

PASSION BLUE

Victoria Strauss

CHAPTER 1

THE SUMMONS

Milan, Italy, Anno Domini 1487

The massed clouds broke apart and sunlight flooded down, burnishing the rough bark of the apple trees and tossing their shadows across the grass. Giulia caught her breath at the sudden beauty of it, her charcoal stick racing across the paper on her knee as she tried to capture the moment before it vanished.

"Giulia!" The shrill call was as sudden as a slap. Giulia jumped; the charcoal slipped, botching the line.

"Giuuuuuulia!"

Giulia pressed closer to the tree she was leaning against, hoping it would hide her, but it was already too late. She could see Clara stomping toward her between the trunks, her fat moon-face flushed with exertion and annoyance.

"What are you doing out here?" Clara planted her hands on her hips, scowling.

"What does it look as if I'm doing?" Clara was the daughter of the cooking woman who had taken Giulia in after Giulia's own mother died. She never missed a chance to try and make Giulia miserable.

"I've got better things to do than chase around trying to find you, you know," Clara said. "You're s'posed to be in the sewing room making shirts, not outside with your stupid pictures."

Giulia sighed and closed her sketchbook on the spoiled drawing. She'd finished her sewing quota early and had slipped away to the orchard, braving the chill of the mid-April day for the pleasure of some uninterrupted sketching time. At least, that had been the plan.

"What do you want, Clara?"

"I don't want anything." Clara looked smug. "I've been sent to fetch you. The Countess's maid is waiting in the *cortile*. She says the Countess wants to see you."

It took all Giulia's self-control to keep expression off her face. For weeks she'd been dreading this summons--ever since her father, Count Federico di Assulo Borromeo, died of a fall from his horse, plunging the whole of the household into mourning.

"Well? Don't just sit there like a lump. She's been waiting nearly half an hour, that's how long it took to find you."

The sun had gone in again and the grayness had returned. Carefully, for she didn't want to give Clara the satisfaction of seeing her hands shake, Giulia stowed her sketchbook and her charcoal stick in the pouch at her belt, then got to her feet and shook out her skirts. She began to make her way back through the orchard, toward the great bulk of Palazzo Borromeo that rose beyond.

"Are you scared, Giulia?" Clara trotted along beside her. "I'd be, if I was you. Everyone knows the Countess hates the sight of you. Think she means to throw you out, now the master's gone?"

Giulia, who feared exactly that, did not reply.

"I hope she does. I can't wait to have the bed all to myself."

"You'll need it, as fat as you're getting."

"I'd rather be fat than a bean pole like you! A man likes something he can get hold of."

"Yes, but he also likes his hands to meet round the back."

Clara hissed. "I hate you, Giulia. Always so high and mighty, with your nose in the air and your stupid drawings, like being the Count's bastard makes you better than the rest of us. Well, you're a servant just the same as we are, and your ten drops of noble blood won't fill your stomach when you're on the street begging for pennies, or maybe doing other things to stay alive. And it will serve you right!"

Clara stopped following when they reached the *cortile*, the paved court at the heart of the palazzo, but Giulia could feel the other girl's malevolent gaze as she went to meet the Countess's maid, who was waiting by the fountain. The maid led her toward the marble stairs that rose to the palazzo's upper floors, where the Borromeo family lived in a series of magnificent suites and chambers. The stairs were for the household and its guests, not for servants or for bastards. Never before had Giulia set foot on them.

The maid left Giulia in an unfurnished anteroom, with faded frescoes of hunting scenes on the walls. It seemed a very long time before the Countess entered, in a swirl of velvet and brocade.

"My lady." Giulia dropped a low curtsy. Too late, she realized that her fingers were stained with charcoal. Rising, she tried to hide them in her skirt.

"My husband made me the executor of his estate and will." The Countess's voice was as icy as the marble of the antechamber's floor. "It is my word that rules here now."

"Yes, my lady." Giulia had felt this woman's hatred many times over the years, but she could count on the fingers of both hands the number of sentences the Countess had ever addressed to her.

"You are--what, sixteen?"

"I turned seventeen in March, my lady."

"My husband made provision for you in his will. Three hundred ducats, to be used for a dowry."

Giulia gasped. She looked up before she could stop herself, into the Countess's hard dark eyes. Hastily she looked down again.

"I see you are surprised. As was I. My husband did not share this intent with me."

"My lady--I never knew--that is, I never expected--"

"No matter." The Countess waved Giulia's words away with one ring-heavy hand. "I have arranged a chaperone, as is proper. At noon tomorrow you will leave for Padua, where you will begin your novitiate at the convent of Santa Marta."

Convent? "My lady...I don't understand."

"It's quite simple. My husband intended that you marry. Well, I have arranged for you to become the bride of our Savior Jesus Christ. Your dowry is small, but even so the nuns have accepted it, as a favor to my family. For as you know, Padua is where I was born."

"But--" Giulia couldn't seem to get her breath. "My lady, I don't want to be a nun."

"And what possible difference could you imagine that makes to me? This is *my* house now. And *I* say: Leave my house!" The Countess's rigid self-control cracked. Rage strained her voice. "Did you think this day would not come? Did you think, when he died, you would continue as before?"

Of course Giulia hadn't been so foolish. Her mother, the most skilled of the household's seamstresses, had also been the Count's favorite mistress, and he had protected Giulia for her sake--arranging for Annalena, the cooking woman, to take Giulia in after Giulia's mother died, seeing that Giulia had her mother's place in the sewing room when she grew old enough, summoning Giulia every year to ask if she was content. Giulia knew well that his protection ended at the instant of his death. Even so, she'd hoped she would be allowed to stay. Life in Palazzo Borromeo wasn't always easy, but it was the only home she knew.

She'd tried to prepare herself for the worst. But never, in her most awful fantasies, had she imagined this. Not the Count's bequest. Not the fate the Countess had just decreed for her.

"Now thank me, girl," the Countess said. "For I am giving you a better place in life than ever you could have gotten on your own, and an opportunity to save your miserable soul in the bargain."

Giulia raised her chin. She no longer had anything to lose. Even so, she couldn't keep her voice from shaking, as she defied this woman who had absolute power over her, body and soul. "I will not thank you," she said. "I will never thank you."

Color flooded the Countess's pale cheeks. She stepped across the space between them and slapped Giulia's face--once, twice, three times, her rings adding weight to the blows.

"You go tomorrow," she said, biting off each word. "Now get out of my sight. Never let me see you again."

Head high, face throbbing, Giulia obeyed. She didn't curtsy, a disrespect she never would have dared show before. But what difference did it make now?

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She couldn't face going downstairs, where Clara would be waiting to gloat. Instead, she climbed to the storerooms in the attic. She'd often hidden there as a child, to escape the unfriendliness of the other servants or the bullying of Clara's brother Piero, and it was still where she went when she wanted to be alone. She found her favorite nook among the bags of grain and crates of spices and dusty furniture, and huddled there, breathing hard with horror and with rage.

I can't be a nun. I can't! She was as devout as anyone, but to be locked away from the world in a cold cloister, dressed in a heavy habit, fasting and praying and doing penance day after day...even to imagine it made her feel as if she were being sealed inside a coffin, or falling down a well that had no bottom.

But what could she do? Run away? She had some money, and the topaz and silver necklace that had been her mother's and was meant to be her dowry. But how far would those things take her? There was no one she could go to--her mother's parents were long dead, and her mother's brother, a soldier, had perished in an epidemic of fever. Survival would be hard enough for a grown woman with no relatives to depend on, no household to be part of, no village to take shelter in. For a girl of seventeen, it would be all but impossible.

Giulia had been brave enough, a few minutes ago, to look the Countess in the eye. But right now, this instant, she knew she was not brave enough to run away.

I wouldn't escape even if I did. She'd do everything in her power to see me caught and punished, in return for all the years my father sheltered me.

Giulia bowed her head onto her drawn-up knees, feeling the pain in her cheeks where the Countess's rings had bruised her. The Count had left her a dowry. A dowry! It was as unexpected as snow in June. She hadn't loved him;

it was impossible to love a man she saw so rarely, a man she could never quite convince herself not to be afraid of. But he had been her protector, and she'd always been grateful to him--now more than ever, knowing he had tried to extend that protection beyond his death.

The Countess had cheated him. She'd cheated Giulia as well, as thoroughly as if she'd kept the dowry for herself. It wasn't just the money. It was Giulia's whole future the Countess had snatched away--the dream Giulia had cherished since childhood, of a husband, children, a house of her own. A place where she belonged. None of those were possible for a nun.

It's as if she knew the prediction of my horoscope. In the chill of the attic, Giulia felt a deeper cold. *Short of killing me, what could be a more perfect way of making it come true?*

"Oh Mama," she whispered. "What shall I do?"

She'd been only seven when her mother died. It had comforted her, then, to imagine her mother looking down from heaven, like someone leaning over a high balcony. She'd long ago left that literal image behind, but she still spoke to her mother sometimes, half-hoping, half-pretending, she was close enough to hear.

And all at once, like an answer, Giulia saw what might save her.

She caught her breath. It was not a new idea. She'd first conceived it years ago. But it was frightening and risky, and she had always held it at the back of her mind, saving it for a last resort.

Everything had changed today. Last resorts were all she had.

She wiped her eyes. With new purpose she got to her feet, and went in search of Maestro Carlo Bruni, the Count's astrologer.

CHAPTER 2

LAST RESORTS

Giulia had first gone looking for Maestro Bruni ten years ago, when her mother was only a few weeks dead.

Giulia's mother hadn't had much to leave behind. Just a pouch of coins she'd saved, the silver and topaz necklace she had inherited from her own mother, and a cedar box holding a few small gifts from the Count, the velvet dress and linen chemise that were meant to be Giulia's trousseau, and Giulia's horoscope, rolled into a scroll case for safekeeping.

Giulia had moved in with Annalena right after the funeral, in a room just down the hall from the one she'd shared with her mother. She'd already stitched the coins into the hem of her skirt and the topaz necklace into her waistband; the cedar box she brought with her, pushing it under the bed where she now had to sleep with Annalena's two children, Clara and Piero. She left her father's trinkets and the trousseau clothes in the box, but the horoscope she concealed under the mattress, where she thought it would be safer.

She was wrong. A few days later, she returned to find the box lying open on the floor. The garments her mother had so lovingly made and embroidered were ripped and smeared with mud. The Count's trinkets were gone. So was the horoscope--all but a single torn fragment, which had fallen behind a chest.

Giulia knew Piero was responsible, just as she'd known he was the one who pulled the head off her doll and dropped it in the chamber pot and smeared the soles of her shoes with dog dung so that she tracked it about

without realizing. But she was only seven, and she was afraid of Piero, who was twelve and twice her size, and she'd learned that complaining to Annalena only made things worse. So she said nothing. She packed the clothing back into the cedar box and found a hiding place in the attic. She hid the necklace and the coins there as well. For the horoscope fragment, she sewed a waxed canvas pouch that she could wear around her neck.

She was sad about the ruined trousseau, though she cared little about the stolen trinkets. But it was the loss of the horoscope that really hurt. The horoscope had been her mother's special gift; she'd spent all her savings to commission it from the Count's own astrologer, and it was as fine as the horoscopes of the Count's legitimate children. On one side, against a deep blue background, was a large circle divided into twelve segments, each containing clusters of spiky symbols that represented the stars and planets that had been in the sky at the exact moment of Giulia's birth. On the other side, neat columns of black-ink script described the symbols' meaning.

"This is the story of your life, my love," Giulia's mother would murmur on the nights when she allowed Giulia to take the horoscope out of its case and unroll it on the bed to admire. "Everything that will ever happen to you is written here, everything you will ever be and do. I hadn't enough to pay the astrologer to read it to me, but one day we'll go to a notary and he'll tell us what it says."

"When will we go, Mama?"

"When you're old enough to understand. This horoscope will guide your life, my love. You'll never have to be like me, stumbling blindly through the years, never knowing what choices to make, letting all your chances slip away. You'll always know what's coming, and you'll always be prepared. You don't yet know how important that is, but you will one day, I promise. Because in the end, Giulia--in the end, the only person you can rely on is yourself."

Giulia had known that Piero hadn't just torn the horoscope up, but utterly destroyed it. Even so, she couldn't stop herself from looking for it--among the kitchen scraps, in the ashes of the fires, even in the foul-smelling darkness of the privies. She'd come to fear it a little, for her mother's death had taught her that the world held awful pain as well as happiness, and the star-map of a life must surely show both. Yet she wanted it back, as painfully, as hopelessly as she wanted her mother back.

Or *was* it hopeless?

A month after Piero found the cedar box, Giulia finally scraped up the courage to make her way to Maestro Bruni's rooms. He'd created the horoscope--perhaps he remembered it well enough to re-create it. "I can pay you," she told him, offering her mother's coins. But he shook his head.

"I'm sorry, child. I'm not the astrologer your mother commissioned." He was a small man, thin as a wire, with soft brown eyes and a hooked nose that reminded her of a bird's beak. She liked his gentle manner, and the serious way he listened to her. "I came into the Count's employ only two years ago."

"There's this." She held out the fragment. "Doesn't it help?"

He glanced at the symbols, then looked at the side with the writing. He frowned. "This is not a happy prediction, my dear. It says--" He seemed to catch himself. "That your stars are not favorable for marriage."

"They aren't? But why not?"

"I don't know, my dear. It's just a fragment."

"But...Mama wanted me to marry." Giulia's eyes filled with tears. "She said I had to find a husband to protect me. She said it was the most important thing of all. She said...she said I must never end up like her, living in a little room at the bottom of a big house, with a child who has no father."

"Oh, my dear." Maestro Bruni's brow creased with sympathy. "Such predictions are possibilities, not certainties. What's written on that bit of paper doesn't have to happen."

"It doesn't?"

"Our lives are written in the skies of our birth. But God gave us free will. That means we can resist the influence of our stars, and shape our lives through our own choices. Suppose...suppose your birth horoscope showed there was danger to you of death by drowning. You could stay away from water, from boats--anything that might cause you to drown. Or suppose, as in your case, your stars say it will be difficult for you to marry. If you do everything you can to look for a husband, rather than waiting for him, as most girls do, perhaps you will marry after all. Do you see?"

"I...I think so."

"There may have been predictions in the original chart to balance this one." Maestro Bruni smiled. "Would you like find out? Shall I cast you a new horoscope?"

"Oh, sir! Would you?"

"Indeed I would. And put away your coins, my dear, I won't take even a penny. When were you born?"

"In March, sir. I'm seven."

"In Pisces, then, in...hmmm...1470. And the day and hour?"

Giulia opened her mouth to reply. Her mother had always celebrated her name day in March. But the day and the hour...

"I don't know," she said in a small voice.

"Did your mother never tell you?"

Had she? Giulia couldn't remember. She shook her head.

"Then I'm sorry." He sounded genuinely regretful. "Without at least the day of your birth, there's nothing I can do."

He held out the fragment. Giulia took it, trying not to cry.

"Don't look so sad, child. Most people never know their stars. Others do, and pay no heed to the warnings written there. One can live a good life without a horoscope, and a bad life with one. Better the former than the latter, don't you think?"

"Thank you, sir." Giulia curtsied. "For your time."

"Come back and visit me if you remember more." He smiled. "Even if you don't, eh?"

Giulia never did remember more. But she had returned to Maestro's rooms whenever she could slip away. He'd been kind to her, and unlike the servants' quarters, his cluttered study held no painful memories of her mother. She was too young, then, to question why he would welcome her; it was only as she grew older that she began to understand how lonely he was, for he was unmarried, just as her horoscope predicted she would be, and his family was far away in the city of Vicenza.

He indulged her curiosity about his instruments and books. As she proved how quickly she could learn, what had been a game became something more. He taught her to read and write, both in Italian and in the practical Latin of scholars and the Church. He let her delve into his books on history and philosophy and geography. She began showing him her drawings, which he praised as only her mother ever had before; it was he who gave her the leather-covered sketch book that she carried always in her belt-pouch. Over the years he came to rely on her as a kind of secretary, to copy out his scribbled interpretations of the elaborate horoscopes he created for the Borromeo family: natal horoscopes for the birth of children, electional horoscopes to determine the proper times for important events, horary horoscopes to answer important questions.

The visits to Maestro fed Giulia's hunger for knowledge. But also, they were refuge--from the tedium of the sewing room, from Piero's bullying and Clara's malice, from her uneasy position in the household, excluded from the upstairs world because of her bastardy, isolated within the downstairs world for the same reason. By long practice, she was able to ignore the other servants' coldness and occasional mockery--making fun of her charcoal-stained fingers, mincing along behind her with their noses in the air and pinched expressions on their faces, to show they thought she put on airs. But she could not always fully armor herself against the hurt and the anger. It was good to have a place where she was not only accepted, but valued. Even, perhaps, loved.

"You're as clever as a boy, my dear," Maestro sometimes told her. "I don't know what God was thinking, to give such an intellect to a girl."

Giulia knew he didn't mean the words to sting. But they did. A boy who could read and write could do so many things--even if he were a servant, even if he were a bastard. But a girl...no matter how clever a girl was, no matter how full of learning she stuffed her head, all a girl could do was to get married and have children.

And according to her horoscope, Giulia might not even be able to do that.

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Her cheeks still throbbing from the Countess's blows, Giulia descended to the palazzo's third floor, where Maestro had his rooms. She knocked at his door, then, as always, slipped inside without waiting for a response.

Maestro's study was as familiar to her as any room in the palazzo, with its red marble floor and its smell of dust, leather-bound books, and incense. Pedestals under the windows supported an armillary sphere and a celestial globe; alcoves along the inner wall held books and astrological instruments. Another wall was almost entirely covered by a tapestry depicting the universe--Earth at the center, surrounded by the spheres of the Sun, the Moon, the planets, and the higher spheres of the heavens. Angels with golden wings ringed the outermost sphere, where God sat on His throne, His hand outstretched to show that it was by His will the cosmos moved.

Maestro was sitting at his cluttered desk. He half-rose when he saw Giulia, his welcoming smile disappearing.

"Merciful saints, Giulia! What happened to your face?"

"It was an accident." Giulia shook her head. "It doesn't matter. But Maestro, the Countess is sending me to Padua to be a nun. I must leave tomorrow."

"Ah." Maestro sat down again.

"Did you...did you know?"

"No. But change is afoot in this house. I fear none of us will escape it."

"I don't want to be a nun." Just saying it made Giulia breathless. "I don't mind if she sends me away--just not to a convent. Could you talk to her? Please?"

"Me?" Maestro drew back. "My dear, she would not hear me. I had the Count's favor, but not hers. Between you and me, I've begun looking for a new patron."

"But if you knew someone who would give me a position--there's your cousin in Vicenza, perhaps his household needs a seamstress--"

"No, no, no. I care nothing for the Countess's displeasure, but I can't make that choice for my cousin." Maestro shook his head. "I'm sorry, Giulia. For your sake, I wish I were a man of influence, but I am not."

He is kind, Giulia thought. *But not brave*. She hadn't really expected he could help, but she'd had to ask, just to make sure all other roads were barred to her.

"Ah, Giulia, how I will miss you. A pox upon that woman and her stupid pride."

Giulia felt her throat tighten. She would miss him too, this gentle man whom she loved almost as a father. She'd miss him terribly. But she couldn't let herself be distracted by that now.

"Maestro, do you remember telling me about your friend, the astrologer who makes talismans? Maestro Bastone, wasn't it?"

"Barbaro. Francisco Barbaro. My former friend, Giulia, as you know well."

"Didn't you say he lived in Porta Nuova, on Via...Via..."

"Via Sette Coltelli in Porta Orientale." Maestro caught himself. "Giulia. What are you up to?"

"I can't be a nun, Maestro. I have to do something."

"What, get Barbaro to make you a talisman to save you from the convent? Sorcery is a sin, Giulia, an invention of the devil, not just for those who practice it but for those who seek it."

"It'd just be one talisman. And I'd never want another."

"One talisman or a hundred, it's all the same. My dear, this is not the way for you."

"But I can't think of anything else! You can't help me--I can't run away--I've no one to take me in. I don't want to wind up a beggar or...or a whore, I don't want to be called a thief because I stole my own self and cheated the Countess of her cruelty!" She caught her breath in a sob. "If this...sorcerer can help me--"

"Giulia." Maestro got to his feet. He was as stern as Giulia had ever seen him. "You wouldn't even know about Barbaro had you not found his letter hidden in that book years ago. I never would have told you. I said as much as I did only to make clear to you the evil of the path he chose."

"But Maestro--"

"I would like to claim that it was he who corrupted me." Maestro raised his voice to carry over hers. "But I cannot. He and I succumbed together as apprentices, and continued as astrologers. For me, the small magics that were

our first passion were enough, but he was always drawn to darker things. When he began to study the daemonic spirits, crafting incantations to summon them and rituals to bind them, I saw that we were meddling with powers God does not mean us to possess. In fear of damnation, I renounced all magic and left the house we shared. He sent me that letter, cursing me for what he called my betrayal. As corrupt as he was when I left him, I cannot imagine the depth of his depravity now. I forbid you to go to him. By the duty you owe me as your tutor, *I forbid it.*"

For a moment Giulia held his gaze. Then she bowed her head, as if in defeat. "Yes, Maestro."

"Good girl."

She felt wretched to deceive him. But like the Countess, he had left her no choice. In her mind, as she often did, she heard her mother's voice: *In the end, the only person you can rely on is yourself.*

"You should have presents to go away with." Maestro left his desk and began to move around the room, reaching up to shelves, opening chests. "A supply of paper, for your drawing. A quill and an inkpot--with a cap, so you won't have to worry about spills. Ink powder that you can mix as you need. And Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I know how you love them."

"Oh, Maestro, thank you. But I don't know if they'll let me keep such things."

"We shall hope they will. Ah, Giulia. If you were a boy, I'd have made you my apprentice long ago."

Giulia looked at him--his clothes always a little shabby, his fingers always stained with ink, his papers always in disarray, his mind always on his books or in the stars. Normally she didn't notice, but just now she could see it clearly: *He's getting old.* A great surge of grief and affection rose up in her. She stepped forward and flung her arms around his neck.

"I'll never forget you," she whispered fiercely. "Thank you for your kindness, for everything you've taught me."

"There, there." He patted her awkwardly on the back. "God keep you safe, my dearest girl. Remember that in Milan, there is one who loves you."

"I love you, too." She stepped away. "Goodbye, Maestro."

She carried his gifts up to the attic, then pried up the loose floor board that hid her mother's topaz necklace and pouch of coins. All the while, she repeated the address Maestro had given her, so she would not forget: *Maestro Francisco Barbaro. Via Sette Coltelli. Porta Orientale.*

God, if this is a sin, forgive me. But I don't know what else to do.