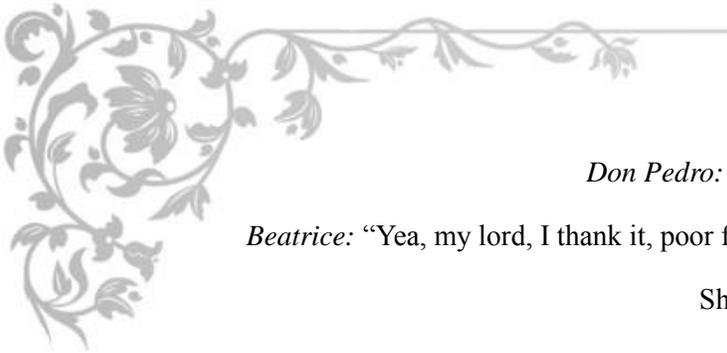


THE WINDY SIDE OF CARE

By Rachel Heffington

First Chapter Sample

CHAPTER 1



Don Pedro: “In faith, lady, you have a merry heart.”

Beatrice: “Yea, my lord, I thank it, poor fool. It keeps on the windy side of care.”

Shakespeare’s “*Much Ado About Nothing*”

I COZIED AN APPLE IN MY HAND and tried the weight of it against my palm, contemplating whether or not beaming a judge with half-rotten fruit would qualify as contempt of court. Quite probably.

“I swear before the Court of Ashby, the birth certificates were *switched!*” I shouted. “How else have *I*, Lady Alisandra Carlisle, obtained the features of our royalty? If Auguste Blenheim is Ashbian to the core, can you explain why he is short and dark as coal smuts when every royal has been fair and tall since the Ancient Days?”

I imagined that the band of rooks in the pine above me were actually court folk, blinking in unison at my reference to coal smuts. I lobbed my apple at the tree and listened to the taffeta-winged disturbance it created among the quarrelsome birds.

It would be the judge's turn to speak now, and I took the pins from my bun and shook my hair down to make it as much like a horsehair wig as possible. I could *feel* the role in this state.

“It would seem, Lady Carlisle, that you are making claims of fraudulence against His Majesty, the King,” My throaty voice rang out with all the conviction of an experienced barrister’s on the stillness of our orchard.

The rooks fell silent, each leaning from his perch into the cloying, windfall-scented air. They listened to my one-woman trial and would probably have been against me had they possessed voices with which to speak.

“Your answer, Lady Carlisle?” I asked myself ominously.

It was important that I practice these situations, considering my aspiration to one day take the throne I knew should be mine. Would I answer the real court confidently? Could I?

Yes. Say yes.

I willed my tongue to form an affirmation, but it balked, stumbling before a jury of birds. How could I stand before the Court of Ashby and hope for better results?

Addlepate.

Furious for failing yet again in this daily exercise, I bundled my skirt like a basket, rolled a few chill apples into it, and headed toward the house.

“If Auguste Blenheim the Pig had not stolen my birthright, I should never have had to stand out here making myself stupid for an audience of rooks.” I wasn't sure if I spoke to myself or to God. Did it matter, really? I pushed through the gap in the orchard fence, sliding easily through the narrow opening, and trotted across the stable yard. The old-faithful smell of breakfast tumbled out of the stone kitchen, and I followed its cinnamon beckoning.

Ellen-Best turned as I dropped my apples on the table. “Have you seen yourself in the mirror?” she scolded. “You're all over with straw bits.”

“No.” Today I was glad for the absence of a looking glass in the kitchens; I wished not to look at my royalty. Some days it was just too infuriating.

“TEA!” The imperative broke in on our conversation with a suddenness almost electrifying.

“COMING!” I shouted back. Serving girls in manor houses were not supposed to shout at anyone, much less at their betters. But the makers of Proper Etiquette had doubtless never lived in a house with this many passages, corridors, and miniscule staircases.

I had instituted my own etiquette early on.

Ellen cocked an eye at the main house. “She’s chirpy.” She pulled me to her side and gathered my thick hair back into a sleek knot.

I escaped and darted to the cupboard. “Has Stockton come up yet?” I clattered several teacups onto a tray and righted them in haste.

“Stockton? He’s never been on time these eight years. Why, please God, would he change habit now?”

“I need him to deliver a letter for me. I’ve gained ground, Ellen.”

“Have you?” Her tone was doubtful.

“I have. The first thing to do was try to find Father’s certificate of death.”

“Naturally.”

I scooped tiny, curled tea leaves into the silver bobber and dropped it into the teapot. “There never was a certificate—birth or death—for a single Bickersnath Carlisle in the whole Kingdom of Ashby, according to the Records.”

“They must be a healthy race, those Bickersnaths.” Ellen stirred the porridge and raked a cone of sugar over-top.

Brows knitted, I pondered how best to respond to this non sequitur. “Either that or my real father has a less ludicrous name.” I dropped my fingers on Ellen’s shoulder and pulled her to face me. “Ellen. You have always told me that I am truly a daughter of Blenheim. A royal. How do you know?”

Ellen’s eyes traveled down my slender frame and back to my face with a wry smile. She smoothed my uncouth eyebrows with one finger and winked. “You have too much Blenheim going on for anyone to deny.”

I groaned. “That will not stand in court, Ellen.”

She waved me off. “How do *you* know you’re a royal? Were you born with gold flowing through your veins, teething on jewels?”

I made a precise pyramid of sugar lumps and shoved them next to the saucers on the tray. “They say my father—Bickersnath—died and left me to that awful woman he had married a few

weeks before. They say my heart was broken.”

Ellen and I both knew that wasn't the case. I never had a father. Well, biologically I must have had one, but I certainly had never looked him in the eye and given him the filial kiss. There was more than one thing wrong with the whole story anyway. Had no one thought it remotely suspicious? Unhappy man marries beautiful woman. Beautiful woman shapes up rather nasty. Man unhappier than ever; woman unhappy as well. Three short weeks . . . Oops, he's dead! Oh, poor dear child. Let's see what we can do with her. Free labor!

One would think there would have at least been an inquest. If it was true at all.

We knew it wasn't.

“Their story is pale cider,” I said. “Were I really nothing, Laureldina wouldn't let me keep my title. They would not bother to tell me this story about Bickersnath Carlisle.”

If Ellen and I were right, then King Henri and his queen were my parents. They had given me up because the people of Ashby had expected a princeling. And when the people of Ashby expect one thing and are given another they are prone to a nasty little thing called Anarchy. The House of Ashby would not last long under a gale of the common-folks' fury. The common-folk generally scour the countryside with fire *and* sword, and sometimes a plague or two for good measure: the People's Way.

There are many problems with a system of King's Justice, but Anarchy is not one of them; sometimes I rather thought a tyrannical ruler might behoove the people of Ashby. Anything would be better than their own dictatorial tendencies. But there it was: The way of Ashby was writ in blood, and not many would be fool enough even to try to convince them otherwise. My father, the king, had obviously not been a fool. Per his wisdom, I was a dethroned royal living an interesting existence as a kitchen drudge.

The only question then: Who was my substitute? I mean, who was Auguste really, and how was I going to make sure that I was recognized as heir and Auguste deported back to whence he came?

My current scheme was to firm up the facts I already knew and then work at becoming a “Lady of State” as they call the girls up castle way. If anyone was to denounce Auguste, I wanted it to be me and I wanted it to sting. One isn't given the chance to depose a royal on a daily basis.

I'd rather get acquainted with the man that my triumph may be greater.

I snatched half a piece of bacon from Laureldina's tray. "Ellen-Best, tell me when Stockton does drag in; I've a letter for Lord Humphries and it mustn't wait till tomorrow. What a disappointment it would be to find someone else had poisoned Auguste's coffee and ruined *my* chances forever."



I carried the tea things upstairs, one tray on my head, one in each hand—a practiced art.

"TEA!" the shriek came again, but this time I was prepared for it. I backed into the door to push it open with my hip and rump then glided through the room, careful to deposit the trays in perfect silence.

I raised my gaze enough to meet Laureldina's chin, refusing to look any higher. "M'lady, would you like a syrup? Your voice sounds like a crows' caucus."

By her stiffening, I knew my stepmother had taken the hit. "No, thank you, Alis. You might, however, have the decency to pluck your eyebrows. They offend reason, child."

"They are a patriotic gesture," I said in honeyed tones. "A nod to Ashby, madam, in light of the prince's approaching birthday. *All* the Blenheims have incorrigible brows."

Laureldina sighed one of her insinuating sighs that could mean anything from, 'Oh dear, surely you aren't making this up?' to 'Oh heavens, of course you are.'

I decided to bide my time before saying anything else. I spread the tea things on Laureldina's side table and began the laborious and precise process of making her First Cup.

"Elbows *straight*," Laureldina chided, tapping my elbow with her fingers. "I don't know why I bother training you. I'm sure it is my native goodness and gentility that has kept you from the poorhouse thus far."

"I'm sure it must be." I wondered how far one could stretch the definition in good conscience. "Are the girls awake, madam?"

She tossed her hands. "God only knows, child. Go wake them before the tea is worthless. Do

you want them to feel as if they're drinking from chamber pots?"

"Yes, madam. No madam."

In truth, I rather wished to reverse my answers.

I backed out of the room with the remaining trays, to all appearances submissive. Of course I recognized my propensity toward impudence as one not terribly helpful for a grown woman, but it is a harsh person who expects overmuch from a disinherited princess.

Biting my tongue both mentally and literally, I pushed through the latticed door dividing My Lady's chambers from those of her daughters. Vivienne and Clarisse reclined in their beds, quite angelic-looking. How ill-tempered women are blessed with all the beauty has forever been a mystery to me; how men can stand enough of the poison to marry them a greater mystery still.

I clashed the trays onto the dressing table then twitched the curtains open, flooding the room with sunlight.

"Oh, Alisandra!" Clarisse flung one bare, white arm over her eyes.

"You'll blind us all!" Vivienne sat up and parted her red curls. "Since you're stupid enough to wake us like that, come fix my hair." She slipped from her bed and sauntered to her dressing table, where she sat and proceeded to fix her own tea, yawning the while. "Has the mail come yet, Thing?"

I twisted her curls into ornate coils, spearing them into place with jeweled pins. "No, Vivienne."

"Marvelous." She took a letter from her bosom and handed it to me. "See that this is delivered to Lord Grosvenor." She took a bite of toast with a dreamy sigh and rested the point of her chin in her hand. "*J'adore mi amour.*"

"Don't even try to speak French, Vivienne." Clarisse rolled out of bed and pulled a yellow silk wrapper from the chair onto her Junoesque frame. "It's so inelegant."

"You told me last month that French was the height of fashion."

Clarisse pushed me out of the way and hugged Vivienne's neck. "Of course I did, darling, but that was before *you* started trailing Spanish through it."

Vivienne scoffed and pushed her sister away.

Clarisse trod on my bare feet and stumbled backward. “You horrid thing!” she cried. “Why aren’t you wearing your slippers?”

“The cat made a mess in them,” I said in my most tranquil tone. “You can’t have wanted me to come upstairs wearing them in that state.”

Clarisse pressed a hand to her midsection. “No . . . no, you are correct . . . But your *feet*, Alisandra!”

I bent my knees so the skirt hem might hide my grass-stained, roughened toes. “I am having a pair of crystal slippers made, you know,” I said with a smirk. “Soon my beautiful feet will be showcased in the finest glass-work for the public’s viewing pleasure.”

Vivienne’s green eyes widened and Clarisse glared at me. “You wretched creature. Mama!” she howled.

“What is she doing now?” Laureldina warbled from her gilded cage.

I smiled and curtsied to my sisters, fingering a second letter I’d pilfered from the pocket of Clarisse’s gown. “I shall mail that letter, Vivienne, only I wondered: would you like to translate it into Italian first?” I peered at Lord Grosvenor’s name and the pretty scrawl in Clarisse’s handwriting below: “*La mia bella amante?* Oh my, Clarisse! That *is* bold. Calling Lord Grosvenor your 'beautiful, illicit lady-love' will certainly win his affections. It might affront his masculinity, but he'll be quite glad you think him beautiful; he's so sure on that point himself.” I tapped Vivienne's arm with the letter and winked. “She’s besting you, Vivienne. You had better call him ‘the burning heat of your passion’ if you hope to keep up.”

Clarisse’s eyes were livid. “Vile pig! Horrible sneak!”

I made my way to the hall door and turned on the threshold. “You don’t think, girls, that Lord Grosvenor cares which of you he kisses so long as you’re both possessed of good looks and reasonable fortunes?”

“Mother!”

But I was already halfway downstairs, laughing.

My laughter was destined for a short life. Laureldina’s son, William, stood at the bottom of the staircase, grinning. I stopped short and made an effort to meet the eyes of this young man

who, by virtue of being the half-brother of my stepsisters was no relation to *me* at all.

“Alis, Alis . . . always causing a row.” He offered his hand to me, and though the gesture befuddled me, I knew enough of him not to refuse.

I gave him the tips of my fingers. “Has Barnaby been up with your coffee?”

“He has *not* been up. I was hoping you'd do it.”

I stepped backward, took my hand from his, and raised my eyebrows. “Your kindness is too great, sir, it overwhelms me. That you would think to offer *me* a chance for *more* drudgery . . . benevolence itself.”

“Not so fierce, Alis.” William ran a hand over his smooth chin and shook his head, smiling at me from under a shock of bright gold hair. “You’re the sort of thing they write about, y’know.”

William’s manner confused me. As usual, I was made to feel a fool as I stood there beneath his roving eyes. My tongue was the prized mechanism by which I ruled the house, putting this one in his place and raising another to a higher station. I knew not what to do with a man who begged for more of my backchat.

Wordless, I passed William and ducked down the hall to the kitchen, glad he did not try follow today as he sometimes did. Two months he'd been home, and I still hadn't found a solution to the dilemma of his infatuation.



Young Stockton was perched on a stool by the sink, three cookies stacked on one of his patched knees and a mug of goat’s milk raised to his mouth. He made a face at me over its rim, swallowed with a gulp, and wiped his lips. “Well, Alis?”

I grinned at the throaty up-and-down cadence of his changing voice and snatched one of the cookies. “Well?”

“Have you got anything for me to take up Ashby-way?”

“I have. Two letters to Lord Grosvenor”—I laid them on the table with a wink—“and a letter from myself to Lord Humphries.”

“Is old Humphries going to help you, then?” Stockton stowed the letters for the younger lord in his leather bag and stared at the sealed note I offered. A beam of sunlight from the window above the sink ran through his red hair and lit the freckles across his pale face.

I kissed the letter to Lord Humphries with a prayer and handed it to Stockton. “He has agreed to help in any way he can, and since I found that not a single Bickersnath Carlisle has ever lived or died in the kingdom . . .”

“Never one?” Stockton stuffed the last cookie in his mouth and slid off the stool. “You’re just building your army, ain’t you? First me and Ellen, now Humphries.”

“I wrote to Lord Humphries a month ago, setting forth my ideas of a claim to the throne.”

“And did the old mumbler gobble it?”

“He did.” I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear and took a bucket of eggshells and vegetable peelings to the doorway, flinging them to the chickens around the stoop.

Stockton tossed the strap of his leather bag over his shoulder. “What did you write in this letter?”

I had worked on the letter late into the night and could have quoted its entirety for Stockton had we the time. “I told him that my alleged father, Bickersnath Carlisle, had never existed. I told him that I would be eager to examine any evidence in my favor that could, perhaps, point the way to my rights. I told him that I would need . . . help.”

“Why would Humphries want to help *you*? You’ve got no claim to him.”

“No.” My heart plummeted with the risk I’d taken. “But William has claim by virtue of being Lord Humphries’s nephew. And I’m afraid . . .”

Stockton lowered his brow. “What did you do stupid, Alis?”

“I asked William for his help.”

“In claimin’ your rights?”

“No!” I cast a nervous eye over the several entries to the kitchen, afraid William might be lurking in one of them. “I told William nothing except that I would like to correspond with Lord Humphries about certain points of the law I did not understand.”

“And William wasn’t suspicious?”

I held my breath and offered another prayer that, please God, he was not. “William thinks me amusing and was all too glad to recommend me to Lord Humphries as ‘a fine little woman.’”

“Did he say that to your face?”

“If only.”

Stockton flashed his impish, knowing smile. “Alis, you steamed the seal open and read William's letter before sending it, didn't you?”

I felt my face go hot. Stockton was too keen. “And was I supposed to let him write to his uncle accusing me of treason? ‘Lord Bickersnath Carlisle’ is an invention, but who invented him? For years I have been stowed away as an orphan, put *here* by someone who did not want me to keep the throne. If Laureldina and William suspect me of plotting anything, they won't expect me to fly into danger's face.”

“Danger's face?” Stockton ground his boot in a bit of flour spilled on the floor. “I'm not following.”

I tried to sort the mayhem of my brain. “Let's suppose I am who we think.”

“Right.”

“That means I was deposited here as a *baby*. Laureldina was considered trustworthy enough to keep me—heaven help the man who made *that* mistake! The story says she made a third unfortunate marriage in my widowed father. This would account for my presence, would it not?” I backed into the doorway, ticking the points on my fingertips.

“Aye . . .”

“Oh, Stockton, you aren't listening.”

“I *am* listenin'! But you're going on so long and complicated, I can't keep up with you!”

Still standing in the doorway, I folded my arms and leaned my forehead against the low lintel, feeling the whole world teetering. “I was given up. For some reason Laureldina took me. She must be aware of who I am and, having concealed it this far, must mean to continue to conceal it forevermore. If she thought I knew anything, would she expect me to reach further into the family, contacting her *uncle* to aid me?”

“No . . .” Stockton drawled his reply as if still muddled and only trying to give the answer I

desired.

I pushed away from the doorframe, fingers pressed against my temples to still the dizziness.
“Well, I am safe. For now.”

“Safe from what?”

William’s sudden, lazy voice sent a jolt up my spine, and I wished for one moment that I was the kind of girl who fainted.

End of Sample

[Purchase this story and the rest of the *Five Glass Slippers* collection.](#)

affiliate link