

Chapter 1

A Ring, a Ring of Roses

Cecelia collapsed, veiled in the night shadows of a Gothic arch, her bloodied wedding dress snarled around her feet, the tatters of her train hung from the heel of her one remaining shoe. Streaks of makeup as thick as putty melted down her cheeks, exposing henna tattoos stained on her burnt-cinnamon skin. Her pearl-beaded tiara remained only because her matted hair tangled it. She closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath as her stomach convulsed, forcing bile into her mouth. “I belong to me. Not to him. I get to choose. I choose,” she chanted with her fist tapping the beats of the words against her thigh.

She hadn’t planned on stealing a moped at her wedding. She hadn’t planned to run. After hours of reckless riding and limping through the streets, a maze of narrow roads laid out by the Romans ensnared her. The fear of going back terrified her more than the unknown before her.

Not her first attempt at running; this was an instinctive reaction. She had no purse. No phone, no money, no plan. Nobody. The realization of how lost and alone wrapped her tight like spider silk.

She never thought past the escape. Now she had freedom with nowhere to go. All the storefronts were barred or shuttered, their slats scarred with graffiti warnings of twisted, bizarre creatures. This low slate stoop at the entrance of the basilica welcomed her, but with the doorway spread wide and inviting to anyone.

The chill of the slate steps crawled up her back, sapping warmth and hope. The determination that she felt through the day was failing: desperate hunger and exhaustion made her feel lost,

physically overwhelmed, fragile, beyond repair. She longed for the stolen moments with her mother, the love that melted over her, even just a touch right now in this broken heartbeat. Her own arms wrapped around her shoulders in a self-hug.

There was only drowning silence.

Cecelia had no shore to pull up on. Her hopes and mind drifted alone, like a small boat in a sea of pitch. Scattered lights twinkled in the apartment windows above the darkened storefronts in the plaça. Her dark skin might have let her vanish into the shadows, except for her white wedding dress, now stained and torn. The sign above her said, “Església de Santa Maria del Pi”.

“Del pi? A pine tree?” She looked around, and there was the lone pine tree lit from below by a single light. “Trapped like me.”

The silence here was nothing like home. No slammed doors, no Abba’s voice splitting the air, no mothers snapping at each other like dogs around scraps. Just quiet. Too quiet.

This time she ran from Jordi, the husband her Abba chose for her. Husband? They said their I-dos, but it didn’t feel real. That kiss was more of a smear, his cheek cut with a gash of lipstick.

Instead of words, she released feeble gasps of remorse that grew into spluttering grunts. She was free; she had achieved her goal, but now was alone. “I’d rather die than return to Abba.

“You know what happened today? No, starting yesterday. It was that accursed dowry party. Abba thinks he can sell me for a business deal. So proud of his gifts in that antique dowry chest, you know.” She considered the scraggly, out-of-place tree, “No, you don’t know, so I’ll tell you. Keys: to an apartment and a nice car. A fat leather envelope stuffed with cash.”

A phantom swallowed a streetlight. There was no breeze, but Cecelia shivered to shake off the icy presence, not noticing the shadow growing, approaching, watching her.

Hunched over with chin in hands, Cecelia pulled herself in like a snail hiding in its shell, tears running down her arms. Disheveled, scraped, bruised, and bloodied, she ached inside and out. “Mama?” she sobbed.

“Are you OK?” said a woman who splashed radiance. “You don’t look OK, but you’re pretty. Do I detect a little North African in you, with your almond eyes and high cheekbones. How lucky! Very pretty. You’ll do.”

Here was an angel before Cecelia, a creature that braved the waves of Cecelia’s despair. Her light skin in a gossamer dress was backlit like a cloud floating on light, her face hidden by the shadow, framed by a halo of glowing hair sticking out like spider lily petals.

“What? Who are you? I’ll do?” sputtered Cecelia, blinking. “I don’t know you. Everywhere I go there are monsters waiting for me, in my Abba’s anger, my brother’s stalking, my fake-mother’s smile. So then...who are you?” Cecelia regretted her knee-jerk reaction as she marveled at this woman’s radiance.

“Well me...I’m so sorry. You don’t smell very good, you’re covered in blood and... your dress is, to say the least, torn. Did someone kidnap you from your wedding? Your dress looks like it was so pretty, and here you are blubbering like a lost child. My dear sweet thing, let me help you. What’s your name, sweet child?”

Lured in by her melodic voice, she felt a rush of warmth. Cecelia looked up at the ethereal outline of the woman painted by the lights of the windows behind and made guttural sounds, trying to think what to say. Looking down, she mumbled, “Cecelia. But I’m a mess. There’s all this blood.” Seeing the drips of vomit on her dress, she passed the back of her hand over her chin and pushed back the long mop of black hair clumped with blood and dirt. Her attempt to look

presentable was as futile as Sisyphus pushing his rock up the hill.

“Come with me, my dear. I’ll take care of you. I’m just a little granny, what harm can I do to you? On the other hand, I can be of help in my own gentle way. My home is just around the corner through a little gate.” Her voice carried primitive choruses and enchantments that soothed Cecelia’s fears.

This apparition before Cecelia was offering her a choice: either go with her, or continue sitting on the steps. Going back to Jordi seemed more like a trap, a trap that her father had set for her. She didn’t want to sit on the cold stoop and entertain the thought of a life unknown, she just wanted to be taken care of while numbing her feelings. She looked like a cure, but was she aspirin... or heroin?

“I need a granny. Never had one.” She reached her hand up, a ruby rose and emerald wedding ring catching the light from the street lamps.

“Hmm, isn’t that pretty,” said the woman to herself.

The sharp, bony feel of the woman’s hand surprised Cecelia, especially from someone so beautiful. Yet Cecelia felt so much relief that there was someone willing to help her, someone with such a kind aura. Besides, she thought, this woman is even smaller than my elderly Lalla Hbiba. Cecelia, wearing one high heel, followed. Click-tap and wobble, click-tap and wobble. Around the *basílica*, the woman led Cecelia onto a street that looked like nothing more than a service alley. Several quick turns until they seemed to double back again, and they arrived.

“Where am I, exactly?” asked Cecelia.

“I’m afraid I’m no tour guide, my dear. But I can tell you this is the Gothic District, the home of the dragon slayer.” She leaned in close.

Her breath felt like flames on Cecelia's raw skin.

The woman continued, "Do you know the mythic tale of our patron saint? Barcelona's St Jordi and the Dragon? He saved our princess from the dragon and married her. When he killed the dragon, a rose grew out of the beast's burned remains, a rose that he plucked and gave to her. Then she gave Jordi a book, a symbol of her wisdom and freedom."

"Jordi?" Cecelia exclaimed in fright. "But that's my..."

"Your who?"

"My husband, but it's not legal yet, is it? Maybe that's not important now."

Her fake-mother's voice pinched the flesh of her shoulder, "Once you give your body to him, all of you belongs to him. That's when you're truly married...or better be really soon."

The woman shrugged. "Suit yourself, princess. Here we are."

They walked hand in hand. Cecelia's bronzed hand, adorned with the rose-shaped ruby ring, seemed like rich earth clasped by the old lady's dry and knobby twig-fingers.

As Cecelia hesitated and looked back, a new thought interrupted her sorrow. What if Jordi was my saint, my prince? She considered this with romantic hopefulness. Wouldn't he have come after me then?

Along the cobbled path and through a gate of haphazard planks, the woman guided Cecelia into the garden, where a cobblestone caught her last high heel, twisting her ankle. Now she was stocking-footed, though she kept moving as gracefully as she could, walking on just her toes. Cecelia knew from experience that being less than perfect brought rejection. Fake-mother's icy reproach stabbed, "You look like a camel when you walk. Try to be a graceful flamingo. ...Fine. A giraffe will have to do."

Silken wisps clung to her cheek. She swiped one away, but it hissed and disappeared against her palm. “What’s all this stuff hanging down?” Cecelia balked at the wisps in her face, pulling back against the woman’s urging. Invisible filaments tugged on her skin, warning her of the danger inside.

“Old shreds. They’re harmless,” the woman whispered. “I need to get the broom out, that’s all. You must be hungry?”

Now that she was closer, Cecelia could see that each teardrop shape swayed from a nearly invisible line like liquid party lights. One blob burst on her shoulder.

“Ahhh! What is it?” Cecelia said, swiping at the goo, forgetting that her palm was a bloodied, road-rash mess. Mixing with the blood, the slime turned into a thickening gelatinous mass that oozed through her fingers. She tried to breathe slow, to feel stead her heart beat, but felt only icy panic.

While the woman strolled on through the garden, as if nothing were there, Cecelia kept brushing wisps from her face. The shreds clung to the woman’s hair, becoming airborne fringe around her already wild curls.

As they entered the apartment, a gauzy voice greeted the women from the far end, “My dear, you’ve returned with a friend.”

“Yes, sir,” the old woman replied, “she was lost and needed help. May I give her something to drink? I think you’ll like her.”

Looking into the darkness, Cecelia tried to see the man, or what she thought was a man. All she could see was a swish of faint sparkles reflected around the ceiling.

“Sit,” the woman said. “Sit here, where it’s soft and warm.”

Cecelia reached out to touch the velvety, yielding surface of a hammock, which looked cozy. As she lowered herself, her legs slid out from under her into the stretchy cocoon-like sack that dropped her more than she was expecting.

The woman was gone a while, having disappeared in the shadows beyond the kitchen. Then, as if she'd been in front of Cecelia the whole time, she handed her the glass. The drink tasted like honey, but flowed like kefir.

With nothing to drink since morning, she drank deeply.

The tick-tick-tick of fear muted, her problems drifted far away. Her thoughts slowed, warm with happiness that felt like a hug from the inside. So thirsty, she finished the glass with a huge, thick gulp.

"I don't even know your name; what do I call you," the groggy Cecelia asked.

"Aisha. You may call me Aisha."

"Like Aisha Qandisha? Like the salt-walker? That's creepy? Lured in any men lately?"

"Do I look like I have goat feet like your Aisha Qandisha, silly girl? Settle down. You're just fine, my Cecelia, you may sleep. It's obvious you've had a rough day," she purred.

"Your Cecelia?"

"My new friend," Aisha's smile grew at a glacier's crawl. "Friend, Cecelia. And maybe tomorrow you'll meet your other new friend."

"Aisha, who is that? Why's he hiding?" With that, Cecelia laid her head back and was soon asleep. Aisha took back the glass, washing it clean of the concoction she had given Cecelia.

The blur of time stretched over Cecelia like a shroud, tucked in tight but still warm.
Bandages, medicine, and commands to rest harmonized with canonical chants of

“We love you...

No one loves you like we love you...

We'll hold you forever,

hold you in love,

of course in love,

in love,

Forever.”

They suffocated any love she'd left behind, flooding her with affection until her memories of friends dwindled to a single dying ember. Her reality shrank, boxed in by dark stone and brick walls.

In this euphoric trance, her body healed while her mind tried to reconcile the background fear she felt against the overly attentive care she received. She told herself it was only a name: Aisha. Surely not The Aisha from her parents' stories meant to scare her into obedience. Not The Aisha who comes out at dusk to lure in men.

She clung to hope, though the ember of doubt lay banked in ashes, waiting to be kicked back to flame.

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