

Love Me Not
By
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Part 1 Chapter 1

While picnicking in a clearing surrounded by ancient Tuscan chestnut trees my mother metamorphosed into a butterfly.

At first I cooed. Then, when I could no longer identify her from the others, I wailed. On a warming current, clouds of iridescent, chitonous wings dipped, looped and rose above the treetops and drifted away.

My wails turned into hiccupping sobs. Terrified, I succumbed to sleep, trusting, that upon waking, my butterfly mother would be restored and returned to me.

With her black cloak billowing about her, Maria Fortunato, our valley's prescient midwife, found me huddled between the exposed, iron-hard roots of one of those giant trees. Already knowing there was no point searching for my mother, Maria rescued and raised me with the same love she lavished upon her adored pygmy goats.

I was three years old. I never saw my mother again.

As I woke, the dream-memory of that event faded only to be replaced by an orchestra of chirping crickets leaping in anticipation in my belly.

It was 5 May 1946, my fourteenth birthday, the day on which Maria had said my life would change.

It was time to say my goodbyes. I stared up at the smoke-darkened beams supporting the roof of the shepherd's hut, my

home for eleven years. Instead of winter raindrops, glinting arrows of sunlight snuck through the cracked terracotta tiles and dotted the hard-packed earth.

I turned my head and focused on the rickety table and two chairs in front of the hearth in which fragments of coals nestled in ash winked red. Maria's bed at the far end was empty. She'd left before dawn to move her flock of goats to a distant meadow.

What the room lacked in furniture was remedied by Maria's stock-in-trade. Hanging from the airing rack suspended in the middle of the room were clusters of still-drying, leafy stalks and tubers as well as roots of dandelion, borage, calendula, nettles, bay laurel, fennel and mint. Their combined earth-musk, cucumber-crisp, warm-wood, bitter-sweet and fresh-mint scents suffused the air.

Dried herbs – left whole, crushed, pounded into powder, suspended in oil, or made into salve using snow-white lard rendered from pigs' kidneys mixed with ash and perfumed with lemon – filled numerous bottles stored on shelves. More bottles contained the carcasses of small mammals and reptiles, toadstools and other fungi. Sticky, wagon-wheel shaped spider webs layered between dry leaves rested on the deep windowsills.

Maria's black cloaks, all stitched with various sized pockets, and in different weights for varying kinds of weather, hung from nails serving as clothes hooks. A few nails stood free as my clothes were already bundled into a ball tied with twine.

The peal of the church bell sounded from the valley floor, beating the cock to his first crow. It was time to leave. I rose and reached for the bundle. As the door crack widened, it revealed the splendid distant view I never tired of – the opalescent Tyrrhenian

Sea. Effervescent salt air, gathering the fragrance of wild sage and honeysuckle as it rose from the coast to the hills, filled my lungs.

I turned to face the grey mountain with its jagged ridge resembling the spine of a crested lizard. Accompanied by a trilling chorus of early morning songbirds, I made my way uphill. In a few minutes, with the rising sun warming my back, the perfectly proportioned, three-storey, apricot-walled and green-shuttered Villa Angeli – where I was to live and serve as a personal maidservant – came into view.

Leaving the wild Tuscan countryside, I stepped through the arched, pine-scented cypress door set in the stone wall and entered the enclosed, cultivated vegetable garden. Alternating bushes of rosemary and lavender awash with bees lined both sides of the path. Beyond the bushes, patches of cook's plants and herbs flourished.

'Good morning, Hortensia. Happy Birthday.' Anna, Villa Angeli's cook and housekeeper, almost as wide as she was tall, embraced me. Anticipating her next move, I scrunched my face. But nothing happened. Disbelieving my good fortune, I sneaked a peak through my lashes.

Sparkling lights danced in Anna's raisin-black eyes. 'From today no more cheek-pinching for you.' She still reached out, but all I felt was the feathery caress of air, between her fingertips and my face. It was a feeling I loved. Then she spoiled the moment, with her next words. 'You are now, after all, a young woman.'

My face flushed. Even though I had known her all my life, and loved her as if she were my grandmother, I cringed at the slightest mention of my first, recently experienced menses.

‘Here,’ Anna said, ‘let me help you.’

I released the bundle into her hands, which she casually tossed into the kitchen fire.

‘My...my cloth...’

The flames surged and engulfed the bundle, which fragmented, and in a shower of bright-spitting sparks, dissolved. Cross breezes carried away the stench of burnt cotton.

‘I’ve had new dresses and aprons made for you. They’re on my bed.’ Anna’s rosy-apple cheeks dimpled. ‘Go. Bathe before the water gets cold. And, Hortensia, with all your clothes off.’

My face flushed hotter.

Anna wagged an index finger in the air. ‘Yes. You heard right. *With all your clothes off*. Wash your hair. Don’t forget behind your ears. And scrub your nails and hands. Once you’re dry, get dressed and return here.’ She indicated a spot on the floor.

I entered Anna’s small bathroom off the kitchen and eyed the copper bath warily. Curling wisps of vapour rose from the still surface. Until that moment, I had bathed infrequently, standing in a large bucket of tepid water, wearing a cotton shift. The fragrance of rose-scented geranium/pelagorium filled the room and eased my trepidation. I did all Anna instructed and in record time.

The ankle-length linen dresses, each a patchwork of different colours, thrilled me. The full skirts swished around my legs, and when secured, the white cotton apron ties revealed the narrowness of my waist, which until then, I had not been aware. The triangle-shaped headscarves sat upon my head, and with little effort turned into what I imagined could be a small crown, like the one the Virgin Mary wore.

Holding my shoulders back and belly in, I returned to the kitchen and stood exactly where Anna had indicated.

She circled me. 'My, oh my. The maids did a good job with the dress and apron.'

I felt a twinge of disappointment. I had hoped to hear a compliment. But the truth was, I was hardly anything to look at, even if my new clothes made me feel all grown-up.

Anna unwrapped several pairs of boots. 'See which pair fits best.'

Judging by their good, albeit used condition, the peddler had likely traded hard. Even after the war, leather goods were difficult to find and expensive. I dreaded imagining how many bottles of Anna's renowned pickled vegetables and marmalade filled the peddler's cart.

The best fitting pair was tight.

'Loosen the laces,' Anna said. 'That'll make a difference.'

But it made no difference at all. Within half an hour, blisters bulged on my heels. My squashed toes begged for release, and when the pins and needles feeling disappeared, I believed my toes had died. Later, when Maria arrived for lunch and Anna was out of earshot, I lowered my voice and lamented my sore feet.

More often than not, the silver bangles of Maria's right wrist saved her the effort of communicating by releasing a preemptive sound. Today was no different. They jangled once prior to Maria's snort of disapproval. 'Bah. Be grateful for the fact your job gives you a roof, a bed, food, clothes, and a pair of boots. A small price to pay given your orphaned state.'

While my heart ached from Maria's reminder, my feet and boots went to war. I could not help but wonder which would

surrender first. It would take weeks before the skin on my feet hardened and the leather eased.

I knew my way around the Villa Angeli kitchen, having taken my meals there for as long as I could remember. But now, under Anna's instruction, I learned how to be a personal maid. Later, on my own, I learned to listen hard when Maria and Anna or the housemaids lowered their voices.

That afternoon, for the first time, I followed Anna up the staircase. Arriving on the wide landing, Anna indicated to double doors on the right. 'Here is the library. The door opposite is a guest bedroom.'

We continued down the corridor.

She lowered her voice. 'And here is Master Giovanni Angeli's bedchamber.'

I stifled a shudder. The housemaids had clutched their throats and stuck out their tongues when they told me about our master, who lay slowly drowning in the liquid that gathered in his chest, sometimes even bubbling out of his mouth.

'Where am I to sleep?' I whispered. The night before, as Maria told me my life was about to change, I had been filled with hesitation. But learning I would have a bedroom of my own, all resistance disappeared.

Anna pushed a door open and stood aside.

My belly contracted with excitement, and then released, when I stepped into a small room. It was furnished with a single bed and a set of drawers and there was only one window. In my head, I heard Maria's bangles rattle their reprimand, reminding me of my former humble home. I pressed the heel of one boot down hard and relished the solidness of the two-hundred-year-old floor

underfoot. In the shepherd's hut, I feared the hard-packed earth would open and swallow me whole. As small as my new bedroom was, there were three doors.

Anna noticed my confusion.

'That connects to Mistress Letizia's bedchamber, the other to the guestroom. Come, it's time for you to meet her.'

We returned to the corridor and stopped in front of the last door at the far end.

'Hortensia, remember what I said.' Anna spoke in her lowest voice. 'Under no circumstances react when you see the size of her.'

I felt confident. Aside from Anna's warning, the housemaids' gestures had told me all I needed. When Anna wasn't looking, they blew out their cheeks and extended their arms to indicate Mistress Letizia's size. But their exaggerations did her no justice.

Though it was mid-afternoon, Mistress Letizia still lay abed. She was not dissimilar to a giant snowman: round, squashy, about to melt into a blob. With metres of yellow silk swaddling her form, she appeared even larger. Her hair, thick as a tied bundle of wheat and shiny like the treasured bobbin of gold thread in Anna's sewing box, appeared to have no end. From either side of her face it hung like the curtains and pooled in her lap.

The moment I got the full scope of her, my immediate reaction was to step back. But Anna gripped the knot of my apron's bow and held me firm. I took in the rest of the room.

Six shepherd huts could easily fill her chamber. Furniture, the likes of which I had never seen, included two Cararra-white, marble-topped bedside tables, a dressing table with a fixed centre mirror flanked by two smaller moveable ones, a wardrobe whose

doors were carved with the Angeli coat of arms – an angel in the centre of a shield, atop of which rested a knight's helmet and below the motto *pax et fides* – and a chaise longue. Plush rugs with intricate designs lay on the floor. Better than all this, through the gauzy curtains covering the windows, I glimpsed that view I never tired of.

The sound of Mistress Letizia's voice, sharp and reedy, was at odds with the rest of her. 'How old are you Hortensia?'

I steeled myself and returned her gaze. 'Fourteen, today.'

Her cornflower-blue eyes, almost hidden by the fatty folds of her eyelids, opened wide. 'Younger than me by three years.'

Anna steadied me again by tightening her grip.

Mistress Letizia focused on Anna. 'You did remember to bake chocolate cake, didn't you?'

Her acerbic tone hurt my ears.

'Of course, Mistress.' Anna bobbed her head.

I was shocked. I had never seen Anna display subservience to anyone. But now I saw Anna for who she was – a servant. Given Maria and Anna had schooled me to respect my elders, I felt an uncommon surge of outrage against Mistress Letizia.

Anna's grip increased.

'What about dogs? Do you like small dogs, Hortensia?'

Our valley's hunting dogs were thin but their long legs caused them to appear big. They were excellent trackers with howls that could wake the dead. But, a small dog? I'd never seen a small dog.

Mistress Letizia snapped her fingers. 'Foxy. Here, boy. Come.'

It was then I noticed the size of her hands, and instinctively knew that her unexposed feet were delicate and small, too.

From beneath the coverlet, a shiny-black nose, pointed muzzle, black dots for eyes, perky ears, and fluffed white body emerged. 'Ah, there you are.' She caressed the dog. 'Foxy will decide if you will be a good maidservant to me.'

I froze to the floor aghast. *A dog. Making decisions? This is madness. No. Heresy. What would Don Antonio, the priest, say?* I watched with curiosity as the formally known, *volpino italiano*, looking exactly like the small, white arctic fox, first trotted, then skipped, toward me. He stopped at my feet. His diminutive standing height reached the middle of my calves. He lowered his head, sniffed my boots with keen interest, and licked the leather with his tiny, bright-pink tongue. His tail, a smaller ball of fluff, wagged. He pranced a step backward and then, pressing his nose to his tail, began to spin and executed several faultless pirouettes.

'Ah good,' Mistress Letizia said. 'He thinks you'll do.'

By late afternoon I had traipsed up and down the staircase several times, and each time my toes begged for mercy. First with a tray carrying a pitcher of mint-infused lemonade, followed by a pot of tisane, and then the chocolate cake Anna had baked. The cake almost did not reach its final destination. As I bent to pick up the tray, pain raced from my feet up my legs causing me to lose my balance. My hands fumbled. The tray lurched, sending the cake sliding from one end to the other.

'Hortensia,' Anna hissed, 'be careful. Get that cake to Mistress Letizia in one piece.'

I ignored my sore feet. 'All of it?'

Anna nodded. 'Don't worry. I have another for us to share after dinner when we celebrate your birthday.'

I was relieved to hear it. I had only recently been introduced to chocolate, it being impossible to source during the war. From the moment of my first taste, I loved chocolate above all.