

## Part I

### The Arrival

*April 1681*

#### - Chapter One -

Her heart had stopped breathing. She didn't fuss with her hair or use the vain clutter of the dressing table except to waste time rearranging it. Eventually she turned to what was behind her. Two fancy gowns were laid over a small unmade bed and the chair beside it, creased and dated, suiting a younger shape and needing somewhere to go. She was sure she wouldn't wear them again.

"Donatella! Are you in your room?"

The lace might be salvaged, for she couldn't be without lace, at least around her neck and at most edging her sleeves as well. Otherwise she dressed serviceably, invisibly, in gray or dark blue.

She no longer thought of being bolder or more submissive or, in a city on a bay becoming the sea, swept away at last.

It was as if someone else recalled a ship, who sailed in it and walking down a shady alley with a stranger. There was always temptation for mixing imagination with reality, especially as the past was otherwise inalterable. *Her* reflection was plainly in the mirror, her hair quickly pinned and her face flushed.

"Donatella. I need you!"

She moved to a corner table begging light from a narrow window, cleaning brushes and closing colors yet to finish curled pictures of spring or begin the next season before it did. She'd painted in brighter places, dreamed in them too, and didn't care who saw her as a dreamer. Until she committed herself to introverted ways and being forgotten like a lunatic huddled in a corner hardly knowing the difference between a smile and a frown.

"You might answer me!"

She took the green dress off the bed and pretended to wear it for a small stroll around the room. Then she walked into the hall as if out into the city, her city—at least as it was also born of land and sea, formed by highs and lows, ruled by outer constraint and inner abandon, safe and sorry in disguise. Of course *Genova* had a conceit she couldn't have, knowing its purpose and hiding or flaunting its features of beauty. Once she saw all its wonders and woes

from the esplanade of *Castelletto*, the mountains closer and *la Lanterna* further away. Perhaps she made out her house, if not its signature portal of Saint George and the dragon then a signifying shine on its roof's slant. Whether it was a prestigious place to live depended on how she looked at it—connected up to a parade of palaces, across divides or down crooked stairways to the port.

She was patron and prisoner of a gated entrance and more rooms than the closeness of the surrounding dwellings allowed, aspiring staircases growing them similarly into multiple stories. She could've done without so much unused furniture, mirrors and silver to be cleaned but was greedily accustomed to a tenanted wealth of paintings, tapestries, frescos, and stained glass not created for outside views.

"There you are! What are you doing?"

Donatella had barely reached the doorway of her bedroom, throwing the dress in as if not caring where it landed.