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Chapter One

1603

They say lots of things – don't they? – about what it's like to drown.

That it's a slow and dreamy way to die. That you will see the whole of your life flash before you as you pass into nothingness, or into the next world, although, afterwards, when it was all over, how anyone had ever possibly thought either of these things was quite beyond her.

No, what they don't tell you about what it's like to drown is the sound. Not the sound of the waves beating overhead, or the dip and crack of the boat, or even the muffled voices of the oarsmen – '*Come along, you boys, get on with it, the sooner we finish the job, the sooner we can get home*' – not even the terrible deafening rush of the water roaring in your ears. It is the sound of your own voice that you never forget. The sound of your own voice begging, pleading, crying – *not this, not like this, not the sack, please, please, kill me now* – on and on, even in the water, until it seems to be the very sound of your own voice that chokes and suffocates you. Perhaps that's why she never spoke now. Had never spoken again since. Not now that it was all over; not now that she had passed over into the next world.

Chapter Two

The coast of southern Italy, 1604

The village, when they came to it, seemed to the women to be one of the poorest they had yet encountered in an already bitingly poor land.

Even though they had travelled through the night, when they came to it early that morning they knew immediately that they had made a mistake. The village was not so much a village as a collection of fishermen's huts that clung to the bleak shore like molluscs. From the sea the huts must have seemed more like piles of driftwood, boned and bleached, accidentally spooled together by the tides, which is what they were, really, when you looked at them more closely. Not much more than driftwood and rags.

Through long habit the women stopped at the edge of the village, and regarded their destination warily. There was no church, not even a chapel that they could see, although a stone cross by the wayside just at the entrance to the village had been decorated like a rudimentary shrine with flowers and a picture of the Madonna painted crudely on a piece of tin. A handful of votive charms, fashioned like women with crowns on their heads, had been strung together overhead. They made a tinkling sound in the breeze. Nearby there were the ruins of some buildings which looked as if they had once been more substantial dwellings. The roofs had collapsed, blackened rafters sticking up through the rotted thatch like splinters of bone; but here and there, in amongst the crumbled walls, you could see a stone lintel here, a carved door jamb there, evidence of considerable prosperity in some long-ago and long-forgotten time.

Two of the children, twin girls of about eight or nine, jumped down from the back of the cart where they had been riding, running

one after the other, threading their way like quicksilver through the ruined courtyards. In their brightly coloured dresses they looked like butterflies. Maryam, the leader, called them back sharply.

'What are you thinking, letting them run off like that?' She turned to their mother, a woman with the sad, pale face of a pierrot sitting next to her at the front of the cart.

'What harm can it do? Let them run around for a bit,' the other woman said mildly.

'Just call them back,' Maryam's expression was grim, 'we're leaving.'

'But we've only just arrived –'

'Look there.' Maryam pointed to a wooden doorframe tipping from its hinges.

Elena saw it straight away, the cross painted crudely in lime. Her heart lurched. 'They've brought us to a plague village?'

'That would explain a good deal, wouldn't you say.' Maryam jerked her chin in the direction of the deserted village.

'But I thought they said –'

'Never mind what they said, we're not staying here.' Maryam jumped down from the front of the cart. Even in her bare feet she was a whole head taller than most men, with a chest and shoulders to match. The horse's heavy leather reins seemed no thicker than those of a child's hobby-horse in her hands.

'But we can't go on, we've been travelling for days.' A hot wind was whipping Elena's hair into gritty tangles. 'The children are so tired – we're all so tired.' She gestured to the motley group of women who were gathered behind them, and then at the horse. 'And this poor old nag can't keep going for ever, either.'

The creature, so painfully thin that each individual rib jutted out, stood with its head hanging so low it almost touched the ground.

'I don't care, we're not staying here and that's that.'

Signalling to the rest of the small caravan, Maryam pulled the reins of the horse over its head and began to lead it away from the village, through a patch of scrubby, sandy ground between the fishermen's huts and the sea.

At the edge of the dunes the horse stumbled and fell. Although Maryam beat it with her whip until she thought her shoulder would break, it was clear that the horse was never getting up again.

Later, as the others had begun to set up their camp in the shade of two crooked olive trees on the windswept hinterland, Elena found Maryam sitting with her back against a patch of grass. For a while they sat together in silence, looking out to sea. The wind had dropped a little, and there was no sound except the tiny hiss of wavelets breaking on the beach. There was no sand here, only a thin strip of shingle. There was a strong smell of decay, of seaweed and rotting pine.

'Here, I've brought you this,' Elena handed her a piece of bread and cheese.

Maryam took a bite. There was a taste of salt on her lips. She put the rest in the leather pouch that hung from her belt.

'Well, looks as if we're going to be staying here after all,' she said after a while. Her voice was gruff. Neither of them mentioned the dead horse.

'We need the work, you know.'

'Work? *Panayia mou!* By Our Lady, there's no work here.' Maryam sounded as if she had tasted something sour.

'But – I thought you said –' Elena glanced at her. 'What about the village feast day?'

'There's no feast day.'

'What d'you mean, no feast day?' Elena tried to leaven Maryam's gloomy tone. 'There's always a feast day.'

'What, here? In this ghost town? How can there be a feast day, when there are no people?' Maryam nodded towards the huts. 'It's time to face it – we've been duped. Wouldn't be the first time. A troupe of tumblers on their own is bad enough, no better than thieving gypsies. But a troupe of *women* tumblers, no husbands, no fathers to keep them in order – well, that's against nature, that is.' She spoke bitterly. 'What better jest than to send them off somewhere with a wild goose between their legs? Reckon he must have thought we'd got off lucky, that man from Messina –'

'That man, Maryam –'

But Maryam was not listening. All she could think about was the horse, putrefying already in this heat, she shouldn't wonder. Maryam hid her head in her hands. Should they try to eat it? Sell it? She pressed her fingers into her eyes, so hard that she made sparks of light dance there. The loss of their only horse was a catastrophe so great she knew she had not yet even begun to comprehend it.

They'd have to get back to Messina first, and the only way to do that would be to walk. It had taken them three days to get here. She was the strongwoman of the troupe after all, stronger than three men . . . But even with her great strength she doubted whether she could pull their cart all that way. Perhaps if she tied herself to the shafts . . . As if to shut out the thought, she dug her fingers in still harder.

'Maryam!' Elena was shaking her by the arm. 'Maryam, are you listening to me?'

'What –?'

'He's here.'

'Who's here?' Maryam lifted her face from her hands, her eyes watering.

'The man who hired us. The one in Messina.'

'He's here?'

'Yes, I've seen him.'

'Now you're the one seeing ghosts.'

'He's no ghost,' Elena smiled. 'I've spoken to him, too. He came to the camp. He's there now, waiting for us. That's what I came to tell you.'

They found the man, a Signor Bocelli, sitting at his ease, eating heartily a piece of dried cured bacon between two slices of bread. Maryam, a woman of few words, did not waste her breath on useless reproaches.

'I don't know why you brought us to this plague village, and I don't care. But, see here, we want to be paid for our trouble anyway, *capito*?' She hoped he would not hear the note of desperation in her voice.

Signor Bocelli did not reply immediately. It seemed to amuse him to keep her standing in front of him. He took a large raw onion out of a leather knapsack at his side, the bulb roughly the size and colour of an ostrich egg, and bit into it with relish.

'*Hew!* I'd forgotten!' He grinned up at her at last, shaking his head, his mouth still full. 'You really are *big*, aren't you, giantess.' Maryam watched as a piece of unchewed onion flew out of his mouth and landed on her foot. He followed her gaze. '*Hew!* Feet as big as a Cyclops, hands to match . . .' still grinning, he sighed, '*hew!* And ugly, too, by God.'

You think I haven't heard all this before? Maryam regarded him steadily, watched as the juice from the onion trickled down his chin. *This and worse. Far worse. Is this really the best you can do, you lying, cheating, squirming little tick? Do you know that I could crush your skull with my bare hands?* But she said nothing. Just stood there, in her shapeless man's leather jerkin and boots, staring down at him, until at last he stopped his silly grinning and seemed almost discomfited, quelled by the sheer force of her silence.

'All right, all right.' He let out a belch and threw the rest of the half-eaten onion back in his knapsack.

'Why've you brought us to this plague village?' Maryam was growing tired of Signor Bocelli. 'There's no *festa* here.'

'Well, you're right about that, there's no *festa*. But this is no plague village.' He regarded her with his head cocked to one side.

'What then? I don't like it –' Maryam watched as a lone dog sniffed in the dust amongst the deserted huts '– there's something . . . strange about this place.'

'Did no one tell you? In Messina, I mean?'

'Tell me what?'

'What this village is.'

There was a pause. 'Now you're speaking in riddles, Signor Bocelli.' Maryam's eyes glittered. 'Perhaps you would be so good as to get to the point?'

'Have you ever seen one of these before?' From his knapsack the man brought out a small shiny object and held it out to her on the palm of his hand. Maryam took it, turned it over carefully.

'What is it? A charm? Looks like a fish of some kind –'

'An amulet. Look more closely.'

Maryam looked again. The amulet was made of silver, and showed not a fish, she now saw, but –

'A mermaid!'

The mermaid hung from a silver chain. She was swimming on her back, blowing a horn. She wore a crown on her head; tiny bells hung from her tail.

'I've seen some like these,' she said, remembering the tinkling sound, 'at the entrance to the village, at the stone cross. Only I didn't realise what they were.'

‘In these parts mermaids have always been thought to bring luck. You can find these amulets almost anywhere along the coast – I’m surprised you’ve never seen one before. And this village especially has always been dedicated to the cult. Trouble is –’ he shifted uncomfortably ‘– now they’ve actually got one. A real one, I mean.’