

PART ONE

The Arrival

1681

– Chapter One –

She didn't fuss with her hair or use the vain clutter of the dressing table except to waste time rearranging it. Eventually she turned to what was behind her. Laid over a small unmade bed and the chair beside it were two fancy gowns, creased and dated, suiting a younger shape and needing somewhere to go. She was sure she wouldn't wear them again.

“Donatella? Are you in your room?”

The lace might be salvaged, for she couldn't be without lace, at least around her neck and, at most, edging her sleeves as well. Otherwise she dressed serviceably, invisibly, in gray or dark blue.

She no longer thought of being bolder or more submissive or, in a city on a bay-becoming-the-sea, swept away at last.

It was as if someone else recalled a ship, who sailed on it, and walking down a shady alley with a stranger. There was always the temptation of mixing imagination with reality, especially as the past was otherwise inalterable. Her reflection was plain in the mirror, her hair quickly pinned, her face flushed.

“Donatella, I need you!”

She moved to a corner table, begging light from a narrow window, cleaning brushes and closing colors yet to finish curled pictures of spring or begin the next season before it did. She'd painted in brighter places, dreamed in them, too, and didn't care who saw her as a dreamer, until she committed herself to being withdrawn and forgotten like a lunatic huddled in a corner, hardly knowing the difference between a smile and a frown.

“You might answer me!”

She took the green dress off the bed and pretended to wear it for a small stroll around the room. Then she walked into the hall as if out into the city; her city, at least, as it was also born of land and sea, formed by highs and lows, ruled by outer constraint and inner abandon, safe and sorry in disguise. Of course *Genova* had a conceit she couldn't have, knowing its purpose and hiding or flaunting its features of beauty. Once she saw all its wonders and woes from the esplanade of *Castelletto*, the mountains closer and *la Lanterna* further away. Perhaps she made out her house; if not its signature portal of Saint George and the Dragon, then a signifying shine on its roof's slant. It was a prestigious place to live depending on how she looked at it, whether connected up to a parade of palaces, across divides or down crooked stairways to the port.

She was patron and prisoner of a gated entrance and more rooms than the closeness of the surrounding dwellings allowed, aspiring staircases growing them similarly into multiple stories. She could've done without so much unused furniture, mirrors, and silver to be cleaned but was greedily accustomed to a tenanted wealth of paintings, tapestries, frescos, and stained glass not created for outside views.

"There you are. What are you doing?"

Donatella had barely reached the doorway of her bedroom, throwing the dress in, not caring where it landed.

"Oh, it's so sudden."

Her aunt gave her a key and feather duster for gentler work than Nubesta carrying broom and bucket, hastening an end to the long vacancy of the third floor apartment, a little unnerving to step into its past. It offered another chore for the young maid complaining about wiping tall windows while Donatella removed furniture covers and thought of her mother sitting there, writing more letters than she ever received.

The girl opened a window and the room to the street below, a rag-waving hand jumping out. "Up here! Up here!"

Donatella felt a shiver that shouldn't have surprised her, the bumping and cursing of the movers fading into music and poetry from *La forza dell'amor paterno* as performed at *la Teatro Falcone* on Christmas Monday 1678. She'd worn the green dress, agreeing to excessive curls and anticipation, Nonna showing her how to fan away smoke from the chandeliers and smile although her shoes pinched. After the first act sonnets fell from garlanded boxes for those lucky enough to catch them; as much enthusiasm when the opera was finished. That was Donatella's last trembling in applause and first glimpse of its beneficiary too remarkable for humility as he accepted a gold tray of the taffeta wrapped accolades. He was as well presented in a long shimmering coat with flared skirt, accented with a looped and knotted cravat, an undressed wealth of hair changing the angles of his face as he bowed and then again. Obviously this was the legend of subterfuge, here and there, elegant and rakish, kissing the hand of *Centoventi*, goddess of the stage. He was clever and foolish not to worry she took exception at his as intimate approval of the contralto said to be the daughter of a cook, nothing but wisdom and faithfulness in his deepest bow and sincerest smile towards Genoa's Prince and Princess.

Even overlooked in the audience, Donatella felt he was a suitor offering the art of himself. So at least in the theater she could be chosen.

Nothing more intimate was expected, and shouldn't be. Not even when their landlord, one of the Falcone's managers, announced that *Signor Stradella would be moving into their quiet world.*

And unquiet hearts, resentment sounding in Signor Garibaldi's teasing.

Like offering the pigeons to the cat! Aunt Despina couldn't resist.

It was assumed Signor Stradella would use the apartment for composing as well as sleep and light refreshments. Otherwise he would be out for tutoring and rehearsals during the day and church performances on Sundays, his evenings planned and unplanned with meals and diversions in more and less respectable settings.

Two large but struggling men maneuvered in a long walnut trunk with brass filigree corners and latch. They stood looking down the embossed hall to its sun-splashed end.

“Should we leave it here?” one of them asked.

“Why not?” Nubesta decided. “He’ll put it where he wants.”

“No.” Donatella, not for the first time, had to correct her. “In the bedroom.”

The men grumbled, did what they were told, then left, returning with musical instruments, a pair of trestles, square board, small stool, and a plainer case rattling with poorly packed contents. The apartment was already furnished, not with the Garibaldi finest, but bees-wax polishing gave console tables, armoire, credenza, and bed posts a higher shine. By the time citywide bells announced the vespers hour, Nubesta was done and resting on a frayed settee without any guilt for Donatella reaching over her to wipe the beveled mirror above.

The movers were less irritated as they brought in one crate dropping heavy and another floating to the floor, talking about where they would go drinking. Nubesta followed them out to be sure they were gone.

“Look.” Donatella untied a note from around the handle of the fancier trunk.

“You know I can’t read.”

“To the most honorable ladies of this household, please make my bed with the hemp sheets, pillowcase and woolen blanket within. A.S.”

“Not such a gentleman,” Nubesta hoped.

The trunk’s carved exterior was scarred and the latch almost fell off when Donatella popped it to fold back the top like a book she shouldn’t read and hadn’t any reason to beyond the first page, the noted bedding on top. She relied on Nubesta’s willingness to go through Signor Stradella’s things that were neatly layered and smelled of parchment and resin; no surprise that he owned the finest neckties, cuffs, shirts, jackets, breaches, dressing gown, ribbons, kerchiefs, gloves, stockings, belts, and buckles, and silver instrument strings unwrapped from a silk velvet cloth.

Nubesta dug a little deeper, discovering two rosaries with gold medals, and a religiously embroidered runner with pointed ends and silk tassels.

“What is it?”

Donatella stretched it out, wondering, too. “A scapular, devoted to St. Dominic.”

“Why would he have it?”

“Let’s see to the bed.”

It seemed a shame to strip already made wealth for grey hemp and brown wool, squeezing a plump pillow like the best sausage meat into a thin and tasteless casement. They pulled the sheets

tight, laid out the yarn-hemmed blanket, finishing with a swollen brocade cover-up, the room ready or not for its soon-to-be-occupant's distinguished if disreputable arrival. It was the second adjective Nubesta seemed to know the most about, as servants often did, talk amongst themselves both informed and ignorant.

"Another note." The girl tugged at it.

Donatella was already fond of the forwardly fluid and looped handwriting. "Most honorable ladies, I know how you hesitate. Please feel free to unpack and arrange my effects, like a puzzle, and see if you can know how I would like them. A.S."

"For a prize?" Nubesta squirmed, waiting for Donatella's next move.

"I don't think we should."

"You went through his clothes. What are a few knickknacks after that?"

"Take the cleaning things and tell my aunt we're done."

Nubesta obeyed sluggishly, the late afternoon warming the room's new belongings, the key Donatella tied around her arm under her sleeve too prominent to forget there.

She entered the dark room to soft meowing, both cats jumping down from her grandmother's bed.

Nonna stirred a little. "You could copy for him."

"I'm sure he has a copyist. I'm sure he has all he needs."

"He might think so." Nonna pulled her granddaughter's face so close to hers against the pillow Donatella almost laid down. "You shouldn't."

Donatella kissed her grandmother's dry cheek, combing her still thick gray hair, regretting more than that she wasn't a chaperone for the theater any longer. Nonna's hands had lost touch with the virginal, her trained voice weakened to whispers, her appetite merely for bread and broth.

"What's this?" A misshapen hand caught the bulge in Donatella's lower sleeve.

"Oh. The key to ... the ... linen closet."

"Well," Nonna winked, "you might keep it, as you never take what isn't yours."

In the middle of the night Donatella rose to a dare and the third floor, bare steps as uncertain as candlelight on an unknown artist's commission of cherubs and festooned fruits and flowers in muted greens, grays, and sienna. The floor of the apartment didn't keep her entry quiet but it seemed only her carefulness was disturbed. The trestle table was set up in the salon, too close to the fireplace with its scalloped oak mantle and triangular copper hood illustrating Vulcan and Venus. Windows on both sides were almost hidden by red curtains with gold scrolling around the Garibaldi coat of arms, the moon somehow casting light on the secrecy of her endeavor. She unpacked Signor Stradella's clothes, carrying the pieces one at a time or in piles to the bedroom and shelves of the wardrobe that threatened to be too small. *He has more of what's necessary and unnecessary than a woman, a much indulged woman.* She opened another trunk holding the

rewards of beautiful music, smiles and connivances, too, doubtful he carried the family heirlooms while by invitation or escape running around and hiding. Whatever explained the collection, he was aristocratic in everything but bedding and especially fortunate in moveable assets, even indifferent with some of them, silver candlesticks and snuffers, trays, bowls, spoons, toothpicks, and boxes as tarnished as his reputation.

Silver wasn't unusual in a city where even the lowest had the chore of it in their homes, while gold wasn't to be seen in any ordinary way, and she supposed he took pride in what he had of it, from buttons and medals to a locked tobacco caddy studded with diamonds.

She sensed some fraud, too, and quickly deposited a reliquary with the scapular in the chest at the foot of the bed. Otherwise she arranged with an eye for practical and creative importance, or just not knowing where else to put things without cluttering incidental surfaces and the narrow mantle. A candelabrum belonged on the trestle table as did a bookstand and bundle of folders with ribbons untied for a chance of revelation, placed next to a decorated writing slope for composing more than little notes to honorable ladies.

Three lutes huddled against the emptiness of a corner, stepsisters born separately of rosewood, maple, and ebony, sharing an inheritance of long necks, heads back, full bodies with rosettes like intricately set jewels on their breasts. Theirs was harmonious rivalry, recalling a master's touch and understanding. On the settee a leather case contained a violin resembling a dead man on the red velvet of his coffin, not mourned but celebrated by nymphs dancing through vines on the frieze high around the room.

As nearby *Santa Maria Maddalena* sounded for Lauds, the gold and diamonded box urgently invited investigation. She guessed where the key might be, pressing a button under the ink bottle section of the slope. A sudden drawer offered it, tiny, burnished, a promise of something special, not in that container but the one worth hundreds of lire which instead of tobacco held more diamonds or a love note or pressed flower or curl of hair or ...

An accolade. She recognized the taffeta tied scroll at once, recalling applause that lingered, hearts melting for the music and man and impossibilities he left behind.

"You're in trouble." Nubesta startled Donatella, who could only hope she wasn't seen locking the rolled sonnet away again, placing its treasured box on the lower shelf of the nightstand. "She's looking for the key."

"Here. No." Donatella put a hand behind her back. "Where?"

Nubesta pulled it out of the door more for power than assistance.

"Give it to me."

Donatella waited for Nubesta to leave before returning one key to its almost private place, exiting the apartment herself as the other met Despina's outstretched hand. Her aunt might've wanted an explanation but didn't get one, Donatella escaping to her room to dress hurriedly, stuffing her hair under a cap, then on her way downstairs in time to welcome a man she'd never met except as he inspired sonnets and forgetfulness.