

The Healer

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

THE HEALER

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*Naples, 1541*

It is the middle of the night, and someone knocks at the door of the physician Don Antonio Marizzi. It is Brother Matteo, a monk sent by the abbess of the illustrious convent of San Francesco delle Monache to ask the physician and his young assistant Betta for assistance. A nun is gravely ill, and the abbess wants Don Antonio to inspect her.

But when Don Antonio and Betta examine Suor Anna, they find her symptoms baffling and are unable to make a diagnosis. Speaking with the abbess, the physician discovers that Suor Anna is the daughter of Porzia, the noblewoman who broke his heart when he was young.

As his memories of Porzia resurface, Don Antonio, who was already fighting depression after a recent scandal that almost destroyed his career, becomes even more despondent.

Meanwhile, young Betta is determined to find out what illness afflicts the nun, and what therapy can be employed to cure her.

Set in the splendid capital of the Kingdom of Naples at intersection between Renaissance and Counter-Reformation, *The Healer* is a gripping tale of love and fear, forgiveness and regret that will transport the reader to one of the most turbulent periods in Italian and European history.

## CHAPTER ONE

Naples 1542

On a cold December night, under the ill omen of Mars opposed to Don Antonio Marizzi's natal Saturn, a cloaked shape shuffled into the physician's bed chamber, its silhouette trembling in the flickering light of the candle it carried in its right hand.

Don Antonio slept an uneasy sleep in a small room furnished with only the bare minimum: a wooden bed, a square table covered with the remains of a late dinner, and next to it, an old stool hidden under a heap of dirty garments. His bed was pushed against the window, his bulky silhouette barely visible in the dim moonlight. If not for his snoring, a peculiar pattern of a long whistle followed by a rumbling noise interspersed with soft, incoherent mumbling, he could have been mistaken for a heap of blankets.

The intruder stopped and raised his candle, casting a grotesque shadow against the whitewashed wall. "Don Antonio!" he whispered. Don Antonio shifted in his bed, his snoring disrupted. The shape shuffled closer, bent over the physician and whispered again, this time as loud as a whisper can be. "Don Antonio!" The sound slithered its way into the physician's ear, while the reek of half-digested onions reached the physician's nostrils. Still asleep, he turned his face to the other side.

“Don Antonio! Wake up!” the voice urged, becoming louder and louder. “Don Antonio!”

Don Antonio jerked up, his heart pounding wildly. Had the devil finally come for him? Only inches from his face, a shriveled shape shifted eerily in the quivering light of the candle. A ghoul, Don Antonio thought, come straight from Hell. Frantically, he groped for the spectacles he’d left in the wall niche near his bed. His bulky fingers searched the smooth surface of the stone slab, clumsily pushing the spectacles off the shelf. They hit the floor with a clinking sound. He panicked at the thought of breaking them. He’d be lost.

The fiendish shape next to his bed put down the candle and stooped to retrieve the spectacles before handing them to Don Antonio. As soon as the physician placed them on his bulbous nose, the ghoul’s features rearranged themselves into the countenance of Pasquale, Don Antonio’s old servant.

Don Antonio felt blood rush to his face. “What in God’s name do you mean to do, you ass, jerking me from sleep like that in the middle of the night? If you intended to cause my sudden death, you almost succeeded!”

Pasquale stepped back, alarmed. “I beg forgiveness, Don Antonio. Brother Matteo is at the door.”

“Brother Matteo?”

“Yes. He asks to see you at once.”

“What is his business?”

Pasquale shrugged. “He did not say, but it seems quite urgent.”

Don Antonio removed his spectacles and rubbed his face with both hands, then peered out the window into the deep darkness that engulfed the house. Dawn was still hours away. He stood up and donned the robe Pasquale offered. “Why don’t you fetch a hot stone from the kitchen and go back to bed,” he added, turning his back to his servant. “It’s freezing out here.”

Pasquale’s face broke into a toothless smile. “Thank you.”

Don Antonio’s gaze followed the bent shape of Pasquale as he quit the room. He should not have yelled at him. Seeking relief at the expense of innocent people was a cowardly thing to do. Keeping his temper in check had become harder and harder lately. Even more worrisome than the ghouls visiting him every night, however, was Don Antonio's increasing desire for death. To meet his Creator at last; to face judgment, instead of always living in fear of His punishment. How easy to become enamored of one’s own death. And yet how sinful.

Dying is easy; living with one’s sins is much harder. Besides, he couldn’t die until he had made sure Betta was taken care of.

He shook his head. He’d always been prone to melancholy, and aging was known to aggravate any excess of black bile. He would take motherwort syrup to counteract such evil tendencies.

He shivered as a chilly gust coming from the vestibule hit him, bringing with it the dampness of the night. As he approached the open door, the heavy shape of Brother Matteo shifted from foot to foot, his cheeks ruddier than usual.

“For God’s sake and with all respect, Brother Matteo, why in Heaven’s name don’t you walk in and close the door behind you? It’s freezing out there, and we already have enough mice in here as it is without inviting more in.” Don Antonio pulled the monk in and closed the door. “What brought you to my humble house at this early hour?”

The monk stepped in, seemingly unfazed by Don Antonio’s gruffness. He fixed his watery eyes on the physician’s. “The abbess entreats you to come to the convent of San Francesco without delay.”

“What can I do for the abbess?”

Brother Matteo hesitated a second. “She would rather tell you herself,” he said. “All I can tell you is that it concerns Suor Anna.”

Don Antonio arched his eyebrows. “Suor Anna?”

“Aye.”

Don Antonio's thoughts went to a young nun who had entered the convent as a young girl and had recently taken her vows, along with several other girls.

“All right then. Let me collect my things.”

“The abbess asks that you to bring your assistant along.”

“Betta? She’s asleep.”

Brother Matteo gave him a funny look. Don Antonio knew what the monk thought: a servant’s sleep wasn’t something people went out of their way to protect. But Betta worked hard, and she was still so young. She deserved all the sleep she could get, which was never enough. Besides, her place was in the house, not out and about, visiting patients. Assisting Don Antonio with the preparation of ointments or helping in the

convent's herbal garden was fine, but examining the ill was another matter altogether. She would have to find a suitable husband in due time, and learning to inspect the bodies of strangers was not among the skills asked of a dutiful wife.

“I'm sorry, Don Antonio, but I have to insist,” Brother Matteo said, sensing the physician's reluctance. “The abbess explicitly asks for both of you to come to the convent. She would not be pleased if the girl were absent.”

An angry retort sprang to Don Antonio's lips – he was not one of the abbess's subjects! – but he caught his tongue just in time. The abbess was a powerful patron, and after the scandal, any possibility of bringing food to the table trumped everything else. Displeasing her was not an option. He quit the room and went to rouse the girl.

Betta slept in a tiny room tucked away next to the kitchen. The girl's cot occupied almost the whole chamber. She lay in the middle of the straw mattress, chest down, her scrawny frame sprawled out. Strands of her long dark hair were pasted to her left cheek, and the coarse blanket was bunched up and tangled around her limbs. She must have had a restless night, but she seemed peaceful now. The curve of her lips was soft, and her face was serene, almost luminous. Her jaw, usually tense, was relaxed. To wake her up now seemed like an act of cruelty.

Don Antonio coughed. No reaction.

He coughed again, louder.

Betta shifted and let out a deep sigh, then changed position, and her breathing eased back into a soft, barely audible sound.

“Don Antonio?” Brother Matteo called from the vestibule, his voice tinged with impatience.

Don Antonio moved closer to the cot. “Well, lass, it’s time to get up!” he blurted out. “Get ready, the abbess is waiting for us.” He pulled at the blanket.

In an instinctive gesture of resistance, eyes still closed, Betta grabbed the blanket with both hands, showing surprising strength for someone who, just a moment ago, was sound asleep. Her quick reaction catching him by surprise, Don Antonio lost his grip on the blanket, and the girl drew it over her head, but a few seconds later she drowsily peeked from under it, her hair a messy halo around her head.

“The abbess is waiting for us?” She asked. “Why? Wh-what time is it?”

“It’s time to go to the convent of San Francesco. We have been summoned.”

“We?”

“Yes, we.”

“I have been summoned too?”

“Yes. Apparently, someone in the convent is ill. Seriously ill, I assume.”

Betta kicked the blanket aside and sat up, trembling with excitement. “I have been summoned by the abbess to visit a patient?”

“I have, but the abbess wants you there too.”

Betta jumped out of her cot suddenly wide awake. “Will I get to inspect her?”

“Yes, but don’t get too excited,” he said. “I just couldn’t refuse the abbess. She’s probably more comfortable with you looking at the nun, in case we need to do a full body inspection. Now get ready. I will wait for you in the vestibule.”

The thrill of anticipation danced in her dark eyes. “I won’t take long!”

“Very well.”

Life will dampen her enthusiasm soon enough, Don Antonio thought gloomily as he left the room.

He went back to join Brother Matteo in the vestibule, and a moment later Betta appeared, clothed in her shapeless woolen cloak. Don Antonio wished he had taken the time to buy her proper clothes. He would have to take care of that if she was to marry a suitable man.

“Don Antonio, we should take your fleam case. You might need it to bleed the nun. And we shouldn’t forget your folded almanac!”

But she stopped in her tracks as soon as she saw Brother Matteo. Brother Matteo, from his part, looked at her as if she had sprung from an old bestiary.

Don Antonio could see why. She was a strange wisp of a girl, dark-skinned, with a thick mane of usually unkempt, long hair and piercing eyes in a child’s face. She looked eleven or twelve at most, but she must have been at least fourteen, as she already had her first menses.

Being stared at like that, Betta forgot her shyness. She pressed her lips together the way she did before uttering an insolent remark. But Don Antonio intervened before she could say any unpleasantness. “We better hurry,” he said, heading for the kitchen. “We need to take care of Suor Anna, don’t we?”

The reminder served its purpose. The two stopped looking at each other and followed Don Antonio into the kitchen. They lit their torches at the hearth, then stepped into the cold night, each immersed in their own thoughts, wrapped in a heavy silence as sticky as a spider's web. In the chilly air of the night, the full moon glimmered through the overcast sky. Shreds of fog lingered in the muddy streets, clinging to the night like disembodied souls unwilling to part from their loved ones. A squealing rat scurried away at their passing, brushing the feet of two ragged wrecks who slept on the palace steps nearby. For a moment, the rank smell of cheap wine covered that of waste and urine.

The dull thud of the men's heavy steps and the lighter tread of the girl's feet reverberated faintly against the massive buildings that lined the narrow alley. Don Antonio's heart felt heavy. This is not how he had imagined Betta's first steps into the wide world.

## CHAPTER TWO

Suor Aurelia, the abbess, wrung her hands, her face a mask of worry. How long until Don Antonio arrived? She glanced at the burly nun who dozed on a stool next to a heavy door that had been fitted with a grilled window. For a moment, a slight twinge of envy rose in her chest, overcoming every other feeling. She could not remember the last time when she slept peacefully.

These were difficult times for Christianity, and suspicion reigned supreme even within the folds of Mother Church. The abbess hoped and prayed for the convent's sake – and of course for Suor Anna's and her family's – that Don Antonio and his assistant would be able to quickly restore the nun's health and reassure the abbess regarding the nature of her affliction. The last thing she wanted was to attract the attention of the Inquisitor's agents.

Many things had changed since Paul III ascended to the papal throne, and not for the better. Ever since the new Pope founded the Holy Office of the Inquisition to annihilate heresy, every convent in Italy had come under intense scrutiny, and even the slightest deviation from the norm was met with suspicion. Well known for the religious discussions taking place on its premises, San Francesco delle Monache was already followed very closely by the zealous guardians of the orthodoxy, and the abbess didn't wish to add more fodder to their suspicions.

The knock at the door shook her from her gloomy thoughts. The guardian nun gave a start and stood up from her stool. She adjusted her habit around her fleshy hips, flattened the folds of fabric, and opened the shutter that covered the grille. Cold air wafted in as she pressed her plump face to the grate.

“Who’s there? State your business!”

“The physician is here,” Brother Matteo answered, “with his assistant.”

Suor Aurelia motioned for the nun to open the door to allow the three brown shapes, stiff with cold, to enter the convent’s atrium. As the abbess approached Don Antonio, Brother Matteo and Betta went to warm their limbs at the brazier next to the guardian nun’s stool.

“Don Antonio! How good of you to come so quickly.”

“Good morning to you, Reverend Mother. How can I be of help?”

The abbess had last seen him three or four weeks before, and yet he looked older than she remembered: his skin appeared grayer, the bags under his eyes darker. But the same could be probably said of her. At our advanced age, she thought, time picks up speed.

“It is Suor Anna,” she said. “She is gravely ill. She has been ill for two days, vomiting and complaining about a burning stomach, sore mouth and loose bowels, but tonight it has become much worse. She drifts in and out of consciousness. From the way she screams when she’s conscious, you would think Lucifer himself gnawed at her guts. We fear for her life.”

“What did the apothecary give her?”

“Peppermint and fennel, to no avail.”

“Take me to her.”

“This way. She’s in her cell.”

“In her cell? Why not in the infirmary?”

“She insisted we leave her there, and we didn’t press the issue. We didn’t want to displease her – or her family.” All choir nuns and the abbess herself came from illustrious noble families who wielded considerable power in the Kingdom of Naples.

Suor Aurelia turned to look at Don Antonio’s young assistant, who had left her place near the brazier to listen in on what the abbess required. As if in response to her gaze, Betta turned around, and the abbess’s thin lips hinted a smile. “Please follow me,” she entreated.

Suor Anna’s cell was richly furnished and quite luminous. The walls hung with fine tapestries and paintings depicting St. Francis, Mary with her Child, but also beautiful women dressed in the ancient Roman fashion. A magnificent Persian carpet – a triumph of finely woven golden, red and black threads – covered the tiled floor. On a skillfully carved wooden sideboard stood a crystal vase, a porcelain plate with round, cream-colored sweets, and a small marble statue of the Virgin, while in a neat stack on an ebony writing desk a diurnal, a Bible, and three leather-bound volumes testified to Suor Anna’s literary pursuits.

Hearing Betta softly gasp at this lavish display of riches, Don Antonio realized that she had never visited a choir nun’s cell before. Usually, ill nuns would be in the

infirmary. Coming from the most illustrious families, choir nuns saw no reason to give up the beauty and comfort they were accustomed to since they were born once they entered the convent. They were waited on by *converse*, lower station nuns who came from less affluent families and did not take final vows.

Awed by the richness of her surroundings, Betta retreated into a corner and waited for the moment when Don Antonio might need her.

The physician walked to the bed where Suor Anna lay motionless.

Without her veil, the nun looked the girl she was. Life had scarcely marked her smooth face, but her pale skin presented a yellowish tinge and brown spots dotted her forehead and cheeks. Her cropped chestnut hair lay on the pillow unkempt and soaked with sweat. Her breath came in labored rasps, and her unfocused eyes roamed the cell.

Next to Suor Anna's bed, an old nun nodded a brief greeting while passing the beads of her wooden rosary through her fingers. "She's been screaming all night," she thundered in the booming voice of the hard of hearing.

In her daze, Suor Anna didn't seem to mind. She was apparently too exhausted to do anything but press her wooden crucifix to her chest. Don Antonio touched her forehead and cheeks. They felt cold and clammy. He bent to listen to her heartbeat, but all he could detect through her habit was the faint flutter of a sparrow's wings, weak and rapid. As a man, he was not allowed to remove her clothes.

"I'd think this is the result of excess phlegm production, if it weren't for the burning in her intestines," he murmured, shaking his head.

“That’s what I thought too,” Suor Aurelia said. She gazed at the nun sitting next to Suor Anna, who seemed to have dozed off in her chair. “The apothecary insisted I wrap her up in blankets and give her wine to dry up her humors,” the abbess whispered, “but I wasn’t convinced this was the right treatment.”

Don Antonio gave the abbess a questioning look. Why hadn’t they called him sooner?

As if to answer his unspoken question, Suor Aurelia added: “I thought it was just a case of indigestion. Some of our sisters have been ill, but they recovered quickly, and I hoped Suor Anna would do the same.”

Reading regret in her eyes, Don Antonio tried to control his frustration. He closed his eyes and asked God to lend him wisdom. He took Suor Anna’s hand and clasped it into his own to sense the strength of her life flow. Her hand was slender and bony, with long, tapered fingers. He held it on the palm of his left hand and observed it: the thin blue lines of her veins, the yellow tinge of her skin. It felt so light on his hand, like an autumn leaf, but he could feel life still pulsating in it.

He ran his fingers over her knuckles and the back of her hand. Her palm felt clammy, but the skin stretching from her fingers to her wrist was parched and wrinkled, like that of an old woman – a sign of dehydration. He stooped over the young nun and smelled her breath. It reeked of garlic. This was not a simple case of indigestion.

“What did she eat for supper?”

“Why, nothing. She didn’t want to eat, and we didn’t force her, knowing that anything she took went right through her.”

“I need to look at the urine.”

Suor Aurelia pointed to a small glass flask standing on the tiled floor, next to the nightstand. It contained a small amount of murky liquid. Betta, who stood right next to the nightstand, picked it up and handed it to Don Antonio, who held it against the candlelight. He didn't like its crimson tinge nor its opacity. He searched his leather bag for his urine color chart, realizing almost immediately that he had forgotten it. Without his chart it would be difficult to make a diagnosis – if only the monk hadn't hurried him.

He made a mental note to bring it next time, then proceeded to taste the turbid liquid. Its bitter aftertaste alarmed him. It was time to have Betta inspect the nun's body.

He gestured for Betta to come closer. He bent over her ear and lowered his voice.

“Have you ever looked at your body in the mirror?” he asked.

Betta flushed violently, and her eyes rushed to the abbess to see if she had heard the question. If the abbess had heard, she didn't show. She looked back at the girl, but her eyes were expressionless, like a quiet sea concealing murky depths.

Betta turned to Don Antonio. “I have... is that bad?”

“It is not, Betta. I want you to know your body, because I need you to be familiar with the human body. You might have to help me in the future, if we want to keep bringing bread to the table. God knows this is hardly what I wished for you, but I've been shown time and again that what we want is of little consequence.”

Don Antonio sensed Betta's relief, as if she had expanded slightly within her own body, taking up more space. Ignoring his own discomfort, he continued: “I want you to remember what you saw in the mirror when you looked at yourself, and I want you to

notice any difference beside those to be expected: she is fair, you are of darker complexion; she might have wider hips, while your body isn't that of a grown woman yet: it's still changing. In many ways you are still a child."

He wondered if Betta could hear the strain in his voice. He didn't want her to grow up. Not too fast. But our will, he reminded himself, is as important as the dirt gathering in the corners of our kitchens.

Betta remained still for a moment, and Don Antonio couldn't tell if she was pondering the weight of the task placed on her shoulders, or if she was trying to recollect the body she'd seen in the mirror, which was changing so fast that it must look foreign to her every time she saw its reflection. Or perhaps she was just preparing herself for what lay ahead, tapping into some hidden resources he knew she had, but did she know?

This was an important day for her, a day she had waited for eagerly, and Don Antonio knew that she wanted to make sure her excitement would not cloud her judgment.

She looked at him, a question lingering on her face.

Don Antonio nodded his assent: *you can do it*, his eyes said. He then exchanged a glance with the abbess, and both stepped out of the cell.

"Has she done this before?" Suor Aurelia asked as soon as they were out of Betta's hearing.

"Many times," he lied.

He looked at the cloister garth, divided into four quadrants by two intersecting walkways. The recent cold temperatures had thinned out the grass, which had lost the

lush green color of the previous month and was now interspersed with drab patches of bare soil; however, here and there small white and purple wildflowers peeked out from among the dry blades of grass. Don Antonio turned his gaze to the well placed at the intersection of the walkways, symbol of Jesus, the Source of Living Water, and he felt a soothing peace descend upon him. *Thy will be done, my Lord.*

A chilly gust of wind swept through the pillared corridor of the cloister. He wrapped his cape tighter around himself and turned his attention inward, to the still, quiet place where God dwelt; the place where all healing came from. He recited a brief prayer, begging the Holy Spirit to assist Betta in her inspection. He would have sat on the stone bench outside the cell, but he feared that the abbess might interpret this as an invitation to join him. He needed some time alone with his thoughts.

“Would you like to join me in my study while you wait for Betta?” The abbess offered. “That way we won’t be exposed to the weather”. She had already started to walk, eager to escape the icy wind.

Don Antonio did not follow her. “You are very kind,” he said, “but I prefer to wait here. Please do not feel obliged to keep me company. It’s cold, and there is no need for both of us to wait here. I prefer to stay here in case Betta needs me.”

“Of course. Please come to my study when your inspection is completed.”

“Very well,” the physician answered, waiting for the abbess to leave before sitting on the stone bench outside the cell.

As the muffled sound of Suor Aurelia’s steps faded out, quiet descended on the cloister, bathed in the milky light of the full moon. Based on the position of the stars, Don

Antonio reckoned that night had almost run its course: dawn would break soon, and the church bell would ring, summoning the nuns to choir to chant their Prime.

He closed his eyes and slowly inhabited the silence, feeling his anxiety gradually dissolving. Even in the most difficult times of his life, silence had never failed to soothe him, and he had learned to listen to its wisdom. He quieted his mind and let his soul drink at the Eternal Source.

He sat still for a while, then took a deep breath and thought about the girl. Suor Anna had entered San Francesco delle Monache as a boarding girl of five or six to be raised in the convent by her aunt, an old nun who, despite her sternness, had loved her niece dearly. Old Suor Ludovica's death the previous year had been particularly hard on the young woman, and Don Antonio had watched with preoccupation as she turned from a rose-cheeked, cheerful adolescent to an alarmingly thin, sad-eyed woman within a few weeks. But the abbess had reassured him that taking the solemn vows would restore her spiritual and physical well-being. And so it had. A few weeks after consecrating herself to Christ, her face had taken on a healthier tone and the gloomy shadow in her eyes had disappeared.

Don Antonio sighed. It took a woman to understand another woman, he thought. He realized that he was glad to have Betta as his assistant. In time, he hoped, she would help him decipher the baffling universe of the female soul, so that he could be a better physician for his female patients.

Betta emerged from the cell with a frown.

“Did you smell her breath?” he asked.

“I did. Garlic. I saw her stool too, watery and bloody.” She sunk onto the stone bench next to him and wrapped her cloak tight around her thin frame. She looked so young.

“Watery and bloody? Perhaps an excess of blood and phlegm. A phlebotomy might help.” But he didn't sound convincing, not even to his own ears. Too many conflicting symptoms.

He felt old, tired, and powerless. Long gone were the days when he stood strong and proud, and felt invincible; when he thought that God in His grace had disclosed some of His secrets to him. Those were the years when he taught at the Studio Generale, Naples University, and people with money and status flocked to his house for well-paid advice. A long time ago indeed.

“Her whole body is yellowy,” Betta said.

“Yes, but her urine is not sweet. This is not the sugar illness. I need to consult my books,” he said.

“I don't want her to die, Don Antonio. What should we do?”

He gave her a tired look. “Betta, there is something I want you to always remember. A healer is a vessel of God's power. We'll do our best, but we don't have the power to know nor change God's plan, and given our limited wisdom, it is a good thing that we don't. A very good thing.”

She stretched her legs and lowered her gaze, pretending a sudden interest in the potted crassula standing next to the bench, but he had seen the proud twinkle in her eyes. He worried about the safety of her soul. She was too rebellious for her own good.

He tried again. "I'm serious, Betta. In the greater scheme of God's plan, bodily health is of little consequence. The salvation of our immortal soul is all that matters, and only our heavenly Father knows when it's a good time for us to leave this world and follow Him to our true destiny. If she is meant to die, she will." His voice softened. "But I understand your concerns, and I know you mean well."

"But if we tried and succeeded, wouldn't that mean that God wished to heal her? What is the risk in trying?" she asked, brushing a tousled strand of hair from her face.

"Of course. We'll do everything we can and, God willing, she'll recover."

He could almost hear the wheels in her head spinning. Her eagerness stirred conflicting feelings in him: tenderness, and yet again, the regret that she was not blood of his blood. He doubted he'd ever felt so eager, even as a youth. "What do you have in mind?"

"Her skin is cold, but that could be her body's reaction to the burning in her gut." She articulated her words carefully, as she always did when she wished to impress him. She must have read his books when he was not paying attention. Her amber cheeks had taken a pink tinge, and she moved her hands slowly, accompanying her words with broad, graceful gestures. "I think we should treat this as a hot and moist disease. If we mix the juice of verbena leaves with vinegar—" She was trembling now, whether with excitement or with cold, he couldn't tell.

"Verbena?"

"Yes. Isn't verbena cold and dry according to Galen?"

He gazed at her. She was learning fast. A mix of pride and sadness stirred in his heart.

“It is indeed,” he said. “We'll ask the convent apothecary to make a concoction and administer it to Suor Anna. But don't set your hopes too high,” he added, seeing her glow with pride at her cleverness. “Come, let's talk to the apothecary. And let us hope for the best.”

As they walked along the corridor, a gray shape materialized at the end of the colonnade. Don Antonio recognized the dignified gait of the abbess; she seemed to glide instead of walk. The abbess kept her hands under her scapular – the only sign that she was not impervious to the chilly drafts sweeping through the ambulatory.

“My dear Don Antonio,” she said as she approached them. She pulled her right hand from under the scapular and rested it on his shoulder. Her eyes looked intently into his, as if she hoped to find there the answer she was looking for. After a moment the intensity in her gaze relented and she sighed. “What do you think of Suor Anna's state?”

Don Antonio pressed his lips together. “What perplexes me most is the mixture of cold and heat. However, as Betta pointed out, the burning in her gut preceded the cooling of her body; therefore, it might be sensible to treat it as a hot and moist disease.”

The abbess raised her eyebrows and several ripples formed on her forehead. “Despite how cold she feels to the touch?” She turned toward the middle of the cloister, her gaze unfocused. “Yet you might be right.” She looked at the girl, who shifted her weight in order to be partially covered by the physician's frame. She didn't like to be the recipient of the abbess's attention.

“A concoction of lemon verbena won't harm her for sure,” Don Antonio mused. “And it might relieve her of some of her symptoms. I will leave instructions on how to brew and administer it. But I don't expect it to be enough; more serious measures will be necessary.”

“I will have the apothecary informed at once. Won't you stay until Suor Anna has taken the concoction? I would appreciate it.”

“There isn't much else I can do at this point. I have a few matters to attend to, and I need to consult my books. That will help Suor Anna more than having me sitting around.”

“But what if her condition worsens? If her body reacts badly to the concoction? What am I to do then?” Suor Aurelia's knobbed fingers clutched the rosary hanging from her belt.

“You don't need to worry about the concoction. It will not make things worse for sure. However, I suspect this to be more than a simple case of hot and moist disease. Some of the symptoms are unusual, and I need to find out what our venerable masters of old say about them. Only then, God willing, will I be in a position to offer real help.”

“But maybe...” the abbess turned to Betta. “Will you agree to leave your assistant with us until you come back? She'll know what to do in case of a crisis.”

Don Antonio saw Betta's eager eyes. The abbess might overestimate Betta's skills, but he saw no harm in leaving her there.

“She can stay, if she desires to do so,” he said.

Suor Aurelia turned to Betta.

“I will be happy to help,” the girl said with an awkward curtsy.

The abbess sighed, visibly relieved. “Thank you. We will be anxiously awaiting your return, Don Antonio. May the Virgin Mary guide your eyes and mind.”

“Amen,” Don Antonio answered.

The abbess put her hand on his arm. “There is something I need to ask of you before you leave,” she said, looking him straight in the eye.

He bowed his head slightly. “I am your servant.”

She dismissed his words with a wave of her hand. “Don Antonio, please, let’s do away with formalities. You know very well that you are not my servant, especially not outside of these walls, and I can’t prevent you from doing anything you set your mind to do. I’m asking for a favor, not imparting an order.”

“I will do my best to comply, milady,” he answered.

“Suor Anna comes from a very important family, the Carafa di Ruvo. Sadly, her father died recently, and I wish to spare Donna Porzia and her younger daughter any unwanted attention after their painful loss. Therefore I kindly ask you to keep Suor Anna’s conditions to yourself until we find out what is ailing her.”

But Don Antonio had ceased listening. His body was still there, but his mind had left, taking him back to a time when life was filled with promises and Porzia d’Aquino, a young girl with fiery hair and shy green eyes, was not married to Count Carafa di Ruvo.

“I love you,” she used to whisper in his ear when they met, unbeknownst to her parents. She smelled of jasmine, and her warm breath on his ear sent shivers down his spine. “I love you,” he would reply, drowning in her presence, pressing his lips to her

white neck, feeling like he had never felt before. And he didn't care that the joy he felt in his chest might kill him. He didn't care about anything but her.

So, Count Carafa di Ruvo had died. The man Porzia had left him for had died.

He was not sure how he felt about it. He repeated the words in his mind over and over again, struggling to imagine the man he had hated with unbearable intensity dead on his chair, in his carriage, on the staircase of his palace, but his mind was blank.

Then, suddenly, grief exploded inside his body, unstoppable, uncontainable. His eyes filled with tears and his shoulders sagged under the crushing weight of the past.

“Don Antonio?”

He realized that the abbess was waiting for an answer. “Can I count on you?” If she had noticed his distress, she didn't show.

It took him all the strength he could muster to reply. “Of course. You can rest assured of that,” he muttered, not really sure what he was assuring her of.

He bowed his head slightly and left.

### CHAPTER THREE

A Suor Aurelia's gaze followed the burly shape of the physician as he left the ambulatory. She seemed to be lost in the maze of her thoughts, but as soon as Don Antonio disappeared, the corners of Suor Aurelia's lips stretched in what Betta assumed was a smile.

“Come to the kitchen, my girl. I'm sure you are hungry. A cup of hot broth will warm your limbs and fill your stomach. And you'll enjoy our barley bread.”

The abbess made the gesture to place her hand on the girl's forearm, but Betta moved slightly to the side. She didn't like to be touched by strangers, and certainly not by the abbess. However, Suor Aurelia's offer was most welcome. Only now, at the prospect of having something warm in her belly, did Betta realize how hungry she was. She hadn't eaten anything since the night before, and she hoped she could rest a bit near the hearth. After the commotion of the night, she was tired and cold.

The main kitchen was located next to the refectory on the opposite side to the church. One day, when she had accompanied Don Antonio on an errand to another convent, he had told her that this was the norm in every convent: the place designed to feed the flesh was usually as far as possible from the sacred space devoted to the spiritual meal, so as not to offend our heavenly Father. She remembered being puzzled by his

explanation. At times, Betta had wondered about the God church people worshipped; but now she no longer cared. She had long stopped trying to understand church logic.

As soon as she entered the kitchen, Betta felt her cold limbs tingle in the warmth of the large hall. She inhaled the savory scent of stew simmering on the fire, all too aware that it was not meant for her. It smelled delicious – juicy and rich. Underneath the familiar odors of beef and onions, Betta detected the aromatic scents of marjoram and thyme, and the tangy fragrance of exotic spices that she could not place – no doubt expensive imports from faraway lands. She sighed, trying not to look too famished.

The kitchen bustled with activity: servants clothed in secular garb worked alongside sisters wearing their gray work aprons. They were all performing various tasks under the close supervision of an older nun. The hum of lively chatter was punctuated by the rhythmic sounds of chopping and kneading as the women cut carrots, celery and onions, diced cheese, sliced cabbage, and worked large balls of dough on the long wooden table that occupied a large portion of the room.

At the cold draft brought in by the two visitors, the sisters stopped chatting and raised their heads to see who had come.

The abbess lifted her hand. “Pray do not let us disturb you.” She smiled. “It is in the interest of us all that you don't interrupt your preparations. I urge you to return to your work and to pray for our sick, in particular for our Suor Anna, who as you know is afflicted with a most painful disease of the stomach.”

At the mention of Suor Anna's name, whispers coursed through the kitchen. Betta wondered if the abbess didn't notice or only pretended not to.

The choir nun in charge of the kitchen came to meet the abbess. “Dear Reverend Mother, how can I be of help?”

“Good morning, Suor Giuditta.” The abbess turned to Betta. “Our excellent Suor Giuditta makes sure that everything runs smoothly in here. A crucial task she performs masterfully.”

Suor Giuditta thin lips stretched in a self-pleased smile, while Betta hinted at a curtsy. “I am very pleased to meet you,” Betta said, wondering if that was the appropriate lie for such a circumstance.

“Suor Giuditta, this is Don Antonio's assistant. She is here to look after our Suor Anna while her master is absent.”

“How very generous of Don Antonio to leave his assistant with us while he is engaged in more pressing matters,” the nun said, scanning Betta from head to toe with her close-set eyes.

“It is indeed. We are very fortunate to count Don Antonio among our friends. And now, if you don't mind, would you be so kind as to arrange for one of your helpers to give our guest a cup of hot broth and a slice of bread? The girl is cold and hungry.”

“Of course.” Suor Giuditta turned to Betta. “You can warm yourself at the fireplace while I ready your broth.”

Betta bowed her head. “Thank you.”

The abbess smiled. “Very well. I'm glad to see you taken care of, my dear. I will see you later on today.”

The abbess took her leave from Suor Giuditta and Betta, and walked out of the kitchen. Betta's eyes followed her until she disappeared behind the closing door.

Surrounded by a flurry of activity, Betta felt as though she had turned invisible. She sat on a bench near the hearth, next to a small girl who was pounding a heavy pestle into a large stone mortar. The crisp scent of ground herbs pinched Betta's nostrils.

The girl stopped her pounding and pushed her sooty hair from her face to stare at Betta. Now that she had stopped pounding with her pestle, the fragrance of herbs subsided, replaced by the rank smell coming from the girl. She must have not washed in months. She was six or maybe seven years of age, slender, with a smeared face and an oversize soiled apron.

Betta smiled at her. "Hello there. What is your name?"

The question seemed to startle the child, who bent back on her mortar and resumed her toil with renewed energy.

"Don't mind her. That girl is as spiteful as a wild cat."

Betta looked up and met a pair of eyes just as black as her own. A young servant with a dark complexion and a full head of tight black curls held a bowl of steaming broth wrapped in a hemp cloth.

"Don't touch it; it's hot," she warned as she placed it on the bench. "Her name is Angiola, and never has a name been less appropriate, if you ask me." She cast a sideway look in Angiola's direction. "That child is no angel. She can be devious as a demon. She steals into every corner of this convent to pry into other people's secrets."

Betta's ears perked up. "Secrets? What secrets do nuns have?"

“Why, none of course,” the servant rushed to say. “But apparently this scoundrel here sees wickedness in everyone. Otherwise she wouldn't peer into everybody's business.”

Betta looked at the girl's unkempt head, bent on her work. Her thin frame shook with exertion as she pounded the heavy pestle.

“Thank you for the broth,” Betta told the servant. She blew into the bowl to cool its content, hoping that the servant would leave soon.

“You don't believe me, do you? No matter.”

The woman tilted her chin defiantly, and Betta noticed the dimple in its middle, which she found odd in her angular face. The only other person Betta knew who had a dimple in her chin was Donna Amalia, who sometimes helped in Don Antonio's kitchen and was very sweet. Betta found it puzzling that this woman had a dimple too, because she was definitely not sweet.

“You are not going to stay here for long,” the servant continued. “My mistress will be well soon.”

“Your mistress?” Betta's ears perked up. “Are you Suor Anna's maid?”

“I am.”

“I hope too that she will be better soon. We gave her a verbena concoction, but I need to see her again. Would you please take me to her once I've finished my broth? I won't take long.”

Defiance flashed in the servant's black eyes. "Why should I? You are not a physician. I can take care of my mistress better than you. She wouldn't want anyone to probe and poke her body; certainly not an unknown wench."

Betta had not expected such a violent reaction. She had tried her very best to be courteous, something that did not always come naturally to her, and felt humiliated and hurt. Harsh words formed on the tip of her tongue, but she held them back. "I'm sure you want the very best for your mistress, and my master and I mean well. We would appreciate any help you can give us in curing her."

Betta felt very pleased with her dignified phrasing, but the servant gave her a malevolent glare. "I might talk to your master when he's here, but I see no point in talking to you. In the meantime, I hope you'll enjoy your broth and the generosity of our convent." And with that, she strode away.

"Don't take offense," said a plump nun passing her by. "Zelda hasn't been herself since her mistress's illness." She stopped and patted Betta's shoulder. "Truth to be told, she's never been the friendliest person..." A couple of converse nuns near-by had stopped their toil to hear what she had to say. "...but I have to go now," the plum nun added and scurried away.

*Not the friendliest person? That Zelda is a shrew,* Betta thought, recovering from the shock. She turned to the girl next to her, who had stopped pounding and was looking at Betta's broth with famished eyes. "No wonder Zelda doesn't like you, Angiola. I doubt she likes anyone." She filled her spoon with broth and offered it to the girl. "Would you like some?"

The girl's eyes lit up in her grimy face. She puckered her lips and slurped up the content of the spoon, but jerked back yelping almost immediately, spewing out the hot liquid. She threw Betta an accusing look.

“Oh Angiola, I'm so sorry! I thought you had heard that the broth was hot. You should have blown on it first. Here, take a bite of my bread. It will soothe your poor mouth.”

Angiola ignored Betta's offer and turned her back on her, pounding into her mortar more vigorously than ever. She seemed determined to make a poultice out of those herbs.

So much for trying to be kind, Betta thought. She gave up on her attempts to make friends and settled instead on eating and observing the whirlwind of activity around her. Several women worked around the table while others walked back and forth carrying steaming pans, tranches of meat, and baskets of vegetables. A scrawny maid washed dishes in a stone tank supplied with running water. Betta had heard that some of the noblest palaces in Naples were equipped with running water, but she had never seen it with her own eyes. At Don Antonio's house, they had to fetch the water from the well in the courtyard every time they needed it, and here it flew directly into the tank at the turn of a lever. They must be rich indeed, these nuns, she thought.

Her impression was confirmed by another wondrous contraption that lined the wall on her left: a stove long enough to accommodate several pots at the same time, each heated by a separate fire. At the moment, four fires were in use, with the pots being occasionally stirred by two converse sisters, but there would have been space for two

more. With so many mouths to feed it made sense, Betta conceded, to have an efficient kitchen. A kitchen in a private house was a different matter.

Even more amazing that those inventions, however, was the orderly manner in which the women conducted their business. What had seemed to Betta at first sheer chaos and confusion revealed itself to be a highly organized form of cooperation. Such smooth efficiency was clearly the result of years of practice and discipline under the authority of a strict hierarchy.

Oblivious as she had been to the differences in the nuns' habits, Betta realized now that while all sisters were clothed in gray and had a white wimple, the abbess and the kitchen supervisor wore a black veil instead of the gray one worn by the converse sisters. Apparently, the black veil marked the superior status of the choir nuns.

Betta mopped up the last drops of her broth with the remaining bread. Her hunger had been sated, and it was time to look at Suor Anna again. She stood up and walked out the kitchen, feeling the piercing gaze of the dark-skinned servant, Zelda, boring holes in her back from the other side of the table.

A whiff of rancid breath hit Betta's nostrils as soon as she set foot outside the kitchen. "Suor Anna's disease is God's punishment for her sins! Woe unto her and unto anyone to attempts to spare her from God's wrath!"

Only inches away from Betta a decrepit nun spat her words with such force that drops of saliva hit Betta's face. Her milky white eyes devoid of irises rolled aimlessly in their sockets, and she brandished a cane almost as gnarled as herself.

“The harlot you and your master are trying to save deserves to die!” she bellowed in the young girl's ears, swinging her cane. Betta jumped back just in time to avoid being struck.

The uncanny feeling that the woman could see her despite her apparent blindness sent shivers down Betta's spine. She looked around. A couple of yards away, two converse sisters regarded the scene with uneasiness, but they didn't seem inclined to intervene.

The door to the kitchen opened, and Suor Giuditta stepped out. “Come now, Suor Lucia. You shouldn't become so agitated.” She placed her hands on the old nun's shoulders, but the woman didn't relent.

“Dark times indeed are those in which the very souls who are supposed to uphold the tenets of human virtue drag their feet in mud! It won't be long until the whole city festers like a great suppurating wound!”

Suor Giuditta patted the old nun's shoulder. “Let Betta be. She's just following her master's orders. She is a servant, and she is here to do what her masters has told her to do.”

“A servant? A slave she is, to the Evil One! Heathen, isn't she? Isn't she one of those infidel moors, with dark skins and dark souls, poisoning this house of God with her baleful presence? Trying to scuttle God's plans!” The nun's raucous voice became strident, then turned into a joyless laughter that shook her shoulders and twisted her prune-like face. “As if God allowed heathens to thwart His plans!” Her laughter suddenly turned into cough, as though she were choking on her own spit.

Betta was shaken. If the old nun was blind, how did she know about Betta's darker skin? Why had she called her heathen?

“Here, here, Suor Lucia.” Suor Giuditta patted the old nun's back and motioned for young nun close-by to bring some water. Obviously, this wasn't the first time that Suor Lucia's animated tirades had turned into a fit of cough. “Suor Lorenza in the kitchen is reading an obscure passage from the Book of Revelation, and we'd like to hear your opinion on it.”

Her cough finally ceasing, Suor Lucia turned around, her cloudy eyes fixed on some invisible point in the distance, the tip of her cane resting on the floor. “The Book of Revelation? Obscure and terrible, like God's wrath. Capable of instilling terror in the stoutest souls.”

“Aye. As the oldest sister in our convent, would you please help us elucidate God's message?”

The old nun seemed to hesitate.

“Please,” Suor Giuditta entreated.

For a moment, the old nun seemed caught in an internal debate, but then her features rearranged into a look of confusion. Gone was the rage, replaced by bafflement. She looked around, as if not sure of where she was.

Suor Giuditta emitted a sigh of relief. She hooked her arm under Suor Lucia's arm and ushered her into the kitchen.

The old nun had barely disappeared in the kitchen when the first golden sunrays spilled over the cloister, bathing the pillars in a warm glow and dissipating the last tendrils of night mist.

“Poor girl, she must have shocked you!” said one of the two converse nuns, approaching Betta. Her eyes shone large and blue in her wimpled face, innocent like those of a newborn baby. “Please don't pay attention to Suor Lucia. She's a little...”

“...disturbed,” concluded her freckled companion, and both snickered. They weren't much older than Betta.

“She sees sin and corruption everywhere.”

“But don't let her ruin your day. We are grateful that you are here to take care of Suor Anna.”

“We are. But now, dear sister, we should go, shouldn't we? We're late,” said the first sister, widening her blue eyes in concern.

“Oh yes, we are,” echoed the freckled nun. “We are so very late. So much laundry to do. Piles of laundry. Hills and hills of laundry. Mountains of laundry. Have a good day, and may God bless you.”

The two nuns turned into the staircase and vanished.

Betta's thoughts went back to the old nun's outburst. Suor Lucia's behavior was surely the result of dementia. Old age must have dried up her brain just as it had shriveled her body.

The bell rang for Prime. Soon, everybody would go to the church for the first daily office. It was a good time to visit Suor Anna, Betta thought.

She was about to head to the nun's cell when she sensed a presence. She spun around just in time to see the glimpse of sackcloth fabric disappear behind a pillar. A small wooden clog still peeked from the pillar's base. Angiola. Betta smiled and pretended not to have seen her. Angiola must have known that she had been found out, however, because she emerged from her hideout and joined Betta. They took a couple of steps in silence, then Angiola slid her hand in Betta's. Betta squeezed it lightly. Angiola's hand was small and the skin of her palm was rough, hardened by her work in the kitchen.

When they arrived at Suor Anna's cell, Betta turned to face Angiola.

"I'm sorry, Angiola, but I have to visit Suor Anna, who is very ill. I can't take you in with me."

Angiola looked up briefly, as if trying to decipher Betta's words, then sprinted off. Betta followed her with her eyes until she disappeared behind the gate leading to the garden where the nuns grew herbs and simples – lavender, fennel, chamomile, and other medicinal plants used for medical purposes. She drew a deep breath and walked into the nun's cell.

Betta's eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness of the room. Pausing on the threshold, Betta waited until she could make out the contours of the cell: the chest of drawers in the entrance, the gracefully designed wooden table on the left, and finally, a little farther away, Suor Anna's bed. The nun lay motionless under an intricate blanket made of a shimmering fabric. It must have been brocade, Betta thought. She had never seen brocade, but she knew that it was a very expensive fabric, and Suor Anna's blanket

looked very expensive. The nun was not alone; next to her, holding her mistress's hand, sat Zelda. She had her back turned to Betta and her shoulders were trembling softly. Betta felt compassion for the bent figure who seemed so much smaller, sitting next to her ill mistress. Maybe Zelda didn't have any family – nobody except for Suor Anna, who was deadly ill.

Wishing to comfort Zelda, but bracing herself for another attack, Betta slowly approached her. Zelda was now rocking back and forth on her chair. Her silent weeping had turned into a soft wailing.

Betta resisted the impulse to put her hand on Zelda's shoulder, fearing that such a gesture wouldn't be welcome. "Zelda," she whispered, not wanting to startle her.

Zelda looked up and gave Betta a look so desperate that the younger girl felt dizzy.

"Zelda, I swear to you, may God be my witness," Betta said, "that my master and I will do everything we can to save her." But Zelda showed no reaction. She kept looking at Betta as if she didn't understand what she was saying.

Betta moved to the other side of the bed and touched Suor Anna's forehead. She expected it to be cold, just as it had been earlier, but it was hot. Betta was not sure what it meant, but she knew that the temperature had to be brought down.

"Zelda, could you please bring me a cloth and a basin filled with cold water?" she asked the servant. "Your mistress is very hot to the touch. We need to cool her down."

Zelda stood up to fetch the items Betta asked for, but her demeanor suggested that she was quickly losing hope.

Betta sat next to the nun, waiting for Zelda to come back. She looked at Suor Anna – at her delicate features, at the pale freckles dotting her fair skin. Her cheeks were flushed, and her forehead glistened with sweat. Betta lightly dabbed her face and smoothed away the damp hair plastered to her temples and forehead. She felt a surge of affection for this young woman not much older than herself, who was unconscious, helpless, ill, and fighting for her life. She felt a strange sense of kinship with her. In a different time, in a different place, she could have been the sister she never had.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Don Antonio took the long way home, walking south toward the harbor, then turning east in the direction of the market square. The sun had not risen yet, but the light of dawn had already started to dispel the nightly darkness. The area around the market bustled with activity: from the surrounding farms and fields, a steady stream of people poured into the city to sell their wares. The voices of men and women mingled with the lowing of cows and the grunting of pigs. Women carried fish-baskets on their heads, peasants tramped next to their donkey-drawn carts, milk-women plodded along with their clinking cans.

Campo del Moricino, the market square, was very large and irregular in shape. According to the law, the market was to be held here only twice a week, but Don Antonio could not remember a single day when the vast expanse hadn't been filled with farmers and fishmongers, peddlers and quacks, peasants, fortune tellers, and haberdashers, all loudly touting their wares, while the noise of animals herded into the square and the squeals of children running around added to the general din.

When he was a young boy, Campo del Moricino was home, more than the gloomy place he shared with his mother, located in one of the dark alleys that led to the square. He spent most of his time in the Campo with other boys who, like him, preferred the street to their shabby homes.

Don Antonio meandered among vegetable crates and baskets filled with fish, almost slipping on a pat of manure to dodge a startled goose that appeared out of nowhere.

“Careful, sir,” someone said behind him. He turned around and saw a tiny woman selling balls of fried dough out of a large bowl. “You don’t want to soil your expensive clothes,” she added, smiling mischievously. The deep wrinkles forming at the corner of her eyes told Don Antonio that the woman was older than he had first thought.

“Here,” she said, “have a fritter. And watch your step!”

He wasn’t in the mood to eat, but he didn’t want to offend her. He took the fried dough she offered and produced a coin from his pocket.

“Thank you. One is enough,” he added when she motioned to put more fritters in a bag. “Keep the coin.”

A big smile appeared on her lips, and the wrinkles around her eyes deepened.

“May the Virgin Mary protect you and all your descendants to the tenth generation!”

Don Antonio thanked her for her good wishes, not deeming it necessary to tell her that there weren’t any descendants, that his bloodline would end with him. He looked around, eager to find something that would take his mind off the thought.

Some of the stands were quite opulent: next to their donkey-drawn cart, a farmer and his wife were surrounded by a bounty of fruits and vegetables – carrots, onions, cabbage, apples, pears, nuts, and even sweet oranges, those perfectly round fruits from

faraway lands. The couple also sold eggs, milk and cheese, and their stand bustled with activity, attracting many customers, mainly maidservants from wealthy households.

Some merchants, however, had much less to sell. A young woman kept busy making wicker baskets that nobody bought; an old man sat patiently behind a meager offering of cabbage and parsnips.

The physician could sense the hopes and fears coursing through the crowd that was swirling around him; even after all those years, he was still much more in tune with their worries and dreams than with the aspirations and concerns of his wealthy patrons.

He looked around and felt the quiet desperation of the poorest among them, those who had seen their hopes shattered, their children dying of hunger and hardship. He had been one of them. He was still one of them, despite his training as a physician and the wealthy people he consorted with.

Campo del Moricino pulsed like a living being, and its heartbeat was Don Antonio's heartbeat. He was born here, among this people for whom every day was a struggle.

How could he have ever believed that Porzia would choose to share her life with him – beautiful Porzia with golden curls and porcelain skin, who belonged in a different world, a gilded paradise where hunger and poverty were unknown?

The street urchins running around in the square conjured the image of a scrawny boy being sent out on futile errands when a grown man, his father, came to visit his mother...

## CHAPTER FIVE

Naples 1510

“Caterì, this boy has to learn a job,” Vincenzo the apothecary told Caterina the seamstress, handing her his hat and his coat.

“Yes, Vincenzo,” she answered, cleaning her hands on her apron and pinning a strand of her dark hair back in place. She took his hat and coat and put them in the other room, then scurried to put away her embroidery. Vincenzo didn’t like to see things lying around when he came to visit Caterina.

Vincenzo sat down on the only cushioned armchair and stroked his goatee pensively. He glanced at Antonio, called Tonino, who was eleven years old but on the small side for his age. The boy was sitting at the table and eating soup.

Tonino kept his eyes fixed on the bowl in front of him, feigning great interest in the onion rings swimming in his broth. The last time his father brought up the subject, the boy was ten, and his mother convinced Vincenzo that they could wait until their son was a little older before they apprenticed him.

“He could be apprenticed to Master Giovanni, the carpenter...” Vincenzo said.  
“Would you like that, child? I could talk to Master Giovanni. He owes me a favor, and

I'm sure something could be arranged. After all, he doesn't have any sons – only daughters. That poor man! No sons to help him in the shop. Can you imagine?"

Tonino kept his mouth shut and tried to make himself inconspicuous. Vincenzo turned to Caterina. "Three girls! And they all need a dowry!"

"Oh, would you really do that, Vincenzo? That would be wonderful!"

Tonino looked at his mother. He hadn't expected her enthusiastic reaction, given how much he helped her in the house and with her work. Did she really want to get rid of him? The adoring expression with which she looked at Vincenzo made it even worse. She was so submissive when he was around.

Vincenzo leaned forward on his chair and gave the boy a long, careful look. "What do you think, boy?"

Tonino didn't think that would be wonderful. "I don't know," he said, keeping his eyes on his bowl. He mopped up the remains of the onion with a piece of bread, then grabbed the bowl with both hands and slurped it clean.

"Tonino! What do you mean you don't know?" His mother intervened. "Your father here is worrying about you. He wants to take care of you, and he wants you to learn a respectable job. Besides," she lowered her voice, "I have lost some customers, and we could use another income." Tonino looked at Vincenzo, who was examining his fingernails and pretended not to hear the last sentence.

Tonino sighed. Being a carpenter would be a respectable job, but he didn't want to be a carpenter. He wanted to be an apothecary, just like his father.

“I am not sure Master Giovanni would find me suitable,” the boy said. “He is probably looking for someone stronger than me.”

“Stand up,” Vincenzo demanded, then examined him carefully. “You might be right,” he conceded, looking at Tonino’s thin arms and long, skinny legs. “You are scrawny like a plucked chicken.”

Tonino didn’t care that his arms were thin and his legs skinny. He ran the fastest among his friends, and he was the only one of the bunch who could read. But when he saw the contemptuous expression on his father’s face he would gladly have given it all up for a pair of muscular arms.

He sat down, defeated, even though he should have been happy that he had won: he would not be apprenticed at the carpenter’s workshop after all. He looked at his bony legs, crossed under the table. They were not the legs of a laborer, but they were good legs; at any rate, good enough for an apothecary. Being an apothecary didn’t require physical strength. An apothecary didn’t have to be strong: he had to be observant, and had to be able to read the book of nature and the tomes written by the ancient masters. He had to know the movement of the stars and hope that God the Almighty would lend him part of His wisdom to alleviate the pain of the ill. But he didn’t have to be strong.

Every time Vincenzo came, Tonino asked him questions about ointments, electuaries and medical waters, but his father didn’t like to engage in that sort of conversation. “What’s the use of all these questions?” he would ask. “Here, go buy some tripe. Your mother works hard, and we don’t want her to become too skinny, do we,

son?” Vincenzo would look appreciatively at Caterina’s hips, making her blush, then reach into his pocket and give him a couple of coins.

And with that, little Antonio would be dismissed, forgotten even by his mother, who was completely absorbed in the task of making Vincenzo comfortable.

Tonino knew that his father’s shop would go to his younger son, Attico, who was ugly and stupid, and totally unfit to do anything but cling to his mommy’s skirts. Tonino didn’t understand why Attico should inherit the shop when he, Tonino, was Vincenzo’s firstborn, and clearly much more capable than that spoiled brat.

His pain was compounded by Caterina’s passive acceptance of the situation. As far as he knew, she had never put in a word for him. She never did or said anything that could annoy Vincenzo, Tonino thought bitterly.

“We are lucky, Tonino,” his mother always said when they were alone. “Your father is a good man. He could have forgotten us once he started his own family, but he did not. He still comes by. He brings us food and money – and medicines when we need them.”

*Yes, Tonino would think, and when that ugly wench Rosina he married meets you on the streets she sneers at you with her servants, and laughs when her snotty son spits on us. And Vincenzo knows it, and still doesn’t do anything to make them stop. A fine man indeed.*

But he would never utter a word because he knew that his mother’s heart had been broken the day Vincenzo married Donna Rosina. He didn’t say anything but despised them both. It pained him to despise his mother, because he loved her too, and

his heart had been broken too when hers had. His father was a different matter. Tonino enjoyed despising him, in a dark and bitter way that soothed the wound in his own heart, nourishing it at the same time.

He hadn't always felt that way. At first, when he was a small child, he looked up to his father and couldn't wait for him to visit them. His father was an important man, the owner of the well-known Apothecary of Santa Rita, and his customers were powerful and rich. Tonino knew that, because Vincenzo liked to talk about his important patrons and the wondrous remedies he prepared for them.

As a small child, Tonino was glad to run errands for his father: it made him feel important in Vincenzo's eyes. "Tonino, bring this ointment to Palazzo Cusano," Vincenzo would say, and the boy would comply, eager to please the older man. "Bring this message to Bernardo the butcher," and Tonino would grab the scribbled note and dart to the butchery. "Go help at the duke's stables and tell the servants I'll visit their mistress in a little while," and off he was. Often, his mother would chime in, asking the boy to deliver embroidered chemises and delicate tablecloths to the wealthy patrons of the palaces he was asked to visit. "Have these delivered to the head servant, but please be careful," she would say anxiously. "Do not give them to anyone else, and do not let them fall on the street!" When she said that, a frown appeared on her pretty face.

"Of course not, Mother," he would rush to reassure her. She worked day and night to feed them both, and he didn't want to make her life harder than it was.

For a while, Tonino was happy to do as he was told, but as he grew older, he no longer appreciated being sent away. It hurt him to realize that his father was not keen on

spending time with him, and he didn't like leaving his father and mother alone. He tried very hard not to think about what might be going on during his absence, but it was difficult, with all his friends making jokes and obscene gestures whenever he left his home to go on an errand.

He started resisting being sent away: he was thirsty, and couldn't leave without a drink of water; he was cold, and had to fetch a vest; he was hot, and had to take off his shirt; he would suddenly get a violent bellyache, and had to lie down on his cot. Only then, when all excuses had been exhausted, would he leave, dragging his feet and vowing that he would always cherish the children God would give him, and would never send them away. And whatever job they would want to learn, he would let them.

At first, his wish to be an apothecary might have been a passing fancy, due to his desire to emulate his father. But it put down roots and grew strong the day Vincenzo sent him to the monks to fetch some remedies.

"Go to Brother Tommaso in the monastery of San Domenico," Vincenzo had said. "Tell him that Vincenzo the apothecary sends you. I need juniper and willow bark – Brother Tommaso knows how much of each I need."

Tonino did not want to go, but in the end he had to. He walked listlessly from his hut, feeling sorry for himself and mad at everyone else. His friends in Campo del Moricino called after him, asking him to join them, but he didn't even answer, just pressed on, ignoring their calls and, when he didn't reply, their insults and laughter. He kicked at a stray dog on his path, and the dog growled and made ready to attack, but Tonino gave it such a nasty look that it changed its mind and went back to its spot with a

whimper. That pleased Tonino no end. Hating everyone and letting out his anger at anything that moved – a mangy cat who shrieked and bolted away when Tonino hit it with a pebble, a large rat which he killed with just one vicious shot – made him feel strong and powerful.

As soon as he reached Piazza San Domenico Maggiore, the impressive frame of the church appeared in front of him in all its splendor, its tall spires reaching toward the sky. He stopped to take it all in. He rarely came to this side of town, and he had forgotten how magnificent this house of God was. It was as if God Himself had appeared in His unbearable glory. Suddenly ashamed of his petty viciousness, Tonino quickly reached for the door of the apothecary and scurried inside.

A silent darkness engulfed him as soon as he walked in. After the loud din of the street, Tonino felt suddenly blind and deaf - a disembodied presence. But the smells in the apothecary overwhelmed him. Rosemary, and lavender and rose, yes definitely rose, the queen of flowers... mint, eucalyptus, oregano... many other scents he had never smelled before. He immersed himself in them, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Slowly, a large round room started to take shape. It was lined with wooden shelves, and in the middle of it stood a massive wooden desk.

A large shape leaned over the desk; this must be Brother Tommaso. Tonino had never seen anyone so large. God could have made two men with the same amount of flesh, and still have some left for a child or two. He could have made at least five Toninos, the boy thought as he silently crossed the tiled floor to reach the desk. The

shape didn't move. Tonino wondered if the monk was dead. That would be exciting! And his father couldn't get mad if he came back empty-handed.

He squinted to see if he could detect any movement, however slight – but no. Definitely dead. Maybe he had been dead for hours, or even days, Tonino thought, thrilled at the possibility. Tonino sniffed the air. He knew the fetid smell of death, but his senses were overpowered by the strong scents he was immersed in. He walked closer, until he realized that the monk's eyes were following his every movement! That was the most frightening thing that had ever happened to him.

“What can I do for you, young man?” a deep voice asked, and Tonino's heart skipped a beat. The monk was not dead after all. He was carefully looking at him. “You must be Vincenzo's son. You are the spitting image of your father.”

At that, Tonino instantly forgave the monk for being alive.

“I am,” he answered proudly, resuming his normal gait. “My father needs juniper and willow bark,” he said, looking around. “He gave me these coins. Are they enough to also get me a piece of licorice?”

“Yes, but you'll have help yourself. There is a ladder in that corner,” the monk said, taking the coins and directing his gaze to a small wooden ladder on the other side of the room. “The novice who was supposed to help me today never came.” He slowly turned around to point at the upper shelf behind him.

“There is juniper,” he said.

Tonino looked up and saw a beautifully decorated ceramic jar with *JUNIPER* written in elaborated letters. “You'll find a measuring spoon inside the jar. Three

spoonfuls should be enough. Willow bark is right next to it. Here, put them in these bags.”

Brother Tommaso opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out two cloth bags. He handed them to Tonino.

Tonino took the bags, then fetched the ladder and shoved it to the shelf on the other side of the room, ignoring the horrible screeching sound he made. He climbed higher and higher until he could reach the ceramic jars.

The vessels all stood next to each other like proud soldiers ready for battle, flaunting their richly decorated uniforms to impress their enemies. Tonino was glad he could read the writing on the jars and felt grateful to his mother who had sent him to the monks to learn his letters. Some remedies had common names – marjoram, fennel, cloves – but some he had never heard of, and he tried to memorize their names so that he could later ask his father: tragacanth, mandrake root, benzoar stones... there were too many to remember them all. He tried to imagine what powers they might have. Could they heal wounds? Cure leprosy? Revive the dead?

He had heard that some remedies could cure humoral imbalances. He thought about his mother’s melancholy tendencies. She was always so worried! Maybe one of these jars could make her smile and laugh again. But which one...?

“Have you fallen asleep up there, boy?” Brother Tommaso’s voice echoed in the silence of the room, shaking Tonino from his reverie.

“I’m almost finished,” he answered. He hurried to fill the first bag. As soon as he opened the jar, the resinous, slightly bitter scent of juniper hit his nostrils, wiping out all

other smells hanging in the air. He wondered what it was good for. Quickly, he filled the small bag in his hand and put the lid back on the jar before stretching to reach the ceramic vessel containing willow bark. As he extended his arm to grab the vessel, his glance fell on a label reading *CINNAMON*. What a strange name. Before realizing what he was doing, he opened the jar to find out what shape, color and fragrance something called *cinnamon* would have. Inside, 2 or 3 reddish sticks stood next to each other, emanating a very distinctive scent – sweet and musky, and a bit spicy. Tonino found it quite pleasant, and wondered if it would lift his mother’s spirits.

Brother Tommaso, however, was growing impatient. He heaved himself from his chair and shuffled his huge frame toward the ladder.

“Boy! Why are you taking so long?”

Tonino looked down, wondering if the monk was going to shake the ladder to make him fall like a ripe apple. “My name is not ‘boy’,” he said, feeling very brave for his cheeky reply, given his precarious position. “My name is Tonino.”

“Well, Tonino, you are making me nervous up there,” Brother Tommaso said, placing his big hand on the side rail of the ladder. He looked up. “Are you doing some mischief?”

“No, sir. I’m just smelling!”

“Smelling? Are you putting your snotty nose into those jars? Do you know how precious and expensive some of those remedies are?”

Then, unexpectedly, the monk’s deep voice turned into a rumbling laugh. If mountains could laugh, that’s how they would sound, Tonino thought.

“Well, Tonino, I should have known. You are an apothecary’s son after all. But you are not supposed to do that. Take your bark now and come down before you get me in trouble. You are not even supposed to be up there!”

“Yes sir,” Tonino answered, placing the lid back on the cinnamon jar. And what he meant was, *yes, I’m coming down*; and *yes, I am an apothecary’s son*; and *yes, I will be one myself*, which was not in reply to Brother Tommaso but rather to an inner conversation he was having with himself.

He opened the willow bark jar and inhaled the faint earthy smell. It wasn’t as strong as juniper’s and cinnamon’s, and he found that disappointing. He closed his eyes and inhaled again, slowly this time, letting the scent slowly travel through his nostrils until he could appreciate its delicate woody fragrance. He knew what this remedy was for: his father brought it one day when Tonino was ill, and his mother made an infusion with it and gave it to the boy to drink. It tasted awful, but it made Tonino feel better almost immediately. He bit into one of the pieces. Yuck, that was bitter! He spit the chewed bit into his hand, then coughed loudly to disguise the noise.

“Are you getting intoxicating, boy? Some smells are best left alone. Come down already!” Finally, having filled his bags, Tonino began his descent. As soon as he touched the floor, Brother Tommaso took the bags from his hands. “Let me weigh both.”

He weighed them and gave him a piece of licorice root. “Here,” he said. “Bring my greetings to your father.”

The boy was almost out the door when the monk added: “And come visit this old monk again before he dies of solitude and turns into stone!”

“Thank you, I will!” Tonino said and left, but not before he had sworn to God to follow his father’s footsteps, may the Virgin Mary be his witness.

Promises are easy to make, but hard to keep, and reality has an annoying way of intruding. Tonino kept his promise hidden in a secluded corner of his heart, and almost forgot about it. He resumed his everyday life and kept visiting Brother Tommaso, who taught him about the virtues of famous and not so famous remedies, and would even let him smell the herbs from time to time. However, as weeks and months went by, Tonino believed less and less that he would ever become an apothecary. Without his father’s support, his promise to God seemed nothing more than a child’s fancy.

For a while the topic of finding Tonino a job wasn’t raised again. The boy would always find ways to be useful and earn some money, and Vincenzo decided to wait till the boy had grown a bit stronger, as his slight build made it difficult to find him an employer. Tonino also noticed that since their last discussion, Caterina seemed more relaxed. She occasionally put little delicacies on his dinner plate: a peach, a sugary treat, or even a small piece of beef. He suspected that it had to do with Vincenzo, but that was something the boy didn’t care to dwell on.

One day, however, Vincenzo announced that he had good news. “I have talked about Tonino to Marsilio the printer,” he said walking in, handing his coat to Caterina.

“You have?” Caterina asked. “What was it about?”

Tonino, who was cutting cabbage for the soup, felt his father’s gaze on him but kept his eyes on the cabbage.

“Marsilio is looking for an apprentice, and I think Tonino would be perfect for the job. It wouldn’t be anything particularly strenuous,” he added, as if to deflect any objection before it was raised. After all, Tonino was still thin as a rail.

“Did you hear that, son?” his mother asked, putting her hand on Tonino’s shoulder. “I’m sure you will enjoy working in Master Marsilio’s workshop! Don’t you love books?”

“What do you say, son?” His father sat down in his chair looking self-pleased. “Master Marsilio wants to see you in his shop tomorrow. You are twelve now, it’s time you learned a trade.”

Master Marsilio was a nice man, but Tonino didn’t want to be a printer, no matter how much he liked Master Marsilio and books. Nor did he want to be a carpenter, a butcher or a blacksmith.

“I don’t want to be a printer,” he stated calmly, putting the shredded cabbage in a pot. The slap in the back of his head cut his breath short.

“What is wrong with you, child?” his mother asked. She looked angry and hurt. She never laid a finger on him, not even when he deserved it, and he was utterly shocked that she had now. The slap hadn’t been painful; the disappointment he read on her face was. But he couldn’t stop now. He looked his father straight in the eye.

“I want to be an apothecary, just like you.”

Vincenzo sat back in his chair and narrowed his eyes. “Caterì, is this your idea?” he asked, without taking his eyes from the boy.

“For the love of San Gennaro, Vincè! What do you think? This boy has a mind of his own, and it doesn’t always work properly!” She threw her hands up. “I give up. Holy Mother, sweet Mary, you put some sense into my son!”

Tonino sat still, flustered.

“To be an apothecary you have to attend the university,” his father explained slowly, looking at him, “and once you have obtained your degree you have to have enough money to open up a shop. How do you plan to do that?”

Tonino pressed his lips together and held his gaze, trying to ignore the ache in his heart. Attico would never have had to answer such a question.

It was at that moment that what he had always known deep inside became utterly clear. His father didn’t love him, and would never love him, no matter how hard he tried to please him. The realization welled inside him like a hot wave and spread all over his body. His cheeks caught fire and tears pricked his eyes. He sprang up and ran out the door. The next day he apprenticed himself to Master Marsilio.

Marsilio was a slender man about thirty years of age, with brown, wavy hair that fell to his shoulders. He had jovial manners and seemed enthusiastic about his job. His workshop consisted of a large room where six men were busy performing different tasks involved in the production of books.

“I’m glad to meet you,” Marsilio said with a warm smile when the boy came to his workshop. “Your father speaks very highly of you.”

Tonino blushed. His father must have sung his praises to make sure Marsilio would hire him.

“I’ve known him for many years now – a very fine man,” the master printer continued. “I’m happy to have his son work in my shop.”

“Thank you, Master Marsilio.” Tonino was surprised at the admiration transpiring from Marsilio’s words. “I’ll do my best not to disappoint you.”

“Of course you won’t!” Marsilio answered good-naturedly. He looked at him carefully. “Let’s see... how old are you?”

“I am twelve, sir.”

“Very well. A bit on the weak side, but we’ll make a man out of you, no worries! You will be our courier, but I also need you to support these fine young men who I am lucky to work with,” he said with a flourish aimed at his employees, but his words were lost in the creaking sound of the press. He went on, raising his voice: “These highly skilled men...” then stopped, realizing they were not paying attention, engrossed as they were in their tasks. “Gentlemen! May I introduce you to the divine Providence in the shape of young Tonino? He will make our lives easier starting from today!”

The men grumbled a brief greeting before resuming their toil. They seemed used to the exuberance of their employer.

Marsilio gently pushed Tonino around the large room and explained the different tasks and the tools used to perform them. He pointed to Paolo and Lorenzo, the composers, who stood in the back of the room. Paolo looked younger than his colleague – Antonio guessed he was in his late twenties – while Lorenzo seemed to be in his mid-

thirties. They worked facing each other but were separated by two inclined desks placed between them, one against the other. On each desk lay two wooden cases divided into several compartments. The two men picked the types one by one from the individual compartments and assembled them in lines in their composing sticks. Each stick could hold several lines of texts, Marsilio explained. Once they were full, the content was transferred into a tray, thus creating the forme, the mirror image of the page to be printed. Antonio saw that the two men frequently looked at a copy of the book they were reproducing. Theirs seemed a complicated job requiring an enormous amount of concentration.

Marsilio pointed to a wooden structure consisting of two posts and a crossbeam, with a large wooden screw inserted into the crossbeam. “This is our printing press.” His voice vibrated with pride. Attached to the end of the screw there was an iron sheet – “it’s called *platen*,” Marsilio said – which could be lowered onto the bed of the press by pulling a long-handled lever. The printer pointed to the printed sheets hung up to dry. “Without the pressure,” he said, “there wouldn’t be any printed books.”

Close to the printing press Filippo, the beater, was applying ink to a rectangular frame filled with metal types with the help of two ink balls. The rectangular frame was the forme, Marsilio told Tonino. It lay on the bottom portion of the press, which would later be rolled under the platen on a pair of rails. Hinged to it was what Marsilio called the tympan, a plate where the blank sheet was to be placed. Attached to the tympan, almost like its extension, was the frisket, a projecting frame with windows cut out, whose purpose was to protect the margins of the paper from excess ink. Once the ink had been

applied uniformly to the forme and the sheet had been placed on the tympan, the frisket was lowered onto the paper, leaving out only the portions to be printed, and both tympan and frisket were folded over the bed of the press. This was rolled under the platen, at which point the lever was pulled and the sheet was squeezed against the inked type.

“What do you say, boy?” asked Marsilio. “Isn’t it a wondrous invention?”

Antonio thought it was the most ingenious thing he had ever seen.

At first the boy acted mainly as a courier – he delivered messages, took orders, submitted requests, and ran any kind of errands Marsilio entrusted him with. When he was not running around on behalf of the workshop, he swept the floor, cleaned the tools, wiped the forms, and kept the storage room tidy. He tried to be as helpful as he could, and quickly became virtually indispensable. Soon enough, he was charged with making sure they never ran out of supplies and paper, and he was even allowed to use the ink balls one day to apply ink to the forme when Filippo was ill to his stomach and had to go home early.

He tried his hand at anything he could – he worked the lever, cast new type, dampened the paper to prepare it for printing, and was very thrilled when Paolo, with Marsilio’s consent, let him assemble an entire line of letters on his composing stick.

Tonino was excited to be part of a team whose mission was to create books. There was much more to books than he would have ever suspected. They were a door to a new universe waiting to be explored; he realized that he didn’t need to ride a horse or board a

ship to visit unknown lands: he only needed a book. And the lucky reader who knew Latin or Greek could even converse with the old masters and learn their secrets.

He had always loved books, because they were beautiful and pleasant to smell and to touch, and because he saw them only on very rare occasions; working in Marsilio's printing shop, he also learned that some of them were dangerous, and capable of instilling terror in kings and princes, cardinals and bishops. Being found with the wrong book in your hands could send you straight to the gallows.

Tonino developed a new respect for books, and a little fear. They had the power to heal or poison the soul, just like medicines could heal or poison the body.

After Tonino started working in Marsilio's workshop, life resumed his course almost as before, or so it seemed. He was soon earning his keep and contributing to his mother's household, and Marsilio came to depend more and more on his skills. In turn, when Marsilio noticed the veneration with which Antonio treated medical tomes and herbals written in Latin and Greek, and how painful it was for him not to be able to read them, he took it upon himself to teach Antonio some Latin, earning his ever-lasting gratitude.

Antonio's excitement at slowly unlocking those venerable texts was however dampened when he realized that Latin was useless with Dioscorides' pharmacopoeia, the most important herbal ever written. It was a massive book consisting of five tomes, beautiful illustrated with detailed depictions of herbs and plants. The first time Antonio saw it was in Brother Tommaso's apothecary, and later he found it also in Marsilio's

storage room. Dioscorides' work was written in Greek and had never been translated into Latin.

His disappointment, however, was mitigated by his excitement at being able to access – although only partially, due to his still rudimentary Latin skills – two important treatises on herbal remedies he also found in Marsilio's shop: the *Liber de Simplici Medicina*, which Brother Tommaso called *Circa Instans* from the first sentence of the first chapter, and the *Tractatus de Herbis*.

Brother Tommaso was very familiar with the *Circa Instans*. When he told Antonio that he used it to issue his recommendations and to prepare his remedies, the boy decided to intensify his study of Latin in order to be able to make sense of the wondrous descriptions he found in the *Circa Instans*.

Antonio started to copy the descriptions which impressed him the most, or those he wanted to show Brother Tommaso to see if the remedies they referred to could be found in his apothecary, in the hope that the monk would agree to show them to Antonio. He copied them onto any scrap of paper that Marsilio discarded – which weren't many, since paper was too expensive to discard lightly. They were mostly flawed sheets that Marsilio couldn't use for his books, or pages that had to be thrown away because a mistake had slipped in them during composition.

The boy stayed long hours after his work was finished, thankful that Marsilio let him use his ink and quills to copy the words describing a useful remedy and the accompanying image at the back of the book, if there was one. He could not afford to buy a copy of the treatise or even a proper notebook, but he didn't care: those hours bent over

the treatise were a valuable exercise in Latin and an effective way to learn about the healing powers of nature.

“Aloe calide et sicce complexionis est in secundo gradu,” he read and copied one day, mentally translating the text from Latin: *aloe is hot and dry in the second degree*. The text continued to explain the virtues of aloe, which “purges choler and phlegm and melancholy.” Antonio had no idea what aloe was, but it seemed it could be something for his mother, who was becoming increasingly worried and withdrawn. “It calms the nerves, and alleviates dropsy and constipation; and mixed with rosewater, it is good for clearing the vision.” He looked at the back of the book to see if there was any depiction of the plant in question, but couldn’t find any.

“What is aloe, Brother Tommaso?” he asked the old monk at his next visit to the monks’ apothecary. It felt wonderful to have someone like Brother Tommaso to talk with about herbs and remedies.

“Why are you asking?”

“Because it seems to have so many virtues... It purges choler and phlegm and melancholy, and it calms the nerves. It can heal burns and different ailments of the skin, and can also be ingested to counter melancholic states.”

“Is this little Tonino speaking, or is it old Matthaeus Platearius talking through your mouth?” The monk studied him through narrowed eyes. “Except that you are no longer little Tonino, are you? You are young man.” He sat back on his chair and clasped his hands on his huge belly. “Well, almost,” he added with a warm smile.

The boy shifted his weight from one foot to the other, pleased that the monk had noticed that he had grown. “Master Marsilio calls me Antonio...”

He failed to add that everyone else did too, except his mother, who insisted on calling him Tonino. That didn’t bother him, though; on the contrary. To his mother, he would always be Tonino, and he liked it that way.

“I think aloe would be good for my mother,” he added, “but I don’t even know what it looks like. There are no pictures of aloe in the *Circa Instans*.” He couldn’t conceal his disappointment.

“Well, Antonio, since Platearius neglected to insert a depiction of aloe in his book, let’s see if we can find one in another herbal.” The monk rose from his chair and headed to the low cabinets located under the shelves on the opposite side of the room. Walking across the room in his cumbersome gait seemed to exhaust him, and he had to pause every three or four steps. Upon reaching the cabinet, he stopped to catch his breath. “Here,” he said, pulling a gilded key from his pocket, “open the cabinet for me, would you?”

Antonio, who had stayed behind, moved closer to take the key and unlock the cabinet door.

“Very well, boy. Let’s see...” The monk took the spectacles hanging from his neck and put them on his nose. He placed his right hand on the open cabinet door to steady himself, then leaned forward to inspect the books.

“Hum... no. Maybe this? No, not enough illustrations. Maybe the *Hortus Sanitatis*? But where is it? Holy Savior... Why is it that, when you look for something, it's never there? Actually, there should be something even better...”

As he thumbed through the books, his mumblings became less and less clear, until he finally erupted in “Here it is! This is what I was looking for!” He turned to look at Antonio, showing him a medium-sized volume.

“Please note that this is the Latin *Herbarius*, not the German one published in Mainz,” he announced, “much better quality!”

But Antonio was unimpressed. He was not interested in subtleties; he wanted to find out what aloe looked like, and where one could find it.

Together they sat, the large monk and the lanky boy, forehead to forehead, and browsed through the colorful illustrations until they found aloe. Antonio learned that it was a succulent plant, bright green with thick, spiny, tapered leaves filled with a viscous juice. It looked quite plain, he thought, for a plant powerful enough to heal burns and ailments of the skin, and that could be ingested to counter melancholic states.

“Where does it grow?” He asked the monk.

“In many places. For example, in our monastery's herbal garden,” the old monk answered with a twinkle in his eyes. “And yes.”

“Yes to what?”

“Yes, I will give you some next time you come. Now it's too late, the garden is closed. Wasn't that your next question?”

“No. That was going to be my second question.”

The monk arched his eyebrows in a baffled expression.

“My first question was going to be ‘can I borrow this book?’”

The monk exploded in good-natured laughter. “You are a cheeky boy! But I like your determination. You can borrow it if you promise to bring it back next week in the same exact state as it is now.”

“You have my word.”

“Very well. Take it!”

As he walked out of the apothecary with the book firmly in his hand, the boy repressed a self-pleased smile. He had made Brother Tommaso laugh with his witty remarks. The monk was not the only one who was full of surprises.

The following week was extremely busy, because Antonio wanted to copy as much as possible from the *Herbarius* before he had to take it back to the apothecary. Since he worked long hours at Marsilio’s workshop, that had to be done at night by candlelight. Drawing from both the *Circa instans* and the *Herbarius*, making the best of the few scraps at his disposal, he decided to create his own herbal. It would consist of loose sheets, each dedicated to one plant, with a picture and a description of the plant’s healing properties. Since he couldn’t afford dyes and pigments, his pictures were black and white, but what they missed in color he made up in accuracy, at times even improving on the *Herbarius* after his observations in Brother Tommaso’s apothecary. In the course of a week he had produced a dozen beautiful cards, which he kept in a wooden crate next to his cot and looked at proudly before falling asleep.

Count D'Aquino was a stocky man in his late thirties, with short, dark, curly hair and a trimmed beard and mustache. He was the only heir to an illustrious family dating back to the Lombard duke Radoald, who lived in the 7th century, well before Charlemagne was even born, as the Count was fond of recounting. Although that was a truly impressive pedigree that never failed to inspire awe in his interlocutors, it only ranked second in the list of merits Master Marsilio ascribed him, the first being that Count D'Aquino was his most generous patron.

The Count's literary interests ran the gamut, from hunting treatises to Virgil, from chivalric literature to Ptolemy's astrological tomes, with daring incursions into controversial texts like Erasmus's Praise of Folly and Pico's Oration on the Dignity of Man (the Count was rumored to have heretical sympathies).

He usually came in person to Marsilio's workshop when he wished to order a book or look at Marsilio's stock. He enjoyed chatting with Marsilio and other patrons, and hearing about the latest literary novelties from Venice; he was also keen to find out what Marsilio's press was working on and for whom. He was a genial man with an acute sense of humor not rarely directed at himself, but behind his relaxed manners was a shrewd mind with well-developed political intuition and ambitions.

Antonio, who was well on his way to becoming Marsilio's right hand, liked Count D'Aquino from the first time he saw him in the shop: he appreciated his open mind, his apparent lack of arrogance, his sharp intellect – and the feeling seemed to be reciprocated. When one of the Count's books was ready, Antonio would volunteer to

bring the loose sheets to Palazzo D'Aquino, unless the agreement with Marsilio included the binding, in which case the book would go to one of the bookbinders who worked with Marsilio.

When Antonio ran errands to Palazzo D'Aquino, it was not infrequent that the Count himself would ask the boy to come up to his apartments. If Antonio delivered a book, the Count would often ask the boy suggestions about the cover: should it be decorated? How about the lettering on the cover? What color would Antonio suggest? And before the boy left, he always sent him to the kitchen to collect marzipan sweets to bring back to Marsilio's workshop.

And so it came that one day, when Antonio had just been admitted into the palace, a girl came running to the door to see who it was. She was the loveliest girl Antonio had ever seen, so fair that she looked unreal, as if she had just stepped out of one of those enchanting Florentine paintings that had started to grace the most beautiful churches of Naples. Her golden hair was gathered up on the top of her head, leaving only a few loose curls to frame the perfect oval of her face. Her blue eyes shone with intelligence and curiosity. She must have been a couple of years younger than Antonio, who had just turned 16.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Porzia! Come back!" A voice called from another room. "We are not finished yet!"

"What's your name?" she repeated. The only sign that she had heard the voice from the inner rooms was the little crease that appeared on her forehead.

Antonio's mouth was dry as sand, but he managed to answer: "My name is Antonio. Antonio Marizzi."

She came forward with her hand outstretched. "Nice to make your acquaintance, Antonio Marizzi. My name is Porzia D'Aquino, and I live here."

Antonio had no idea what he was supposed to do with her hand, nor if he was expected to bow. In his embarrassment, he briefly grabbed the tip of her fingers and hinted at a bow.

A middle-aged woman came into the vestibule. "Porzia, please come back and finish your Latin assignment," she said, her voice sharp with annoyance. Porzia must not have been an easy pupil.

"Well, Antonio Marizzi, I have to go," the girl said, her voice tinged with regret. "I wish you a pleasant day." She was even lovelier when she smiled.

"Thank you, milady. A good day to you too," he replied, feeling a puzzling mixture of relief and disappointment at seeing her leave with her instructor. It was extremely hard to talk to her while keeping his composure, but when she left Antonio worried that he might never see her again.

He had noticed that Porzia hadn't wanted to leave. Was it because she liked talking to him, or because she didn't want to study Latin? His mind suggested the latter, but his heart decided to believe the former.

## CHAPTER SIX

Naples 1541

Betta was still sitting next to Suor Anna when Don Antonio came back to the convent. She and Zelda had managed to bring down Suor Anna's temperature with cold compresses, and the nun was now asleep, apparently faring better. Zelda and Betta, tired but relieved, were both slouching on their chairs. Despite their best efforts, they had nodded off to sleep.

Don Antonio's arrival startled them awake.

"What are you two doing? Weren't you supposed to take care of Suor Anna?"

"We did!" Betta replied, stung by the implicit remark. "Look for yourself."

Don Antonio decided to ignore Betta's somewhat insolent tone. He touched the nun's forehead, relieved to discover that she felt normal – no longer cold and clammy, nor hot, as Betta said she had been.

"Do you think she is recovering?" Betta inquired.

"She might, but let's wait before we pronounce her out of danger."

"What disease does she have?"

"I don't know yet. Some of her symptoms point in one direction, but others don't seem consistent with any tentative diagnosis I made." He looked at the nun. "Anyway,

since the situation seems to have normalized, it's time for us to go home. Other patients might need me, and God knows we need the money.”

Betta didn't share Don Antonio's optimism, but there wasn't anything else to do at this point than wait.

Betta had a hard time falling asleep that night, and when she finally did, it didn't last long. Long before dawn, she woke up in a pool of sweat, her heart beating wildly in her chest. She pushed away the damp hair pasted to her forehead and took a deep breath, waiting for her heart to slow down.

She had never told anyone about her recurring dreams. They might think she was possessed, and she couldn't bear the thought of Don Antonio looking at her with suspicion or even revulsion. Perhaps she was possessed. She had too many doubts and questions to be a true believer. Maybe God had given up on her, allowing demons to prey on her soul.

In her dreams, she wandered alone through a thick fog, dizzy and wretched, searching for something as if her life depended on it. But what? What was she looking for? Her lost faith? The past she couldn't remember?

She rubbed her eyes and sighed. She would probably never know.

This time her restlessness was even greater than usual. She had the odd feeling that something was eluding her. That she'd found the answer to some question, only to discover that she'd forgotten the question.

She looked up at the small window in the corner of her room. It was utterly dark outside, so deeply, blindingly dark it seemed impossible that the sun would ever rise again. Everyone was asleep in the house. Pasquale's thunderous snores echoed from the adjacent room, so different in rhythm from those of Don Antonio, whose bedchamber was on the other side of the hall. Don Antonio's snoring reached her faintly: a long whistle followed by a burbling sound similar to that of boiling soup in a cauldron, then the whistle again, and the burbling, in an ever-repeating pattern she had always found reassuring. She huddled up in her coarse woolen blanket and tried to go back to sleep, but the pallet felt harder than usual and the blanket itched her skin, forcing her to scratch her arms, her shins, and her belly. She shifted, unable to find a comfortable position, while a mounting sense of anxiety coursed through her veins.

Finally relinquishing all hopes of sleep, she pushed the blanket aside and sat up on the cot's edge. The tiled floor chilled the soles of her bare feet. She wrapped herself in her blanket and sat still, listening for sounds coming from outside. But the street was silent: no clapping of donkeys, shuffling of peasants, lowing of cows and calves; only the snoring from the other rooms. She slowly inhaled the whiff of moist air that reached her through the cracks of the windowpanes, then opened the window to peer into the chilly night. The rain had cleared the street below of most offending odors, washing away rotting vegetables, human waste and animal dung. She took a deep, long breath, trying to still her racing mind.

Her thoughts went back to Suor Anna – her dark urine, the blood in her stool, the yellow tinge of her skin. She had read about these signs in one of Don Antonio's tomes, but she couldn't remember which. Was it Galen? Avicenna? She needed to check.

She groped in the darkness for the tallow stub on the chair next to her cot. She fetched it and tiptoed to the kitchen to light it at the fireplace. Don Antonio's study was next to the kitchen. She didn't have to pass in front of his room, but she still needed to be very quiet. He would be angry if he found her browsing through his books. A small twinge of guilt surged inside her that she immediately silenced. If he didn't want her to consult his tomes, he shouldn't have taught her how to read.

In the trembling light of the candle, she headed to the study, determined not to go back to bed until she found an explanation for Suor Anna's symptoms. She stayed up long hours, browsing tome after dusty tome, careful not to tear the brittle pages, her heart pounding in her chest as she touched those venerable volumes. It was almost dawn when she went back to sleep, her mind clutching the answer like a child eagerly holding a coveted sweet.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The next morning, a fretful abbess welcomed Don Antonio and Betta in her scriptorium. "It's so good to see you, Don Antonio," she said, clasping his right hand in both of hers. "Please come in." She looks frail, Betta thought. The dark circles under her eyes spoke of a sleepless night. She was probably unaccustomed to situations over which she had no control.

The abbess closed the door and showed Don Antonio a ladderback chair with a red velvet seat. He sat on it while Betta stood nearby, once again awed by the richness of her surroundings. The whole room was lined with shelves filled with rolled-up parchments, leather-bound tomes, small statues of St. Francis and St. Claire, even a jewel-studded hourglass. On either side of the abbess's desk stood two walnut cabinets with doors so finely carved they seemed to be made of lace instead of wood. Inside, Betta glimpsed more books interspersed with colorful glazed ceramic jars and other oddly shaped objects she couldn't place. She wished she could ask Don Antonio what they were, for he surely knew. But she knew better than to interrupt the conversation.

"I'm afraid Suor Anna's condition has worsened," Suor Aurelia said. "She thrashed in her bed the entire night, muttering hoarsely. Her words made no sense. She had two vomiting fits, but very little came out of her empty stomach; just the verbena concoction you gave her, mixed with mucus and blood."

Don Antonio frowned. "Blood? I had hoped she would be better by now."

Betta's mind raced with the implications of Suor Aurelia's words. Suor Anna had vomited blood. Wasn't that one of the symptoms she had found? Betta's heart grew heavy with the increasing awareness that her suspicions might prove correct. But she also sensed a small thrill of pride at the research she had carried out the night before. She was starting to think like a real physician.

"Unfortunately, she is not. When Suor Filomena saw that she was bathed in sweat and that her lips were cracked, she tried to pour some drops of water into her mouth. Suor Anna flailed her arms so violently that the cup in Suor Filomena's hands flew to the ground. Our good sister decided not to insist, for fear that it might do more harm than good."

"Water is rarely harmful," Don Antonio said pensively. "May we inspect her?"

"Of course. Please come with me."

They exited Suor Aurelia's scriptorium and walked along the pillared ambulatory enclosing the square cloister garth. The abbess and the physician walked briskly toward the nun's cell, but Betta slowed down to admire the rose bushes adorning the cloister. They bloomed in a triumph of yellow, pink, and red despite the late season. She inhaled their delicate scent, grateful for it after the foul odors of the street. In the tepid winter sun, immersed in such peaceful beauty, Betta felt that the suspicions she'd formed the night before after consulting Galen were simply outrageous. She felt discouraged. All those hours straining her eyes in the dim light of the candle might have been for naught. This was surely no place for violent crime. How could she have thought it even for a minute?

Her mind must have been clouded by her unsettling dreams and by the late hour. Maybe she was not cut out to be a physician after all. But what was she then? And who was she? An orphan, a servant, a girl whose past was shrouded in shadows.

An opening in the ambulatory revealed the perfect symmetry of the cloister garth. Evergreen shrubs delineated its outer borders, reinforcing the impression of an otherworldly enclosure. Flowerbeds planted with daisies and pansies adorned the meadow. Surrounded by such quiet beauty, Betta felt her gloomy thoughts evaporate like fog in the early morning sun. Her gaze lingered on the two intersecting pathways arranged in the form of a cross, which divided the cloister into four equal parts. In the center, where the pathways met, stood a stone fountain. Its massive basin was engraved with a continuous design of arches on columns that echoed the arches of the pillared ambulatory. *This is how heaven must feel*, she thought. *A place where all worries are quenched, all yearning sated, and all questions answered.* If she could only spend some time in this place, maybe her nightmares would stop tormenting her.

“Betta!” Don Antonio called. “Keep up! We are going up to Suor Anna's cell. You don't want to get lost in the convent.”

For a moment she wished she could do just that.

“I'm coming,” she said.

After the floral scents of the garth, Betta's nostrils stung from the pungent stench of garlic and vomit hovering in the nun's cell. The great bunch of lilies on Suor Anna's dresser, meant to refreshen the air, only made it worse. The heady fragrance of the

flowers, mingled with the acrid reek of Suor Anna's illness, made Betta's stomach turn. Don Antonio didn't seem affected by the smell. He approached the nun's bed and placed his hand on her forehead.

“Cold as marble.” He shook his head, frowning. “Where can I find last night's urine?”

“There is none to look at,” Suor Aurelia replied slowly. “In fact, she hasn't passed water since yesterday morning. Odd, isn't it?” Tilting her head to face him, Suor Aurelia resembled a perplexed sparrow.

Betta had often noticed that pleading look in the eyes of Don Antonio's patients, a look that said *Please heal me, make me whole again*, but it startled her to see it in the eyes of such an important woman. Betta's heart filled with pride for her master, but beside that pride she detected another faintly unpleasant feeling. She envied Don Antonio's ability to inspire awe and admiration in someone else. She wanted to be able to do the same. This yearning had been growing in her soul for years, she realized with shock. It had been nourished by her thirst for knowledge and tended by her ambition. Yes, that was what she wanted. She wanted people to regard her with deference and respect. One day, she swore to herself, bishops and princes would look up at her with the same pleading look she saw in Suor Aurelia's eyes.

Don Antonio tightened his jaw, his eyes fixed on the ghostly countenance of the ill nun. “The fact that she didn't pass water could mean a number of things, none of them encouraging.”

“Since Suor Anna is the daughter of a common friend, I know you'll do all that is in your power to heal her.”

Don Antonio looked up from the wretched frame of the ill nun. “Of course I will. It's my obligation and duty,” he answered brusquely. “There's absolutely no need to mention a friendship that might have existed once but is no more.”

“It seems that the lady in question still counts you among her friends. She begs you to accept this as a sign of her gratitude for all the dedication you are pouring into her daughter's health.”

He lowered his gaze to glance at the coral cameo Suor Aurelia held in her hand. Set in gold, it was oval in shape. It depicted a cherub with its tiny wings aflutter.

“So delicate and so masterfully engraved,” Suor Aurelia said, not noticing how pale Don Antonio had become. “It must be very valuable.”

“It is very valuable.” He picked up the cameo and turned it in his fingers, then placed it back in Suor Aurelia's hand.

“Please give it back to her,” Don Antonio said. “And reassure her that I don't need presents to do my duty.”

“I don't think she meant it that way, Don Antonio,” the abbess said.

Don Antonio bushy eyebrows came together in a way that made some stray hairs stick out. “How then?”

“Lady d'Aquino has a generous heart. And like all generous souls, she believes the best in everyone. She's not one to bribe an upright man into doing his duty.”

“I haven't seen Lady d'Aquino Carafa in a long time.” His lips curved contemptuously at the name *Carafa*. “Not since she married the Count Carafa of Ruvo. I understand that she is a good friend of yours, and I'll accept that sometimes people change as they reach maturity. The way you describe her, however, is not how I remember her.”

Suor Aurelia was about to reply, when the din of loud voices reached them from the staircase. “Cati!” a woman screamed. “Cati!” The distressed voice grew louder and nearer. “I want to see her!”

“Please, m'lady!” another voice said. “Wait! You cannot wander around the convent unaccompanied.”

“You cannot stop me from seeing my sister! I demand to see Caterina at once!”

Don Antonio shot up. “Caterina? Who's Caterina?”

“That was how Suor Anna was called before she took her vows,” the abbess answered, peering out the door.

“Caterina? That's how Porzia christened her?” A look of utter confusion spread across Don Antonio's face.

“Caterina Maria Cecilia was her full name before she took her vows. And now her sister is approaching.”

“Her sister?”

Suor Aurelia turned her attention to Don Antonio. “Yes. Lady Fulvia Carafa is very close to her sister.”

Don Antonio stood up, his eyes locked on the hourglass on Suor Aurelia's shelf. It was a masterful piece of art and an ingenious device, but his gaze went right through it, locked on something that nobody could see but him. "How old is Suor Anna?" His voice was hoarse, as if it came from some forgotten recesses of his soul.

The abbess peered at his face attentively. "Our Suor Anna has turned twenty in March."

For a moment, Betta feared that Don Antonio might faint, he had become so pale. He closed his eyes and inhaled slowly, and this seemed to give him some strength, but to Betta he appeared to have shrunk in size. He shuffled toward the door, his shoulders stooped, then turned to face Suor Aurelia. "We need to take our leave now," he said. "Let us go, Betta."

Before he could step out a young woman erupted into the cell. Two older nuns tried to restrain her without success. "Caterina!" She screamed. "Where is my sister? I want to see her!"

Red blotches spotted the girl's pale complexion and her eyes were swollen from crying. Her elaborate hairstyle had come undone, and loose strands fell down her neck in a cascade of melted gold.

Suor Aurelia stepped in front of her. "Pray, stay behind, my child. This could be contagious."

Lady Fulvia jerked her arms from the nuns' grip. "I don't care! If Cati dies, I want to die with her. Who are you to stand between sisters?"

Betta expected the abbess to lash out with a scathing retort. But instead she said, “My dear daughter—”

“Don't you call me that!” Fulvia flashed her an angry look. “I am not your daughter, and neither is Caterina!”

Suor Aurelia's jaws tensed. “May I remind you that she took her holy vows only months ago? She now belongs to this convent and to her heavenly Groom.”

“She was forced to take those vows, as you know quite well.”

The abbess flushed violently. She turned to Betta, standing next to Suor Aurelia's desk, and then to Don Antonio, who stood frozen on the threshold. “Thank you, Don Antonio. I will see you and your assistant later,” she said. “Pray you leave now, if you don't mind.”

“Very well,” said Don Antonio. He pushed past the two nuns who stood just outside the door.

Glued to the scene unfolding in front of her, Betta found it hard to move. Disheveled as she was, Lady Fulvia looked wild and beautiful. She was about Betta's age. Betta admired her courage and her fierce determination. It must be nice to have a sister who loves you so much, she thought. Someone who's known you since you were a small child.

Caught up in her reverie, Betta didn't realize that Don Antonio had left. When she saw that he was gone, she dashed out of the cell. “Don Antonio!” she yelled, running to the staircase, not caring what the nuns might think. “Wait for me!” She darted down the steps three at a time, finally catching up with him in the ambulatory.

“Don Antonio!” She gasped, panting. “Why didn't you wait for me?”

He didn't answer; he just kept pressing ahead. They passed the cloister, she breathing heavily, he charging ahead like an enraged bull.

“Don Antonio,” she said, touching his forearm, “I need to talk to you.”

“What do you want to talk about?” he asked without breaking his stride.

“I think I know what ails Suor Anna.”

His bulky frame stopped abruptly. “You do.” His face was dark and menacing, and Betta braced herself for the thunderstorm gathering ahead. “You think you know what she has. Nobody knows, but you do. Well then, pray, share your knowledge with me.”

“Well, as Galen says...” Galen was a good source, one that Don Antonio respected greatly. She swallowed. “As Galen says in his *Book of Venoms*—”

“The *Liber de Venenis* wasn't written by Galen. It was written by Santes de Ardoynis. I wonder how accurate your information can be if you can't even get your sources straight.”

Betta's cheeks caught fire. How stupid of her to confuse Galen with a lesser author. She swallowed, all eagerness to share her thoughts with him gone. But she thought of the long hours she'd spent in the study, reading until dawn, her eyes smarting from the black tallow smoke coiling up from the candle, her limbs aching from sitting so long on the hard wooden chair. She felt blood heating up the tips of her ears.

“I hadn't expected words of praise,” she said, struggling to keep her voice level. “But at least some appreciation for my efforts to help. At least that.” She panted, dismayed to feel tears welling up in her eyes.

He raised one of his caterpillar eyebrows. “Do not expect anyone to appreciate you, my girl. If you do, you are bound to experience bitter disappointments. Do not give the world this power. We carry out our duty for the glory of God alone. Now come. We will discuss your findings at home.”

“Master, please come and look what it says here.” Betta gestured for Don Antonio to come closer. They had just lit the fireplace, but it had yet to warm the study. She didn't care; nor did he, apparently. She was thrilled that he let her touch his books. Perhaps he might even agree to teach her some Latin one day. Without Latin, she couldn't progress much further in her studies.

Don Antonio sat in his upholstered chair, staring into empty space while she retrieved volume after volume from the dusty shelves and lay them on his desk for his inspection. His previous anger had dissolved, leaving him weak and listless. Maybe she should worry, she thought, but she was too excited to do so.

“Look what Peter from Abano says here: *arsenic poisoning may cause stomach pain, bloody and watery stools, cold and clammy skin, weakness, and the inability to pass water.* That's exactly what Suor Anna has. She's been poisoned!”

He turned to look at her. “Don't be too hasty. These are very vague symptoms. It could be anything.”

“But what about her yellow tinge? Her garlicky breath? I found those symptoms in your notes on Avicenna's Canon. The fifth book discusses poison and—”

“I know what the fifth book is about. But Suor Anna's disease has not been caused by poison. Who on Earth might want her dead?”

“But—”

“You poke your nose into someone else's notes and you think you know everything. This is why I forbid you from browsing through my books, and especially through my notes. They can be dangerous in the hands of a fool!”

Betta felt as if he'd slapped her. How wrong she had been; he wasn't ready to give her access to his tomes after all. He never would. Her heart hammered so loud in her chest, she was sure he could hear it too.

“If you think I'm a fool, you should find another apprentice.”

“You seem to forget your station. You are a servant and you'll do as you are told.”

“I might be a servant, but I can read. Both Peter from Abano and Avicenna agree: Suor Anna's symptoms are those of poisoning. And if I could read old Greek I'm sure I would discover that Hippocrates does too!”

She slammed the tome in her hands and stormed out of the study toward her room. *Stubborn old man*, she thought. *Stubborn and stupid*. She'd never insulted him in the past, not even in her mind, but it was the truth. He was being stubborn and stupid. And blind.

She put her fists to her ears and threw herself on her cot. She'd been so naive, thinking that he'd teach her everything he knew. How could she become a physician if nobody taught her?

“Betta.” Don Antonio was on her threshold. “This quarrel is ridiculous. Get ready. We need to go back to the convent.” He made to leave, then turned. “And I need your help. Your eyes are much better than mine.”

“Yes, but they are mine.”

“No, they are not. I bought them eight years ago, along with the rest,” he said, and left.

She pressed her face into her pillow, repressing the urge to scream.

Suor Anna's cell smelled of sweat and vomit. The ill nun lay motionless on her bed. Next to her, an old nun sat next to Suor Anna's bed, a rosary coiled in her lap. Her eyes were closed, whether in prayer or sleep, Don Antonio didn't know. As he moved to rouse her, something under Suor Anna's bed caught his attention. He stooped to get a better view and saw the brown shape of an animal, unmoving on the floor, panting heavily. Maybe Suor Anna had a pet, like many other nuns in the convent? But he sensed something odd about it. Don Antonio moved closer. A rat. The creature looked up at him with terror in his beady eyes. Apparently, it was paralyzed. Otherwise, it would have darted away. Scattered on the floor next to its paw Don Antonio saw white crumbs. A bit farther, he detected a half-bitten sweet that looked exactly like those on Suor Anna's sideboard. He glanced at the old nun, who snored quietly, clutching the rosary in her

flaccid hands. He motioned for Betta to grab one of the sweets in the porcelain plate. She stood closer to the sideboard and could tread more lightly than him. Meanwhile, he grabbed the dying rat by the tail, looked out the grated window to make sure nobody was passing by, then tossed it out through one of the narrow openings.

Betta looked at Don Antonio. “We need to bleed her to purge the bad humors caused by the poison.”

“Bleeding would only hasten her death,” he said gloomily. “The only possible antidote I know of is theriac, and the apothecary here doesn’t have any.”

She looked at his hunched shoulders and his drooping head and felt the last remnants of her anger melt away. Pain made him look frail, almost transparent, as though he was made of fine crystal that might break in the wind. She didn't understand his sorrow, but she didn't need to. A good physician knew when to pry into someone's soul and when to respect a person's reserve. Sympathy and warmth were the most powerful tools in a healer's arsenal.

“Betta,” Don Antonio continued, “I need you to run as fast as you can to the Hospital of the Incurables. The apothecary there is a friend. I'm sure he has some theriac. Show him this. If he has it, he will give it to you.”

He removed the chain he wore around his neck and placed it on hers. A red stone cast in silver hung from it. It was agate, a most effective remedy against melancholy and evil spirits. “He'll recognize it as mine. Please Betta, please, come back as soon as you can. With the theriac.”

She rushed out of the nun's cell clutching the agate in her hand. In the garth, the rain had resumed its steady patter. In the convent church, heavenly voices sang the Magnificat. The office of Vespers was about to end.

The Hospital of the Incurables was located on the green Hill of Sant'Agnello, at the northern end of the city, near the Gate of San Gennaro. It was a quiet, beautiful place, surrounded by the verdant fields of Capodimonte and Infrascata and removed from the populous tangle of bustling alleyways that made the heart of the city.

The monumental complex, built in the new classical style favored by the nobility, was arranged around a spacious courtyard. It was comprised of a three-winged building for the care of the ill – mainly those afflicted with the French pox – and two churches, both dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

The Incurables was the largest charitable hospital in the whole Kingdom of Naples. What Betta found more impressive, however, was the fact that a woman, the Spanish noble Maria Longo, had founded it a couple of decades before, and that it was mostly women who had kept it running smoothly ever since.

As one of the licensed physicians who served the hospital, Don Antonio knew those dedicated women quite well. Every time he talked about them a note of admiration crept into his voice. So, it can be done, Betta thought, as she strode toward the entrance; a strong woman can leave a mark on her times. It might be difficult, but it can be done.

The pharmacy was located in the courtyard, half hidden under the pillared arcade. The door stood ajar. She pushed it slowly and peeked inside, her eyes struggling to adjust to the darkness. “May I... come in?” she asked.

Nobody answered.

She hesitated, then walked in. As her eyes got used to the darkness, she found herself surrounded by wooden shelves and cabinets filled with ceramic jars and vases of different shapes and colors, all artfully decorated and labeled. The whole room was permeated with a musty smell, with overtones of pungent and heady scents. She could make out most of the smells - rosemary, oregano, musk rose – but the ones that thrilled her the most were those that her nose had never smelled. At one point, the aromatic odor of *lignum vitae* reached her nostrils. She was brought back to the time when one of Don Antonio’s contacts had brought him branches of guaiacum, the tree of life, a plant from the New World, and had rubbed it to release its pungent scent. “Very effective against the French pox,” the man had added, creasing his forehead. Don Antonio had paid a handsome sum for it.

She shuffled from cabinet to cabinet, following scents and memories, reading the inscriptions: absinth, marjoram, chamomile, almonds, nutmeg... mostly simples that she was familiar with. But then, locked in a glass cabinet she saw a vessel labeled *Mumia vera aegyptica*. She knew what it was, for Don Antonio had told her about mumia’s wondrous virtues. Its main ingredient was a powder obtained from ground ancient mummies, which was known for its rejuvenating properties and for its power to cure a wide variety of ailments and diseases of the stomach, liver and spleen. Next to it, a jar

read *Bezoars*, and a smaller vessel carried the label *Ground unicorn horn*. And there, on the top shelf of the locked cabinet, right above the unicorn horn, was the Theriac. It was a wondrous cure-all with hot and dry properties, but its long and complicated preparation made it very expensive. Don Antonio told her that among its many ingredients was viper's flesh, which made it fit to counter any poison.

“And who exactly are you?”

Betta saw a bespectacled monk looking at her.

“My name is Betta, and I am Don Antonio's assistant.” Introducing herself as the physician's assistant filled her with pride. That's what she was now, wasn't she?

“I see. I didn't know that Don Antonio the physician had an assistant.”

“He does, sir, and it's me,” she said, showing him the red stone.

“Well, well, let's see.” He took the stone in his hand and examined it.

“Very well,” he said, satisfied. He put his hand in his pocket and produced a fat bundle of keys. It looked at each of them, and picked a gilded one. “Here it is.”

The monk put the key into the cabinet's lock, opened it, and pulled out the jar. He then opened a drawer and pulled out a vial, which he filled with the precious antidote.

“Here you go. Put it in a safe place. It's very expensive,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“Many thanks, sir,” Betta said, sliding the vial into a hidden pocket in her gown.

“Pay Don Antonio my respects,” the monk said.

“I will,” she replied, and left.

When Betta emerged from the hospital, the rain had ceased and the curtain of clouds had receded, leaving purple and orange shreds aglow in their wake. The incessant downpour that had battered the roads during the previous hours had left them soggy with mud, a desolate state made more evident by the unusual emptiness of the narrow alleys leading to the city center.

Betta gathered the folds of her gown as she dodged muddy puddles and melting heaps of donkey droppings, the theriac safely hidden under her cloak. She wondered where everyone was. She dimly recalled the public crier of the Grand Court of the Vicaria blasting his trumpet through the city just a few days before. At the time she had paid little heed to what she'd expected was yet another edict issued by the viceroy against Lutherans. But now she wondered if perhaps the crier had announced something else: the arrest of a counterfeiter, the introduction of another gabelle on grain or fish, a religious celebration. She shrugged. Whatever it was, it was welcome if it cleared her way back to the convent of San Francesco.

Still avoiding the mud and filth, Betta marched along Via Santa Chiara. She flanked the thick wall that enclosed the monumental nunnery of the Poor Clares, the Monastery of Santa Chiara after which the alley was named. Encased between Santa Chiara and San Francesco delle Monache, the alley was never particularly crowded, especially since the viceroy had ordered the dismantling of all sheds and shacks throughout the city to stem the tide of rampant crime which thrived in the darker corners of Naples. Its emptiness surprised her nonetheless: being part of a thick net of alleyways that stretched from the coastline to the heart of the ancient Greek city, there was always

the stray sailor or merchant who wished to avoid the hustling and bustling found in other, more commercial streets.

The clamor of loud voices reached her as she neared the corner to Via San Biagio dei Librai, the booksellers' street. That must be where everyone had gone. Throngs of people lined the street, shouting insults and gesturing wildly. They were barely contained by an insufficient number of guards who played their role only perfunctorily, intervening here and there to push back the rowdiest elements. Everybody's glance was directed toward the square where the powerful Prince of Salerno held residence when in Naples.

The reason for the commotion became soon clear. A slow-moving procession inched in Betta's direction, led by the public crier who stopped at regular intervals to blow mightily into his trumpet, producing a piercing sound that rang throughout the street. A thundering announcement, delivered in a sing-song monotone, followed each blast:

“This is Gaetano Fusile, parricide and blasphemer. He will be hanged in Campo del Moricino for having viciously murdered his father Domenico Fusile. The Great Court of the Vicaria delivers this verdict in the name of his Excellence the Viceroy Don Pedro de Toledo. Long live the Emperor!”

The crier's last words drowned in the deafening roll of drums. The standard-bearer followed the crier, holding a banner with the Hapsburg two-headed eagle. Immediately behind him came six officers, four of them on horses, then a small group of foot soldiers,

while other soldiers were interspersed among the bystanders. Betta observed the haughty faces of the officers, who scanned the crowd attentively, ready to intervene at the first hint of rebellion. Behind them, the foot soldiers marched together in loose formation, eyeing the surrounding crowd suspiciously. Betta could sense their tension. It wouldn't be the first time that relatives of the condemned would attack the procession in an attempt to free their kinsman.

Bringing up the rear, the white-hooded friars of the Confraternita dei Bianchi marched dutifully, giving spiritual assistance to the prisoner. Their task was to facilitate his "good death" and ensure the salvation of his soul. Two of the friars lagged behind, walking on either sides of an ox cart that carried a bound man between twenty and thirty years of age with a crucifix in his hands.

The prisoner swayed back and forth wailing incoherently. One of the friars bent to murmur something in his ear, but this only elicited a violent jerk from him. He lunged forward as if to throw himself out of the cart, but was held back by the ropes that bound him to its meager sides. Defeated, the man collapsed on himself and the crucifix fell to the bed of the cart. Although the friar's face was concealed by his hood, Betta had the impression that he briefly considered picking it up and placing it back in the man's hands; but he didn't, possibly sensing the futility of such a gesture.

The prisoner now lay motionless on his left side like a half empty sack of turnips. He resumed his wailing, his gaze roaming the jeering crowd. As he passed in front of her, his eyes briefly met Betta's, and she saw a gaping emptiness lurking behind his terror and desperation. She'd seen that utterly vacant look before, in the eyes of a dying bull, just

before the beast fell down with a sickening thump, spears protruding from his neck during a bullfight in Campo del Moricino.

Betta shuddered. The man was already the ghost of himself: behind the bruises and wounds that oozed a yellowish-red fluid, his face shone whiter than the hoods of his comforters. A board hung from his neck with the word *parricide* in crudely painted letters. His body was burned and torn where the red-hot pliers of his tormentors had bitten his flesh. The mob mocked him, spat on him, and hit him with mud and rotten fruit, but the man barely seemed to notice.

A wave of nausea surged from the pit of Betta's stomach. It wasn't caused by the sight of the broken prisoner: she was accustomed to blood and wounds. It was brought on by the bloodthirsty excitement of those around her who had come to enjoy the spectacle of suffering and death. She looked at the men and women standing next to her, jeering and mocking the condemned. Not a soul showed compassion for the man.

Two small boys wiggled their way to the front of the crowd, giggling uncontrollably and elbowing Betta out of their way. Clothed in rags and barefoot, they joined the crowd in shouting insults at the prisoner. Their high voices stood out from the rest of the mob as each of them tried to outdo his companion.

“Wake up, you fleabag, rogue, whoreson!” screamed the older.

“Wake up, you vomit licker, rag shitter, fart gatherer!” shouted the younger.

At 'fart gatherer' the older boy exploded in a peal of laughter, sealing the victory of the younger ragamuffin who beamed in triumph. Between those two it was clear who the leader was.

Street urchins usually stank like farm animals, a smell Betta preferred to the rancid reek of adult sweat; but these two emanated an unusual and unbearable stench. Betta noticed that it came from the brown mush oozing from the younger boy's cupped hands. Having won the insults contest, the boy pressed his lips together and focused his gaze on the huddled shape of the prisoner, then took aim and threw. Flying to its target, part of the mush sprayed on those closest to the boys while the bulk of it landed with a splat on the prisoner's neck. The man gave out an inarticulate sound, closer to the lowing of a cow than to a human utterance. The boys doubled over in mirth. Their glee, however, was short-lived. A portly man with brown filth dripping down his sleeve smacked the younger urchin. "You stinky roach! I'll make you lick it!" The boy staggered under the impact of the blow, but his chump kicked the man in the shin and pulled his friend away. As the man howled in pain, the two disappeared in the crowd faster than sewer rats.

Caked in blood and soiled with waste and rotten foodstuff, the prisoner struggled to sit up, hindered in his movements by the rope binding his wrists. Grunting and groaning, he finally rose with the help of the hooded monks on his sides. He scanned the crowd with his left eye, the other being bruised and swollen shut. A poultice of comfrey and lobelia with onion juice thrown in for good measure would cure the bruises in only a couple of days, Betta thought. As an herb of Saturn, comfrey was cold and dry, perfect for drying up excess humors and reduce swellings.

When the prisoner tried to stand up, a foot soldier hit him with the butt of his arquebus. The man crumbled down with a loud grunt, and Betta noticed that his mouth was encrusted with blood. They had cut out his tongue, she realized: the usual

punishment for blasphemers. That was why he was unable to speak. Outrage mounted in her chest. It certainly wasn't the will of God to harm one of His creatures. Nature always strove to repair wounds and hurts, and nature was the language of God.

Angry and disgusted, Betta resolved to leave, but something kept her from doing so, a reluctance that puzzled her. There was something about the condemned that made her think she might have seen him before. She took a closer look, and just as the trumpet rang out again, she suddenly knew. The swollen face of the prisoner was that of an acquaintance of Don Antonio! He surely knew. Why had he not told her?

Unable to leave, she followed the grim pageant until it stopped at the palace of the noble family of Carafa della Spina. A couple of steps to Betta's right, the crier blew on his trumpet, then announced in his booming voice: "Here in the courtyard of this noble house the condemned spat in the victim's face, threw him to the ground, and kicked him in the back and stomach, as witnessed by Carlo Fusco and Mario Sorano, servants of the House of Carafa della Spina."

A large man with a brown cape and a huge ax in his hands came forward. At the sight of the executioner, the prisoner let out a shrill cry and threw himself about, struggling against the restraints that secured him to the cart. Now only a couple of feet from the condemned, Betta was close enough to see the blood-soaked ropes biting into his chafed wrists as he struggled. His fighting ended abruptly when the man with the ax punched the prisoner in the stomach as two muscular men untied his left arm and pinned it to a wooden board.

The hangman lifted up his ax and brought it cleanly down on the prisoner's wrist, severing his hand with a definitive thud. An unearthly shriek escaped from the lips of the prisoner, filling the air with horror. For a moment, even the street urchins suspended their jeers. Blood spurted everywhere, splattering the garments of three men in front of Betta who sprang back in disgust. Others, more safely removed, laughed at their discomfort. To staunch the blood gushing from the severed limb, the executioner applied the carcass of a freshly slaughtered chicken to the stump.

The prisoner had ceased to scream; in fact, he lay limp on the cart, a lifeless heap of flesh and rags. The executioner put down his ax and reached for the bucket that someone had passed to him. With a fluid move, he splashed its contents on the prisoner, causing him to jerk up, spitting and catching his breath to the wild amusement of the mob. It was just water, Betta realized: not human waste, as she had expected from watching previous death pageants.

While the mob's attention remained riveted on the unlucky wretch, Betta's gaze fell on the severed hand, already turning gray on the besmirched board. It lay on the board, palm facing up and fingers curled like a large dead spider. She moved closer to observe the amputated limb. If she could take it home to dissect it and examine its bones, sinews and veins, she might be able to discover what made it move.

Someone else had a similar idea, for Betta saw a woman hook the hand's small finger with her own and slowly pull the hand toward her. Her small frame was wrapped in a brown cloak. Although strands of long gray-streaked hair escaped from under her

cape, the woman appeared fairly young. She must have felt Betta's gaze on her, for she looked up and locked eyes with Betta.

Her eyes were narrow and elongated like no other human eyes Betta had ever seen. The black irises carried so much malice that Betta shuddered. After flashing Betta a menacing glance, the woman slipped the dead hand into her cloak and disappeared into the crowd. Almost immediately, a sharp cry rose above the din of the mob. "The witch! Stop the witch! She stole the prisoner's hand to make evil spells!"

At that, mayhem erupted. The officer in command turned to the soldiers yelling "Follow her! Get the hand!" The foot soldiers plunged through the crowd in the direction where the woman had disappeared, followed by two mounted officers. Desperate to escape the hoofs of the excited horses, people pushed and shoved amid a cacophony of deafening screams. Mothers screamed for their children, husbands for their wives, people cried and yelled the names of their relatives. Betta felt her breath coming in and out in short, quick spurts as though an iron fist were tightening around her windpipe. Wherever she turned, she saw fear and confusion. She spun around, desperate for an escape, her way blocked by hundreds of people pushing and screaming. We are all going to die, she thought. The frantic thud of her heartbeat reverberated through her body. She gasped for air, drowning in an angry ocean of limbs and bodies reeking of sweat and fear. Nausea overtook her like a forceful wave. Vomit shot out from her mouth and she fell limp to the ground, swallowed by the stampeding crowd.

\* \* \*

The boy noticed something lying on the street, and moved closer to inspect it. It looked like a heap of rags. Who knows, maybe he could sell it and get some money. His little sister followed him without much enthusiasm, dragging her doll behind. She was tired and hungry.

When the boy got closer, he realized that it was a girl, lying motionless on the street. She looked just like his sister's rag doll, only bigger and uglier. Her dress was soiled and torn, and her hair had come undone. He bent down to examine the girl's face, caked with blood and mud.

"Yuck! She stinks of puke!" he said.

"Is she asleep?" The little girl asked, inching closer.

"Asleep? In the middle of the road? Are you stupid or what? She is dead."

"She is not dead!" his sister cried, hitting him with her doll.

"Stop that!" he screamed. "Look! She is dead!"

He poked the girl's body with his foot, then kicked her in the side. No reaction.

"See? She's dead. Let's go."

The procession was gone, and the street was quite empty. The boy and his sister had to find a better place to steal or beg. "How much did you make?" he asked her. He was getting hungry too.

She fished into her apron and dug out three copper coins.

"That's all??" Her brother asked. "We can't buy much of anything with that!"

The girl looked at the meager bounty on her palm. "It was more...!" She let go of her doll, who fell to the ground, and plunged both hands into her apron. "Two ladies gave

me one silver coin each!” She frantically scraped around its large pocket, but all she could produce besides those copper coins was a pretty piece of glass.

“You must have lost your money when those horses scared the hell out of everyone! Maybe someone stole them from you!”

The girl started to weep, at first silently, then louder and louder, with big gulps and sobs. The boy sighed. He hadn’t been able to steal anything, and his sister’s begging hadn’t been very successful either. Stupid horses. He picked up the doll and grabbed his sister’s hand.

“Let’s go,” he said.

A deep moan made them stop. They had forgotten about the girl on the ground.

“See? She’s not dead!” The girl said, drying her tears. “Maybe if we help her, her family will give us something to eat.”

Maybe his sister was right. Despite her dirty dress, the girl on the ground didn’t look like a street girl. They approached her.

“What’s your name?” the little girl asked her. Her brother pushed her aside. He was the older of the two, after all.

“I’m Tano, and this is my sister Cetta. What’s your name?”

But the girl didn’t reply, she just lay there, eyes closed, moaning. When she finally opened her eyes she gave them a vacant look. Maybe she was deaf and dumb, Tano thought, or slow-witted. Maybe her family didn’t want her back. Just their luck. “What’s - your - name?” he repeated slowly.

“My name?”

“Yes, your name!”

The girl sat up, and spasm of pain contorted her face. “Wh-Where am I?”

“Are you hurt?” Cetta asked.

“I-I don’t know.” She touched her body. “I don’t think so.”

“Do you remember your name?” Tano asked.

“Yes. Betta. My name is Betta.”

“Do you need help going home?”

“Home?” Betta looked puzzled. “Oh my God, I need to go! Where is my...” She touched her belt, then gave a deep sigh of relief. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” She looked at them. “I’m fine. I can go home on my own.”

“But we thought that if we helped you, your family would give us something to eat!” Cetta said, visibly disappointed. Her brother averted her gaze, but his stomach spoke for him, emitting a loud growl. “See? Tano is really hungry too!” Cetta said.

Betta laughed, but as soon as she did, her face grimaced in pain. “Well, I’m not going home. I’m running an errand for a convent, but you can come with me if you want. I’m sure the good nuns will give you some bread if I tell you that you helped me get back on my feet.”

Betta got up, but she could not walk very fast – her whole body ached. The boy and his little sister adjusted to her pace, and the doll did too.

When they finally reached the convent, Betta was taken to the abbess's study, where Don Antonio had been waiting for her. In the meantime, Tano and Cetta sat in the refectory and dunked bread in the milk the nuns had given them.

"Where in Heaven have you been?" Don Antonio exploded as soon as he saw her. "A snail would have been faster than you!" But the furious expression on his face was soon replaced by a worried look. Betta looked awful.

"For Heaven's sake...! Are you all right? Come here, let me see..." He inspected her bruised face, the cut on her forehead. "What in God's name has happened to you?"

"On my way back from the apothecary I stumbled across a death pageant. It was horrible! But the strangest thing was... a woman stole the prisoner's severed hand, and then all hell broke loose! I was pushed by the crowd... and I don't remember anything else. I supposed I fainted. But look!" she said, "I have the theriac! Suor Anna can be cured now!"

Betta untied her belt and produced a small vial with a turbid liquid inside.

"Very well, Betta," Don Antonio said. "You rest now. I'll ask the abbess to send someone to take care of you."

It was almost dark when Betta woke up. They had put her in the empty cell of a nun who had recently died of old age, and they must have forgotten about her. She got up and was about to leave the cell, when she heard a long, high-pitched wail eerily similar to a wolf's howl. Unsure if it was human or animal, she peeked out of the door and saw Flavia surrounded by nuns, who tried to calm her down.

“Caterina! I want to see Caterina!”

“Not now, you can’t,” said Suor Aurelia firmly. “You will see her once we have prepared her body,” she added, placing her hand on the girl’s shoulder.

“Don’t you dare touch me! You and my mother – you imprisoned her here, you ruined her life, you killed her!” Flavia’s face was swollen and streaked with tears.

“Be careful with your accusations, girl,” Suor Aurelia said in a quiet voice that Betta found more frightening than her usual tone.

“Why should I be careful? What should I fear?” Flavia retorted. “Are you threatening me?” She sounded defiant, but her shrill voice betrayed fear. *She is afraid of Suor Aurelia*, Betta thought, and it made sense. Betta realized that she had always been scared of the abbess herself.

“I am not threatening you, of course not. I’m just saying that, before you accuse anyone of your sister’s death, we should investigate the facts.”

Betta started to get nervous. What did she mean?

Suor Aurelia turned to the nuns: “Dear sisters, please go back to your occupations. There will be much to be done, but the best way for you to be helpful now is to resume your work.” She fluttered her hands as if to shoo away irritating flies.

“First of all,” Suor Aurelia continued, as soon as she was alone with Flavia, “I would advise you not to discuss this with anyone, inside and outside these walls.” Her tone was icy. “Now, we need to look at the facts. Suor Anna was very ill, and ill people sometimes die.”

“But she was getting better! Zelda said that she was recovering!”

“Yes, but that was last night. After taking the theriac, her condition plummeted.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that. Things changed very fast after she was given the theriac. Of course, it could have been the nature of her disease, which is still unknown to us. Maybe God took her, knowing what is best for her.”

Betta had stopped listening. She was devastated by the news of Suor Anna’s death, but before she could even begin to mourn her, she was overcome by sheer terror. Suor Anna was on her way to recovery until she took the theriac. What if she had died because of the theriac? What if someone had put something into the vial Betta carried while she was unconscious? Did they suspect her of having poisoned the nun? Suor Aurelia might have thought that Betta was jealous of Suor Anna, and the threatening tone she used with Flavia might have actually been directed at Betta – the suspected murderer.

Betta was an orphan and a servant: even if she professed here innocence, nobody would believe her, least of all Don Antonio, surely crushed with sorrow, who would hate her.

There was only one thing to do: run as far as possible from the convent, and from Naples.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Laura Vinti earned her Master's degree in Foreign Languages and Literature *summa cum laude* at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples, Italy in 1997. She works as a translator and as an adjunct Professor of Italian, and has recently begun to operate tours that introduce visitors to Italy's hidden gems. Laura received her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2016.