

I didn't discover the truth until many years later; it was a matter about which my father never spoke. But I knew he hated me for it, for the scandal that clung to his heels, the murmurings that faded, but never completely ceased. My mother was eighteen when she gave birth to me and eighteen when she died. A week between giving birth and losing life. She was found hanged, her chemise stained with afterbirth blood. Her feet were only a hand span from the floor, the window open, church bells effusive in their Easter welcome as her eyes stared open, the whites blood spotted, her body swinging slightly in the draft. Milk that should have fed her son oozed through the cotton chemise, making plate sized orbs, and around her left wrist there was a bruise, indigo, darkening to the colour of molasses.

This is what they told me.

This is what I believed.

The physician said my mother had suffered a brain fever; 'milk fever,' some call it, a temporary madness. She had been so troubled that she had committed self murder and alienated herself from God whilst bringing disgrace on the Gianetti house. They said that she had regarded suicide as a blessing, a release from pain.

But in my dreams I hear her choking, see her hands scrabble at the cord around her neck, watch her feet jiggle and shudder, doggy-paddling in dry air, her bladder loosening as she suffocated.

It was my fault. Had she never given birth she would not have killed herself. I was the worm in her belly, the wasp in her head; I was the cause - and my father reminded me of it every day of my life.

Chapter One

St Mark's Basilica,

Venice, 1549

*The rest of his relations with the
great is mere
beggary and vulgar extortion.*

(Burckhart, on Pietro Aretino)

He was walking splay-footed, his gait typical of an obese man, his arms swinging at his sides like the oars of a boat, churning up the hot air as he crossed St Marks. Pietro Aretino, mountebank, confidante of Titian, whoremonger, literary pornographer and known across Europe as ‘the Scourge of Kings.’ As he entered the church he sensed someone behind him and, dipping his porcine fingers into the Holy Water, turned.

“Signor Baptista,” Aretino greeted the man, making a flamboyant show of crossing himself. “I heard you were away in Florence.”

“It was a short visit.”

“To see your family?”

“My family is Florentine, yes. But I was there on another matter.”

Aretino glanced at Baptista’s side, his sword’s gilded pommel catching the light from the high windows above.

“Did you find use for your ‘friend’, Adamo?”

“My friend is seldom lazy for long.” He replied, his oval face perfectly composed, clean shaven, the sloe eyes unreadable.

Cunning bastard, Aretino thought, waddling to his seat as the choir began singing. Immediately Aretino’s gaze moved from Baptista to the young boy soloist, then his attention passed to a stern faced man in one of the front pews. Almost as though he was aware of being watched, Barent der Witt glanced up, curtly returning Aretino’s effusive bow of the head.

“You said you had news for me?” Aretino whispered to Baptista as they took their seats at the head of the congregation.

Knowing that he could be seen by seen by everyone, Aretino’s presence worked as a reminder to those who feared him, which numbered hundreds in Venice. Every lie, every secret, every insult, Aretino took care to hoard. He had made his own personal abacus of sin;