

Prince Laird and the Love Potion is a 79,000-word, dual-POV rom-com/romantasy. It pokes fun at issues of self-confidence, reaching beyond your comfort zone, and taking responsibility. It is the second book in the Unfettered Fairytale series.

Prince Laird and the Love Potion An *Unfettered Fairytale* (Book 2)

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Chapter 1 • A Losing Joust

An English castle, sometime before the Renaissance...

Prince Laird was being helped into his armor when Sir Justin was brought from the jousting yard into the tent on a litter. Laird's eyes widened and his stomach turned when he saw the evidence of the man's wound—the sharp piece of a shattered lance protruding from the gap in his armor at his crotch, and a spreading pool of blood wetting the cloth of the litter.

Laird rushed over to the litter. "Get the royal healer!" he shouted, as he eased Justin's helmet off his head as gently as he could and spoke softly to his friend. "Justin. Can you hear me?"

Justin opened his eyes.

He isn't dead, thank God!

Laird pulled Justin's right gauntlet off and took his hand tightly in his own. "Say something, man. Are you alright?"

Justin, his face gray and his forehead beaded with sweat, managed a dubious smile. "I've been... skewered," he said with a weak laugh, his gaze flicking down to indicate the protruding piece of lance.

Skewered? Laird glanced again at the bit of broken lance protruding from Sir Justin's groin and shuddered. A severed sausage, skewered on a sharp stick to be roasted over a fire—that was the unfortunate image that came to Laird's mind at Justin's reference. *Egad! Is he saying his manhood's been... er, compromised?*

"Where's that bloody healer?" he shouted again.

"I'm a comin'," he heard a quavering voice call from the back of the tent. The healer was an elderly man with a stooped back, a crooked nose, and an eye that had the unfortunate habit of wandering off to look at things other than what the healer was supposed to be looking at.

The old rascal has probably been napping again! Laird thought. "Hurry yourself, man!" he called impatiently.

"I'm about ready to be roasted," Justin said with another attempt at laughter, but his face was too pinched with pain for the effort to carry conviction.

“We’ll be roasting you tonight, alright, at the feast,” Laird shot back with a smile, “but with wine, ale, and bawdy jokes at your expense.”

Justin smiled weakly but then, as a spasm of pain shook him, a look of fear filled his eyes. “Promise me,” he whispered with a pleading look, “that you’ll look after my mum.”

“You know I will,” Laird replied, squeezing his hand. Then, after a pause, he continued. “Though, you know, your mum is a bit old for my taste in ladies. But while we’re about it, may I also have that sorrel stallion you’ve been training up?”

Sir Justin looked up into Laird’s solemn face for a moment, and then he choked out a laugh as Laird’s face relaxed into a grin. “No!” he said more firmly after catching his breath. “You may not have that horse... and I’ll find someone else to look after my mum!”

“Ah” said Laird sadly, “Too bad. I did so admire that horse.” He paused for a moment, then went on firmly, “But you’re not going anywhere just yet, so you can stop pushing your filial duties off on me!”

Just then the healer shuffled up to the litter and began removing Justin’s armor.

“See that he gets the best of care,” Laird told the healer, his voice filled with command and indicating his impatience with the man’s slow arrival.

“Tha’ I shall, Yer Highness,” the healer replied, glancing at Laird with one eye and keeping the other firmly fixed on his task.

Then Laird’s squire stepped into view. “Yer next up at the tilt, Yer Highness,” the young man said.

Laird nodded and squeezed Sir Justin’s hand once more before allowing the squire to put on his final piece of armor and help him mount his horse. Once he was mounted, the squire put his gauntlets on him and handed him the reins. Laird glanced back at the tent once more, where Sir Justin now lay screened from view, and the mental image of a skewered sausage arose in his consciousness once more. But now, to his great distress, it was accompanied by the image of a ripe pair of plums, also skewered, which made him shiver. *It’s bad enough one could lose one’s life in a joust. But good Lord! It never occurred to me one could lose one’s... boys.* He shivered again and shook his head to dispel the image.

He’d seen knights impaled by bits of shattered lance before in the jousting yard. He’d even seen men killed in the game of might. *It’s simply one of those things. It might happen, but probably not today, and certainly not to me.* And he knew that there were gaps in a knight’s armor where the breast plate ended and the leg plates began that presented small but dangerous gateways to wretched, potentially deadly injury. There was a major artery running up the legs near that gap which, once severed, could empty a man’s life blood onto the sand in a matter of moments.

Justin’s wound was not spurting copious amounts of blood, however, so that artery had, thankfully, been missed.

Still, the wound... his manhood! While not immediately fatal, the wound was certainly serious. *I'd much prefer to die in a joust than lose my cock in one!* While Laird couldn't speak with complete assurance on the issue, he strongly suspected that most of the other jousters—should someone care to poll them on the subject—would feel the same. Although, in all probability, none of them had ever given that possibility any serious thought. And Laird wished with all his heart that he could stop giving it any thought as well.

He took a deep breath and tried to refocus his energy. *You're the next rider, man. Buck up*, he told himself. He'd be expected at the tilt as soon as the runners had picked up the pieces of broken lance and a squire had caught Justin's horse, which was now cropping grass at the end of the jousting track, apparently bored and unconcerned with the drama it had been a part of.

Laird shrugged his shoulders to settle his armor more comfortably and shifted his legs in an attempt to close the gap at his groin. *I can hardly back out now*, he told himself firmly. Jousts didn't get called off for injuries. They weren't even held up for outright death.

Jousts were the ultimate game of male showmanship. They were an exercise in skill. And fearless power. Brute force. To pull out because one feared for the safety of one's manhood—one's personal lance, as it were—would make one a laughing stock. It would bring shame upon Laird's own head and that of the entire royal family. No matter that his cock would be safe—he'd never have the chance to use it again. Every self-respecting woman in the kingdom would laugh behind his back. Or, worse yet, pity him. And while, in Laird's studied opinion, any sex was better than no sex, his pride would not permit him to accept pity sex!

Not that I'm getting any sex at all at this point.

Laird was known throughout the kingdom for his two great talents. (Three, if you counted dancing.) He was the kingdom's greatest swordsman and his skills in the bedchamber were the stuff of legend. Lately, however, Laird seemed to be losing the exquisite talent with women he'd long been known for. He'd tried over the course of several months and on multiple occasions—and failed miserably every time—to bed the one maiden he currently wanted more than any other: Plié.

Plié was his brother's wife's younger sister, and he'd wanted her since the moment he'd first laid eyes on her—even though she'd been dressed as a whale at the time. His brother was Prince Tagert, the crown prince, and his wife, Aria, was a performer in his brother's Musical Extravaganza—along with all of her sisters, including Plié. The girls were simply the daughters of the local candlemaker at the time, and Plié had been the lead dancer in the chorus of magical sea creatures. She'd moved with the allure of a siren's song. Wonderfully fluid in her movements. Feline, even though she'd been portraying a fish. She'd undulated like the waves. Rolling and surging like a body of water... warmed by the sun and filled with the life of the sea. An ocean whose currents flowed only to him. Many a night, she'd pounded the shores of his dreams. Dreams from which he'd awakened wanting only to fall back to sleep and plunge once more into her warm waters.

They'd finally met at a dinner to celebrate the engagement of Prince Tagert and Aria. Plié had danced with him that night but had drawn a very clear line on anything more personal. Laird had smiled his most alluring smile, whispered his sweetest nothings into her ear, and held her as if she were made of the finest porcelain, with his hand pressed against the small of her back, just above the luscious swell of her bum and with just enough pressure that they were both aware of exactly where that hand was... but she'd refused to melt into his arms as so many maidens had before. She'd made it obvious that he could hold her close and gently manipulate her body until they both fell into ecstatic exhaustion—but only if they were both fully clothed and in a room full of people.

And what fun is that? Laird had wondered. His seduction technique was tried and true. Tested numerous times: smile, dance, whisper, press, leave the dance floor and guide the maiden to a nearby bedchamber. It simply didn't fail. And yet... it had.

Since the wedding, Plié had moved into the castle to be Aria's chief lady-in-waiting, and her very proximity, the sweet torment and temptation of seeing her daily—combined with her inexplicable yet persistent disinterest (which had wounded his manhood like a fractured lance)—had made his life miserable. But this week he'd made some progress, tiny though it might be. He'd asked if he could wear her colors while he jested, and she'd bestowed upon him a lovely silk scarf—a sea green color, like the ocean nymph that she was—which he'd carefully tucked into the right armhole of his breast plate. He'd imagined how it would flutter beside him as he drove his horse toward his opponent, with Plié watching from the stands at her sister's side.

Laird shifted uncomfortably on his horse. *Stop thinking about her, you fool!* Thinking about Plié was no way to prepare for a joust. He needed his wits about him. His head in the game. And his manhood tucked away, out of sight and out of mind. Even in these few minutes, sitting astride his horse at the edge of the arena, thoughts of Plié had stirred his cock to uncomfortable attention. He shifted again and eased himself within the rigid confines of his metal girdle.

Laird watched as the ground crew gathered the reins of Sir Justin's horse and led it from the arena, the smell of dust intensifying as the horse was walked by.

"Up next," the announcer called in a booming voice from the front of the arena. "His Royal Highness Prince Laird!"

Laird rode his horse out into the arena at a slow walk. He could hear the roar of the crowd as the people cheered, and he raised an arm in acknowledgement. He was, of course, a perennial crowd favorite. The young prince, beloved by the people. He had never been bested at swordplay and had never been unseated at the joust.

"And his opponent, Sir Richard of Norwich!" the announcer yelled.

Laird saw his opponent approach the tilt from the other end of the yard. He knew little about the man, although they had spoken on several occasions. Sir Richard had even jested at the castle before, although Laird could not recall if they'd ever met one another at the tilt. What he *could* recall about Sir Richard was his sister—the lovely Leonora, who had accompanied Richard to the castle for the tournament last year. Laird recalled her long, black hair, and the most ladylike

way she'd gasped when he'd bedded her, taking her virginity. A thought flew into his head as he watched his opponent trot his stallion into the arena—*had Leonora accompanied Richard again this year and is she sitting, at this moment, in the stands watching?* And, if so, was she wondering which of the two men she should cheer for—the man she was connected to by blood or the one she'd been connected to by an evening's lust?

The thought was fleeting, and Laird paid it little heed, not having thought of lovely Leonora for quite some time. Even if she were here, Laird had no desire to revisit their brief romance. Actually, he hadn't given her another thought since the moment he'd left her bedchamber. It's not as though he lost interest in every woman as soon as he'd bedded her. He had, on occasion, rekindled an old flame. He liked to joke that he was "coming back to the table for seconds." He just no longer had any desire for Leonora—or any other woman in the kingdom—*save one. Plié. The one who will not have me.* That thought made him frown, but he forced it from his head.

He looked at Sir Richard, who was a giant of a man, waiting at the other end of the tilt. Tall and broad, easily outweighing Laird by five stone. Laird's mouth was suddenly dry. He'd unseated many larger opponents, but possibly none as large as Sir Richard. And while size was important, Laird knew technique would carry the day. In fact, he'd had no fears about this joust at all—*until Justin, and the unfortunate image of the skewered sausage popped up in my head. Blast! There it is again!* Laird shifted again to close the gap in his armor.

Laird's squire came up beside him, handed him his lance, and helped him hook it to the arret on his breastplate, which helped hold the lance in place. Laird bent down slightly so the young man could lower his face shield, which cut off a good ninety percent of Laird's range of vision. He sat up straight, cradling the lance in his right hand, ensuring it was well balanced over the horse and pointed toward his left-hand side to meet its target. He tilted his head just enough to the right so that he could see the flag when it was lowered, but not so much that he lost sight of his target.

This is it, he thought as he took a deep breath. My manhood is on the line. Pity it's not only my life on the line. I shall just have to pray for death, he thought with solemnity.

* * * *

Meanwhile, in the spectator's stands...

Plié watched with great interest and more than a little trepidation as the next pair of knights approached the tilt to joust. The last joust had ended with a horrific injury to one of the riders. An injury that had quieted the entire crowd... for a moment. Until nervous laughter had broken out here and there along with more than one bawdy comment. "Better him than me!" seemed to be the prevailing sentiment.

Prince Laird was up next, which worried her a bit, considering the outcome of the last pass. It was exciting too, since he was wearing her scarf—the one he'd requested from her. She would never admit this to anyone—most especially to Laird himself—but she'd found the gesture touchingly romantic, and it had pleased her. As a lady-in-waiting, she didn't as yet have an extensive wardrobe, and this was the loveliest—and only—silk scarf she'd ever owned. It was a green that highlighted her light brown eyes... and although she had little familiarity with the

custom of a knight wearing a lady's colors, she hoped that the custom involved the return of the scarf after the joust. She smiled when she saw it hanging from his breastplate.

Laird had pursued her, with what seemed to be increasing desperation, since the evening she'd first met and danced with him at her sister's engagement feast. And the request for her scarf was undoubtably the latest salvo in his campaign to lure her into his bed. But even though the gesture might be sullied by ulterior motives—and it came from someone she could not imagine being involved with romantically—the idea of it still made her knees a little weak.

She'd been living at the castle for only a matter of months, and already it seemed that she'd caught the eye of one of its most exalted residents—a prince, no less, and the one who was second-in-line to the throne! She'd never imagined that her world could change so completely. That she would go from being the second daughter of a candlemaker, living in a tiny stone cottage with her family of eleven, to being the Chief Lady-in-Waiting (and the sister) of a princess and living in a large and well-furnished castle! Never had she imagined that she'd trade the drudgery of doing her siblings' laundry and emptying pots of night soil for the romance of being courted by royalty.

Although, to be quite honest, Plié would hardly describe what Laird was doing as *courting* her. He was, most certainly, pursuing her. He paid her a great deal of attention, and the request for her scarf had specific implications under Royal Court Rules of Engagement. However, Laird had a reputation. And while many people had reputations, those reputations preceded them quietly down silent hallways and slipped into rooms unnoticed and whispered to those paying close attention. Laird's reputation, on the other hand, ran down the hallway shouting, kicking open doors, and exposing itself to the startled audience. His reputation put him squarely in the realm of men who did not seriously *court* women. His was the realm of men who toyed with the affections of women... along with whatever intimate body parts they could entice those women to uncover.

He is a rogue and a rake, Plié reminded herself firmly, which puts him decidedly off limits. And he is a prince! Princes do not court ladies-in-waiting. They bed ladies-in-waiting until a duchess or princess becomes available. No, he is a rogue and a rake and a prince... with two distressing—devilish, even—dimples. She sighed.

Well, alright. She *did* find him terribly attractive. And it wasn't just his physical qualities. He was fun to be around, and they seemed to have much in common—dancing, horseback riding, and their mutual affection for the royal couple, Tagert and Aria. And he was clearly interested in her, which always made a man more appealing. But Plié knew she would never allow him to have his way with her. That path led to certain heartbreak.

She put her thoughts aside as she watched the two men at the tilt. When the flag fell, they spurred their horses into a run—her sea-green scarf fluttering poetically, a splash of color against Laird's silver armor. The horses flashed towards one another at a terrible pace. Both lances broke. As the pieces of the lances fell away, Laird sailed backwards off of his horse and landed on his back in the dirt.

The crowd let out a collective gasp, and Plié surged to her feet. *Surely he's alright*, she thought as she watched, clutching the fabric of her gown with a fist and waiting for him to get up. But he didn't.

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