



THE

AMALFI  
CURSE

a novel

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THE LOST APOTHECARY

# PROLOGUE

## *Letter to Matteo Mazza in Naples, Italy*

Monday, April 9, 1821

Signor Mazza:

We have not formerly made each other's acquaintance, yet I pray you will take very seriously what I have to say.

You are the owner of Naples's most preeminent shipping company, and your business is at the mercy of the sea. Yet as of late, I've become convinced the sea is at the mercy of something else: a small group of women living in Positano.

Many have marveled, in years past, over the tiny fishing village's good fortune and its consistently favorable seaside conditions. The tides, for one, are suspiciously calm. Mariners often remark on the village's lack of erosion, yet it is hardly protected by a natural reef, and it is not nestled inside a cove. Why do the battered cliffs of Amalfi and Minori suffer collapses and dangerous cascades of rock, yet Positano does not?

The glut of redfish and *pezzogne*, too. How is it that on days when the fishermen from other places return with bycatch or empty nets, the men of Positano have—yet again—a superb haul? Even at a quarter moon. It is as though the lunar rhythms have no effect on this village.

Ah, but tides and fish are one thing. Pirates, well, they are quite another. Now, I don't mean to make assumptions about those with whom you associate, Signor Mazza, but surely you are aware of this incongruity: there is no record of pirates having ever landed in Positano.

These buccaneers sack ships in Sicily. They ransack from Salerno to Capri. If I were to prick a pin in a map marking everywhere pirates have landed along our coast, it would appear a perfect band, skirting the whole edge of the Amalfi coastline—every village but one. One!

Dare I say, Positano seems insulated. Protected. Favored.

Elsewhere on the peninsula, men lament their filthy seawater, the looters, bad catch. *Yes, Positano has been prosperous, they tell me, but we will never move our families there, for their luck will run out. Any day now. Mark my words.*

Even some of Positano's own are bewildered by their good fortune. The men keep well-armed, sure they are due for a pirate attack. Others salt and dry and bottle their fish, certain their waters will soon dry up. Still others refuse to build too close to the shore:

the cliffs will crumble eventually, they say, sending those hilltop residents to their rocky deaths.

There is something going on in Positano—a secret, very closely guarded.

And I believe I know precisely what this secret is.

Might we strike a deal, Signor Mazza? For a price, I am willing to reveal what I know—to tell you what I have learned, what I have seen. *Who* I have seen.

I can only imagine the fortune such information would bring you.

Please respond at your soonest convenience.

Signed,

Your devoted friend, associate &c.

## CHAPTER ONE

### MARI

*Wednesday, April 11, 1821*

Along a dark seashore beneath the cliffside village of Positano, twelve women, aged six to forty-four, were seated in a circle. It was two o'clock in the morning, the waxing moon directly overhead.

One of the women stood, breaking the circle. Her hair was the color of vermilion, as it had been since birth. Fully clothed, she walked waist-high into the water. A belemnite fossil clutched between her fingers, she plunged her hands beneath the waves and began to move her lips, reciting the first part of the *incantesimo di riflusso* she'd learned as a child. Within moments, the undercurrent she'd conjured began to swirl at her ankles, tugging southward, away from her.

She shuffled her way out of the water and back onto the shore.

A second woman with lighter hair, the color of persimmon, stood from the circle. She, too, approached the ocean and plunged her hands beneath the surface. She recited her silent spell on the sea, satisfied as the undercurrent grew even stronger. She gazed out at the horizon, a steady black line where the sky met the sea, and smiled.

Like the other villagers along the coast tonight, these women knew what was coming: a fleet of pirate ships making their way northeast from Tunis. Winds were favorable, their sources said, and the flotilla was expected within the next day.

Their destination? Perhaps Capri, Sorrento, Majori. Some thought maybe even Positano—maybe, finally, Positano.

Given this, fishermen all along the Amalfi coastline had decided to remain at home with their families tomorrow and into the night. It wouldn't be safe on the water. The destination of these pirates was unknown, and what they sought was a mystery, as well. Greedy pirates went for all kinds of loot. Hungry pirates went for nets full of fish. Lustful pirates went for the women.

On the seashore, a third and final woman stood from the circle. Her hair was the rich, deep hue of blood. Quickly, she undressed. She didn't like the feeling of wet fabric against her skin, and these women had seen her naked a thousand times before.

Belemnite fossil in one hand, she held the end of a rope in her other, which was tied to a heavy anchor in the sand a short distance away. She would be the one to recite the final piece of this current-curse. Her recitation was the most important, the most potent, and after it was done, the ebbing undercurrent would be even more severe—hence the rope, which she would wrap tightly around herself before finishing the spell.

It was perilous, sinister work. Still, of the twelve women by the water tonight, twenty-year-old Mari DeLuca was the most befitting for this final task.

They were *streghe del mare*—sea witches—with unparalleled power over the ocean. They boasted a magic found nowhere else in the world, a result of their lineage, having descended from the sirens who once inhabited the tiny Li Galli islets nearby.

The women knew that tomorrow, wherever the pirates landed, it would not be Positano. The men would not seize their goods, their food, their daughters. No matter how the pirate ships rigged their sails, they would not find easy passageway against the undercurrent the women now drew upward from the bottom of the sea. They would turn east, or west. They would go elsewhere.

They always did.

While the lineage of the other eleven women was twisted and tangled, filled with sons or muddled by marriage, Mari DeLuca's line of descent was perfectly intact: her mother had been a *strega*, and her mother's mother, and so on and so on, tracing back thousands of years to the sirens themselves. Of the women on the seashore tonight, Mari was the only *strega finisima*.

This placed upon her shoulders many great responsibilities. She could instinctively read the water better than any of them. Her spells were the most effective, too; she alone could do what required two or three other *streghe* working in unison. As such, she was the sanctioned leader of the eleven other women. The forewoman, the teacher, the decision-maker.

Oh, but what a shame she hated the sea as much as she did.

Stepping toward the water, Mari unraveled her long plait of hair. It was her most striking feature—such blood-colored hair was almost unheard of in Italy, much less in the tiny fishing village of Positano—but then, much of what Mari had inherited was unusual. She tensed as the cold waves rushed over her feet. *My mother should be the one doing this*, she thought bitterly. It was a resentment she'd never released, not in twelve years, since the night when eight-year-old Mari had watched the sea claim her mother, Imelda, as its own.

On that terrible night, newly motherless and reeling, Mari knew the sea was no longer her friend. But worse than this, she worried for her younger sister, Sofia. How would Mari break this news to her? How could she possibly look after spirited Sofia with as much patience and warmth as their *mamma* had once done?

She'd hardly had time to grieve. The next day, the other *streghe* had swiftly appointed young Mari as the new *strega finisima*. Her mother had taught her well, after all, and she was, by birthright, capable of more than any of them. No one seemed to care that young Mari was so tender and heartbroken or that she now despised the very thing she had such control over.

But most children lose their mothers at some point, don't they? And sprightly Sofia had been reason enough to forge on—a salve to Mari's aching heart. Sofia had kept her steady, disciplined. Even cheerful, much of the time. So long as Sofia was beside her, Mari would shoulder the responsibilities that had been placed upon her, willingly or not.

Now, toes in the water, a pang of anguish struck Mari, as it often did at times like this.

Neither *Mamma* nor Sofia was beside her tonight.

Mari let out a slow exhale. This moment was an important one, worth remembering. It was the end of two years' worth of agonizing indecision. No one else on the seashore knew it, but this spell, this incantation she was about to recite, would be her very last. She was leaving in only a few weeks' time, breaking free. And the place she was going was mercifully far from the sea.

Eyes down, Mari slipped her naked body beneath the water, cursing the sting of it as it seeped into a small rash on her ankle. At once, the water around her turned from dark blue to a thick inky black, like vinegar. Mari had dealt with this all her life: the sea mirrored her mood, her temperament.

As a child, she'd found it marvelous, the way the ocean read her hidden thoughts so well. Countless times, her friends had expressed envy of the phenomenon. But now, the black water shuddering around her legs only betrayed the secrets Mari meant to keep, and she was glad for the darkness, so better to hide her feelings from those on the shore.

Halfway into the water, already she could feel the changes in the sea: the two women before her had done very well with their spells. This was encouraging, at least. A few sharp rocks, churned by the undercurrent, scraped across the top of her feet like thorns, and it took great focus to remain in place against the undertow pulling her out. She used her arms to keep herself balanced, as a tired bird might flap its wings on an unsteady branch.

She wrapped the rope twice around her forearm. Once it was secure, she began to recite the spell. With each word, *tira* and *obbedisci*—pull and obey—the rope tightened against her skin. The undercurrent was intensifying quickly, and with even more potency than she expected. She winced when the rope broke her skin, the fresh wound exposed instantly to the bite of the salt water. She began to stumble, losing her balance, and she finished the incantation as quickly as possible, lest the rope leave her arm mangled.

She wouldn't miss nights like this, not at all.

When she was done, Mari waved, signaling to the other women that it was time to pull her in. Instantly she felt a tug on the other end of the rope. A few seconds later, she was in shallow, gentle water. On her hands and knees, she crawled the rest of the way. Safely on shore, she lay down to rest, sand and grit sticking uncomfortably to her wet skin. She would need to wash well later.

Terribly time-consuming, all of this.

A sudden shout caught her attention, and Mari sat up, peering around in the darkness. Her closest friend, Ami, was now knee-deep in the water, struggling to keep her balance.

“Lia!” Ami shouted hysterically. “Lia, where are you?”

Lia was Ami's six-year-old daughter, a *strega*-in-training, her hair a delicate, rosy red. Not moments ago, she'd been situated among the circle of women, her spindly legs tucked up against her chest, watching the spells unfold.

Mari threw herself upward, tripping as she lunged toward the ocean.

“No, please, no,” she cried out. If Lia was indeed in the water, it would be impossible for the young girl to make her way back to shore. She was smaller than other girls her age, her bones fragile as seashells, and though she could swim, she'd have nothing against the power of these tides. The very purpose of the incantation had been to drive the currents toward the deep, dark sea, with enough strength to stave off a pirate ship.

Lia wasn't wearing a *cimaruta*, either, which gave the women great strength and vigor in moments of distress. She was too young: *streghe* didn't get their talisman necklaces until they were fifteen, when their witchcraft had matured and they were deemed proficient in the art.

At once, every woman on the shore was at the ocean's edge, peering at the water's choppy surface. The women might have been powerful, yes, but they were not immortal: as Mari knew all too well, they could succumb to drowning just like anyone else.

Mari spun in a circle, scanning the shore. Suddenly her belly tightened, and she bent forward, her vision going dark and bile rising in the back of her throat.

This was too familiar—her spinning in circles, scanning the horizon in search of someone.

Seeing nothing.

Then seeing the worst.

Like her younger sister's copper-colored hair, splayed out around the shoulders of her limp body as she lay facedown in the rolling swells of the sea.

Mari had been helpless, unable to protect fourteen-year-old Sofia from whatever she'd encountered beneath the waves that day, only two years ago. Mari had spent years trying to protect her sister as their mother could not, yet in the end, she had failed. She'd failed Sofia.

That day, the sea had once again proved itself not only greedy but villainous—something to be loathed.

Something, Mari eventually decided, from which to escape.

Now, Mari fell to her knees, too dizzy to stand. It was as though her body had been hauled back in time to that ill-fated morning. She bent forward, body heaving, about to be sick—

Suddenly, she heard a giggle, high-pitched and playful. It sounded just like Sofia, and for a moment, Mari thought she'd slipped into a dream.

"I am here, *Mamma*," came Lia's voice from a short distance away. "I am digging in the sand for baby *gran*—" She cut off. "I forget the word."

Ami let out a cry, relief and irritation both. She ran toward her child, clutched her to her breast. "*Granchio*," she said. "And don't you ever scare me like that again."

Mari sat up, overwhelmed by relief. She didn't have children, was not even married, but Lia sometimes felt like her own.

She steadied her breath. *Lia is fine*, she said silently to herself. *She is perfectly well, on land, right here in front of all of us*. Yet even as her breath slowed, she could not resist glancing once more behind her, scanning the wave tops.

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The women who'd performed the spell changed into dry clothes.

Lia pulled away from Ami's embrace, sneaking toward Mari, who welcomed her with a warm, strong hug. Mari bent over to kiss the girl's head, breathing in her fragrance of oranges, sugar, and sweat.

Lia turned her narrow face to Mari, her lips in a frown. "The spell will protect us from the pirates forever?"

Mari smiled. If only it worked that way. She thought of the pirate ship approaching the peninsula tonight. If it did indeed make for Positano, she imagined the captain cursing under his breath. *Damn these currents*, he might say. *I've had my eye on Positano. What is it with that village?* He would turn to his first mate and order him to alter the rigging, set an eastward course. *Anywhere but this slice of troublesome water*, he'd hiss at his crew.

"No," Mari said now. "Our *magia* does not work that way."

She paused, considering what more to tell the girl. Nearly every spell the women recited dissipated in a matter of days, but there was a single spell, the *vortice centuriaria*, which endured for one hundred years. It could only be recited if a *strega* removed her protective *cimaruta* necklace. And the cost of performing such magic was substantial: she had to sacrifice her own life in order for the spell to be effective. As far as Mari knew, no one had performed the spell in hundreds, maybe even thousands, of years.

Such a grim topic wasn't appropriate now, not with young Lia, so she kept her explanation simple. "Our spells last several days, at the most. No different than what a storm does to the ocean: churns it up, tosses it about. Eventually, though, the sea returns to normal. The sea always prevails."

How much she hated to admit this. Even the *vortice centuriaria*, long-lasting as it was, faded eventually. The women could do powerful things with the sea, yes, but they were not masters of it.

"This is why we keep very close to our informants," Mari went on. "There are people who tell us when pirates, or strange ships, have been spotted offshore. Knowing our spells will only last a few days, we must be diligent. We cannot curse the water too soon nor too late. Our fishermen need good, smooth water for their hauls, so we must only curse the water when we are sure there is a threat." She smiled, feeling a tad smug. "We are very good at it, Lia."

Lia traced her finger in the sand, making a big oval. "*Mamma* tells me I can do anything with the sea when I am older. Anything at all."

It was an enticing sentiment, this idea that they had complete control over the ocean, but it was false. Their spells were really quite simple and few—there were only seven of them—and they abided by the laws of nature.

“I would like to see one of those big white bears,” Lia went on, “so I will bring an iceberg here, all the way from the Arctic.”

“Sadly,” Mari said, “I fear that is too far. We can push the pirates away because they are not all that far from us. But the Arctic? Well, there are many land masses separating us from your beloved polar bears...”

“I will go to live with other sea witches when I’m older, then,” Lia said. “Witches who live closer to the Arctic.”

“It is only us, dear. There are no other sea witches.” At Lia’s perturbed look, she explained, “We descended from the sirens, who lived on those islands—” she pointed to the horizon, where the Li Galli islets rose out of the water “—and we are the only women in the world who inherited power over the ocean.”

Lia slumped forward, let out a sigh.

“You will still be able to do many things,” Mari encouraged. “Just not everything.”

*Like saving the people you love*, she mused. Even to this day, the loss of little Sofia felt so senseless, so unneeded. The sisters had been in only a few feet of water, doing somersaults and handstands, diving for sea glass. They had passed the afternoon this way a thousand times before. Later, Mari would wonder if Sofia had knocked her head against the ground, or maybe she’d accidentally inhaled a mouthful of water. Whatever happened, Sofia had noiselessly slipped beneath the rippling tide.

*She’s playing a trick*, Mari thought as the minutes passed. *She’s holding her breath and will come up any moment*. The girls did this often, making games of guessing where the other might emerge. But Sofia didn’t emerge, not this time. And just a few months shy of fifteen, she hadn’t been wearing a *cimaruta*.

Lia began to add small lines to the edge of her circle. She was drawing an eye with lashes. “*Mamma* says you can do more than she can,” she chirped. “That it takes two or three of the *streghe* to do what you can do by yourself.”

“Yes,” Mari said. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Because of your *mamma* who died?”

Mari flinched at this, then quickly moved on. “Yes. And my *nonna*, and her *mamma*, and so on. All the way back many thousands of years. There is something different in our blood.”

“But not mine.”

“You are special in plenty of ways. Think of the baby needlefish, for instance. You’re always spotting them, even though they’re nearly invisible and they move terribly fast.”

“They’re easy to spot,” Lia disputed, brows furrowed.

“Not for me. You understand? We are each skilled in our own way.”

Suddenly, Lia turned her face up to Mari. “Still, I hope you do not die, since you have the different, special blood and no one else does.”

Mari recoiled, taken aback by Lia’s comment. It was almost as though the young girl sensed Mari’s covert plans. “Go find your *mamma*,” she told Lia, who stood at once, ruining her sand art.

After she’d gone, Mari gazed at the hillside rising up behind them. This beach was not their normal place for practicing magic: Mari typically led the women to one of countless nearby caves or grottoes, protected from view, via a pair of small *gozzi*, seating six to a boat. But tonight had been different—one of the *gozzi* had come loose from its mooring, and it had drifted out into the open ocean. This had left the women with only one boat, and it wasn’t big enough to hold them all.

“Let’s gather on the beach instead,” she’d urged. “We’ll be out but a few minutes.” Besides, it was the middle of the night, and the moon had been mostly hidden behind clouds, so it was very dark.

While a few of the women looked at her warily, everyone had agreed in the end.

Mari stood and squeezed the water from her hair. It was nearly three o’clock, and all of the women were yawning.

She shoved the wet rope into her bag and dressed quickly, pulling her shift over her protective *cimaruta* necklace. Hers bore tiny amulets from the sea and coastline: a moon shell, an ammonite fossil, a kernel of gray volcanic pumice. Recently, Mari had found a tiny coral fragment in the perfect shape of a mountain, which she especially liked. Mountains made her think of inland places, which made her think of freedom.

As the women began to make their way up the hillside, Mari felt fingertips brush her arm. “Psst,” Ami whispered. In her hand was a small envelope, folded tightly in half.

Mari’s heart surged. “A letter.”

Ami winked. “It arrived yesterday.”

It had been two weeks since the last one, and as tempted as Mari was to tear open the envelope and read it in the moonlight, she tucked it against her bosom. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Suddenly, Mari caught movement in the corner of her eye, something on the dock a short distance away. At first, she thought she'd imagined it—clouds skirted across the sky, and the night was full of shadows—but then she gasped as a dark form quickly made its way off the dock, around a small building, and out of sight.

Something—someone—had most definitely been over there. A man. A late-night rendezvous, perhaps? Or had he been alone and spying on the women?

Mari turned to tell Ami, but her friend had already gone ahead, a hand protectively on Lia's back.

As they stepped onto the dirt pathway scattered with carts and closed-up vendor stands, Mari turned around once more to glance at the dock. But there was nothing, no one. The dock lay in darkness.

*Just a trick of the moonlight*, she told herself.

Besides, she had a very important letter nestled against her chest—one she intended to tear open the moment she got home.