicken and the sweetbreads on the table, he stood by the door, the very picture of a deferential servant.

'Freize: eat with us,' Luca commanded.

'I'm supposed to be your general factotum,' Freize repeated the grand word. 'Or servant.'

'No one can see,' Isolde pointed out. 'And it feels odd when you don't sit down. I like you to eat with us, Freize.'

There was no need for her to repeat the invitation. Freize pulled up a chair, took a plate and started to serve himself generously.

'Besides, this way you'll get two dinners,' Ishraq pointed out to him with a little smile. 'One now, and one in the kitchen later.'

'A working man needs to keep up his strength,' Freize said cheerfully, buttering a thick slice of bread and sinking his white teeth into it. 'What's Ravenna like?'

'Old,' Luca remarked. 'The little that I have seen of it so far. A great city, wonderful churches, as beautiful as Rome in some parts. But before we leave tomorrow I want to go to the tomb of Galla Placidia.'

'Who's that?' Isolde asked him.

'She was a very great lady in ancient times, and she prepared herself a great tomb that the priest at church told me to go and see. He says it is very beautiful inside, with mosaics from floor to ceiling.'

'I should like to see that!' Ishraq remarked and then flushed, anxious that Isolde would think that she was trying to get into Luca's company.

As soon as Isolde saw her friend's embarrassment she blushed too and said quickly: 'Oh but you must go! Go with

Luca while I pack our bags for the journey. Why don't the two of you go in the morning?'

Brother Peter looked from one red-cheeked girl to another as if they were troubling beings from another world altogether. 'What on earth is the matter with you now?' he asked wearily.

'If you are to pass as my sister and Ishraq as your servant then you had both better come and see the tomb,' Luca said, quite blind to the girls' embarassment. 'And surely Ishraq should always accompany you, Isolde, when you are walking around a strange city. You should always have a lady in waiting.'

'And in any case, we can't go halfway across Christendom with you two carrying on like this,' Freize said gently.

'Why, what's the matter?' Luca looked from one to another, noticing their confusion for the first time. 'What's going on?'

There was an awkward silence. 'We had a disagreement,' Isolde said awkwardly. 'Before we left Piccolo. Actually, I was in the wrong.'

'You two quarrel?' Luca exclaimed. 'But I've never known you quarrel. What's it all about?'

Freize, who knew that they had quarrelled over Luca, stepped into the silence. 'Lasses,' he said generally to the table. 'Often upset about one thing or another. Highly strung. Like the little donkey. Think they know their own mind even when it's not quite right.'

'Oh don't be ridiculous!' Ishraq said crossly. She turned to Isolde. 'I should want everything to be as it was between us, and anything else will work itself out.'

Isolde, her eyes on the table, nodded her fair head. 'I am sorry,' she said, her voice low. 'I was utterly wrong.'

'That's all right then,' Freize said with the air of a man having brought about a diplomatic compromise in a difficult situation. 'Glad I settled it. No need to thank me.'

'You had better pray for patience,' Brother Peter said crossly to the two girls. 'God knows, that I have to.' He rose from the table and went solemnly out of the room. As the door closed behind him the four young people exchanged rueful smiles.

'But what was the matter?' Luca persisted.

Freize shook his head at him, indicating he should be silent. 'Best left alone,' he advised. 'Like the little donkey when it has finally settled itself down.'

'Anyway, it's over,' Isolde ruled, 'and we should go to bed as well.'

As soon as she rose to her feet Luca held open the door for her and followed her out into the hall. 'You're not upset with me, about anything?' he asked her quietly.

She shook her head. 'I was quite at fault with Ishraq. She told me that she had held you in her arms for comfort, when you were grieving, and I was angry with her.'

'Why would you be angry?' he asked, though his heart was hammering in his chest, hoping that he had guessed her answer.

She raised her face and looked at him honestly, her dark blue eyes meeting his hazel ones. 'Alas, I was jealous,' she said simply. He saw her little, rueful, smile. 'Jealous like a fool,' she confessed.

'You were jealous that she held me in her arms?' he said very low.

'Yes.'

'Because you and I have never held each other close?'

'Well, we cannot,' she reasoned. 'You are promised to the priesthood and I was born a lady. I can't go around kissing people. Not like Ishraq. She's free to behave as she wants.'

'But you do want me to hold you?' He stepped closer and whispered the question against her blonde hair, so that she could feel the warmth of his breath.

She could not say the word, she merely leaned her head towards him.

Very gently, very softly, as if he was afraid of startling her, Luca put one arm around her slim waist and the other round her shoulders and drew her close. Isolde rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes to savour the intense pleasure that rushed through her as she felt the length of his lithe body against her, and the strength in his arms as they tightened around her.

'Did she tell you I kissed her forehead?' Luca whispered in her ear, delighting in the touch and the rose-water scent of this young woman that he had desired since the moment that he had first seen her.

She raised her head. 'She did.'

'Were you jealous of that too?'

There was a gleam of mischief in his eyes, and she saw it at once and smiled back at him, 'Unfortunately, I was.'

'Shall I kiss you as I kissed her? Would that make it fair?'

In answer she closed her eyes and raised her face to him. Luca longed to kiss her warm mouth but instead, obedient to his offer, he gently kissed her forehead, and had the satisfaction of feeling her sway, just slightly, in his arms, as if she too wanted for more.

In a moment she opened her dark blue eyes.

'Shall I kiss you on the lips?' Luca asked her.

It was a step too far. He sensed her flinch and she leaned back so she could see his warmly smiling face.

'I think you should not,' she said, but, contradictorily, her arms were still around his waist and she did not let him go. His arms held her close and she did not step back.

Slowly, he leaned forwards, slowly her eyes closed, and she raised her mouth to his. Behind them the door opened and Freize came out with the dishes from dinner. He checked himself when he saw the two of them, enwrapped in the darkened hall. ''Scuse me,' he said cheerfully, and went past them to the kitchen.

Luca rapidly released Isolde who put her hands to her hot cheeks. 'I should go to bed,' she said quietly. 'Forgive me.'

'But you're not angry with Ishraq, nor upset with yourself any more?' he confirmed.

She went to the stairs but he could see that she was laughing. 'I scolded Ishraq like a fishwife!' she confessed. 'I accused her of loose behaviour for allowing your kiss. And now here am I!'

'She'll forgive you,' he said. 'And you will be happy again.'

She went up the stairs and turned back and smiled at him. He caught his breath at the luminous loveliness of her face. 'I am happy now,' she said. 'I think I have never been as happy in my life as I am now.'

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