

# JULIET'S NURSE

*A NOVEL*

LOIS LEVEEN

*Author of* THE SECRETS OF MARY BOWSER

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ATRIA BOOKS

ALSO BY LOIS LEVEEN

*The Secrets of Mary Bowser*



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# PART ONE



# ONE

 Two nights before Lammas Eve, I go to bed believing myself fat and happy. You will think me a fool for being so deceived, at my age. But in our hearts, we all wish to be fooled. And so we make fools of ourselves.

For months, Pietro and I have finished dinner with a sampling of his latest confections: candied cherries, quince marmalade, muscatel-stewed figs. Though he still cannot afford sugar, Pietro's begun gathering honey from hives in the groves and fields beyond Verona's walls. This frightens me, for I was badly stung as a child. My face swelled so large, villagers crossed themselves when they passed me, as though I was a changeling. But whenever Pietro returns from his hives he hums like he's a bee himself, insisting this will be his good fortune at last. With the honey, he can make, if not the bright,

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hard confetti candy the apothecaries offer, at least such treats as we might sell ourselves.

Though I warn he'll put us in the alms-house by squandering any of the precious spices for our own pleasure, each night I let him pull me to my feet and feed me an unnamed delight. Standing close behind me, he covers my eyes with one broad hand, and with the other slips some new delicacy upon my tongue like a priest placing a communion wafer. "Why do you look for a sting," he asks, his words soft in my ear, "where there is only a sweet?" So I swell not from the sharp sting of a bee but with the many dainties he's made from their honey. Or so I believe, my body spreading and slowing while the spring's warmth deepens into the summer's heat.

The delicate flavorings my husband brings to my mouth seem to sharpen my sense of smell, so that I cannot abide any off odor. I scrub and air everything in our meager rented rooms. And the week before Lammastide, I launder our linens. Every coverlet and pillow-casing, all the sheets stored within our musty marriage-chest—they get such a laundering as I've not found time to do in many a year, killing every louse, flea, and bedbug upon them. It's three days' work, and I struggle with each basketful of bedding as I walk to the public fountain, and even more when I carry the linens wet and heavy back to the Via Zancani, and haul them up the ladder to our roof. Once they're hung along the wooden window-rod under the bright July sun, the sheet-corners catch on the wind like the black-tipped wings of the gulls chasing each other over the Adige River.

My Pietro has never been one to waste a clean bedsheet—nor even a new-swept table-carpet or a leaf-strewn patch of ground



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within a sycamore grove—without taking me upon it. And so every night of the week, he climbs on me with the same merry lover's zest with which he connived me of my maiden-head thirty years before. About this, too, I fool myself: that we could laugh and lust as though we are still such youths as when we first lay together. As though we'd never left the countryside to enter city gates, and the plague had never come.

For seven nights, we sleep snug and satisfied on those sheets. Until the earliest hours of the day before Lammas Eve, when I awaken to find the bedding soaked.

Pietro is a man who rouses neither quickly nor easily, so I give him a knee to where I know he'll most remember it. "You pissed the sheets."

He wakes, and swears, and says, "It's not me who wet it." Pushing off the coverlet, he traces the damp spot with the cinnamon-smudged nail of his stout finger. The stain forms a little sea around the buxom island of me, yet reaches not halfway under him.

Fat and happy. Could I believe myself those things, and nothing more? Could I think myself only old and corpulent, glad just to rut with the same hoary goat I long called beloved husband? In the months of shortened breath within my tight-pulled dress, had I not felt the truth of what was happening?

I had not. I could not. Until Pietro traces it on the sheet, and him still not understanding what it is.

Now it's my turn to swear. "By my holidame, go get a midwife."

He's more stunned by this second, spoken blow than the first, physical one.

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“Husband, will you not see? It’s not age that’s stopped up my bleedings these seasons past.” I pull his hand onto me. “It was a quickening, so long done that here’s my water, broke. Blessed Maria and Sainted Anna, I am about to birth a child.”

This brings him full awake. He kisses the last of the words from my mouth, and kisses my full belly, and kisses each of my broad haunches. The glad fool even kisses our puddled sheets, he’s so pleased at the news.

“A midwife,” I remind him, as the church bells ring for lauds-hour.

He dances his way dressed with even greater glee than that which with he usually undresses me. The way he sways and hoots, it seems as if he’s still drunk on last night’s wine, until he stops before the picture of the Holy Virgin suckling her babe. He crosses himself three times and mutters a prayer to her to keep me well while he is gone. Then my great bear of a husband, forgetting to duck his head, smacks his broad brow hard upon the beam above the doorway. He reels like a buffoon before galloping down the stairs and out into Verona’s still-dark streets.

Alone, I look to the Virgin, not sorry it is too dim to make out her familiar features. Whatever apprentice painted her had no great gift, for she is a cockly-eyed thing, the black pupil within one pale blue orb gazing down upon her infant, and the other looking straight out at whoever passes before her. Pietro gave her to me when we married. At twenty he knew no better than to pick her, and at twelve I knew no better than to find her lovely. In the decades since, I’ve fancied myself worldlier, snickering at her ill form. But there’s no snicker in me now, as I ask the most unlikely of

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mothers how this could be, and will she bless me, and why do my pains not come, since my waters are already loosed. It's a one-sided conversation, like all I ever have with her. Lonely and terrified, I lie flat on my back, kneading the thick flesh of my sides but afraid to touch my belly. Waiting for Pietro, and the midwife, and my own last and least expected infant to arrive.

"No birthing chair?"

By the time Pietro returns, the day's light is already stealing into the room, and there's no hiding that the midwife he's brought is gnarled like a walnut, with a palsy shaking her hands and head. I cannot imagine where my husband unearthed such a decrepit creature, though I suppose we are lucky that at such an hour he found anyone at all. She sends him away as soon as he shows her in, leaving only me and her assistants, twin girls so half-witted the pair of them do not seem the equivalent of a singleton, to listen to her complaints—the first of which is the absence of a birthing chair. Her only solace in hearing I have none is to say it is just as well, as I am too fat for a baby to escape me seated upright.

Next, she demands to know when my last bowel movement was. Too many days past for me to remember, is the best I can answer. I've not marked each bodily passing like it's some holy feast. Not with such wind, such colic, and such loosing and then stopping-up of bowels as I've had these years past. Why keep careful count of all the troubles that time, that thief of youth and health, works upon my body? We are not wealthy. Though Pietro would insist on seek-

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ing out physick and apothecary if ever I spoke of these ailments, I know such things are beyond our means. So I've taken what comfort I could in having Pietro's honeyed sweets in my mouth, and tried to find in my husband's doting some relief, if not remedy, for everything I suffer.

The midwife seizes on my constipation as though it's the only care either of us has in all the world. Displaying a gleaming desire to purge my bowels, she sends one twin off for common mallow, borax, and dog's mercury to be boiled into a soup, while she sets the other to rubbing chamomile and linseed crushed in olive oil into some hidden nether place where front and back join between my legs. It's not hard to tell which of those girls she favors.

Only when at last I shit to her satisfaction does she turn her attention to delivering my child. She produces a small dowel for the kitchen-twin to coat in chicken fat, then has the other twin open me with it so the midwife might survey my insides. She tells me to scream, loud as I can. I do not find this hard to do, with a fat-coated dowel shoved in me. I shout till I am hoarse, which finally brings on the first birthing pains. A fine trick that, no voice left for howling just when you want to howl most.

From time to time, my banished Pietro calls up from the street, saying he has a gift for me. One twin or the other runs down, returning first with a tiny woven pouch containing a Santa Margherita charm, then with a marten's tooth, then with a wooden parto tray rubbed so smooth with use, I cannot make out which sainted mother is bearing which holy babe in the scene painted upon it. Though I curse the money-lenders and the marketwomen so eager

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to prey upon my worried husband, I wrap my hand around charm and tooth, and tell the twins to set the tray where I can easily see it. Fourteen years it's been, since he last had cause to lavish me with parto gifts. A dozen years since, in my maddened grief, I burned up all the ones he'd ever given me upon a plaguey pyre. I can feel the heat of that fire now, am bathed in the sweat of it, as I beg Santa Margherita and the figure on the parto tray and our cockly-eyed Holy Virgin to make this baby come.

The day is already past its hottest when Pietro sends up three eggs. One tawny, one spring-sky blue, and the last a purest white. The midwife spins the eggs one by one atop my belly, snorting with approval when each comes to rest pointing to my woman-parts. Pricking a hole on the top and bottom of each egg, she bids me blow out the yolks. The twins fill the first shell with amaranth, the second with fennel seed, and the third with sow thistle, each of which the midwife says I am to rub upon my breasts every night to keep my milk thick and plentiful. Setting the shells in a variegated row beneath the Virgin's picture, she beats the eggs till the golden yolks stain all through the glossy whites. In the next pause between my pains, one twin feeds me raw egg swirled in red wine. As I struggle to keep the loose, thick mixture down, the other twin greases my nether end with the rest of the eggs combined with oil of dill, while the midwife lights a votive and mutters an abracadabra of prayer.

After the candle burns low, she orders me to kneel wide-kneed on the floor. The twins heap pillows behind me, and the midwife instructs me to arch back over the pile until my head touches the

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worn wooden floorboards. I tell her I saw an acrobat once that might have contorted backward like that, but he was a strapping young lad, which I most certainly am not. The twins each grab one of my shoulders, stretching and pushing according to the midwife's commands, until I'm as close to that improbable position as a woman my size and age can get.

Once I'm stretched neck to knees like racked linen, the tight globe of my belly pointing up, the midwife lays one icy hand atop the great mound of me, and works the other inside. Palsy shakes her so furiously, I feel the tremors deep within me. I lie folded back like that until my shins are numb, my back cricked, and the upside-down world no longer unfamiliar, before her bony hands jiggle the baby loose. I swear it stands straight up within me, my belly-button a brimless cap upon its hidden head. It balances like that a short minute, then pitches down again facing the opposite direction. But still, it will not push its way out of me.

All my other babies, conceived as they were from Pietro's randy youth and my ready young womb, were eager to press their way into the world. Nunzio came just two months after quickening, and Nesto only three. Donato barely brought me any birthing pains, and Enzo kicked and pushed himself out while Donato was still at my breast. I'd not begun to bleed again before I was carrying Berto, so I cannot say how many months he grew inside me, though it seemed a scanty few. And Angelo, my littlest angel, began to drop from me as I bent to blow out a candle, and was halfway into the world before we had the wick relit. But this baby feels the slowness of our ages. Though I try to fill the time with hopeful prayers,

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I cannot help but think of certain horrors. The widow in the village where I grew up, who swelled four years before she was delivered. A young bride startled by a fox on the way to her wedding bed, who bore a pointy-faced child whose body was thick with reddish fur. The cousin of Pietro's who birthed twins, one as perfect as an orchid bloom, the other a ghastly bluish-purple beast.

The midwife quizzes her assistants on what they think she ought to try, to pry the baby from me. "Girdle the laboring mother with vervain leaves gathered before dawn on the feast day of San Giovanni," recites one. She sounds quite convincing until, picking with a grimy fingernail at a freckle on her chin, she adds, "Or is it plantain leaves, gathered at evening on the feast day of San Giorgio?"

The second twin shakes her head. "Have her wear her husband's shoes upon her hands and his pants upon her head," she insists. "Perch his hat upon her abdomen, while she recites the name of his mother, and his mother's mother, and her mother before her, backward, and begs forgiveness from all their saints."

They go back and forth like that, until at last the midwife claps them each on the ear with a satisfying smack. She informs them that it is time to fumigate my womb, as the smoke from a fire of salt-fish and horse hooves should surely get the child moving. This, I think, is clever true. What being would not vacate where it lay, once the stench of herring and hoof reaches it?

We have some small bit of salt-fish in our store, but as I've never found much call in my kitchen for horse hoof, one twin is sent off for that, while the other scrounges up the last of our apples. This is a disappointment for the midwife, who would prefer an artichoke.

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I'm not sure it matters much, as she shoves it inside my behind, saying it will tip the womb to help slide the baby free.

But it does not, and neither does the fumigation. The day turns to slant-light, then twilight, then dark, and still the baby is not born. The midwife mutters incantations over me while the twins doze in a heap in the corner and Pietro, having snuck back inside, snores from the kitchen floor. In these small hours, I sink into a wet chasm of pain. Muddy, bloody walls undulate high on either side of me, threatening to cave in if I struggle too hard to claw my way out. From this place I pray, not to the Sacred Madonna or any of the blessed saints or even to the Most Holy Trinity, but to my own child. *Come out to me, dearest lamb. If the world is so cruel you are frightened of it, I will hold you, and protect you, and teach it to love you as I already love you.* Words I dare not say aloud but form in my mind, so that my little one alone can hear.

By the next ringing of matins bells, I fear there is no baby in me. Had I not bled four days in a row, some time this past spring? But as the sun slowly rises I feel that my belly is indeed full, though what is waiting to be birthed is not a new babe. It must be one of my well-grown boys, come back to claim the mother-love that floods through me once again, a love I thought I'd buried in the single grave that swallowed all of them. In such delirium, I do not mark the new ways in which my body is stretched and twisted by the midwife's apprentices, what is rubbed or dripped or shoved onto or into the varying parts of me. I come to my senses as the sext bells ring at midday, to find myself standing with an arm over each twin's shoulders, the three of us walking a circle like blinded mules



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turning a mill-wheel. We grind on and on for hours. When, bathed in sweat and mad with thirst, I beg for water, the midwife gives me only wine. But when I plead to be numbed by wine, all I get is tepid water. You can pray to God and holy saints for compassion, but do not bother to ask it of this midwife.

It is the afternoon of Lammas Eve when the baby finally arrives. A daughter, the first I ever bore. I am so grateful when she passes from me, I croak out an exhausted, "Hosanna." But "Susanna" is what the ancient midwife hears. She bathes, swaddles, and bundles my babe. Worn as I am, I can barely raise my head to steal a glimpse of my precious girl before the midwife calls out the window for Pietro, who she chased back out of the house at daybreak, to take Susanna to be baptized. Then she orders one twin to shove hellebore petals up my nose until I sneeze the afterbirth into the other twin's waiting hands.

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Delivered of my daughter, I sleep. When I wake the night is late, the fire out, the room empty. I might believe the laboring and birth all a dream, but for the soreness between my legs, the animal stench of blood and sweat and secundine that hangs in the dark. And the terrific ache that swells my breasts, my hardened nipples ready for Susanna's mouth. Swollen and tender, I hear Pietro's sobs filling the dark house.

A man will cry for joy when his wife has born his son. A soft-hearted man will even weep astonished tears over the delicate beauty of a new daughter. But this animal sound Pietro makes is different. I know it, and the knowing stings spear-sharp through my waiting breasts.

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This is why the midwife sent her off so quick, that my child's tiny soul might fare better than her tiny body would. What ill-formed thing did the midwife sense in my newborn that, with a mother's heart, I missed? I cannot know. And I'll not forgive myself for not knowing.

In my sleep, I'd clutched the Santa Margherita charm in one hand and the marten's tooth in the other. Cupping my belly against the crude stigmata they've pressed into my palms, I wonder how, in all the months my daughter lived in me, babe and mother a single breathing being, I'd not let myself know her. Such a fool I was, not to even admit that she was there. And now, when I most crave her, crave the hungry suck with which she would crave me, she is gone.

*What's tomb is womb.* That is what the holy friars preached when Death with his plaguey army robbed us of so much, more than a decade past. Worms will turn dead leaves, dead trees, dead men into new soil. But what can worms do for a living, grieving woman?

Let the brown-frocked friars tremble with awe over how the tomb of earth sprouts seedlings. Such wonders are no comfort when you birth a babe who dies.

When next I wake, the room is filled with golden light, and all Verona smells of yeasty bread. It is Lammas Day, a harvest feast. Sown seeds reaped as grain, then ground and baked to rounded loaves. Pietro, red-eyed and bewildered, kneels beside our bed, tearing small pieces of the blessed bread. Dipping some in honey, some in wine. Feeding each to me. Could anything be so sweet against the metallic taste of grief?

A Lammas Day procession winds past, its drums and shouts

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and trumpets echoing against the tight-packed buildings, resonating across our floor and up our walls. After the noise passes away, Pietro slips his hands beneath me, his palms warm against the ache across my back. "Susanna is—"

I shake my head, cutting him off. I will not let him say the word. Will not make myself listen to it.

Why could we two not just be alone, like we'd been the seasons past, and happy? But there they are, the portrait of the Holy Madonna suckling sacred babe upon our wall, and some saint or other being newly born upon the parto tray that holds the honey, bread, and wine. Icons of what we cannot have, blessed mothers such as I'm reminded I'll never again be. The plague that stole our other children laid half the city dead. But this fresh loss comes to us alone. This is grief's great trick: you think you have faced the worst of it, not dreaming of all that is yet to come.

Somewhere outside a lonely kitten mewls, and my milk begins to run. Pietro catches the first weak drops on his pinky finger, a too-delicate gesture for a lustful husband. He wets a cloth and washes me, dresses me, rebraids the great length of my hair, and covers it. Then he guides me to my feet, and leads me down the stairs and through Verona's crooked streets. Sore and stiff, I move slowly. But what aches most drives me on, as I hold Pietro's arm, repeating to myself the promise he whispered as he lifted me from our bed. There is a baby waiting. Needing me as much as I need her.

We leave our familiar parish, Pietro guiding me past the towers and guild-halls and churches that mark the way to the Piazza delle Erbe. Even with the merchant stalls closed up for Lammas Day, the

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air hangs fragrant with basil, rosemary, and fennel, the last reminding me that I left my herb-filled eggshells behind. But I'll not turn back. I need no remedies, no potions. I need only a child to draw out what is already thick in me.

We cross below the Lamberti tower, to where the piazza narrows into the Via Cappello. This parish is not a place I ever come, for what have I to do with the Scaligeri princes and the wealthy families who guarantee their power? Nothing. Until today. This holy-day when, stopping midway along the Via Cappello, my husband raises a grand carved knocker and swings it hard against the wooden door. The door opens, and beneath an archway tall enough to admit a man on horseback, I enter Ca' Cappelletti.

The Cappelletti house does not smell of yeasty Lammas Day offerings, nor of the goods sold in the herb-market. There is no hint of the fetid waste that fills Verona's streets or the hogs roaming loose to feed upon it. Those odors cannot breach these walls, thick as a cathedral's. I breathe in the miracle of it, as a house-page no older than an altar boy nods a curt dismissal to Pietro, then leads me alone through the cool air of the ground floor, perfumed by the household's stores of wine and grains, cured meats, hard cheeses, and infused oils. I follow him up stone stairs to a storey so full of wool carpets, fur robes, and lit perfumers, their rich smells settle as tastes on my tongue. The walls and even the wooden ceiling beams are painted with holy images here, and exotic beasts there, and everywhere repeating shapes and dancing patterns that dizzy me.

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We wind past the great sala and through the family's private apartments to an intimate corner of the house. The page stops before a heavy pair of curtains, scraping agitated lines along his neck and stammering out that he's not bidden to go any farther. I part the curtains and, passing between their woven scenes of hinds and hares frolicking in some imagined forest, I enter the confinement room.

A maid-servant weaves through the room with trays of roasted capon and sweetmeats, serving a dozen gossiping women who circle around the new mother's bed. Most of the guests wear jeweled overdresses heavily embroidered with the crests of the city's finest families. The others have the full-skirted habits of Verona's wealthiest convents. No one notices me enter, except a sharp-eyed midwife's assistant, who slips a swaddled bundle into my arms, whispering, "Juliet."

Juliet—a little jewel. No ruby, no sapphire, no diamond could dazzle more. My little jewel and I are as eager for each other as young lovers. Settling upon an enormous pillow on the floor, I cradle her in one arm, loose my milk-soaked blouse, and offer up a breast. She takes it with such lively greed as makes me smile. When she's sucked that, and then the other, to her satisfaction, I lay her down before me on the silken cushion. I snug her head between my calves, her swaddled feet tucking into my plump thighs, my thumbs tracing the soft smooth of her tiny cheeks. Sainted Maria, the very sight of her bursts my mother-heart.

Juliet is my earth, and I am her moon, so caught in our celestial sphere we exist entirely apart from the rest of the bustling confinement room. Invisible even to the new mother lying in the parto bed, who lifts her slender arm, coral bracelets jangling down

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her wrists. With no more signal than that, silver goblets and flasks of trebbiano are brought out for the guests. Bright maiolica bowls appear, their lids hiding spiced stews. Trays come piled with sponge cakes and marzipans and fine salts. All eaten with a set of delicately worked silver forks brought by Prince Cansignorio's aunt, who repeats to each woman who arrives how they were chosen from the Scaligeri inventories by the prince himself.

I care nothing for the lavish confinement gifts, nor for any of the room's fine furnishings, except the heavy silver tub in which I wash Juliet, and the iron brazier over which I warm the swaddling bands to wrap her. To tend, to touch so little a living delight. I lean close to smell the delicate baby scent of her, and know it is my milk on her breath, my kiss on her downy hair. *Dearest lamb*, I whisper with those kisses, *do not worry or wonder what all those other noises are, who makes them and why. They do not matter, now that I am here. Here for you.*

Juliet has a ferocious hunger, rousing herself six or seven times during our first night to nurse. I do not bother to lace my blouse, keeping a breast ready so that she'll not cry and wake the house. But to feed her, I must be fed. In some quiet hour, hungry from her hunger, I steal up to the table beside the parto bed, where remnants of Lady Cappelletta's supper remain. A taper flickers beneath a portrait of Santa Margherita. Is it any wonder the saints favor the rich for offering up such extravagant devotions even while they sleep, when the rest of us can barely afford to keep a candle lit upon a work-table when we are full awake?

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In the dancing light, I pick the darkest of the meat. Even cold, it is the finest I've ever eaten. I close my eyes, sucking poultry-flesh from bone, savoring the flavors until I feel another set of eyes upon me. Lady Cappelletta's.

I slip the purloined bone inside my sleeve, so I'll not be called a thief. But well-fed as Lady Cappelletta is, she does not seem to mark what I've taken.

She stares at my untrussed breasts. "Is that what they do to them? Suckle like piglets till they fall flab?"

Standing so close beside her parto bed, I see she is hardly more than a child herself, consumed by girlish fear at what her body is, what it will become. "Time will do what time will do," I say. "No one stays"—I peer at her and make a careful guess—"fourteen forever."

She looks down at the bumps that even after pregnancy barely bring a curve to her nightshirt. "I'm already turned fifteen."

"An age when bud turns into bloom." An age that is but a third of my own. Her face, her neck, are smooth as a statue, her bead- and braid-strung hair shining. Lady Cappelletta is that beauty the poets call a just-plucked rose, and gossiping old dowagers call a coin that's not yet spent. Wondering that this is not enough to please her, I add, "And blessed that your child is healthy." She cannot know what those words cost me.

"So what if it is?"

"Not it," I say. "She. A beautiful daughter of a beautiful mother."

Some hard emotion pulls at the edges of her pretty mouth. "Who should have borne a son."

"You are young. There will be sons yet."

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“I am young, but my lord husband is not.” She shudders when she speaks of him. “Neither is he patient.”

Surely tonight all her husband’s thinking of is how much it costs to dower the daughter of so fine a house—that will shrivel more than a man’s impatience. But who am I to tell her so?

“He’ll climb right back upon me,” she says, “to make a son.”

Fear tinges her words. Perchance it’s more than age that makes them ill-matched. He must run hot, as men do, and she cold, as I for one do not. Although never having seen her husband, I cannot say whether there is anything in him that might please any woman. Especially one barely out of girlhood.

“The midwife will tell him he must wait, as all men do,” I say, thinking of how Pietro brought me here out of our marriage bed.

Her fingers, heavy with pearl rings, tug at the gold-and-garnet cross that hangs around her neck, then turn the coral bracelets upon either wrist. Extravagant talismans, doubtless from her husband’s family, which no one thought to unclasp at night so she might sleep in comfort.

She’s sorely in need of mothering herself, new mother though she is. I could sit upon this grand bed, stroking her hair and whispering soothing words until her hands lie calm. I might tell her that many a wife whose husband gives her no pleasure in the getting of babies still finds great joy in the children she’s borne. But Juliet begins to stir, and I turn my back to the parto bed to take up the child who is my charge.