

February, 1936

Calabria, Southern Italy

I followed the nun in a haze of exhaustion. I had been trying to memorise the turns along the corridors of the monastery, but when we finally stopped, I realised that I was utterly lost.

'Here we are,' said the nun, opening the door to my cell. 'You'll find it has everything you need.' She smiled encouragingly. 'It will feel like home before you know it.'

'Grazie, sorella,' I said in a small voice.

'One of the sisters will take you to see Mother Superior in the morning. Buona notte,' she said, before turning back down the long corridor.

I raised my lantern and surveyed the tiny room. A wave of loneliness overcame me and I burst into tears. I'd never been away from home before and I already missed my family. The single bed against the whitewashed wall was covered with a sheepskin spread, with another sheepskin on the stone floor under the narrow window. The plain cell was more than I was used to. I'd never had the luxury of privacy and freedom of my own space before – but it wasn't home. How would I ever sleep without the comfort of my sister Paola's warm body next to me and the soft sleepy noises of my oldest sister Teresa in the bed beside us?

I sat heavily on the bed. I was so far from everyone I loved and it was my own fault. My family would be celebrating the last night before Teresa's wedding, enjoying a specially cooked meal. I could picture them laughing, singing and dancing to the music of fiddles and accordions, as our neighbours and friends joined in. The view of the village from our hillside farm, about a fifteen-minute walk from our home, flashed through my mind: the tumble of red terracotta roofs and white lime-washed walls on the river flats. Bruzzano was a small village situated on the very tip of the toe of Italy, just a stone's throw from the island of Sicily. The Bruzzano River ran right alongside the town, moving slowly towards the east coast, while the Aspromonte Mountains towered around it, stretching to the very edges of Calabria's coastline like guardians. A wave of fresh tears turned into gasping sobs as I collapsed into the comfort of the sheepskin.

Two days earlier, Papà had summoned me to the dining table, his face like thunder. At forty-two, he was fit and strong from all the work on the land and, despite the long hours and constant worry over whether we'd have enough food to keep us going for another year, he didn't look his age; his hair was still thick with only a few strands of grey that glinted against the black curls. He often told us that his grey hairs had sprouted because he had to provide for five children, and when I looked at Mamma, who did the most for us, three years younger than Papà but her hair streaked with grey, I thought maybe he was right. Vincenzo was the oldest of us at twentyone, then Teresa a year younger. Paola, eighteen, was nearly two years older than me and then there was Antonio, who was fourteen. But I was the one who gave him the most grief.

'Did you look after the sheep yesterday for Vincenzo?' he asked as he finished off his café e latte.

'No, Papà,' I whispered, standing before him in bare feet on the tiles. But I had covered for Vincenzo, who was supposed to look after the sheep on our thirty-acre farm. As shepherd, it was his job

to keep them safe from wild animals, especially wolves, but he'd wanted to visit a girl, his latest amore, in the village, before he left for Africa with the army. He had taken his best friends, Stefano and Angelo Modafèri, cousins who lived in the next village, with him to act as lookout. Although the cousins were just like brothers to us, spending as much time at our home while we were growing up as Vincenzo did at theirs, sometimes I wasn't sure I liked them, despite their jokes and clowning around. They could be dismissive, arrogant and annoying: pulling our hair, taking our biscotti and refusing to let us play football because we were girls.

But I didn't mind helping Vincenzo because, when I did, I felt like I was a part of a world that was carefree and wild. I longed for the freedoms the boys had.

Papà stared at me, his dark eyes, usually filled with kindness for his daughters, hard as obsidian. 'Don't lie to me, Giulia.'

'I'm not.' I knew how much trouble Vincenzo would be in if Papà found out he was sneaking away rather than doing his work. Papà had caught me telling lies more than a few times, but there was no way he could know the truth this time. I'd been so careful and even though one of the boys from the adjoining farm had come across to play cards and offered me my first cigarette, I'd only taken one puff before giving it back.

'Mamma mia!' He slammed the table. 'Then who did? Because he was seen in the village when he was supposed to be with the sheep. If anything had happened to even one of them . . .'

I flinched and swallowed hard. 'Whoever thinks they saw him must be mistaken,' I lied. I was in too deep now to come clean.

'Testa dura!' Papà rumbled, his hands pressed together as if asking for God's help. 'You told your mother you were going to help Zia Francesca at the trattoria but I was talking to Signora Lipari at the post office this morning and she said she saw you walking in the opposite direction, towards the farm and worse still, that her nephew saw you in the field.' He shook his head. 'I don't know where to begin. It's bad enough that you were smoking cigarettes but you were alone with a boy and you're still lying to me? You know how much I hate lying! I'm so very disappointed in you.' My heart fell.

'But Papà—'

He put his hand up to stop me. 'Basta! Enough, Giulia! You will go nowhere until I'm satisfied that you've learnt your lesson. For a girl your age, you should know better. I thought you'd learnt after the incident with the bicycle.'

I dropped my gaze. I'd taken the bicycle without asking, to borrow a white blouse I was supposed to wear as part of my uniform for the weekly Fascist parade. I'd hidden my blouse, which had a large mud stain and a tear from chasing Antonio after the last parade. The only problem was that I'd got a flat tyre on the way home. Mamma found out about the blouse and the tyre cost a lot for Papà to have fixed.

'I've indulged you and tolerated your impetuous ways for far too long. You have to learn obedience and your place in this village, because this is where you belong.'

I saw red. 'I'll never belong here!' I shouted. 'And why do I have to do what I'm told when the boys do whatever they want?'

'Because it's the way things are done. If you don't learn some respect and you keep on like this, nobody will want you.'

'I don't care! Damn the way things are done. Why would I want to be stuck here in a dead-end village with people who can't see beyond their own noses?'

Papà got up so quickly his chair crashed to the ground. 'I've a good mind to find you a husband who'll tame your wild ways and teach you respect.'

'I'd rather die than marry anyone you want me to.' We were nose to nose.

'Go to your room!' bellowed Papà. 'And don't come out until you're ready to see sense.'

'Well, that would be never!' I screamed, turning on my heel and rushing to my bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

The memory of that fight still made my blood boil. Sobbing, I buried my face in the sheepskin and pounded my pillow with fury until I was spent.

I took a shuddering breath and stared at the shadows the lantern made on the cell wall. I was here now and had to make the best of it. Somehow, the Madonna had heard my prayers and given me an opportunity to do what I'd always dreamed of.

I'd finished school nearly two years earlier, at the age of fourteen. At first, I helped Papà on the farm with Paola. As well as tending our flock of sheep, we planted wheat and had an olive grove, a small orchard of citrus trees and some grape vines for wine. We raised pigs, chickens and goats, and had our milking cow Bella and our donkey Benito, named after Il Duce, Prime Minister Mussolini. I helped milk the sheep and prepared the milk for cheesemaking, threshed wheat at harvest time to separate the grain to be milled into bread and pasta flour and picked olives to be crushed for oil, grapes for wine, and the citrus fruits. I never seemed to do my chores as well as Paola and I usually disappeared as soon as I could to spend time with my Nonna Mariana, Mamma's mother, who was a maga, a traditional folk healer.

I'd always been interested in healing and I loved walking with her as she picked wild herbs from the surrounding hills and explained how to find them and what they were good for. I enjoyed watching her in her busy clinic, which she ran from the front room of her house, choosing herbs to treat someone's illness. But spending time with Nonna was another thing that Papà had forbidden, after his younger sister had died following treatment from a woman who called herself a maga but was really a strega, who practised witchcraft. He never went as far as stopping Nonna from visiting us at home because he knew it would break Mamma's heart. He reluctantly accepted her place in our family, on the condition that she never treat any of us.

Even though Papà yelled at me time after time and punished me for disobeying him, I continued to sneak away to Nonna's whenever I could. Finally, he decided that I'd be better off working in his sister's trattoria, where I could be kept busy helping Zia Francesca prepare and cook meals. Whenever I wasn't needed at the restaurant, I was helping Paola on the farm.

Papà didn't realise Zia Francesca gave me freedoms he would never allow. After her customers were gone, she often let me look through glamorous magazines that came from the big cities of the north, like Milano. The women in these magazines were dressed so differently from me, in clothes that looked like they were designed for lives of purpose and independence. There had even been an advertisement for women to join the Red Cross as volunteer nurses. Could women become more than wives and mothers, forever controlled by their husbands and fathers, despite the Catholic Church's rules and the Fascist teachings we had drummed into us at school? If the women in these magazines could choose how they lived, perhaps I could find a way to do the same. I wasn't going to live my life like a prisoner.

After my fight with Papà, I decided to run away. I would join the Red Cross in Reggio and become a nurse rather than marry the husband Papà would choose for me, trapping me in the village. Reggio, the biggest city in Calabria and the capital of our province, was over forty miles away on the opposite, west coast.

I'd packed my few belongings and was walking the road to the coast, where I'd meet the bus to Reggio, when Zia Francesca caught up with me. She begged me to come back before anyone saw me, telling me she had an idea to get me what I wanted.

Back at the trattoria, I waited in the kitchen making the sugo for the evening's menu while Zia Francesca, Mamma and Nonna Mariana talked in hushed whispers.

'What are we going to do?' Mamma whispered in a panic. 'Mannaggia! I know she's strong-willed but I never thought she'd do something like this. If Andrea finds out . . .'

'She's safe now, Gabriella,' said Nonna soothingly.

'But she can't stay here and I'm worried that if she comes home, she'll do something stupid or try to run away again the next time she and Andrea fight.'

Hearing Mamma's deep sigh, I hunched over the pot, ashamed I'd disappointed her. She was right, I couldn't go back home. If Papà found out I'd tried to run away, my life was as good as over. Family honour meant everything and my actions would only bring shame on my family. And even if he didn't find out what I'd done, I couldn't forgive him for what he'd said. The memory of that morning flared my anger, hot and explosive, once more. I took a breath to calm myself.

'Allora, so, I have an idea,' said Zia Francesca. 'Maybe we can solve this problem and at the same time get the education that Giulia needs to fulfil her desire to become the type of healer that Andrea would approve of.'

'Basta!' said Mamma abruptly. 'We've been through this before. Andrea won't hear of it.'

I crept to the door to hear better and peered at the three women, their dark and grey heads together. It was reassuring to see Nonna Mariana, her long hair plaited into braids and twisted onto the back of her head. She was always a steadfast and calming presence.

'Mariana, didn't you once tell me that you know the renowned herbalist Fra Fortunato?' asked Zia Francesca. She was immaculate as always in a tailored skirt and blouse that Teresa had no doubt made for her from fabric sourced in Milano. Her long hair was parted in the middle and swept up in a

fashionable knot at the back of her head, no strand out of place. I touched my own hair briefly. Like hers, it was thick and black, but unruly and hastily tied into a braid, loose pieces snaking down my back and around my face.

‘Si,’ said Nonna, her eyebrows raised in surprise.

‘And that he now resides at the Monastery of the Madonna where you know the abbess?’ Zia continued. ‘With your connections, Giulia could go and study herbalism under the tutelage of the monks.’

I was taken aback by this new revelation. Perhaps there was more to Nonna than I knew.

‘What do you think?’ Zia asked, looking from my grandmother to my mother. I felt sure she was holding her breath, just as I was.

Mamma shook her head. ‘Do you really think it’s possible?’ she asked. Her curly brown hair spread around her head like a halo. As least I knew where I got my unmanageable locks from.

Nonna squeezed Mamma’s hand, her luminous green eyes beseeching. I had inherited Nonna’s eyes, less common in this part of Calabria. ‘Giulia has a gift from God and it would be an affront to Jesus and the Madonna if she was not allowed to develop her talents.’ She shrugged an apology. ‘Fra

Fortunato’s knowledge of herbal medicine is second to none, not just of our local plants, but of other Italian and European remedies too. And if Giulia’s half as good as I think she’ll be, she’ll make a decent living. People will come from all over the region to see her once her reputation spreads.’

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach at her words. I’d often wondered about the strong connection I had with her and how we just knew what was wrong with somebody when they weren’t feeling well.

Calabria was an ancient place and its history of healing dated back thousands of years. Many rituals and traditions were passed down generation to generation, mother to daughter, and most maghe used ‘the old ways’, a combination of herbal treatments, common-sense remedies, superstition and the power of faith in God, Jesus, the Madonna and all of the saints of the Catholic Church, to help people to feel better. Nonna carried on the traditions that many locals expected her to use. As she had explained to me, there were many ways to treat illness, but if a patient didn’t believe in what you were doing, it was much harder – if not impossible – to heal them.

‘But what about Andrea?’ said Mamma, pulling her hand away in frustration. ‘He’ll never allow it.’ Mamma had happily given up any thought of being a healer to marry Papà; her passion didn’t run as deep as mine and Nonna’s, even though she had talent. Nonna’s world was the realm of women and magic, unfathomable and uncontrollable, something Papà didn’t understand. But what upset Papà the most was Nonna’s treatment of people affected by il malocchio, the evil eye. He believed she resorted to witchcraft to treat such cases.

Zia Francesca nodded. ‘I’ve thought about that . . .’ She put her head close to Mamma and Nonna, even though they were alone. ‘Andrea doesn’t have to know that she’s studying, only that she’s learning how to behave from the nuns.’

Mamma shook her head, eyes wide with alarm.

‘Think about it, Gabriella,’ said Nonna firmly. ‘This could be a good opportunity to give Giulia and Andrea time apart, give them a chance to calm down, and for Giulia to think about her future with a level head without the worry that she’ll run away again. Andrea gets what he wants too – a disciplined daughter.’

I wasn’t sure how I felt about the idea of going to the monastery. It was an isolated place high in the mountains not too far from here. The thought of joining the Red Cross had been filled with adventure; spending my days with monks and nuns sounded dull in comparison. But I knew I’d go anywhere to learn any form of healing. And if it took me away from Papà and his anger, even better.

‘But what happens when she comes home?’ Mamma said. ‘Since she’s not yet ready for marriage, once she’s gained skills in a reputable manner, she can bring in a proper income for the family. Surely Andrea can’t object to that?’ If Nonna thought this was a good idea, then maybe it was a way to get what I wanted: a purpose for my life besides marriage and children.

‘I want Giulia to be happy too, but it’s just not possible,’ said Mamma, her voice rising in desperation. She dropped her head into her hands and my heart dropped too. Of course it was too good to be true.

‘This is the perfect opportunity to help her do the work she was born to do,’ Zia Francesca said. ‘If somebody saw her on the road and my brother finds out, especially after he caught her lying again, the monastery’s far enough away to keep her safe and they’ll both have time to come to their senses.’ She hesitated. ‘I know it means deceiving Andrea, but this is Giulia’s future. All that matters to my brother is taming Giulia’s wild ways and if she learns a craft in the process, then surely he’ll be happy she’s bringing in an income, just like Teresa.’ Zia looked pleased with herself and I had to admit that I couldn’t see a single hole in her argument. My sister Teresa always did what was expected of her and Papà had supported her wish to become a dressmaker. I wasn’t sure about being tamed by the nuns but if it meant Papà would let me work as a healer . . .

Mamma sighed. ‘I want Giulia to have a chance. But we’d have to make a plan to convince him.’

‘Then it’s settled,’ said Nonna Mariana, smiling broadly and sagging back into her chair with relief. ‘We’ll arrange for her to go as soon as possible, otherwise who knows what she might do next.’

‘What about Giulia?’ asked Mamma. ‘We should make sure she’s happy about this.’

‘Oh, she knows,’ said Zia Francesca with a smirk. ‘She’s been listening at the door this whole time and hasn’t been stirring my sugo.’

Papà had agreed to send me to the monastery after Mamma and Zia Francesca spoke to him about an opportunity to work there that had become available. Hard work and discipline were all I needed, they reminded him, not the threat of a husband.

The night air seeping through the stone walls of the cell was enough to force me from my stupor. I changed out of my dress and into my nightgown, slipping between the coarse sheets on the small bed, desperate to get warm. If only I was still in the kitchen at the trattoria, surrounded by the rich aromas, talking and laughing with Zia Francesca, warm, happy and content. My stomach grumbled loudly. I knew I should be grateful for being here but I was finding it hard to be thankful. I missed my mother, brothers and sisters, Nonna, and Zia Francesca’s cheerful disposition and optimism. I still

couldn't believe I wasn't at Teresa's wedding. Had it been only this morning that Zia drove me to the village at the bottom of the mountain pass where Fra Giacomo, a monk from the monastery, waited for me with his cart loaded with supplies?

'Forza! Take this opportunity with both hands,' Mamma had said as we parted. 'Make us proud. Study hard and do what the nuns and monks ask of you. When you come home, what happened between you and your father will be forgotten.'

Papà had barely looked at me as he'd muttered a gruff goodbye before he'd left for the farm that morning, which made me even more angry.

'He might forget, but I won't.'

Mamma touched my cheek. 'He loves you and wants the best for you but he doesn't understand what it's like to be a young woman with her life just beginning. You're passionate and stubborn like he is. Just remember: if we're smart, we can get what we want, even in a man's world. But you have to be sensible. We rarely get second chances.'

My father might think that this was a way to subdue my wild ways, to remind me of my responsibilities as a young woman, but I saw this as an opportunity to improve my life.

But only with my first sight of the monastery as the sun began to fall behind the mountain peaks had the enormity of what I'd done hit me.

'Home – there's no better sight,' Fra Giacomo had said with a sigh.

Home . . . I had never been so far from my home before. How was I going to manage among strangers without the love and support of my family for seven months?

Tears fell down my cheeks as I huddled under the covers. Tomorrow I would meet Mother Superior and I needed to make a good impression to prove that I deserved to be here. Without her support, I'd never last long enough to learn all I needed to become a herbalist – and change my path.