

THE CONTRARY CONTESSA

By Susanne Marie Knight

Chapter One

1799

Leaning up against the villa's rough wall, young Lexia Cappello gazed out at the pandemonium around her. No matter the direction, it was a certainty that if she moved, she would be in the way. Even a child of four would have known this, and Lexia could boast of six years.

If she walked to the right, through the double doors made of French glass, she would bump into her mamma, rushing about as she prepared for her wedding to the Englishman later today.

If Lexia moved to the left, she would disturb her Nonna--Grandmamma--who arranged bouquets of colorful flowers that were to decorate the villa for this special event.

In front of Lexia, the main entrance into the house bustled with people scurrying to and fro as if their very lives depended on movement. Everyone within miles around gathered inside and out to celebrate the union between one of Sicily's finest families and a noble lord from the far reaches of England. To walk forward into the crowd for one as small as she was to risk her very life.

And to the back of Lexia, alas, was but a stucco wall, supporting her meager frame.

Amidst the earsplitting noise and commotion, Lexia stood transfixed. Her lower lip trembled even as her eyes began to water. She had been instructed not to soil her delicate silk pink gown--a gift from her future papa. So smooth the material felt against her sun-bronzed skin.

But Lexia was something of a tomboy; how could she pass the endless hours ahead, clean and unmussed, until the priest arrived for the wedding?

Without warning, someone enveloped her in a hug. "Ah, *poverina!* You poor child!"

It was *Zia* Concetta, Lexia's favorite aunt. "You are all dressed up with no place to go, is that not right, my plump, little melon?"

Lexia grinned. All the townsfolk knew she was as skinny as a bone. "*Zia*, I don't look like a melon."

Zia Concetta bent over to kiss Lexia's cheek. The smell of fresh basil and parsley was strong on the older woman. She must have been cooking for the big feast. "You are too sharp for me, child."

With a rustle of heavy linen skirts, she guided Lexia through the double French doors. "Come. Let us convince your Mamma Francesca there is no need for you to be trussed

up like a Christmas goose so far in advance. The wedding is not for three more hours.” Sometimes grownups made no sense whatsoever. How could she be dressed like a goose? Although the mention of food did cause Lexia to lick her lips.

After *Zia Concetta* closed the doors, shutting out the outside noise, Mamma peered over the dressing screen. “Ah, Concetta! It is fortunate you have come. I cannot decide whether to wear the teardrop pearl earbobs or the gold and carnelian ones.”

Mamma was the most beautiful woman in all the world. With her dark hair swinging and brilliant brown eyes flashing, she had no need of jewels to shine. People always whispered that Lexia took after her mamma. She wished that was so, but the looking glass never lied.

Sneaking a peek at her reflection, she wrinkled her nose and sighed.

Mamma soundly gave Lexia a smack of a kiss. Then of course, she pulled out her handkerchief to rub away excess lip salve on Lexia’s cheek. “You have not gotten dirty, little one. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

If only to earn her mamma’s approval, Lexia would forgo all the pleasures the villa’s gardens held. Only....

She glanced out the window at the high, proud juniper trees lining the main walkway. They rustled their branches at her, teasing her to come play. Why oh why did anyone want to remain indoors on a glorious day like today?

Zia Concetta pulled a stray wisp of greying hair back into her heavy bun, then wagged a stout finger at Mamma. “Francesca, I make a deal with you. If you allow this sweet babe the freedom to roam until two hours hence, I shall give you my advice.”

She wisely held up her two hands to stop Mamma’s sputtering of words. “I promise on the Blessed Mother to wash her clean and dress her again in this fancy English gown.”

Mamma’s dear face pulled into a frown. “She is only six, Concetta. And she loves to roam free, just as..., well, you know. Can Lexia be trusted to return? I do so want to please Edoardo.”

Still in her chemise, Mamma moved gracefully to the looking glass. In her hands were a pearl earring and a red circular one. “Saints above, how am I to decide?”

She whirled around, a vision in her underclothes. “*Si, sì*. Yes, I agree. But Lexia, you must promise not to get into trouble.”

“I won’t, Mamma. I promise.” Lexia raised her gaze to her beloved aunt and gave her a big thankful smile. This dress, although pretty to look at, bound her tightly on the bodice. And although the material was silky smooth, scratchy seams irritated her skin.

She pulled on her lower lip. Why did looking pretty have to be so painful?

“Edoardo is a marquess, you know.” Mamma sprinkled her cheeks with a dusting of rice powder.

The resulting spray tickled Lexia’s nose, making her sneeze.

“The Marquess of Rutherford,” Mamma continued. “A fine English lord. Maybe I should

practice speaking more English. We must do our best to be worthy of Edoar--I mean, Edward, and his ancient family.”

From a floral arrangement, Mamma picked out a rose to smell its sweet fragrance. Then she held the deep red flower against the dark of her hair. “And I shall be his marchioness.”

“Bah!” *Zia* Concetta commented as she untied the ribbons on Lexia’s gown. “There is no finer name in all of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies than Cappello! It is best if you remembered that, Francesca.”

Zia Concetta was angry, but Lexia didn’t understand why. “He is ancient, Mamma? But you said he has a son. I want to have a brother.”

“No, no, I do not mean your new papa is old.” Mamma fluttered her hands as if to brush away Lexia’s words. “You will see. Indeed, he is quite handsome. And as for his son, Roberto, Robert--your new brother--he has seventeen years. He even has his own title--the Earl of Wroth. Can you imagine? The boy is... well, he is not happy about the wedding, I fear.”

Mamma looked sad. She used her handkerchief to touch at the corners of her eyes. “But the marriage is meant to be, is that not so, Concetta? When I first met Edward, he gave me roses--red, white, pink, and yellow. Without knowing *Fortuna*, the tradition of true love, he gave them to me.”

Mamma dipped her face in more roses arranged throughout her room. “And these, also.”

Zia Concetta nodded slowly. “*Sì*, it is *Fortuna*. Any man giving a lady the four colors of roses is meant to be her husband. Red for love, white for truth, pink for romance, and yellow for hope.” She made the sign of the cross. “It is fated you marry this Englishman. And you must wear the pearl earbobs for purity. The red carnelian, *Gesù Cristo!* That is for the wedding night!”

For some reason, Mamma blushed.

Now stripped of that restricting dress, Lexia put on one of her comfortable cotton shifts. Barefoot, she gratefully wiggled her toes on the wood floor, eager to be gone. Maybe she could find her good friend, Vito, and romp in the dirt under the hot summer sun. With *Zia* Concetta and Mamma busy arguing about something unimportant, it was easy to slip out the door.

But sharp-eyed Mamma had the last word. “Two hours, *sì?* And no trouble.”

“*Sì*, Mamma. *Grazie!* Thank you.” Lexia bobbed her head. For two blessed hours she could run free without worrying about grownup matters like weddings, new papas, and new unhappy brothers.

* * * *

“I do wish you’d wipe that frown from your face, Wroth. The day’s much too beautiful to wear the mask of tragedy.” James Dutton pulled on his horse’s reins, then viewed the commanding presence of Mount Etna in the distance. “Even though we *are* in the

birthplace of tragedy--as in Roman theatre, don't you know?"

Robert Weston, the Earl of Wroth, and heir to the Marquess of Rutherford, also halted, but only to ring a peal over his friend's head. "Dutton, if you are trying to impress me with your knowledge, you have failed miserably. You credit the Romans for inventing a literary form they only *copied* from the ancient Greeks."

He allowed his stallion, Fury, to graze upon the plentiful roadside grass. "It is no wonder your first term at Cambridge was a decided disaster."

"Egad, Wroth, only roasting you," Dutton grumbled, the tips of his ears turning pink.

"Damme, you are so out of curl, you'd skin a fellow alive! Why I agreed to accompany you on this trip, I'll never fathom."

"Cut line, Dutton. You know as well as I that this is your only chance for the Grand Tour."

As a redhead, Dutton's fair skin already was turning uncomfortably red in the unyielding Sicilian sun. Despite his hat however, he somehow managed to redden further.

Robert contritely looked his friend in the eye. "A thousand pardons, old fellow. I had no call to say that."

Removing his beaver top hat, he ran a gloved hand through his hair. "In truth, we are both deuced fortunate to be able to do any traveling, thanks to that monster Bonaparte's preoccupation with his bloody campaign in Egypt."

With England at war for seven years now, a fellow had to grab any lull in the fighting to satisfy the wanderlust in one's soul.

Robert replaced his hat, then arched his back to relieve some of the strain from sitting in the saddle. "It is just that my father's actions are so... so damn irresponsible. First, he fancies himself to be some sort of scholar, then he leaves his estate for months on end to study art, of all things, and now he is leg-shackling himself to a Sicilian abbess. Insufferable!"

"Hey, hey, doing it too brown, don't you think? You've never even met the woman."

"What is to know?" Robert snorted in disgust. "They are all the same. Out for what they can get."

He glanced at the majestic Mount Etna, and in spite of his low spirits, was momentarily struck silent by the volcano's immense size looming over the fertile countryside. A kind of kinship developed within him for this cone-shaped mountain. If only *he* could also vent his anger by erupting.

As his father's heir, he could not possibly enlist in the Army or sign up to join the British Navy, as he wanted to do. True, he was but the tender age of seven and ten. But his father could do as *he* pleased. Wasn't he deserting the land of his birth for a damned foreigner?

Hell and blast! Things just were not fair.

Robert nudged his horse into a trot. "I have delayed the inevitable long enough. The road to the town of Randazzo and the Cappello villa is just ahead. We shall need time to

make ourselves presentable.”

Tongue set firmly in cheek, he added, “After all, I would not wish to scandalize my father by appearing at his wedding in all my dirt.”

Dutton kept pace beside him, bouncing like an amateur on his fine bit of blood. “If you want my opinion... and I know you don’t, but I’ll give it to you anyway--you’re being too hard on the female sex. Especially Italians or Sicilians. Same thing, anyway. What about that girl back in that seaport town? What was the name of it--Towermina?”

“Taormina. And she was five and thirty, if she was a day.”

Wiping his forehead, Robert wished for even a ghost of a breeze. But none stirred the eucalyptus trees lining the road, nor was there movement among the orange groves on the other side of them.

“Oh, right. Positively ancient. What does the woman do but take one look at you--and I admit we both looked bedraggled after our ferry ride from the mainland--then she insists you accept a gift of flowers? Roses, don’t you know? And she refuses to take payment. Just said that you’d be needing these.”

Dutton gestured to the back of Robert’s horse where a total of twelve roses--pink, red, yellow, and white--lay tied to the back of his saddle.

“I tell you, Wroth, that gave me goose-bumps, for some odd reason.”

“Perhaps the scent of roses disagrees with you,” Robert said lightly. However, he too had felt something peculiar about the exchange.

The woman, dressed in a shabby head scarf and slovenly gown, had a disturbing glow to her dark eyes. Poverty reeked from her lean form, and yet she forced twelve perfect rosebuds on him.

“*Signore*, you take *fiori*. Flowers. You need *fiori*,” she had declared.

He shrugged his discomfort away. “Enough about her. Here is the turn for the villa. Thank the Lord we have only one more day. Then we can be gone from this Godforsaken land.”

His words rang false, even to him. If ever a land appeared blessed, it was Sicily. Brilliant life-giving sun, piercing blue skies, and miles and miles of vegetation--as far as the eye could see.

Farther back, orchards of lemon stood alongside the orange trees, and greening vineyards seemed to be everywhere. Wildflowers grew to profusion, dotting the landscape with turbulent bits of color.

Now close to the slopes of Mount Etna, a jumble of exotic trees teeming with energetic birds parted so that they could pass. This place was, in a word, paradise.

But the Marquess had disappointed Robert once again. How could his father be so... faithless to his duty?

Dutton had the audacity to laugh, as well he should. He had something of a poet’s heart.

“How can you be so blind, Wroth? This place is enchanted, so lush, vibrant, and alive. Why, even the trees seem to bend to greet us. I say, what the deuce?”

By all that was holy, a *monkey* fell out of a cluster of huge, leafy beech trees, landing squarely in front of the horses. Fury responded to this indignity by rearing up--a most frightful sight, whether viewing it from the ground or from the animal's back. It took all Robert's concentration and strength to stay in the saddle and quiet the horse. Not to mention preventing the stallion from pounding the little creature into the dust.

Road dirt flying, at last Fury's thunderous hoofs remained safely on the earth. The danger past, Robert could not help expostulating. “Of all the damned--”

“Softly, now,” Dutton urged. “This is but a child.”

Good Lord, Dutton was right! Hunched over in the middle of the road was a boy... or girl. Robert could not tell. A branch of oval leaves stuck out of his or her curly mound of coffee-brown hair, and the legs, bare to the thigh, were almost as thin as his fingers.

His senses returning to him, he leaped off his horse and crouched down by the child's side. “Are you hurt?”

The largest brown eyes he had ever seen puddled up with tears. The child, it was a girl about five or six, pulled down her tattered dress leaving only dirty toes exposed. Her lower lip trembling, she mutely stared at him.

He carefully removed the tree branch from her hair and smoothed down some of her riotous curls. How silky and fine her hair felt.

“Dutton,” he called to his friend, “she must not speak English. How do you say ‘hurt’?”

“What am I, a deuced dictionary?” Dutton slipped off his mount and held both horses' reins to prevent a stampede. Fury had an unfortunate reputation of mimicking his name.

Dutton whisked out a small book and ran his finger down some pages. “Here it is, Wroth. It's *‘danno.’*”

The child, wide-eyed with some foreign emotion, gasped. Perhaps she thought he meant to hurt her.

With his hand, Robert gestured toward her. “You, er, *danno?*”

She vigorously shook her head, displacing dozens of appealing curls. How could he have ever thought her a boy... or a monkey?

“No, no, *Fratello,*” she replied.

He removed his handkerchief and wiped away a fat tear rolling down her cheek. “*Fratello,* what does that mean?”

Dutton skewed his protruding lips. “Damme--I mean to say--demmed if I know. This book is only English to Italian.”

Robert ruffled the girl's hair again. Something about this child touched him. Whether it was the brave way she held back her tears in front of two strangers or perhaps something else entirely, he did not know. The fall *had* to have hurt, and she had no natural padding to cushion the blow.

From out of nowhere, he came up with a wonderful idea. He did not usually consider the needs of others, so why was he bothering today?

No matter. He walked over to his horse and untied the bouquet of roses. After all, what use did he have for the flowers?

“Here, my moppet, here is a gift. You must be careful, however. Roses always have thorns.”

He showed her the sharp, woody points on the stems. “This is called a thorn.”

She nodded. “Thorn.”

Pleased that she repeated the word, he handed her the bouquet. But, strangely enough, her hand flew to her mouth as if she had never seen such beautiful roses. The poor child. Had she never received a gift before?

“*Fortuna*,” she whispered.

In the distance, another young voice warbled out some words.

Still holding the flowers, the girl scrambled to her feet. “Vito!” she called out. She made an unsteady curtsy to Robert, and then Dutton. “*Grazie, signori*.”

As suddenly as she appeared, the child vanished into the thick underbrush of bushes and trees.

Dutton handed Robert his reins. “What the deuce was that all about? I’ve never seen you so patient before. Especially with a child.”

“How should I know?” Robert replied more nonchalantly than he felt. He placed his foot into the stirrup and remounted his horse. “We need to hurry, Dutton. If we are late, I shall blame it all on you.”

His friend took the gibe in good stead. “You always do, Wroth. Why should today be any different?”

Riding up the road to the Cappello villa, Robert was uncustomarily quiet. The meaning of the word *fratello* came to him in a flash. Brother. The child had called him ‘brother’. But why on earth would she do that?

* * * *

Limping back to the villa, Lexia clenched her teeth hard, trying to ignore the pain that stabbed her with every movement she made. Gracious, who would have thought falling out of a tree could hurt so much?

Danno. Yes, she definitely had suffered “*danno*.”

But she could not have admitted that to the handsome English boy, now could she? And to think he was to be her brother.

And also, more important, *Fortuna* decreed him to be her husband!

She clasped the beautiful roses too tightly and managed to prick her finger on a thorn. As vivid red blood trickled down her hand, tears coursed down her cheeks. She could not be brave any longer.

Passing by the front garden's pond and gushing fountain, she entered through the back door of the villa into the kitchen. By chance Lexia bumped into the one person who could make her discomfort better.

"*Zia, Zia!* I hurt! Help me."

Zia Concetta stopped stirring the large pot of sauce simmering on the fireplace. After the wedding, everyone would feast on pasta and meat sauce. "What is it, my child?" she asked. "What--"

Her weathered eyes grew as wide as lemons. "*Gesù Cristo!* What has happened? Tell me everything."

She handed the sauce-dripping, wooden spoon to one of the helpers, and with her arm around Lexia, *Zia* Concetta hurried over to a private alcove.

The roses now lay in a heap on the polished floor, but Lexia was in too much pain to care.

"I fell," she said with a sniff. "I hurt."

In a quick motion, her aunt removed the dirty shift. "Blessed Mother!" She made the sign of the cross. "Of course you hurt, my angel. You are blacker than black, and bluer than blue."

Lexia looked at her skinny body. From her waist, down the legs, to her heels, she was the color of a pickled olive.

After pouring some water from a pitcher into a bowl, *Zia* Concetta wrung out a cloth and gently swabbed Lexia from head to toe. The motion soothed her, and she yawned.

"What am I going to tell Mamma Francesca, eh? Lexia, you little imp. You went climbing trees, no? Trees on your mamma's wedding day! I shall fix you a hot posset of milk and honey. It will put you right to sleep."

Lexia rubbed at her eyes. "But the wedding! I have to go. I have to see my brother."

"Your brother?" *Zia* Concetta wrapped Lexia in a warm towel and led her to the door.

"*Sì*. Yes, he gave me the roses." She gestured toward the flowers.

Her aunt stayed Lexia's hand and saw the cuts on her skin.

"It was a *thorn*," Lexia explained, using the English word.

"Eh?"

"Thorn. *Spina*. He told me to be careful, but I forgot. See, *Zia*? They are the four colors. *Fortuna*. He will be my husband."

Her aunt glanced at the flowers, now spread to reveal their soft petals. "*Fortuna*," she whispered. "But, Lexia, who gave these to you?"

"I told you. My brother. You know, Roberto." Lexia's eyelids refused to remain open. Reaching her room, she sank down on her bed, wincing only a little from the pain. "Must go to the wedding," she murmured as she settled in on her pillow.

Zia Concetta's roughened hand smoothed the hair out of Lexia's closed eyes. "Sleep now, child. I will tell Mamma Francesca what has happened. Maybe you will wake up for the feast, *sì?*"

Lexia could only mumble. The way she felt now, she probably would sleep until dawn.



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