

*A
Rumored
Fortune*



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POLITANO


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This book is heartily dedicated to the two people
whose presence resounds through this novel.

First, to Rose,
dear friend and godly example.
It is her family history that was
the inspiration for this novel,
when she told me the captivating story
of her ancestors and their buried money . . .
and what it eventually cost their family.

Second, to my wonderful Vince,
who is the basis for this novel's hero.
I remember walking down the aisle toward you
and hearing the strains of a song
that has proven more true
than I even knew at the time—
“God gave me you.”



1

Never let common sense stand in the way of a great legend, they say, and there's wisdom in that. Because on occasion, those great legends turn out to be true.

—*Notebook of a viticulturist*

SOMERSET, ENGLAND, 1866

“I say Tressa Harlowe's dead. It's the only explanation for it.”

I didn't set out to eavesdrop, but some conversations are simply too interesting to avoid overhearing. Especially when the topic discussed by these strangers is me. In such cases, I had no choice but to absorb every word, for wasn't it my business even more than theirs?

I gazed from my shadowed corner of the dim room at the greasy little man who spoke these words and thanked my lucky stars I'd lost my way in the rain and wandered into this place.

The brutish man beside him tore off a hunk of bread and

plunged it in his mug. “Dead? Ach, no. She’s too smart for that.”

His mousy little companion hunched over his mug as if his frame couldn’t support its own weight. “Either way, she’s been away from the castle for months. It’s the perfect opportunity, Hamish.”

I could hardly wait to hear what opportunity my absence afforded them. I leaned forward and reached for my tea, drawing it into the folds of my cloak as I listened.

“So what exactly are you asking me to do, Tom Parsons?”

I breathed deeply in anticipation of the response, and my senses were flooded with the putrid scent of the place.

“I’m suggesting we avail ourselves of an abandoned treasure. No different than mining, simply digging for gold.”

Hamish thumped two meaty forearms on the rough counter. “Look, you know how I feel about thieving from the rich. But this is different. I’ll not go stealing from the likes of Tressa Harlowe. Much as I need that new horse, I won’t do it. If that hidden fortune exists, and that’s a mighty big *if*, well then, she deserves it.”

“It seems everyone loves that little princess of the castle.” Tom Parsons wrinkled his nose as if he could offer no suitable reason for this affection toward me. “Have you even met the girl?”

“Aye, a good many years ago, but you can tell who she is even from afar. Such a lot of life packed into a little mite of a girl.”

“I daresay I’d be full of life if I stood to inherit 10,000 a year.” The man’s narrow lips pinched with resentment. “What does that girl need with a fortune anyway? Won’t she have a hundred rooms all to herself one day? I’ve two up, two down, and ten people to fill them.”

What did he know about rooms? Little good it did to have a hundred rooms or a thousand if they were mostly devoid of life.

Parsons spoke again, sniffing at his drink. “It’d be mad not to take such an opportunity. It’s like a golden egg with no goose to guard it.”

“Ach, you’re a fool.” Hamish threw his head back to down the last of his cider and then thunked the heavy mug back onto the counter. “She’ll be back when she hears what’s happened. Any day that fancy carriage of hers will come rattling down the road, spraying mud on all us common folk as she comes to claim her own.”

I froze, straining to hear the rest. What? What had happened at my home? Father’s summons now seemed ominous rather than exciting.

The proprietor strode through the crowd then and approached me, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. “There’s a man willing to take you to Trevelyan’s outer gates, but no further. He’s waiting by the door.”

I stiffened as his direct address lifted my cloak of obscurity. “Thank you, sir.”

“But save yourself the trip. With all the goings-on at Trevelyan, they won’t be looking for help.”

Me, in service? The mud and rain must have done more damage to my appearance than I’d thought.

Both men at the bar pivoted to face me as the man spoke, their two pairs of eyes seeing me for the first time. I fancied a light of recognition glowed from Hamish’s face, but Tom Parsons merely observed me with a hint of annoyance at the interruption.

I rose and pushed back my shoulders, bestowing a gracious

parting smile toward them both. “Good evening, gentlemen.” I moved past them, holding my breath as I squeezed between the tightly packed patrons, and then turned back. “You are most correct, by the way. The fortune does exist. I’ll warn you though, it’s guarded by the princess of the castle, and I suggest that you do not underestimate her.” With a polite smile, I turned again toward the door and sailed through the crowds.

Outside, rain poured off the metal roof of the porch, creating a curtain between me and the waiting cart. I ducked and ran to the vehicle, where a man hoisted me into the dark chamber and slammed the door behind me. We only traveled a mile or two, for our own carriage had been nearly home when it had broken down, but the silent drive seemed endless. Perhaps by the time I reached Trevelyan and found help, the driver who’d stayed behind with Mother would have the carriage repaired.

Looking up at the impressive fortress before us, I wondered how those men could even doubt the existence of Father’s legendary hidden fortune. I’d only glimpsed it once, but I’d always known of it, like one knows of the queen without ever meeting her. The idea of it had long haunted me, and I’d peppered Father with questions about it until one day when he’d given me his most direct answer on it. “I’ll tell you where it is when I’m dying,” he’d said with his usual gruff dismissiveness, and I’d accepted that answer.

At that time in my life, I believed him.